

Religious Studies Program Review 2021-22: Self-Study

November 30, 2021

This Religious Studies (RS) 2021-22 program reviews includes all RS programs and minors:

1. RS Independent Major (40 credits)
2. RS Concentration (28 credits)
3. Christianity Studies minor (20 credits)
4. Islamic Studies minor (20 credits)
5. Judaic Studies minor (20 credits)

Contents:

1. Program description
2. Program goals
3. SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) of alignment of RS goals with OU goals
 - a. student success
 - b. research
 - c. community engagement
 - d. diversity/equity/inclusion (DEI)
4. Summary and plan for program improvement
 - a. 5 areas of excellence
 - b. 5 areas of improvement
 - c. plan for improvements
5. Appendices
 - a. student enrollment in RS concentration and 3 minors (RS 2013-17; OIRA 2017-21)
 - b. student enrollment in key religious studies courses (Banner, 2011-21)
 - c. brochure religious studies

1. Program Description

The Religious Studies program at OU was started in the mid-1980s by history professor Leonardas Gerulaitis. In the mid-1990s, sociology professor Gary Shepherd formalized the RS Concentration (28 credits) and the RS Independent Major (40 credits). From its start, almost all OU students who declared the RS Concentration combined this with their own major. Hence, for many years the Concentration enrollment was very low and typically varied between 1 to 2 students per year. Occasionally, once every 2-3 years on average, a student (often with a high GPA) would contact the director RS to set up a personalized schedule for the RS Independent Major. (See Appendix 1 for the detailed RS student enrollment numbers.)

The three minors (each 20 credits) make up the other key element of the Religious Studies program. The oldest minor is Christianity Studies, which started in the mid-1990s. Charles Mabee was the director in 2000-21; Randy Engle took over in November 2021. Judaic Studies started around 2005 and is directed by Mike Pytlik since 2012. Finally, Islamic Studies started around 2006; Malik Balla is the director since 2011. Each minor has different requirements, but they all include 1 or 2 core courses, 1 or 2 field-related courses, and 1 application course. (See Religious Studies brochure for details.)

RS does not conduct student exit surveys for three main reasons: (1) RS Concentration and Independent Major enrollments are too low to obtain significant and representative results. (2) All RS students take the RS Concentration (and even the RS Independent Major) together with their primary major, which is their preferred career. (3) Past attempts by the previous Director RS, Epstein, to contact former RS students and collect exit surveys were unsuccessful due to these considerations.

Since around 2010, the visibility of the RS program was greatly strengthened by having numerous popular events on campus for students, staff, and faculty with lively discussions and food. In recent years, before COVID-19, these included such annual events as the *World Religions Showcase* (a forum explaining all major world religions, typically in September), the *Forgiveness, Wellness, and Religion* panel (in cooperation with the William Beaumont School of Medicine and OU Nursing; November), and the *Future of Religion* panel. In February 2021, RS together with Sociology, Anthropology, Social Work and Criminal Justice hosted a virtual *Christian Nationalism* event, with Zoom talks by Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry. RS also regularly invites appealing local speakers, such as Dr. Bryan Pitts (Indiana U Bloomington), Dr. Mohammad Khalil (MSU) and Dr. Saeed Khan (WSU). However, the COVID-19 pandemic and recent budget cutbacks make it impossible to continue organizing a variety of popular campus events, which almost certainly negatively impacts RS recruitment and enrollment in classes. Many RS faculty teach classes for the Liberal Studies programs (BALS and MALS) as well as the Honor College. Religious Studies has a strong presence at Go for the Gold and Student Orientation II, but this has not translated into increased recruitment or enrollment in recent years (likely also partly due to COVID-19).

The main challenge for RS is the following. OU students across campus told Gooren in 2018 that they were interested in religion and spirituality; most were also interested in learning more about Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. However, this interest has not translated in higher enrollment in RS classes (yet). Some possible reasons are discussed below under 3a. We urgently need events, Lunch and Learns, and study abroad programs to resume so that we can use them as a vehicle to draw students to our classes, since many OU students currently are largely unaware that RS courses are available and will benefit their careers.

2. Program Goals

The following 4 key goals all foster religious literacy¹ among OU students and on campus:

1. To offer students the opportunity to study and understand the world's religions from an *academic* – rather than faith – standpoint. This includes attention to their histories, beliefs, and cultural, historical, and political impact on today's world to foster cross-cultural awareness.
2. To teach students practical and academic critical *knowledge* of the nature of religious experience, the sacred, ritual, authoritative religious texts, and individual and social transformation based on religions in multiple cultures and societies throughout history.

¹ Cf. Steven Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.

3. To prepare students with multiple *skills* (interpersonal, critical thinking, writing, and self-knowledge) across multiple potential careers in the humanities, social sciences, and STEM that emphasize the full range of civic engagement, social responsibility, and ethical leadership.²
4. To bring students in direct personal contact with (other) faith traditions to foster mutual understanding and interfaith dialogue.

3. SWOT Analysis of RS and OU Goals

A SWOT analysis provides a systematic evaluation of a program's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

a. Student success

One major strength of the RS program is the *small size of its classes*: RS classes are capped at 20 or 30, allowing *personalized attention* to all students through a close relationship with the instructor. The student-instructor ratio is high in the RS program. COVID-19 required us to add many new RS online classes and experiment with new formats, e.g., a recorded "micro-lecture" available for view by students at any time or place. Many RS classes meet General Education requirements, and most RS classes are writing intensive with a strong emphasis on developing and strengthening good writing skills, which is a key element of student (and future career!) success. The counterpart *weakness* here is that RS needs to recruit more students to its classes as well as to the RS Independent Major, Concentration, and the 3 minors. Both Islamic and Judaic Studies have *scholarships* that contribute to student access and success. The main external *threat* for RS is the continuing decline in student enrollment at OU, leading to 50-67% of scheduled RS classes being cancelled in the regular semesters since COVID hit. Apart from Michigan demographics, one main internal *threat* is increasing limitations on electives for OU students; another internal *threat* is the slow erosion of CAS General Education classes across OU in the last years that hurts small programs offering many Gen. Ed. classes in particular.

However, low RS student enrollment also offers a *great opportunity* for future expansion (see also item 4. Plan for Improvement). Pytlik leads a travel abroad archaeology class in Israel every summer (with Carroll), while Engle leads a summer travel abroad class in England; both noted afterwards that these students increased their commitment and enrolled in many classes in the program. RS also organizes many campus events that create direct contact between students and faculty and thus help build a community with a common culture, contributing to student success. A key campus event is the annual *Religious Studies Student Conference* in early April, which gives an award to the year's best student paper in any RS (or religion-related) course. Unfortunately, COVID prevented us from celebrating the student conference last year. Some activities we are currently planning for the near future are offering the new class *Spiritual but Not Religious* (fall 2022, Pytlik), and planning potentially monthly events dealing with religious traditions and coping, stress, health and wellness, social justice, and the value of learning about these religious traditions.

² These 4 RS program goals include and support 6 of the 8 CAS FLAGS (Fundamental Learning outcomes, Achievements, and Goals): critical thinking and problem-solving, communication and listening, diversity and inclusion, teamwork and collaboration, work ethic and integrity, and leadership.

Many RS faculty are actively mentoring student clubs, which we know contribute greatly to student success. Director Islamic Studies, Balla, and Lela mentor the Muslim Student Association, which has over 250 members. Director Judaic Studies, Pytlik, mentors Hillel. Guffey mentors the Religious Studies Student Club. Engle is mentor of the Coptic Club and also speaks regularly at the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship campus group on Thursday nights.

b. Research

All faculty teaching RS classes are adjunct professors or special lecturers. Some may consider this a *weakness*, yet we think it constitutes a *strength* because it creates coherence.³ Lela is an imam who is working on his PhD dissertation *A Methodological Approach to Reforming Islamic Family Law in the United States* in Oxford, UK. Mabee (ethics; New Testament), Engle (Calvinist liturgical theology), Guffey (early Christian asceticism), and Pytlik (archaeology of Israel) regularly publish articles in peer-reviewed journals. Guffey also published a monograph in 2019, while Engle signed a book contract for 2024. Director RS Gooren is an associate professor of anthropology who produces 1 or 2 peer-reviewed publications a year and published 2 monographs on religious change in Latin America. RS students are not currently involved in faculty research. RS has lost a faculty member in the last 3 years (Fleer), but also gained a new one (Guffey). A possible future *threat* is the retirement of some RS adjunct faculty. However, this also provides an *opportunity* to recruit new adjunct faculty from outside OU. RS faculty routinely emphasize the need for students to get good advising in the College of Arts and Sciences or other schools. The Director RS typically gets emails from 1-2 students every year who ask about possibilities of doing the RS Concentration or a minor, but these do not always come to fruition.

c. Community engagement

Another major *strength* of RS is how it actively engages with the wider religious and immigrant communities of Southeast Michigan, especially with Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Pre-COVID, this mainly occurred through events, particularly the *World Religions Showcase* and, for example, the many events discussing ethics in academia, publishing, or medicine. The OU Pontiac initiative sponsored activities in schools and faith communities. Most RS faculty are highly engaged with (inter)faith communities, for example by giving public lectures and being active in (inter)faith social networks and on social media. In mid-2020, Guffey, Lela, and Pytlik gave Zoom talks on how faith communities cope with COVID, moderated by CAS Dean Corcoran. One major *weakness* and *threat* is the consistent lack of adequate funding from OU and the College of Arts and Sciences.⁴ A related *weakness* and a *threat* is the current lack of major external financial sponsors, although in 2019 the well-funded Cis Maisel Center for Judaic

³ Another advantage is that these adjunct professors are more tied to the region and OU. Thus, RS faculty are less likely to be on the labor market after the recent contract negotiations than OU's tenured and tenure-track faculty.

⁴ The previous RS director, Alan Epstein, requested a budget of \$6,000-7,000 to be able to accomplish our program goals and fund multiple campus events. Since 2018, Gooren has continued this practice. For many years, however, the actual budget RS received was in the \$1,000 to 1,500 range. In 2016, RS received \$2,000 for the first time. In 2020, RS received \$2,500, but then COVID hit. The expectation is that the 2021-22 budget will be cut by approximately 50% to around \$1,250. In the middle of a pandemic is the worst time to cut program budgets.

Studies was founded (directed by Pytlik). Of course, this weakness also offers future *opportunities*. Gooren, Engle, and Pytlik are directly involved in activities to recruit external sponsors. Since 2019, but delayed by COVID, concrete plans are also in motion to recruit major new sponsors in Islamic Studies through Kelly Conway (CAS). Further ahead are future *opportunities* to recruit sponsors from Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist (immigrant) communities.

d. Diversity/equity/inclusion (DEI)

Almost all RS classes, especially REL 1100 *Introduction to Religion* and REL 1850 *World Religious Traditions*, encourage and develop student empathy by teaching about other faith traditions in other cultures. Many RS classes encourage (and often require) students to attend faith meetings from other traditions, contributing to an awareness of cultural and religious diversity and reflecting on their histories of either privilege or exclusion. This is particularly important in the current context of globalization and global geopolitical conflicts, which often have religious components.

Religious Studies produced an anti-racism statement on behalf of the program to respond to the Black Lives Matter events of Summer 2019, although Oakland University limited programs in making these public (preferring a single OU message). This RS statement also indicated our commitment as a program to diversity, equity, and inclusion in our curriculum.

The most diverse student population is found in REL 1150 *Introduction to Islam*, which includes a majority of Muslim students immigrating from countries all over the world. Islamic Studies classes in general tend to have more diverse student populations than classes in Christianity and Judaic Studies. We aim to recruit some of these Islamic Studies students to other RS courses, which would greatly increase the overall RS DEI representation and also boost our general enrollments. Second, the 250 Muslim students in the Muslim Student Association (MSA) will be contacted to gauge their interest in Islamic Studies as well as other RS classes. Third, RS will make concerted efforts to reach out to OU's increasing numbers of international students, who by definition are highly diverse: culturally, ethnically, and religiously. Fourth, RS will develop outreach methods, including by contacting and working with local area high schools in Southeast Michigan, to *recruit more non-traditional students and senior citizens* into the program. These groups also tend to have higher representations of underrepresented ethnic and religious minorities than OU's core of conventional students.

4. Summary and Plan for Improvement

a. Areas of Excellence

1. RS faculty have academic and personal *connections to faculty and administrators in numerous departments* in the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), but also to *other OU schools*, especially the Honors' College, Nursing, Education, Business, and Health Sciences. This interdisciplinary cross-fertilization finds expression in cooperation with faculty from these schools, for example in teaching (future) collaborative courses, but also in joint organization and co-sponsoring of campus events – past and future. At least three RS faculty also have direct personal and academic ties to other universities in the area of Southeastern Michigan.

2. RS faculty also have *strong connections to OU students from multiple schools*. Because of the small sizes of RS classes, students get personalized attention from RS faculty and cooperate with them in areas such as the student organizations, campus events, and public lectures at faith communities.
3. RS classes and public events are uniquely *well-suited to discuss contemporary issues of personal and workplace ethics as well as globalization, conflicts, and socioeconomic inequality*.
4. RS faculty take great pride in measuring their instructional success in terms of boosting the *critical thinking, cross-cultural awareness, and religious literacy* of their students.
5. One main strength of the RS program is the *small size of its classes*: RS classes are capped at 20 or 30, allowing *personalized attention* to all students through a close relationship with the instructor. The student-instructor ratio is high in the RS program. All RS courses are taught in a welcoming, non-doctrinal manner to students of any religious and non-religious conviction – students need never surrender their own beliefs or adopt any to entertain those of others.

b./c. Areas and Plans for Improvements

1. RS aims to schedule appealing future campus events, post-COVID, that often tie in with RS courses that are hit hard by low enrollment. Some examples are events on the role of religion in contemporary world affairs (supporting REL 1100 *Introduction to Religion*), President Modi and Hindu nationalism in India (supporting REL 3900 Special Topic: *Hindu Spirituality*), Japan (REL 3900 ST: *Japanese Religions*), and China (REL 3900 ST: *East Asian Religions*). Cosponsoring for these events will be sought from History, political science, International Studies (IS), and other units. IS partly suffers from the same low enrollment problems as RS in its introductory and special topic courses. RS will make concerted efforts to reach out to OU's increasing numbers of international students, who by definition are highly diverse: culturally, ethnically, and religiously. Finally, RS just partnered with the Episcopal Diocese of SE Michigan and Bishop Perry to bring Sister Joan Chittister to our area. We will use this major event as a way to reach a new constituency and to promote our programs at OU with our own students and the wider (campus) community. While the funding was secured from the Diocese, the OU Religious Studies program is the main partner and we will host a reception. This is one example where our limited funding has nonetheless resulted in a key partnership that will only grow in the future (action by director RS, supported by all RS faculty).
2. RS will expand its curriculum by adding new courses on topics that OU students have expressed high interest in, such as (practical aspects of) spirituality, yoga, and meditation techniques. Some possible examples are *Meditation Practices and Techniques, Spiritual but Not Religious, Mysticism across the Traditions, Religion, Spirituality and Social Media, and Religion, Spirituality and Gender*. RS will conduct a campus-wide survey, possibly in partnership with Sociology, Anthropology, Social Work and Criminal Justice or other academic units, to poll OU students to determine what their main interests in and viewpoints of religious studies are, and then offer those classes (action by director RS, supported by all RS faculty).
3. RS will also expand its curriculum by adding new courses that are tailored especially to students in the College of Arts and Sciences, Nursing, Education, Business, and Health Sciences. Some possible examples are *Spirituality in Nursing, Business, Engineering, Medicine, and Health Sciences*. Other examples are *Religion, Spirituality and Death (or Grief)* and *Religion, Spirituality and Vaccinations* (action by director RS, supported by all RS faculty).

4. RS aims to build up (even) more contacts in our area's religious communities in order to recruit and cultivate more new donors to sponsor our program. Supported by the director RS, Kelly Conway (Director of Philanthropy, College of Arts and Sciences) is currently working on bringing in new sponsors for Islamic Studies, following a successful consultancy in 2019-20 by Dr. Mohammad Khalil (Director Religious Studies, MSU). Further ahead are future opportunities to recruit sponsors from Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist (immigrant) communities (action by director RS, supported by all RS faculty, especially those teaching on these religions).

5. RS will explore the possibility to offer special programs and classes for (retired) *senior citizens* in the area, which is now a main source of revenue for universities in Western Europe. RS will also explore the possibility to offer *certificate programs for non-traditional OU students*. These students would enroll as certificate seekers, and enroll in a number of our religious studies courses. Bishop Perry from the Episcopal Diocese expressed that there is an ongoing need for their congregants and officials to seek continuing education. RS could potentially offer this to any number of religious communities in Southeast Michigan (action by director RS, supported by all RS faculty; Guffey and Pytlik have direct contacts with the Episcopal Diocese).

Appendices:

a. *Student Enrollment in Religious Studies Concentration and 3 Minors* (OIRA 2017-2021, RS archives 2013-2016): see separate Word file.

b. *Student Enrollment in Key Religious Studies Courses* (Banner, 2011-2021): see separate Excel file.

c. *Brochure Religious Studies*: see separate PDF file.