

Department of Religion

Some often asked questions:

Why Is Religion Taught at Oberlin?

Oberlin has included religion as an integral element in the study of the Humanities for at least two reasons: (a) the liberally educated student must understand religion as a dimension of human life which, whether reckoned for good or ill, has had a profound and decisive effect on our conception of human nature, destiny, and action; (b) the liberally educated student needs to recognize the interplay between the religious dimension itself and areas of life studied by other disciplines within the Humanities and in the Social Sciences.

What Is Religion?

Some scholars emphasize cultural and linguistic factors, stressing the way in which a religion resembles a way of life. Some emphasize human experience and concern, noting the ways in which religion may symbolize and express inner feelings or attitudes. Some emphasize the doctrinal and informative, stressing the ways in which a religion may lay claim to the truth about human life. At Oberlin, the study of religion is likely to involve the student in all three ways of characterizing religion.

Is That All?

Historically, the study of religion extends from the time of the appearance of human beings until the present. Geographically, it embraces the entire world. Culturally, it spans West and East, as well as ancient, classical, medieval, modern, and contemporary civilizations. In terms of disciplines, it draws upon methods of study used in anthropology, philosophy, history, archeology, classics, literary criticism, theology, and sociology – as well as art and music.

How Can All This Be Done within a Liberal Arts College?

Students from any field may take courses. Courses at the 100- and 200- levels are usually open to all students without prerequisites. Courses taught are grouped within ten categories, and the student who majors in religion is expected to take courses within at least four of these:

American Religious History; Christian History; East Asian Religions; Ethics; Gender and Religion; Islam; Jewish and Christian Scriptures; Judaism; Modern Religious Thought; South Asian Religions. A major must also take a concentration in one of these by selecting additional courses plus a seminar. The faculty offers a range of advanced research seminars in each of its regular categories. In addition to course work, faculty members in the department will sometimes offer private reading courses in subjects of special interest for advanced students. Finally, those seeking an extensive research and writing experience may pursue a Capstone Project and/or Honors. Oberlin has for years been known for its teaching of religion as well as for the quality of its religion graduates.

Why Study Religion at Oberlin?

Perhaps just for the fun of it. Or perhaps because it promises to be one of the most important cultural forces of the 21st century. A major in religion can provide a preprofessional degree for those who intend to pursue the study of religion beyond the baccalaureate degree or who hope to enter the ministry or the rabbinate. Moreover, a religion major can—and does—just as often serve as the focus of a liberal arts education for the student who plans no further academic or professional study of religion. What have alums done with their Religion major? Just about everything from shipbuilding and environmental law to puppet performances and film-making. If understanding our multicultural world is a high priority for your life after Oberlin, the study of religion is essential. Students who major in religion can be active in the life of the department through an elected "majors committee."

Anything Else?

Every year distinguished lecturers in the field of religion are brought to Oberlin for the Haskell Lecture series, for the Herbert G. May Memorial lecture, and under the auspices of the Mead-Swing Committee.

Who Teaches Religion at Oberlin?

Check the listing on back.

If you have further questions, write to the
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Department of Religion Faculty

JOYCE KLOC BABYAK

Ph.D., Yale University (1998) – Religious Ethics

CYNTHIA CHAPMAN

Ph.D., Harvard Divinity School (2002) – Jewish and Christian
Scriptures

JAMES C. DOBBINS

Ph.D., Yale University (1984) – East Asian Religions

ANNA GADE

Ph.D., University of Chicago (1999) – Islam and
Southeast Asian Religions

MARGARET KAMITSUKA

Ph.D., Yale University (1999) – Women and Religion

DAVID G. KAMITSUKA

Ph.D., Yale University (1993) – Modern Religious Thought

A. G. MILLER

Ph.D., Princeton University (1994) – American and African
American Religion

PAULA RICHMAN

Ph.D., University of Chicago (1981) – South Asian Religions

ABRAHAM SOCHER

Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley (2001) – Jewish
Studies

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