

Religious Studies, MA

The Master of Arts program in the Department of Religious Studies is designed for students who wish to advance their understanding of a particular area of religious studies or explore multiple traditions and topics beyond the undergraduate level. Many MA graduates from the department go on to pursue a PhD, while others bring their advanced education and competency in global religious diversity to such careers as health care, law, diplomacy, ministry, social advocacy, journalism, counseling, and informatics. MA students participate fully in the life of the department and study alongside PhD students.

MA students train to analyze the ways in which diverse religious traditions originate, develop, and interact over time, and learn to identify and use multiple methods for the study of religion, including historical, philosophical, ethical, literary, linguistic, psychological, ethnographic, and digital approaches. Students typically draw on the expertise of several different members of the religious studies faculty and are also encouraged to work with faculty members in other UI departments who specialize in their areas of interest. Some MA students work, for example, with scholars in the departments of Anthropology; Asian and Slavic Languages and Literatures; Classics; Communication Studies; English; Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies; and History.

The program offers a collegial intellectual community, including a departmental colloquium series, a collaborative reading group in critical theory, and an ethos of mutual support among the graduate students.

Graduate study in the Department of Religious Studies is highly flexible and personalized, and is shaped to individual students' interests concordant with existing faculty expertise.

Areas of Current Faculty Expertise

Religions of Southwest Asia, North Africa, and the Mediterranean

Religion, law, and politics in the Islamic world; the history of interpretation of the texts and traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; Greco-Roman and Egyptian religion and culture; digital humanities.

Religions of East Asia

Religious traditions of China and the political, social, and economic factors that have shaped them; modern religion and culture in Korea, most notably Christianity; religion and gender in transnational perspective; religion and empire.

Religions of the United States and the Atlantic World

History and ethnography of religion in the United States; African American religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, and African diaspora religions); West African religions; religion, media, and the negotiation of technological change; Latina/o/x Christianity.

Religion, Ethics, and Society

Religion and morality; religion, emotion, and affect; human rights; religion's relationship to gender, race, and ethnicity; ethics of medicine and biotechnology; religion and health.

Themes

Graduate study is also developed by theme. Popular themes include religions' relationships to public life, gender, race, media and technology, and human health and well-being.

Learning Outcomes

- Teaching success: students gain expertise in how to teach religious studies in a liberal arts setting, and if they serve as teaching assistants (TAs) during their graduate program, they show effectiveness in reaching a diverse audience of students.
- Critical knowledge of the field: students become familiar with foundational texts in their field, as well as influential scholarship that critically engages these texts and seeks to move the field in new directions; students identify ways in which they can contribute to the corpus of texts that compose their field.
- Academic skills: students develop skills to read carefully and think critically, and they write in clear and compelling ways about topics related to the study of religion; students have hands-on opportunities to develop key skills in public engagement.
- Religion and social equity: students gain a critical understanding of the historical entanglement of global religions with racism and misogyny; they can articulate religions' relationships to unjust power structures, as well as religions' contributions to greater social justice.
- Professional engagement: students demonstrate successful participation in the life of the department, their subfield, and the broader field of religious studies; they communicate about their learning with students from other fields.

For more detailed information on graduate programs in religious studies, contact the Department of Religious Studies or visit Graduate Program on the department's website.

Requirements

The Master of Arts program in the Department of Religious Studies requires a minimum of 30 s.h. of graduate credit. Students must complete 24 s.h. of the credit required for the degree at the University of Iowa and must maintain a cumulative grade-point average of at least 3.20. The MA is offered with or without thesis.

All MA students are required to demonstrate competency in English and at least one other language that is relevant to their advanced research; more specific language requirements are set in consultation with an advisory committee. Students are supervised by a three-person committee consisting of an advisor and two additional faculty members.

All MA students must complete the following four courses.

Course #	Title	Hours
RELS:5400	Colonial Knowledge Production and Its Discontents: Religion and the Academy	3

Three graduate seminars (9 s.h.) from these:

RELS:5200	Asian Religions in the Modern World for Graduate Students	3
RELS:5300	Genealogies of Religion	3
RELS:6070	Nonprofit Organizational Effectiveness I	3
RELS:6075	Nonprofit Organizational Effectiveness II	3
RELS:6150	American Religious Histories	3
RELS:6200	Seminar: Religious Ethics	3
RELS:6343	Feminist Criticism	3
RELS:6345	New Materialisms	3
RELS:6580	Seminar: Religion and Society	3
RELS:6710	Seminar: Approaches to Human Rights	3
RELS:6723	Seminar on Islamic Law and Government	3

Students select remaining coursework depending on their area of interest and in consultation with their advisory committee.

In their MA thesis work, students demonstrate and refine their research and writing skills. They may count a maximum of 6 s.h. of thesis credit toward the degree. Students must defend their thesis to their committee. Those who choose not to write a thesis must pass an examination that tests their competence in completed coursework. MA study in the department is expected to be completed in two years.

Admission

Applicants must meet the admission requirements of the Graduate College; see the Manual of Rules and Regulations on the Graduate College website.

Application materials must include an application form; a transcript of all undergraduate and graduate work (one copy must be sent to university Admissions, and a second copy to the Department of Religious Studies); an application or waiver of consideration form for graduate assistantships; three confidential letters of recommendation; and a writing sample that demonstrates the applicant's ability to engage in critical analysis. Applicants must also submit a statement of purpose that explains their objectives for graduate study and states which area of graduate study in religion best suits their objectives. Students may indicate one of the department's traditional areas of concentration or an area that is defined more by theme [p. 1]. Students are advised to view the Department of Religious Studies website, most notably the faculty pages, to ascertain whether their area of interest is well-supported by faculty expertise.

Moreover, students are encouraged to contact relevant faculty members prior to applying for graduate study in order to explore areas of mutual interest. It is helpful to include information about such contacts in their statement of purpose. The strongest applications show how students would benefit from working with multiple members of the faculty. For details, see Graduate Admissions Process and Graduate Funding on the department's website.

All application materials must be received by Jan. 15 to receive full consideration for fall admission.

Career Advancement

Graduate students in religious studies acquire a wide range of competencies that are useful for almost any career they pursue. Students gain research skills; they master the craft of writing; they learn to plan, manage, and complete large projects; they gain teaching skills that are useful both inside and outside the academy; they learn to argue a point persuasively; they gain the ability to communicate with others about controversial issues; they learn how to understand and mediate differences in religious perspectives and values; they acquire highly valued language skills; and they gain expertise in the use of digital technologies for research and teaching.

Students who earn an MA often gain admission to excellent PhD programs in religious studies and other areas of study, such as journalism and mass communication. Others have gone on to divinity school, law school, and into careers within media and communication, health care, libraries, museums, church leadership, government, and public service.

Academic Plans

Sample Plan of Study

Sample plans represent one way to complete a program of study. Actual course selection and sequence will vary and should be discussed with an academic advisor. For additional sample plans, see MyUI.

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Course	Title	Hours
Academic Career		
Any Semester		
30 s.h. must be graduate level coursework including 24 s.h. completed at the University of Iowa after admission; up to 6 s.h. of graduate transfer credit allowed upon approval. More information is included in the General Catalog and on department website. <small>a, b</small>		
All MA students are required to demonstrate competency in English and at least one other language that is relevant to their advanced research; more specific language requirements are set in consultation with an advisory committee.		
Students often develop plans of study either in relation to traditional areas of concentration or by theme. <small>c</small>		
		Hours
		0
First Year		
Fall		
RELS:5400	Colonial Knowledge Production and Its Discontents: Religion and the Academy	3
Graduate seminar course (prefix RELS) <small>d</small>		3
Elective course <small>e</small>		3
		Hours
		9
Spring		
Graduate seminar course (prefix RELS) <small>d</small>		3
Elective course <small>e</small>		3
Elective course <small>e</small>		3
		Hours
		9

Second Year**Fall**

Graduate seminar course (prefix RELS) ^d	3
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Elective course ^e	3
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Hours	6
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Spring

Elective course ^e	3
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Elective course ^e	3
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Exam: Master's Final Exam ^f	3
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Hours	6
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Total Hours	30
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- a Students must complete RELS:5400 and three graduate seminars (9 s.h.). Courses may be offered at different times, so students should work with faculty advisor and the department to determine appropriate coursework and sequence.
- b Students must complete specific requirements in the University of Iowa Graduate College after program admission. Refer to the Graduate College website and the Manual of Rules and Regulations for more information.
- c Traditional areas of concentration may include religions in the Middle East, Ancient Near East, or Mediterranean, religions in Asia, religions of Europe and the Americas, or topics related to religion, ethics, and society. Popular themes include religions' relationships to public life, gender, race, media and technology, and human health and well-being. Students work with a faculty advisor to determine an area of concentration that best suits their interests.
- d See General Catalog for list of approved courses.
- e Work with faculty advisor to determine appropriate graduate level elective coursework and sequence.
- f Final summative exam.