Religious Studies, Ph.D.

The doctoral program in the Department of Religious Studies trains students to become advanced practitioners of the study of religion—researchers, scholars, teachers, and facilitators of informed public discourse. It can prepare a person to become a college professor or to bring a nuanced, critical understanding of religion and its influences to such careers as health care, law, diplomacy, ministry, social advocacy, journalism, counseling, and informatics.

Doctoral students analyze the ways in which diverse 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. Students can draw on the expertise of the religious studies faculty and also are encouraged to work with faculty members in other UI departments who specialize in their areas of interest. Many Ph.D. students work, for example, with scholars in the Departments of Anthropology, English, History, and Asian and Slavic Languages and Literatures, as well as Classics and Gender, Women’s, and Sexuality Studies.

Graduate study in religious studies is flexible; it can accommodate individual students’ interests within the limits of existing faculty expertise.

Concentration Areas

These are some of the potential general areas of concentration.

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

Additional Information

Students who want to apply to the graduate programs are advised to review the faculty profiles on the Department of Religious Studies website to ascertain whether their area of interest is well-supported by faculty expertise.

It is the expectation that Ph.D. students will complete their studies in six years; five for those who are accepted into the program with an M.A. and transfer credit.

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.

Learning Outcomes

• Teaching success: students understand how to teach religious studies at public universities, and if they serve as teaching assistants (TA’s) during their graduate program, they show effectiveness in reaching a diverse audience of students.

• Critical knowledge of the field: graduate students are 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: graduate students read carefully and think critically, and they write in clear and compelling ways about topics related to the study of religion.

• Religion and social equity: graduate students have 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: graduate 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.