

**The College of the Humanities: The Religion Program
RELI 4850X / 5850X: Studying Religious Transformations**

Professor Ash Geissinger

Email: Ash.Geissinger@carleton.ca

Class meetings: Thursdays at 11:35 am-2:25 pm
(synchronous; online)

Course description

In this seminar, we will critically examine various approaches taken in the academic discipline of Religious Studies and other allied fields to the study of religious transformations of different kinds, particularly conversions, deconversions, and revivals. The examples studied are from several different religious communities, geographical locations, and times. Questions to be considered include: How analytically useful are terms such as “conversion”? How do the stories that people tell of their conversion, deconversion, or renewed dedication to faith “work”, and for whom? Why do some religious communities seek to convert outsiders, while others do not? How have some religious communities resisted pressures to convert? How do seemingly personal and individual religious decisions relate to broader social, economic, and political contexts? When and in what ways do religious transformations become matters of public concern? What can studying religious transformations tell us about how communities (whether religious or otherwise) construct their identities?

Course objectives

By the completion of this course, students will be able to:

- more clearly articulate their understanding of the ways that social conditions shape religious beliefs and practices, and that religious beliefs and practices when shared collectively can have an impact on how society is constructed
- apply a theoretical perspective to a primary text
- engage with secondary sources and their peers in thoughtful informed discussion of topics related to the study of religion, orally and in writing
- formulate and defend a thesis based on advanced research
- write a well-researched academic paper on a topic in religious studies that is free of grammatical and syntactical errors and uses proper citation and bibliographic style

Course evaluation

For 4850

- 6 reflection papers on the readings (2 pgs. long; 5% each)—30%
- Short in-class presentation (5-10 min)—10%
- Essay topic proposal (due Jan. 28)—5%
- Annotated bibliography (due Feb. 11)—5%
- Essay—25%
- Class presentation on essay topic (April 8)—5%

- Seminar presentation, attendance and informed participation—20%

For 5850

- 8 reflection papers on the readings (1-2 pgs. long; 4% each)—32%
- Short in-class presentation (5-10 min)—10%
- Essay proposal and annotated bibliography (due Feb. 11)—5%
- Essay—28%
- Class presentation on essay topic (April 8)—5%
- Seminar presentation, attendance and informed participation—20%

Course Readings and Films

All course readings and films can be accessed through cuLearn. You will need to be signed into the library website in order to access these materials.

Reading responses

These responses must highlight the key issues raised by one of the assigned readings for the class in light of the main themes of this course, as well as the central arguments that its author (or authors) make. More detailed instructions will be given in class.

Essay proposals and annotated bibliographies

The essay must deal with a topic related to religious transformations. The proposal must include: a working title, a preliminary thesis statement, and a preliminary outline which makes it clear what aspect of the topic will be addressed and how. The annotated bibliography must list at least 7 academic sources (peer-reviewed articles from academic journals, books published by university presses), with two or three sentences explaining how each source will be used. The essay proposal and annotated bibliography must be submitted by the dates given, or the essay will not be accepted.

Short in-class presentation

Each student will do a short presentation on conversion to or deconversion from a specific religious community, past or present, which answers the following questions (as relevant): Did/does this community seek or permit converts, at least ideally? If so, what type(s) of instruction, ritual, or other practices are expected or required in order to join the group? If this community bans or severely restricts conversion, in what ways does it do so? Did/does this community have mechanisms of excommunication, and if so, how are they supposed to function? Are there ritual or bureaucratic components involved in leaving the community? How did/does this community theoretically respond members who leave? What do these features indicate about how this community constructed/constructs its identity and sought/seeks to perpetuate itself? More details about this presentation will be discussed in class.

Seminar presentation and active, informed participation

During the semester, each student will be responsible for presenting on one of the readings assigned for a class and leading a short class discussion. As with any seminar course, it is essential that all students commit to doing the assigned readings before class, attending regularly, and participating actively and in an informed way in class discussions.

Note: If any student misses more than three classes (which would mean missing a third of the class) they cannot get credit for the course.

Research paper presentation

In the final class, all students will present their research papers to the group. Presentations will last 15 minutes, followed by about 10 minutes for questions and discussion. All papers must be in completed physical form for this presentation. However, papers can and should be amended based on feedback received during the presentation before being submitted.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1

Jan 14—The main academic approaches to studying “conversion” and other types of religious transformation; problematizing these

Readings: Lewis Rambo, “Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change,” *Social Compass* 46.3 (1999): 259-271.

Katherine Gerbner, “Theorizing Conversion: Christianity, Colonization, and Consciousness in the Early Modern Atlantic World,” *History Compass* 13.3 (2015): 134-147.

Week 2

Jan 21—Analyzing conversion narratives

Readings: Kathleen Self, “Conversion as Speech Act: Medieval Icelandic and Modern Neopagan Conversion Narratives,” *History of Religions* 56.2 (Nov. 2016): 167-197.

Daniel Winchester, “Converting to Continuity: Temporality and Self in Eastern Orthodox Conversion Narratives,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54.3 (2015): 439-460.

Week 3

Jan 28—Religious transformations and communal boundaries

Readings: Mary Elizabeth Perry, “Finding Fatima, a Slave Woman of Early Modern Spain,” *Journal of Women’s History* 20.1 (Spring 2008): 151-167.

Frans Ciappara, “Conversion Narratives and the Roman Inquisition in Malta, 1650-1700,” *Journal of Religious History* 40.4 (Dec. 2016): 508-524.

Elyse Semerdjian, “Armenian Women, Legal Bargaining, and Gendered Politics of Conversion in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Aleppo,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 12.1 (March 2016): 1-30.

Week 4

Feb 4—Religious transformations, state power, and resistance

Film: Malcolm X (Spike Lee, 1992)

Readings: Paula Cooley, “Women’s Religious Conversions on Death Row: Theorizing Religion and State,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70.4 (Dec. 2002): 699-717.

Ula Taylor, “As-salaam alaikum, my sister, peace be unto you: The honourable Elijah Muhammad and the women who followed him,” *Race and Society* 1.2 (1998): 177-196.

Week 5

Feb 11— Religious transformations as quests

Readings: Tuhina Ganguly, “Connecting Their Selves: The Discourse of Karma, Calling, and Surrendering Among Western Spiritual Practitioners in India,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86.4 (Dec. 2018): 1014-1045.

Anabel Inge, *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman: Paths to Conversion* (Oxford University Press, 2016), Chapter 3.

Week 6 READING WEEK

Week 7

Feb 25—Inreach, re-conversion and religious revival

Film: Unorthodox (Anna Wexler, 2013)

Readings: Elise Berman, “Voices of Outreach: The Construction of Identity and Maintenance of Social Ties Among Chabad-Lubavitch Emissaries,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48.1 (2009): 69-85.

Elmira Muratova, “‘He Who Pays the Piper Calls the Tune’: Muslim Sponsors of Islamic Revival in Crimea,” *Religion, State & Society* 37.3 (2009): 263-276.

Week 8

March 4—Missions and proselytizing

Readings: Hui-Tzu Grace Chou, “Mormon Missionary Experiences and Subsequent Religiosity among Returned Missionaries in Utah,” *Social Sciences and Missions* 26(2013): 199-225.

Marie Nathalie LeBlanc, “‘The Power of a Simple Gift’: The Ethics of Children’s Evangelization by Christian NGOs in Côte d’Ivoire,” *Social Compass* 66.2 (2019): 256-272.

Girardo Rodriguez Plasencia, “Joining Soka Gakkai in Cuba: Affiliation Patterns and Factors Influencing Conversion Careers,” *Social Compass* 62.2 (2015): 159-171.

Week 9

March 11—Crypto-religiosity

Readings: Miriam Bodian, “Men of the Nation: The Shaping of Converso Identity in Early Modern Europe,” *Past and Present* 143: 48-76.

Eliza Kent, “Secret Christians of Sivakasi: Gender, Syncretism, and Crypto=Religion in Early Twentieth Century South India,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79.3 (Sept. 2011): 676-705.

Week 10

March 18—Analyzing deconversion narratives

Readings: Heinz Streib and Barbara Keller, “The Variety of Deconversion Experiences: Contours of a Concept in Respect to Empirical Research,” *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 26.1 (Jan. 2004): 181-200.

Bradley Wright et. al, “Explaining Deconversion from Christianity: A Study of Online Narratives,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 13 (2011): 1-17.

Maria Vlieg, “‘Speaking Out Would Be a Step Beyond Just Not Believing’—On the Performativity of Testimony When Moving Out of Islam,” *Religions* 10 (2019): 1-20.

Week 11

March 25—Deconversion in enclave communities and processes of resocialization

Film: *Disfellowshipped*

Readings: Louis Frankenthaler, “Dialogic Deconversion: Understanding Undercover Infidelity,” *Journal of Religion & Society* 17 (2015): 1-17.

E. Marshall Brooks, “The Disenchanted Self: Anthropological Notes on Existential Distress and Ontological Insecurity Among ex-Mormons in Utah,” *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 44 (2020): 193-213.

Mario Cardano and Nicola Pannofino, “Taking leave of Damanhur: Deconversion from a Magico-Esoteric Community,” *Social Compass* 65.3 (2018): 433-450.

Week 12

April 1—Religious transformations and societal impacts

Readings: Julie Fennell and Laura Wildman-Hanlon, “The Children of Converts: Beyond the First Generation of Contemporary Pagans,” *Social Compass* 64.2 (2017): 288-306.

Diana Gustafson and Jennifer Selby, “Theorizing de-Christianization in Women’s Reproductive Lives in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 59 (2016): 17-25.

Joel Robbins, “How Do Religions End? Theorizing Religious Traditions from the Point of View of How They Disappear,” *Cambridge Anthropology* 32.2 (Autumn 2014): 2-15.

Week 13

April 8—class presentations



Humanities

University Regulations for All College of the Humanities Courses

Academic Dates and Deadlines

This schedule contains the dates prescribed by the University Senate for academic activities. Dates relating to fee payment, cancellation of course selections, late charges, and other fees or charges will be published in the Important Dates and Deadlines section of the Registration Website.

Online Learning Resources

While online courses offer flexibility and convenience, they also present unique challenges that traditional face-to-face courses do not. [On this page](#), you will find resources collected by Carleton Online to help you succeed in your online courses; Learning Strategies and Best Practices, Study Skills, Technology and Online Interaction and Engagement.

Copies of Written Work Submitted

Always retain for yourself a copy of all essays, term papers, written assignments or take-home tests submitted in your courses.

Academic Integrity at Carleton

The University Senate defines **plagiarism** as “*presenting, whether intentionally or not, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others as one’s own.*” This can include:

- reproducing or paraphrasing portions of someone else’s published or unpublished material, regardless of the source, and presenting these as one’s own without proper citation or reference to the original source;
- submitting a take-home examination, essay, laboratory report or other assignment written, in whole or in part, by someone else;
- using ideas or direct, verbatim quotations, or paraphrased material, concepts, or ideas without appropriate acknowledgment in any academic assignment;
- using another’s data or research findings;
- failing to acknowledge sources through the use of proper citations when using another’s works and/or failing to use quotation marks;

- handing in "substantially the same piece of work for academic credit more than once without prior written permission of the course instructor in which the submission occurs."

Plagiarism is a serious offence that cannot be resolved directly by the course's instructor. The Associate Dean of the Faculty conducts a rigorous investigation, including an interview with the student, when an instructor suspects a piece of work has been plagiarized. Penalties are not trivial. They can include a final grade of "F" for the course

[Academic Integrity Policy](#)

[Academic Integrity Process](#)

Academic Accommodation Policy

Academic Accommodation

Carleton University is committed to providing access to the educational experience in order to promote academic accessibility for all individuals.

Parental Leave: The Student Parental Leave Policy is intended to recognize the need for leave at the time of a pregnancy, birth or adoption and to permit a pause in studies in order to provide full-time care in the first year of parenting a child or for health-related parental responsibilities.

Religious obligation: Carleton University accommodates students who, by reason of religious obligation, must miss an examination, test, assignment deadline, laboratory or other compulsory academic event.

Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:

Academic accommodation of students with disabilities is available through the [Paul Menton Centre](#) by evaluations that are carried out on an individual basis, in accordance with human rights legislation and University policy, and with the support of relevant, professional/medical documentation.

Survivors of Sexual Violence

Individuals who disclose that they have experienced sexual violence will be provided support services and will be treated with dignity and respect at all times by the University and its representatives. A person affected by sexual violence is not required to report an incident or make a complaint about sexual violence under the formal complaint process of the Sexual Violence Policy in order to obtain support and services, or in order to receive appropriate accommodation for their needs.

[Supports and services available at the University to obtain information about sexual violence and/or support.](#)

Accommodation for Student Activities

Carleton University recognizes the substantial benefits, both to the individual student and for the university, that result from a student participating in activities beyond the classroom experience. [More information.](#)

Grading System at Carleton University

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor, subject to the approval of the faculty Dean. Standing in courses will be shown by alphabetical grades. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean."

The [system of grades](#) used, with corresponding grade points and the percentage conversion, is listed below. Grade points indicated are for courses with 1.0 credit value.

Course Sharing Websites and Copyright

Classroom teaching and learning activities, including lectures, discussions, presentations, etc., by both instructors and students, are copy protected and remain the intellectual property of their respective author(s). All course materials, including PowerPoint presentations, outlines, and other materials, are also protected by copyright and remain the intellectual property of their respective author(s).

Students registered in the course may take notes and make copies of course materials for their own educational use only. Students are not permitted to reproduce or distribute lecture notes and course materials publicly for commercial or non-commercial purposes without express written consent from the copyright holder(s).

[More information](#)

Student Rights and Responsibilities at Carleton

Carleton University strives to provide a safe environment conducive to personal and intellectual growth, free of injustice and characterized by understanding respect, peace, trust, and fairness.

The [Student Rights and Responsibilities Policy](#) governs the non-academic behaviour of students. Carleton University is committed to building a campus that promotes personal growth through the establishment and promotion of transparent and fair academic and non-academic responsibilities.

[7 Student Rights and Responsibilities](#)

Deferred Term Work

In some situations, students are unable to complete term work because of illness or other circumstances beyond their control, which forces them to delay submission of the work.

1. Students who claim illness, injury or other extraordinary circumstances beyond their control as a reason for missed term work are held responsible for immediately informing the

instructor concerned and for making alternate arrangements with the instructor and in all cases this must occur no later than three (3.0) working days after the term work was due. The alternate arrangement must be made before the last day of classes in the term as published in the academic schedule. Normally, any deferred term work will be completed by the last day of term. In all cases, formative evaluations providing feedback to the student should be replaced with formative evaluations. In the event the altered due date must extend beyond the last day of classes in the term, the instructor will assign a grade of zero for the work not submitted and submit the student's earned grade accordingly; the instructor may submit a change of grade at a later date. Term work cannot be deferred by the Registrar.

2. In cases where a student is not able to complete term work due to illness or injury for a significant period of time/or long term, the instructor and/or student may elect to consult with the Registrar's Office (undergraduate courses) or Graduate Registrar (graduate courses) to determine appropriate action.

[More information of deferred Term Work](#)

Deferred Final Exams

Students who are unable to write a final examination because of a serious illness/emergency or other circumstances beyond their control may apply for accommodation. Normally, the accommodation for a missed final examination will be granting the student the opportunity to write a deferred examination. In specific cases when it is not possible to offer a deferred examination, and with the approval of the Dean, an alternate accommodation may be made.

The application for a deferral must:

1. be made in writing to the Registrar's Office no later than three working days after the original final examination or the due date of the take-home examination; and,
2. be fully supported by appropriate documentation and, in cases of illness, by a medical certificate dated no later than one working day after the examination, or by appropriate documents in other cases. Medical documents must specify the date of the onset of the illness, the (expected) date of recovery, and the extent to which the student was/is incapacitated during the time of the examination. The University's preferred medical form can be found at the Registrar's Office [here](#).

[More information on Final Exam Deferrals](#)

Financial vs. Academic Withdrawal

Withdrawn. No academic credit, no impact on the CGPA. WDN is a permanent notation that appears on the official transcript for students who withdraw after the full fee adjustment date in each term (noted in the Academic Year section of the Calendar each term). Students may withdraw on or before the last day of classes.

Important dates can be found [here](#). Make sure that you are aware of the separate deadlines for

Financial and Academic withdrawal!

Making registration decisions in Carleton Central involves making a financial and academic commitment for the courses you choose, regardless of attendance. If you do not attend – you must withdraw in Carleton Central within the published deadlines to cancel your registration. You can do this via the [MyCarleton Portal](#). A fee adjustment is dependent on registration being canceled within the published [fee deadlines](#) and dependent on your course load.

Department Contact Information

Bachelor of the Humanities 300 Paterson Hall CollegeOfHumanities@cunet.carleton.ca

Greek and Roman Studies 300 Paterson Hall GreekAndRomanStudies@cunet.carleton.ca

Religion 2A39 Paterson Hall
Religion@cunet.carleton.ca

Digital Humanities (Graduate) 2A39 Paterson Hall
digitalhumanities@carleton.ca

Digital Humanities (Undergraduate Minor) 300 Paterson Hall
digitalhumanities@carleton.ca

MEMS (Undergraduate Minor) 300 Paterson Hall
CollegeOfHumanities@cunet.carleton.ca