

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

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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 do the stories that people tell of their conversion, deconversion, or renewed dedication to faith “work”, and for whom? How analytically useful are terms such as “conversion” and “deconversion”? 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 theoretical perspectives to primary texts
- engage with secondary sources and their peers in thoughtful informed discussion of topics related to the study of religion, orally and in writing
- further develop their ability to critically read and analyze written texts and media

Course evaluation

Students in 4850 and 5850 will be evaluated on the basis of:

- Regular, active, and informed course participation (worth 20%)
- the following 4 assignments (worth 20 percent each):
 1. Written analysis of a story of religious transformation—**Sept. 21** (hand-written in class, 40 min. allotted)

2. Written reflection on the Semerdjian reading (questions which are to be answered will be posted on Brightspace; **due Oct. 19** at the beginning of class)
3. Oral presentation in class (15 minutes; held during weeks 11-14)
4. Written response to an oral presentation (hand-written in class, 40 min. allotted)

More details about these assignments and what is expected will be given in class. Students taking 5850 will be expected to demonstrate more advanced analytical skills.

Regular, active, and informed participation

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 quarter of the class) they cannot get credit for the course.

Course Readings and Films

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

Intellectual Property

All course materials (including lectures, outlines, PowerPoint presentations, handouts, and similar materials) are protected by copyright. I am the exclusive holder of copyright and other intellectual property rights for all course materials. Students may take notes and make copies of course materials for their own educational use, but may not reproduce or distribute lecture notes and course materials publicly for any purpose, commercial or otherwise, without my express written consent. Student work in this course remains the exclusive intellectual property of the student(s) who produced it, and will not be shared with anybody without their permission, except in accordance with Carleton University policies.

Academic Integrity

The University Academic Integrity Policy defines plagiarism as “*presenting, whether intentionally or not, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others as one’s own.*” This includes 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. Examples of sources from which the ideas, expressions of ideas or works of others may be drawn from include but are not limited to: books, articles, papers, literary compositions and phrases, performance compositions, artworks, research results, calculations and the results of calculations, diagrams, computer reports, computer code/software, material on the internet and/or conversations.

Examples of plagiarism include, but are not limited to:

- any submission prepared in whole or in part, by someone else, **including the unauthorized use of generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT)**;
- using ideas or direct, verbatim quotations, paraphrased material, algorithms, formulae, scientific or mathematical concepts, or ideas without appropriate acknowledgment in any academic assignment;
- using another's data or research findings without appropriate acknowledgement;
- failing to acknowledge sources through the use of proper citations when using another's work and/or failing to use quotations marks.

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.

Email Policy

The Carleton communications policy states that faculty must conduct email communications with students only through Carleton email accounts. Therefore, be sure to send any emails to me through your Carleton email; I cannot respond to messages sent through any other account.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1

SEPT. 7—Introducing academic approaches to studying conversion and other types of religious transformation

Read:

- 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

SEPT. 14—How do conversion narratives "work"?

Watch: *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992)

Read:

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

Week 3

SEPT. 21—Religious transformations and social contexts

Read:

- Fenggang Yang and Andrew Stuart Abel, "Sociology of Religious Conversion," *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, pp. 140-163.
- 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 4

SEPT. 28—Religious transformations and the state

Read:

- Niklas Foxeus, "Leaving Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar," *Handbook of Leaving Religion*, pp. 116-129.
- 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.

Week 5

OCT. 5—Historical approaches to religious transformations

Read:

- Marc David Baer, "History and Religious Conversion," *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, pp. 25-47.
- Mary Elizabeth Perry, "Finding Fatima, a Slave Woman of Early Modern Spain," *Journal of Women's History* 20.1 (Spring 2008): 151-167.

Week 6

OCT. 12—no class (I am presenting at a conference)

Read:

- 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 7

OCT. 19—Crypto-religiosity

Read:

- Matthew Warshawsky, "Inquisitorial Prosecution of Tomas Trevino de Sobremonte, a Crypto-Jew in Colonial Mexico," *Colonial Latin American Review* 17.1 (2008): 101-123.
- 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 8

OCT. 26—fall break (no class)

Week 9

NOV. 2—Psychological approaches to studying religious transformation

Read:

- Kyle Messick and Miguel Farias, “Psychological Approaches to Leaving Religion,” *Handbook of Leaving Religion*, pp. 307-322.
- 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.

Week 10

NOV. 9—Inreach, re-conversion and religious revivals

Watch: *Unorthodox* (Anna Wexler, 2013)

Read:

- 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.

Week 11

NOV. 16—Missions and proselytizing

Readings:

- Girardo Rodriguez Plasencia, “Joining Soka Gakkai in Cuba: Affiliation Patterns and Factors Influencing Conversion Careers,” *Social Compass* 62.2 (2015): 159-171.
- Hui-Tzu Grace Chou, “Mormon Missionary Experiences and Subsequent Religiosity among Returned Missionaries in Utah,” *Social Sciences and Missions* 26(2013): 199-225.

Week 12

NOV. 23—Analyzing media representations of religious transformation

Watch: “Van Hagelslag naar Halal” (“From Chocolate Sprinkles to Halal”—Dutch reality tv show with English subtitles)

Read:

- Nella van den Brandt, “Lost Daughters: Affective Framings of Women Embracing Islam,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 90 (2022): 674-694.

Week 13

NOV. 30—Deconversion in enclave communities and processes of resocialization

Watch: *Disfellowshipped*

Read:

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

Week 14

DEC. 7—Religious transformations and the next generation; course conclusion

Read:

- 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.