

Majoring in Religious Studies

Religious Studies at MSU introduces students to a vibrant and interdisciplinary academic field that is global in scope and attends to some of the key challenges facing citizens of the twenty-first century. Religious Studies asks not only how religion in its many forms has addressed fundamental human questions about life and death, truth and belief, and ethics and social justice. It also considers the political, social, and cultural effects of religion in both the ancient and the modern world. Rather than promoting any particular set of beliefs, the academic study of religion teaches *about* religion. That is, it provides students with a rich body of factual knowledge about the global history of religion, as well as the critical thinking skills necessary for interpreting that knowledge.

Courses in Religious Studies

Courses in Religious Studies are designed to provide a basic “religious literacy” so that they can understand the role that religion plays in public life, both at home and abroad. To this end, MSU’s Religious Studies faculty offers two kinds of courses. First, we teach courses that train students in the history of the major world religions, including their textual, philosophical, and material cultures. Second, we offer courses and seminars that ask students to analyze how religion intersects with other cultural forms, including politics, science and technology, literature, and visual and material culture. Our courses ask students to think critically about the production of knowledge and to consider how Religious Studies draws on the methods of other disciplines, including history and philosophy, as well as archaeology, literary analysis, critical theory, cultural studies, anthropology, etc. At all levels of the Religious Studies curriculum, we stress the development of skills in close reading, analytic writing, oral presentation, primary research, and critical thinking. Globally oriented and inherently interdisciplinary, Religious Studies is now, more than ever, a vital component of a liberal arts education.

Major Requirements

There are four primary components to the Religious Studies major: (1) courses in the history of world religions; (2) courses in religion and culture; (3) the methodologies requirement; and (4) the capstone seminar.

Course Distribution Requirements

The major in Religious Studies consists of 47-48 credit hours. The courses must include the following:

- 3-4 credit hours in introductory surveys (RLST 100, 110)
- 3 credit hours in Asian religious traditions (RLST 202, 203)
- 3 credit hours in Abrahamic religious traditions (RLST 201, 204, 205)
- 9 credit hours at the 300-level (RLST 321, 325, 326, 330, 332, 370)
- 6 credit hours at the 400-level (RLST 402, 405, 407, 410, 490, 491, 492)
- 15 credit hours of Religious Studies electives (RLST 206, 207, 217, 220, or other classes listed above)
- 6 credit hours in disciplinary methodologies (see below)
- 3 credit hours for the Capstone Seminar (RLST 499)

Methodologies Requirement

As an interdisciplinary field of inquiry, Religious Studies documents and analyzes religious phenomena by making use of research methodologies developed within other academic disciplines. Students majoring in Religious Studies at MSU are required to select one such methodology and develop proficiency in it by taking at least two courses in the pertinent department (which may be the department of a second major). This methodological training will then provide the student with the requisite skills to complete the research component of the major.

Students should devise their research specialization in consultation with their advisor. The general principle, however, is as follows: think about the kind of capstone project that sounds most interesting to you, and design the requirement around it. Are you interested in the iconography of Hindu poster art? Concentrate in art history. Are you likely to write about Jewish theological influences on the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas? Concentrate in philosophy. Curious about the religious practices of Chinese laborers in Butte? History. Thinking about an ethnography of a campus Christian group? Pick anthropology. Intrigued by James Joyce's Catholic upbringing? Go for English. Piero Pasolini? Film. You get the idea. Your specific topic will probably change, but the methodological training will stay with you and will in most cases serve as the basis of your capstone research project.

What to do with a major in Religious Studies

It is estimated that about 25% of graduates in Religious Studies programs go on to graduate school or professional training (e.g., law school). Degree-holders pursue multiple careers, ranging from academic and professional to business and government. These include education, non-profit organizations, federal diplomatic and intelligence agencies, journalism, publishing, television media, social welfare organizations, and youth organizations.

Like other majors in the Humanities, a major in Religious Studies equips students with highly transferable skills in writing, discussion, and critical analysis. Courses in world religions like Islam and Hinduism serve as valuable preparation for students interested in careers in international business, government service and related fields in which training in cultural diversity is important.