Religion and Politics

The John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics serves as an ideologically neutral venue for fostering rigorous scholarship and informing broad academic and public communities about the intersections of religion and U.S. politics.

The Center’s programs include:

- Public lectures, conferences and symposia relating to issues at the intersection of religion and U.S. politics;
- Research colloquia on American Religion, Politics and Culture, in which scholars and students discuss cutting-edge research;
- Religion & Politics, an online journal engaging a diverse array of scholars, journalists and public leaders;
- New courses on American religion and politics for Washington University students, conducted in both St. Louis and Washington, D.C. The courses contribute to an interdisciplinary undergraduate minor in religion and politics.

The Center offers a Religion and Politics minor, an interdisciplinary program that combines resources from the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics with relevant offerings from other academic programs, including Religious Studies, Political Science, History, American Culture Studies, African-American Studies, English, and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Designed to complement and contribute to students’ major fields of study, the minor also aims to augment the undergraduate education of those considering postgraduate professional programs in public policy, education, law, medicine, or social work. The Religion and Politics minor provides an opportunity for exploring in sustained ways how religion and politics have intersected American culture, both in historical and contemporary terms.

As part of the program, students may examine any number of issues such as church-state relations, religion’s role in shaping gender and sexuality debates, religion and electoral politics, public conflicts over the nexus of religion and science, religion’s entwining with reform movements (from abolition to environmentalism), or confluences of religion and politics in national vocabularies, media, and imagination.

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The Center does not offer a major. Interested students are encouraged to explore the Minor in Religion and Politics. Please visit the Minors page for more information.

The Minor in Religion and Politics  
Required units: 15  
12 units must be at the 300-level or above and at least 9 units must be offered through the Center.  

Required courses:  
RelPol 201 Religion and American Society  
or RelPol 225 Religion and Politics in American History  

Required activities:  
Attendance at five auxiliary events, such as lectures, colloquia, panels, conferences and lunch discussions, sponsored by the Center on Religion and Politics.  

Semester in D.C.  
Religion and Politics minors are strongly encouraged to spend a semester or summer in Washington, D.C., as part of the University’s Semester in D.C. program. The program’s requisite
L57 RelPol 201 Religion and American Society
This course explores religious life in the United States. We focus our study on groups and movements that highlight distinctive ways of being both "religious" and "American," including the Americanization of global religions in the U.S. context. Major themes include religious encounter and conflict; secularization, resurgent traditionalism and new religious establishments; experimentalism, eclecticism and so-called "spiritual" countercultures; the relationship between religious change and broader social and political currents (including clashes over race, class, gender and sexuality); and the challenges of religious multiplicity in the United States. Students: (1) acquire knowledge of the disparate religions practiced in North America during the 20th century and beyond; (2) examine some of the chief conflicts as well as alliances between religion and the American social order in a global context; and (3) develop interpretive tools for understanding religion's present and enduring role in the U.S. and the world. Same as L23 Re St 2010 and L98 AMCS 2010.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S: IQ, HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 225 Religion and Politics in American History
Same as L23 Re St 225, L98 AMCS 2251.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S: IQ, HUM

L57 RelPol 2590 Freshman Seminar: From the “City on a Hill” to 9/11: Religion and Social Justice in America
From the Puritans’ search to build the “city on a hill,” to the growing conflation of Islam with terrorism, Americans have long nurtured a self-identity as “God’s chosen people,” an idea that has helped them justify and normalize a theology of both conquest and suffering. This course analyzes how religion served to buttress and contest notions of social domination, punishment, reform and revolution in the United States from the colonial era to the present. Attention is paid to the voices of established religious leaders for whom the Church was their home, as well as religious dissidents who were often outcast as lunatics. Topics include the American Jeremiad, abolitionism, slave rebellions, Native American Catholicism, Fundamentalism, the Catholic Worker Movement, Pacifism, the Black Freedom Struggle, the Moral Majority and Post-9/11 military and gender interventions with the Islamic world. Same as History 2590
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH, SD A&S: IQ, HUM, SD EN: H

This course introduces students to important themes in the history of African-American, and thus in American, religious history, among them slavery, emancipation, urbanization, migration, consumer culture, sexuality, politics and media technologies. Primary attention is given to Afro-Protestantism in North America and the cultural, social, and religious practices and traditions of these black communities. However, students also are introduced to specific expressions of religious diversity and varying religious traditions and practices in African-American communities. Same as L22 History 2600, L23 Re St 2600, L98 AMCS 2600.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S: IQ, HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 302 Religion and Politics in 20th-Century U.S. History
This course provides both a chronological and thematic overview of the history of religion, political culture, and society in 20th-century America. While moving sequentially through key transformations running from the beginning to end of the century, we also pause each week to examine particular episodes and themes that illuminate substantive and symbolic societal turns. Specifically, this course encourages us to think more deeply about the ways religious ideas, institutions, and individuals intersect with and weave through broad political developments like populism and progressivism; corporate and labor activism; the rise and decline of New Deal liberalism; war and American empire building; the power shift to the Sunbelt; urban and suburban power struggles; social movements of the Left and the Right; the politics of family, education, and community; civil rights and ethnic identity; conservatism and globalization. The overarching goal of this course is to place religion at the center of political development in the 20th century, and at the center of our understanding of this recent past. Here religion is not (as is often done by political historians) cordoned off as an agent of change worthy of consideration only under exceptional circumstances and in rare moments, but rather is considered as a consistent, powerful player that always brings competing passions and interests, drama and controversy to the political realm. This primary agenda is accompanied by a couple of others. In addition to absorbing the historical “facts and figures” of religion and politics in the 20th century (on which students are tested), students also are encouraged to encounter and critique different styles of historical writing, from biographies and autobiographies to traditional monographs, articles and essays to editorials. What makes “good writing”? “Good history writing”? What are the challenges inherent to writing effective religious and political history? This set of issues is important for us to consider, because they lead to yet a final set of questions: how does one actually go about researching history? Writing it? In addition to taking time for extensive reading in this subject area, students also are expected to complete a major term paper based on both primary and secondary sources. Students begin this project early in the semester and, while in consultation with members of their peer group and instructor, see it through to its conclusion by the last week of class. Same as L22 History 3020, L23 Re St 3025, L98 AMCS 3027.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S: IQ, HUM EN: H
L57 RelPol 3081 City on a Hill: The Concept and Culture of American Exceptionalism
Same as AMCS 3081
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S: IQ, HUM

L57 RelPol 310 Religion and Violence
Is religion intrinsically connected with violence or merely manipulated to justify political positions and incite supporters? How has religion been the motivation and justification behind violent conflict, aggression and persecution? Does religion have a greater power to make war or peace? People have debated these questions for centuries as believers waged war in the name of their god(s). We study several critical theories about religion and violence and test them on historical and recent “religious” conflicts. Our investigation is organized around five types of violence: 1) martyrdom and redemptive suffering, 2) claims on sacred space, 3) the violence of social stratification and “othering,” 4) war and 5) apocalyptic and spiritual warfare. Case studies ranging from early Christian martyrs and crusades to attacks on abortion clinics and Tokyo subways help clarify patterns and types of religious violence. Same as L23 Re St 3100.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S: IQ, HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 325 Food Fights: The Politics of American Jewish Consumption, 1890–2014
This course explores the politics of religion, food, and eating among Jews in the United States from the late 19th century through the present day. The subject is not Jewish food per se but instead American Jewish foodways — the cultural, social, historical, political and economic practices relating to the production and consumption of food. The course is organized chronologically but also by themes that loom large in American Jewish history: the great wave of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe from 1890 to 1924; contention over kashrut, including its increasing industrialization and commercialization; iconic American Jewish foods; and the present-day “new Jewish food movement,” which aims to align Jewish foodways with sustainability and the slow foods movement. The course focuses attention not only on narratives of American Jewish foodways but on core issues of American Jewish identity politics: where are the sources of power and who is recognized as an authority? What is at stake in delineating between Judaism (the religion) and Jewishness (the culture)? How do American Jews present themselves to non-Jewish Americans and how do they respond to Jews who are different from them? How have the politics of place affected the distribution and reception of Jewish food and how have these politics changed over time? Same as L23 Re St 3250, L75 JINE 3252, L98 AMCS 3253.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S: IQ, HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 350 Faith and Politics in America’s Cold War
This course provides a thematic and chronological approach to the history of religion and politics in America’s Cold War (1945–1989). Along the way we engage historical patterns both from the “bottom up” and “top down,” measuring the power of elites as well as rank-and-file Americans to shape the religious and political imperatives of their day. What is religion? What is politics? How did the Cold War redefine them and recast their relationship in profound and lasting ways? These are some of the big-picture questions that we wrestle with as we make our way through the era and the spiritual as well as political crises related to Cold War tensions that animated and defined it. Same as L23 Re St 3500, L98 AMCS 3505.
Credit 3 units. A&S: SS A&S: IQ, SSC

L57 RelPol 380 Politics of Representation in American Religion: Media, Technology and Display
The role of media in both politics and religion is often presumed to be one of broadcasting information to the public. And yet forms of communication are seldom detached entirely from the processes of creating the information that is conveyed. The entanglement of religion, public identities, and media began well before the introduction of cable television and Twitter. This course is designed to draw students’ attention to modes of mediating public identities in American history by focusing on ways in which religion and religiosity have been represented through visual and material artifacts. Students become familiarized with visual and material culture methods and modes of analysis in historical research as well as learn to identify and analyze relationships between religion, representation and public identities in multiple periods of American history and through a variety of technologies. Same as L22 History 3800, L23 Re St 3800, L98 AMCS 3802.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S: IQ, HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 390 Mormonism and the American Experience
The focus of this seminar is Mormonism, meaning, primarily, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (or LDS Church), which is the largest Mormon body. Mormons in the United States have gone from being one of the most intensely persecuted religious groups in the country’s history to the fourth largest religious body in the U.S. (by one count), with a reputation for patriotism and conservative family values. In addition to introducing who the Mormons are, their beliefs and religious practices, this seminar explores issues raised by Mormonism’s move toward the religious mainstream alongside its continuing distinctiveness. These issues include: What is the religious “mainstream” in the U.S.? How did conflicts over Mormonism during the 19th century, especially the conflict over polygamy, help define the limits of religious tolerance in this country? How have LDS teachings about gender and race, or controversies about whether or not Mormons are Christian, positioned and repositioned Mormons within U.S. society? Same as L22 History 3900, L23 Re St 3900, L98 AMCS 3900.
L57 RelPol 395 Topics in Religion and Politics
Same as L23 Re St 3950.
Credit 3 units.

L57 RelPol 406 Natural Law
In Christian theology and philosophy, a claim that there is a “natural law” has typically meant that all human beings share certain moral impulses, principles or judgments because they were all created by God. The claim has many source versions, but it was formulated most influentially by Thomas Aquinas. Through Thomas, natural law became a fundamental notion in Catholic moral theology, but also in philosophical ethics and international law. It entered Protestant traditions at many points, notably in Anglicanism with Thomas Hooker. In the last decades, it has been retrieved for application to public debates on any number of controversial issues, from artificial contraception to torture and nuclear war. This seminar takes up representative parts of this long tradition — first in Thomas Aquinas, then in some of his early modern interpreters, and finally in contemporary controversies. Same as L23 Re St 4065, L84 Lw St 406.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S: IQ, HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 490 Religion and the Politics of Place in Modern America
The history of U.S. religion in the long 20th century (1890s forward) is flourishing as of late, in part because of scholars’ efforts to ground their story in the gritty and messy realities of “secular” spaces, realms outside the pulpit, pew, and seminary classroom once deemed tangential by traditional church historians. Though respectful of developments within overtly sacred spheres, new religious historians have worked to broaden and enrich their renderings of this country’s religious past by applying new methodologies of “lived religion,” pursuing new types of primary source bases (from bottom-up accounts of labor activism to top-down records of corporate power), and applying fresh lines of questioning that dovetail with fresh thinking in other areas of American history. The results of this effort are striking and sure to be long lasting, not just for the study of religion in U.S. history but also for historical treatment of politics and popular culture, diplomacy, capitalism, race, gender, and myriad impulses that have worked (and continue to work) in and on American history through time. This course provides both a chronological and thematic overview of religion and the politics of place in modern America. While moving sequentially through time, pausing to assess transformative moments in U.S. religion and its broader political contexts, the course focuses on particular locations — physical, social, ideological — in which this pattern of development unfolds. Students are, in this sense, asked to read, digest and assess recently published and highly influential books that place religion at the center of dramatic and contested, but also quiet and subtle, social spaces in which the meanings of faith and its role in society are challenged or altered by the encounter, and from which religion emerges with renewed urgency, vigor and determination to revolutionize or reform its surroundings. Same as L22 History 4090, L23 Re St 4900, L98 AMCS 490.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S: IQ, HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 495 Religion and the State: Global Mission, Global Empire
This course explores the complex intersections among U.S. political power on a global stage, and religious institutions and identities. Readings and discussions are organized around two very broad questions. First: How has this nation’s history been shaped by religious “others” both inside and outside its borders? Second: How have perceptions of those others in turn affected U.S. responses to circumstances of global consequence — including, for example, foreign policy and diplomacy, missionary activity, and economic practices? Same as L23 Re St 495.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S: IQ, HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 497 Independent Study in Religion and Politics
Credit variable, maximum 4 units.

L57 RelPol 498 Internship in Religion and Politics
Minors in Religion and Politics may elect to participate in an internship program in partial completion of their degree requirements. The location will be selected in consultation with their adviser and other faculty in the Center on Religion and Politics. In order to receive credit, the work interns perform must be unpaid and must substantively engage the intersection of religion and politics.
Credit variable, maximum 3 units.