Religious Studies, Ph.D.

Graduate study in the department addresses the idea of religion and the ways in which religious traditions originate, develop, and interact over time. Students learn to identify and use multiple methods for the study of religion, including historical, philosophical, ethical, literary, linguistic, psychological, ethnographic, and digital approaches.

Graduate study is flexible. Students create individualized programs of study in consultation with their advisors and core committee members, in light of faculty expertise within the department and around the University. Programs often are developed in relation to one of the following four areas of concentration:

- religions in the Middle East, Ancient Near East, and Mediterranean;
- religions in Asia;
- religions in the Americas and Europe; or
- religion, ethics, and society.

Programs also are developed across these areas or thematically in relation to the department’s central focus which is religion and public life, most notably religion’s impact on the construction of individual and group identities and the dynamics of social change. Included in this focus is religion’s relationship to gender, race, ethnicity, and other markers of identity, and the practice and study of religion in a digital age.

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 Doctor of Philosophy program in religious studies requires a minimum of 72 s.h. of graduate credit. Students may transfer up to 24 s.h. of credit from another accredited graduate school.

Course requirements for the Ph.D. vary according to concentration area. However, all students must complete the following eight required courses.

- RELS:5100 Teaching and Public Engagement 3
- RELS:5200 Varieties of Religion in the Contemporary World 3
- RELS:5300 Genealogies of Religion 3
- RELS:5400 Methods and Theories in the Study of Religion 3

Four graduate seminars, including at least two in religious studies

During their fourth semester in residence, students must submit a departmental program of study, which must be approved by the religious studies faculty. To gain approval to continue in the Ph.D. program, students must complete three of the required Ph.D. courses listed above and two of the graduate seminars; show satisfactory progress toward the language and course requirements of their individual programs; demonstrate the ability to write scholarly papers at a level satisfactory for the Ph.D.; as assessed by the advisor and core committee members (at least two papers must be submitted to the committee); and have a cumulative University of Iowa g.p.a. of at least 3.40 (language courses that do not count toward the Ph.D. are excluded).

Students must pass a comprehensive examination based on a bibliography that covers their main focus area within religious studies (the history, influential figures, perennial debates, and/or theoretical approaches); a secondary chosen area of focus, distinct from the dissertation topic; and an area of specialization or dissertation topic. The comprehensive exam includes an oral defense. Students also must write a dissertation prospectus and a dissertation based on original research, both of which are defended orally. They may count a maximum of 12 s.h. of dissertation credit toward the degree.

Students working toward a Ph.D. may receive an M.A. upon completing at least 30 s.h. of course work and successfully passing the comprehensive examination.

Admission

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

Applicants to the Ph.D. program ordinarily must have a verbal reasoning score of at least 158 and a quantitative reasoning score of at least 147 on the revised GRE General Test (verbal reasoning score of at least 580 and quantitative reasoning score of at least 580 on the old GRE General Test) and a g.p.a. of at least 3.40.

Application materials must include an application form; a transcript of all undergraduate and graduate work (one copy must be sent to the University’s Office of Admissions and a second copy must be sent 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 also must submit a brief personal essay that explains their objectives for graduate study and states which area of concentration listed below, or choose an area that crosses the concentrations and is well supported by faculty expertise. For details, see Graduate Admission, Financial Aid, and Additional Funding on the department’s website.

Areas of concentration include:

- religions in the Middle East, Ancient Near East, and Mediterranean;
- religions in Asia;
- religions in the Americas and Europe; and
- religion, ethics, and society.

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

Financial Support

All Ph.D. students in religious studies receive funding. The department offers financial support for graduate students in the form of teaching assistantships.

The Gilmore Scholarship, for doctoral students who study the intersection of religion, the visual arts, and humanistic values, pays up to full tuition for one year. It is awarded every few years.
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 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 rare language skills; they gain expertise in the use of digital technologies for research and teaching; and so on.

Graduate study in religion can prepare a student to become a professor of religious studies. It also can provide the ability to integrate a deep and theoretically-sophisticated understanding of religion and its influences into other professions, such as medicine, nursing, law, political leadership, policy making, journalism, or counseling.

Students who earn a Ph.D. in religious studies often go on to become scholars and teachers in university or college settings. Other degree recipients have become professional ethicists, leaders of non-governmental organizations, school or church administrators, non-academic educators, digital media specialists, and government employees in the area of international affairs.