

# **1. BOR Academic Advisory Committee for Philosophy & Religion**

## **The Value of Religious Studies Programs**

This document shows that undergraduate training in Religious Studies has definite value, both for the individual student and for the state of Georgia. After providing some background on the field of Religious Studies, the types of benefits are discussed in order to make a case for the value of Religious Studies programs.

### **1. What is Religious Studies?**

The academic study of religion focuses on many different aspects of various cultures and traditions around the world. Degree programs in Religious Studies often provide a rich grounding in liberal arts as well as plentiful opportunities for students to work with faculty honing their skills in reading, writing, discussion and field research. The academic field of religion often focuses on specific themes, specific traditions, or a combination of both. Examples of themes include belief systems, sacred texts, rituals, ethics, gender, politics, history, social sciences, languages, and media studies. Religious traditions which are commonly taught and researched at various institutions include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Daoism, Confucianism and Shinto, as well as the diverse views within such religious communities. Some scholars also focus on African-American, Native American, Caribbean American or African ideologies as well. Comparative work with one or more related disciplines is frequently engaged such as with philosophy, sociology, history, anthropology, psychology, or the sciences.

In Religious Studies, specialists seek to explore and understand religions in many ways. However, scholars of religion not only provide the detail about the history and adherents of religious communities, they also broader theoretical questions about how religion is constructed, and how it contributes to the construction of various other facets of the human experience.

The questions below serve to outline some of these explorations:

- How do religions decide what is important? What kinds of authority (a god, a principle, or a force) do religious people use to justify these decisions? How can religion help us to understand social and political authority?
- Do religions see the world as fundamentally good or bad? Is the physical world the highest reality or is something else?
- How do different religions understand the proper ways to be human? What rules govern bodily behavior and the social order? How have religious ideas contributed to discussions of human rights?
- What fundamental problems do religions seek to address? Would solving these problems make life ideal?
- What determines membership in religious communities? How does social identity affect ethical convictions? What are the sources of ethical decisions?
- Which stories are important in different religions and why? How do they view history?
- Which ceremonies and symbols are important to religions and why?

- How might religions shape people's understanding of death? Do people perform rituals when someone dies? Are there views about what happens after death?
- What are the sources of conflict between religious communities? In what ways might religious conflicts shape state, national, and global politics?
- How can an education in Religious Studies help students to understand how different academic disciplines (History, Sociology, Psychology) produce and evaluate arguments?

A number of religions hold specific views on many of the questions above. Scholars in the field of Religious Studies seek to explore these religious answers deeply and also compare and contrast them with answers from other religious groups around the world.

## **2. Intellectual Benefits of Undergraduate Training in Religious Studies**

In today's world, it is unthinkable to fully understand global politics and markets without a substantial level of knowledge about the major religions. The growing religious dynamic in parts of the Middle East, Africa, and China, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the influence of religious groups in America (both economically and politically), and the changing religious trends in Europe all call for a careful, nuanced understanding of the role of religion in these areas.

However, a thorough study of religions does more than just provide the undergraduate with an informed look at what is happening on the world stage. Students can reach a critical understanding of how social and intellectual forces influence their own lives, learn how to compare their social worlds with others, and learn how to analyze various answers to the pressing questions that religions seek to provide.

Moreover, undergraduate training can also give the student valuable exposure to the growing interaction between Religious Studies and other disciplines: History, Sociology, Anthropology, Philosophy, etc. A foundation in Religious Studies certainly deepens one's appreciation for religious and cultural expression in the Fine Arts as well.

Of course, some very practical kinds of knowledge, including several types of skill sets, are also typically learned throughout the course of a degree program in Religious Studies. These involve learning how to be effective in multicultural contexts, communicating effectively – not only in oral and written formats but also in social media, managing complex projects, and working productively and collaboratively in team environments.

## **3. Employment Benefits of Undergraduate Training in Religious Studies**

Some graduates in Religious Studies use their degree as a foundation for further studies in Religious Studies or for ministry in a church or chaplaincy setting, but most graduates of Religious Studies programs go on to a variety of different careers such as education, non-profit management, international relations, and health care. Some also go into law, politics, government service, business, journalism, counseling, or social work. Because religion is such a pervasive feature of social life, there are few careers where a Religious Studies degree does not provide valuable foundational critical thinking skills

According to Payscale.com's College Salary Report for 2016, the mid-career median salary of a worker holding an undergraduate degree in Religious Studies (and no other degree) is \$60,300.<sup>1</sup> (Religion, especially as taught at a sectarian institution, has a mid-career, median salary of \$56,400. Theology, Biblical Studies, and Pastoral Ministry, when considered as separate majors, are lower on the salary scale.)

In the same Salary Report it is helpful to note that the "High Meaning" percentage (how many in that major believe their work makes the world a better place), which is arguably a significant factor in job satisfaction beyond just the salary, is higher in Religious Studies than for other majors such as Accounting, Business Administration, Business Management, and a number of Computer and Engineering degrees even though the median salaries in those majors comprise a higher figure.

#### **4. How do Religious Studies graduates benefit the state of Georgia?**

As a growing center within the global marketplace, Georgia needs graduates who can navigate a fluid, complex, diverse, and interconnected world in which religion plays a central role. The study of religion offers valuable training for participation in this global marketplace by equipping students to analyze rules and values people use to organize their social, political, and economic lives. Rather than giving students a narrow skill set soon to be eclipsed in a changing marketplace, Religious Studies prepares individuals for any career that requires an ability to critically evaluate information within diverse social contexts.

However, other advantages besides economic ones should certainly be noted. As debates about religious freedom play an increasingly prominent role in state, national, and global politics, Religious Studies prepares students to lead informed and precise dialogue about these important legal questions. Furthermore, the state benefits from a variety of clergy positions that Georgians view as important both culturally and spiritually, and also from the global understanding that Religious Studies graduates bring to numerous careers that they enter, especially law, government service, business, and social work. As the economy draws an increasing number of people to Georgia, it is helpful that expanding religious diversity be understood and taken into account in everyday life so that Georgians can benefit from and appreciate the practices, beliefs, and convictions of new residents. Even the rich tapestry of various Protestant denominations already present in Georgia – a tapestry carefully intertwined with the racial make-up of the state – can also be better understood and appreciated through a solid educational foundation at the undergraduate level.

#### **5. Concluding thoughts**

A degree in Religious Studies can instill a sense of responsibility for discovery, critical thinking, global awareness, and appreciation or sympathy for others. Engaging our modern world with a high level of understanding with the ability to interpret a range of scenarios is an important quality that many employers seek. Knowing how to participate in the proper form of dialogue is the beginning step in appreciating difference so we can all create a civil society together. Religious Studies can accomplish this.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.payscale.com/college-salary-report/majors-that-pay-you-back/bachelors?page=23>

