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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Faculty

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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 refer to the Minors section for more information.

Minors

The Minor in Religion and Politics

Required units: 15

15 units of course work, including:

- One required course: This should be completed prior to the second semester of the junior year.  
  RelPol 201 Religion and American Society (3 units)
or RelPol 225 Religion and Politics in American History (3 units)

- 12 additional units (must be 300-level or above), 9 of which must be taught by Center faculty.

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

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 glimmer 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 context. The course includes readings on the religious 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: TH A&S IQ: HUM BU: BA EN: H

L57 RelPol 240 Jewish Political Thought
This course uses the concepts of political theory to explore the diverse Jewish political tradition. While this tradition includes writing from and about the three historical periods of Jewish self-rule (including the modern state of Israel), most of the Jewish political tradition comes from the understanding of politics as viewed from outsiders to mainstream communities. Additionally, Jewish political thought can be found through a Jewish community's self-understanding based on its interpretation of Jewish text and law by which it bound itself. Because we span over 2,000 years of recorded history, we will not attempt to discern a single "Jewish political thought" but rather look at JPT through the lens of familiar concepts of political theory. The fundamental questions we will explore are the relationship of the Jewish tradition to concepts such as authority, law, consent, sovereignty and justice. We will ask how the Jewish tradition views government and the relationship between the authority of God and the authority of temporal powers. We will explore these questions through a range of materials that include both primary and secondary literature.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S IQ: HUM BU: BA 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 will also be introduced to specific expressions of religious diversity and varying religious traditions and practices in African-American communities.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S IQ: HUM BU: ETH EN: H

L57 RelPol 301
Credit 3 units. BU: ETH

L57 RelPol 302
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S IQ: HUM BU: ETH EN: H

L57 RelPol 305 Between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.: Race, Religion, and the Politics of Freedom
This course focuses on the political and spiritual lives of Martin and Malcolm. We will examine their personal biographies, speeches, writings, representations, FBI Files, and legacies as a way to better understand how the intersections of religion, race and politics came to bear upon the freedom struggles...
of people of color in the U.S. and abroad. The course also
takes seriously the evolutions in both Martin and Malcolm’s
political approaches and intellectual development, focusing
especially on the last years of their respective lives. We will
also examine the critical literature that takes on the leadership
styles and political philosophies of these communal leaders,
as well as the very real opposition and surveillance they faced
from state forces like the police and FBI. Students will gain an
understanding of the ways social conditions, religious structures
and institutions, and personal experiences led to first the emergence
and then the assassinations of these two figures. We will discuss
the subtleties of their political analyses, pinpointing the key
differences and similarities of their philosophies, approaches
and legacies, and we will apply these debates of the mid-20th
century to contemporary events and social movements in terms
of how their legacies are articulated and what we can learn from
them in struggles for justice and recognition in 21st-century
America and beyond.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH, SD A&S IQ: HUM, SD BU: BA EN: H

L57 RelPol 320 Religious Freedom in America
This interdisciplinary course, co-taught by a law school professor
and an American historian, concerns the intersection of religion,
liberty and law in American culture. It introduces students to the
major texts and historical issues concerning religious liberty,
using legal history and case law, intellectual and social history,
and political philosophy. It will address issues of significant
contemporary debate — from the role of religious groups on
college campuses to bakers and gay weddings — along with the
depth historical background, from English settlement of North
America and the making of the Constitution, through the Civil
War, to the Cold War and the recent political developments.
Same as I50 InterD 320
Credit 3 units. A&S IQ: HUM, SD EN: H

L57 RelPol 321 American Religion and the Politics of Gender
and Sexuality
Religious beliefs about gender and sexuality have long played
a vital role in American politics, vividly evident in debates over
such issues as birth control, censorship, pornography, funding
for AIDS research, abortion, contraceptive access, abstinence-
only sex education, sexual harassment, same-sex marriage, and
more. Educated citizens need to understand the impact of these
religiously inflected debates on our political culture. This course
explores the centrality of sex to religion and politics in the U.S.,
emphasizing Christianity (both Protestant and Catholic forms)
and its weighty social and political role regulating the behavior
of women and men, children and teens, as well as its uses in legal
and judicial decisions. Alongside scholarly readings in gender
and sexuality, we will discuss popular devotional texts — on
chastity, marriage, and homosexuality — with a political bent.
Students will leave the course able to analyze how religious
beliefs about sex shape specific gender norms central to U.S.
politics.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S IQ: HUM BU: ETH EN: H

L57 RelPol 3504 The Making of American Conservatism
Since 1932, from Herbert Hoover to the Tea Party
Beginning with Hayek’s The Road to Serfdom and Buckley’s
God and Man at Yale, this course examines some of the major
conservative writers and thinkers in the United States since
World War II. The course includes readings by Russell Kirk,
Richard Weaver, Barry Goldwater, Phyllis Schlafly, Irving Kristol,
Newt Gingrich, and Pat Buchanan as well younger conservatives
like Mark Steyn, Jonah Goldberg, Ramesh Ponnuru, S.E. Cupp,
and Kevin Williamson. Several classes are devoted to black
conservatives including Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, and
Walter Williams. We will try to answer the questions: What
is conservatism and who are its adherents? Can we speak
of conservatism in the singular or are there several types of
conservatism? Are the various forms of conservatism politically
and intellectually compatible? How has conservatism changed
since Reagan and the 1980s? What inroads has conservatism
made in the cultural and political life of the United States? Is
the United States essentially a conservative nation? Time permitting;
we may also watch a few Hollywood movies by conservative
filmmakers.
Same as L98 AMCS 3504
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S IQ: HUM BU: HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 360 Religion and the Modern Civil Rights
Movement, 1954-1968
The modern Civil Rights Movement is a landmark event in
the nation’s political, cultural, and social history. In
many contexts, this movement for and against civil and legal
equality took on a religious ethos, with activists, opponents
and observers believing that the net result of the marches,
demonstrations and legislative rulings would redeem and/or
destroy “The Soul of the Nation.” This seminar examines the
modern Civil Rights Movement and its strategies and goals,
with an emphasis on the prominent religious ideologies and
activities that were visible and utilized in the modern movement.
The course pays particular attention to the Protestant, Catholic,
Jewish, and Islamic traditions, figures and communities that were
indifferent, combative, instrumental and/or supportive of Civil
Rights legislation throughout the mid-20th century.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S IQ: HUM BU: BA EN: H

L57 RelPol 370 Religion and the Origins of Capitalism
This course explores the economic, cultural and social history
of the origins of Anglo-American capitalism from 1500 to 1800.
Throughout we will discuss the worldviews and day-to-day
business decisions of the merchants who created England’s
transatlantic market order and empire. Rather than treat
early capitalism only in terms of material or purely economic
dynamics, it probes the intellectual constructs that combined with
commercial innovations to form capitalism into a social system.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S IQ: HUM BU: ETH EN: H

L57 RelPol 385 Religion and Politics in the Long 1920s
This course is a historical survey of the dynamic relationship
between religion and politics during the 1920s. The 1920s
were a tipping point for a great deal of the fundamental issues
that shaped the 20th century in the U.S. This course seeks
to investigate how religious activism, evangelism, discourse,
practice and reinvention contributed to and was shaped by such
change.
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH, SD A&S IQ: HUM, SD BU: BA EN: H

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 fructified the American 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 & 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: counter-intelligence and surveillance, coordination and cooperation, censorship and publicity, and consultation.

Credit 3 units. A&S: TH & S IQ: HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 4121 American Religion, Politics, and Culture: Historical Foundations
This seminar offers a wide-ranging overview of the leading historical scholarship concerning the busy intersections of American religion and politics. Topics include: church-state relations, religion and foreign policy, religion and social justice, religion and the science wars, the rise of the Religious Right, and the role of religion in public life. Prerequisites: advanced undergraduate or graduate standing in a related field or permission of instructor.

Credit 3 units. A&S: TH & S IQ: HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 4122 American Religion, Politics & Culture: Commentary from Alexis de Tocqueville to Contemporary Pundits
This research-oriented seminar involves in-depth historiographical investigation of leading scholarship at the busy intersections of American religion, politics and culture. The second semester focuses on classic and contemporary commentaries on the American religious and political scene from Alexis de Tocqueville through today's leading pundits. Some sessions will include a visiting scholar engaged in cutting-edge research — a feature that will allow seminar members to work with important scholars from beyond the university. Possible topics include: church-state relations, religion and foreign policy, religion and civil rights, religion and the science wars, the rise of the Religious Right, and the role of religion in national elections. The seminar is taught under the auspices of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics and is offered in two complementary parts (though enrollment in either one of the two is certainly possible). Its ambition is to build up a community of inquirers engaged in the core questions that animate the Danforth Center. Prerequisites: Advanced undergraduate or graduate standing in AMCS, History, or Religious Studies or permission of instructor.

Credit 3 units. A&S: TH & S IQ: 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 & S IQ: HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 480 Readings in African-American Religious History
This course is an introduction to the history and variety of African-American religions in the New World diaspora. The approach will be chronological, from the earliest years to the New World to contemporary expressions. We will also explore some of the major historiographical themes that have catalyzed current scholarship, the purpose and effectiveness of black nationalist movements, issues of class and gender, the persistence of African elements of New World religious practice, performance and popular culture.

Credit 3 units. A&S: TH & S IQ: HUM EN: H

L57 RelPol 485 Christian Nation, Secular Republic
The United States has often been imagined as both a deeply Christian nation and a thoroughly secular republic, and those conjoined framings have created recurrent conflict throughout American history. This seminar is designed to introduce advanced undergraduates and graduate students to current discussions of religion, secularism, and unbelief in American religious and political history. The course also places a complementary emphasis on close readings of crucial primary works, say, about the rise of deistic toleration or the persisting political power of Christianity-in textual particularities. The course takes as its starting point Charles Taylor's monumental account A Secular Age and works from there through various episodes of the Enlightenment and its long aftermath.

Credit 3 units. A&S: TH & 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?
Credit 3 units. A&S: TH A&S IQ: HUM EN: H