The Department of Religion offers Bowdoin students the opportunity to study the major religions of the world—Eastern and Western, ancient and modern—from a variety of viewpoints and without sectarian bias. The department’s interdisciplinary style of inquiry suggests many natural connections to other areas of the liberal arts, including literature, philosophy, art, psychology, history, Asian studies, women’s studies, and sociology and anthropology. By focusing on the nature and effects of religion among various peoples of the earth, students develop a critical understanding of other cultures and deeper insights into their own.

Students may explore the varieties of religion in Asia, chiefly the expressions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and traditional religions in China and Japan. Or they may focus on the forms that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam take among the peoples of the Middle East, Europe, and North America. Introductory, intermediate, and advanced courses are offered in each of these areas.

Courses are critical, historical, multidisciplinary, and cross-cultural. Students analyze such matters as patterns of religious practice, interpretative art and writings, the history of various religious traditions, and the functions of religion in society. In addition, students critically engage the field itself by studying classic theories—what religion is and how one studies it. Typically, religion classes enroll fifteen to thirty students, except for general introductory courses, which tend to be larger.

In each graduating class there are typically eight to twelve religion majors. Many students combine the major in religion with a major in another field, such as history, philosophy, literature, or psychology.

The Major and Minor

The major consists of nine courses in religion, including two required courses—Religion 1101, Introduction to the Study of Religion and Religion 3390, Theories about Religion. For the seven remaining courses, four courses are to be taken at the intermediate level, one in each of the following four designated areas: (1) Asian Religions, (2) Bible and Comparative Studies, (3) Christianity and Gender, and (4) Islam and Post-Biblical Judaism. Majors must also complete an additional advanced course in religion and two electives, one of which may be a first-year seminar.

In order to enroll in Religion 3390, a major normally will be expected to have taken four of the nine required courses. This seminar is also open to qualified non-majors with permission of the instructor. In addition, candidates for honors complete a tenth course, advanced independent study, as part of their honors projects. (See next section.) No more than one first-year seminar may be counted toward the major. No more than three courses taken at other colleges or universities will count toward the major. No courses graded Credit/D/Fail may count toward the major or minor.

Independent Study and Honors Program

There are normally two kinds of independent study: a directed reading course designed to allow a student to explore a subject not currently offered within the curriculum, and a study that will culminate in substantial and original research. For a number of religion majors, work in the department culminates in an honors project. Typically, a student chooses a specialized topic to explore with a member of the faculty, writes a substantial essay, and discusses his or her findings with the assembled faculty of the department. Students contemplating honors candidacy should possess a record of distinction in religion courses, including those that support the project, a clearly articulated and well-focused research proposal, and a high measure of motivation and scholarly maturity. The faculty recommends that such students complete two semesters of independent study in preparing papers for honors consideration.

Study Abroad

Off-campus study is an opportunity to take courses in religion or related disciplines and to study religions as practiced in specific cultural environments. The department encourages students to look for solid programs of study, especially in areas of religion not commonly taught at Bowdoin.

Two programs sponsored by Bowdoin in cooperation with other institutions are especially recommended for the study of Asian religions: Intercollegiate Sri Lanka Education (ISLE) and the South India Term Abroad (SITA). Bowdoin students have occasionally participated in Pitzer College’s term in Nepal and Antioch College’s semester in India. Students have also studied at the Universities of St. Andrews and Edinburgh in Scotland; elsewhere in Britain; as well as at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. There are also opportunities for study in China, Taiwan, and Japan.

Distribution requirements for the major should normally be satisfied with courses taken at Bowdoin. Before studying off campus, majors should have satisfactorily completed Religion 1101 and at least two other courses counted toward the distribution requirements. No more than three courses taken at other colleges or universities will count toward the major.

Facilities and Resources

The Department of Religion is located in Kanbar Hall. The department periodically invites noted scholars of national and international significance to offer lectures and, in some cases, to teach courses that supplement the curriculum.
General religion reference sources, as well as a wealth of information on Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and many other religions are available at Bowdoin’s Hawthorne-Longfellow Library, which also provides online access to religion and philosophical databases.

Faculty
The department consists of four full-time members who are dedicated to teaching and to active programs of research and publication. Many approved religion classes are cross-listed with other departments and are taught by professors from those departments, including history, philosophy, gender and women’s studies, Asian studies, anthropology, and Africana studies.

Todd S. Berzon, assistant professor of religion, B.A., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. (Columbia), teaches courses on Judaism and Christianity in the ancient world, including courses on the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Anti-Judaism, and gender and sexuality. His research focuses on heresy in late antiquity and how Christian intellectuals, in particular, theorized and organized human diversity and difference. He is especially interested in how ancient writers developed notions of religion as a distinct category of human existence.

John C. Holt, William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of the Humanities in Religion and Asian Studies, A.B. (Gustavus Adolphus), A.M. (Graduate Theological Union), Ph.D. (Chicago), teaches courses about Asian religious traditions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as courses on theoretical approaches to the study of religion. In 1982, he organized and founded the intercollegiate Sri Lanka Education (ISEL) Program for a consortium of private liberal arts colleges, and in 1986 he became the first chair of Bowdoin’s Asian Studies Program. His publications include Disciple: The Canonical Buddhism of the Vinayapitaka (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981); A Guide to the Buddhist Religion (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981); and the Crown (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), for which he was awarded an American Academic Book Award for Excellence in 1992; The Anagatavasena Desana: Art and Politics in Late Medieval Sri Lanka (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), and The Buddhist Visnu (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), a study analyzing the assimilation and transformation of the Hindu cult of Visnu by the Sinhala Buddhists of Sri Lanka. He has also written Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religion Culture (University of Hawaii Press, 2009) and edited The Sri Lanka Reader (Duke University Press, 2011). He is currently finishing a book on ritual cultures in Theravada Buddhism and researching another on Buddhist/Muslim tensions in Sri Lanka and Burma, the latter supported by a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship.

Robert G. Morrison, associate professor of religion, A.B., A.M., Ph.D. (Columbia), teaches courses in the academic study of Near Eastern religions, particularly Islam and Judaism, and including a first-year seminar on astrology. Research projects on the role of science in Islamic and Jewish texts have pushed his teaching to take even greater account of religion’s strength as a system of explanation. His book, Islam and Science: The Intellectual Career of Nizam al-Din al-Nisaburi (Routine, 2007), won a 2009 World Prize for the Book of the Year in Islamic studies from the Islamic Republic of Iran. His forthcoming book is The Light of the World: Astronomy in al-Andalus (University of California Press). He is currently working on scholarly networks in the eastern Mediterranean in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Elizabeth A. Pritchard, associate professor of religion, A.B. (Boston College), M.T.S., M.A., Ph.D. (Harvard), teaches courses on Christianity, gender, secularization, and progressive religious movements. She is the author of Religion in Public: Locke’s Political Theology (Stanford University Press, 2013), as well as a number of articles on political theology, agency, pilgrimage, and scholarly approaches to conflict and difference in the study of religion. She has taught a course that brings together Bowdoin students and prison inmates in a Maine Correctional Center and plans to continue developing courses and opportunities that bring Bowdoin students outside the classroom and into the larger community. She is a long-time member of the editorial board of the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion.

After Bowdoin
For a small number of students, religious studies serve as preparation for the professional clergy. The majority of students in the department, however, view the study of religion as an end in itself, finding in it uniquely engaging phenomena with profound influences on human affairs. Students also develop skills that are applicable in a wide variety of careers, such as marketing, child welfare, research, government, law, non-profit work, social work, and go on to study comparative religion at the graduate level. Some have plans to continue developing courses and opportunities that bring Bowdoin students into active programs of research and publication. For a small number of students, religious studies serve as preparation for the professional clergy. The majority of students in the department, however, view the study of religion as an end in itself, finding in it uniquely engaging phenomena with profound influences on human affairs. Students also develop skills that are applicable in a wide variety of careers, such as marketing, child welfare, research, government, law, non-profit work, social work, and go on to study comparative religion at the graduate level. Some have plans to continue developing courses and opportunities that bring Bowdoin students into active programs of research and publication.