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. 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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Majors
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.

Minors
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.

Courses
Visit https://courses.wustl.edu to view semester offerings for L57 RelPol.
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.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH & A&S IQ: HUM BU: ETH EN: H

L57 RelPol 225 Religion and Politics in American History
The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is often recognized as a catalyst for church and state relations in the United States, and yet even close attention to the framing of the religion clauses and their subsequent interpretation in courts of law and public opinion provide only a glimpse of the complexity of religion and politics in America. As a constitutional category, religion affords protections to American citizens — but both the designation of “religion” and “citizen” have been contested throughout the nation’s history. The promise of the Constitution has been equally fraught, as different constituencies vie for the authority of interpretation. This course does not provide hard and fast answers to the complicated cultural, political, and religious history of American public life. But it equips students with a range of analytical tools with which to engage these issues as students and citizens. Please note: Students considering a minor in religion and politics should enroll for this course using the RelPol course number (L57 225).
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH & A&S IQ: HUM Arch: HUM Art: HUM BU: BA EN: H

L57 RelPol 235 Puritans and Revolutionaries: Religion and the Making of America
This course introduces students to the history of religion and politics in America from the English settlements of Virginia and Massachusetts Bay during the early 17th century through the constitutional debates of the 1780s. It pays attention to both formal legal issues regarding religious establishments and wider matters concerning political sentiments and their relationship to religious ideas or values. The course does not advocate a defining argument or single ideological “point,” but rather, facilitates a series of observations of how different positions on the role of religion in early America made sense in their respective historical contexts. Social, political, and intellectual variables made for shifting understandings of what religious ideas mattered to public life in America and how those ideas ought to shape civil affairs.
Credit 3 units. A&S IQ: HUM BU: BA

L57 RelPol 395 Topics in Religion and Politics: Religion and Environment in American History
This upper-level course explores the interactions between human societies and the natural world during the long history of the United States (roughly the 17th century to the present), with continental and ultimately global contexts in mind. Its focus is on the ways religion — ideas, individuals, and institutions of faith — have shaped how humans envision, understand, organize, encounter, and inhabit nature, and on the ways American faiths have been defined by these engagements with earth and its material and imagined properties. Accompanying this primary focus is a second thrust, that which connects matters of religion and environment to major political trends, both as they have been triggered and realized by individuals and communities and as they have helped determine national and international political trajectories. Issues discussed in the course include Native American conceptions of environment and their clash with European settlement, the effects of Christian ecological interpretation and invasion, missionaries, farming, and resource management in the west, industrialization and its religious discontents, emerging debates between preservation and conservation, government and church-based initiatives to regulate land and subsurface wealth, the ascent of environmental concern and activism in the long-1970s, and the very recent (and current) debates of oil, energy, and global warming, which have focused on the social and religious landscape. Besides surveying this long history of religion and environment, and gaining a command of class material, students develop, more generally, interpretive tools for understanding religion’s present and enduring role in the U.S. and the world; acquire knowledge of the disparate religions practiced in North America during the 20th century and beyond; and examine some of the chief conflicts as well as alliances between religion and the American natural and social order in a global context.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH & A&S IQ: HUM Arch: HUM Art: HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 410 The FBI and Religion
This seminar examines the relationship between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and religion (i.e., faith communities, clerics and religious professionals) as a way to study and understand 20th-century religion and politics. The course investigates the history of the FBI as well as the various ways in which the FBI and religious groups have interacted. The course pays particular attention to what the professor calls the four interrelated “modes” of FBI-religious engagement: counterintelligence and surveillance, coordination and cooperation, censorship and publicity, and consultation.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH & A&S IQ: HUM Arch: HUM Art: HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 430 Pilgrims and Seekers: American Spirituality from Transcendentalism to the New Age
The seminar focuses on the formation of “spirituality” in American culture from the Transcendentalist world of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman on through more recent expressions of the “spiritual-but-not-religious” sensibility. For the purposes of this course, “spirituality” is usefully placed in quotation marks in order to emphasize its peculiar construction as something positively distinct from “religion” — a reordering of American religious thought and experience that we explore in historical and contemporaneous terms. The social and political consequences of this turn to the spiritual over the religious also is explored: for example, the consecration of liberal individualism, the environmental vision of nature mysticism, the blessing of a “bourgeois-bohemian” consumerism, and the negotiation of cultural pluralism.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH & A&S IQ: HUM
L57 RelPol 497 Independent Study in Religion and Politics
Credit variable, maximum 4 units.