

Pacific Lutheran University  
Department of Religion

**Learning Outcomes for General Education and Religion Majors and Minors**

**1. Religion Department Mission**

We live in a world where the practice of religion flourishes in a rich diversity, in a country where many social and political issues contain a religious dimension, and in communities where issues are charged with religious language: abortion, fundamentalism, gay rights, environmental protection, Holocaust studies, poverty, stem-cell research, and war. In such a context, ignorance of religion's role in society is unfortunate. Truly the value of a college education *increases* when graduates have a better understanding of religion's presence, diversity, and influence in regional, national, and global life. Indeed, it is imperative that a liberal arts program speak to why religion gives meaning and purpose to billions of people on the planet.

*The study of religion at PLU builds on the historic strengths of Lutheran higher education and enhances global perspectives that reflect our commitment to human communities and the world. This discipline engages students in the scholarly study of sacred texts and practices, histories, theologies, and ethics. Students are invited to investigate the historical and cultural relevance and implications of religion for individuals, communities, and the earth [General Education Description]. At PLU, students can take classes in environmental ethics, the religions of Asia, feminist theology, Luther, Pacific Northwest Indian traditions – to name just a few. PLU students study religion in Tacoma and Seattle as well as far off destinations such as China, Italy, and Trinidad-Tobago.*

*Religion graduates make significant contributions as lawyers, lay and ordained religious leaders, school teachers, college professors, and leaders in local and global agencies devoted to healthcare, global hunger, and the environment. Like people everywhere, PLU students have questions, fears, doubts, and hopes. Through the lively study of religion, we prepare students for focused living in a complex world [Religion Department website].*

**2. Religion Department Goals and Objectives**

- a. To promote the academic study of religion, including its scriptural, ethical, historical, existential, and theological dimensions.
- b. To assist those preparing for church-related vocations or advanced studies in religion.
- c. To lead students to think existentially, religiously, and theologically about the meaning of human existence within Christian and Global Religious Traditions.
- d. To promote maturity, wisdom, sensitivity and understanding of multiple religious perspectives through critical thinking about and interaction with major religious traditions.
- e. To encourage students to engage questions of religion and values; this includes encounter with other disciplines and contemporary society.
- f. To develop awareness of the multi-faceted influence of religion

**3. Religion Department Objectives in Relation to the University's Objectives**

*PLU educates students for lives of thoughtful inquiry, service, leadership and care. The Religion Department contributes to this mission by building on the historic strengths of Lutheran higher education and enhancing global perspectives which reflect our commitment to human communities and the world. Religion courses support the university's educational mission by offering courses in *Christians Traditions* and *Global Religious Traditions*. General education*

students, majors, and minors in Religion thus select courses which reflect the Lutheran and Christian heritage of the university and the university's commitment to global education and global citizenship. Thus, faculty invite students to the study of the historical and cultural relevance and implications of religion for individuals, communities, and the earth.

The integrated learning objectives of the Religion Department are in alignment with the university's learning objectives in that they support critical thinking, written and verbal expression, interaction with others, values and beliefs, and the study of course content through multiple frameworks.

#### **4. Student Learning Outcomes in General Education Religion Courses**

The General Education Program at PLU mandates two required courses in religion for all undergraduates: one in Christian Traditions, and one in Global Religious Traditions.

*Christian Traditions* (4) examines diverse forms of Christianity within their historical, cultural and political contexts.

*Global Religious Traditions* (4) highlights PLU's commitment to local-global education through analysis of diverse religions, both here and abroad.

The Department of Religion supports the university's integrated learning objectives with objectives and outcomes that guide pedagogy, course construction, and evaluated assignments appropriate to general university students and majors and minors in religion.

Courses in Religion are categorized in terms of upper (300-400 level courses) and lower division (100-200 level courses). Lower-level religion courses introduce students to course-specific content and methods in the study of religion. Upper division courses assume participants already have acquired the basic skills of critical inquiry, interpretation, and competent oral and written expression that are essential to religion and the liberal arts. In addition, upper-division courses push higher-level cognitive skills of analysis and synthetic thinking.

##### **a. Skills**

*Students in all courses (upper and lower division General Education courses) should accomplish:*

1. Basic reading: accurate reporting on texts, beginning to identify an author's assumptions and the structures of arguments
2. Basic writing: writing a short paper (5-7 pages) for clear expression and understanding in lower division courses, and a longer paper (15-20 pages) in upper-division courses; command of basic grammar, spelling, and form; capacity to describe a text accurately; capacity to relate one's own ideas clearly and structure an interpretation or argument
3. Basic communication: capacity for oral communication and presentation skills in small group and large group settings
4. Basic thinking: interacting critically with course material; becoming aware of one's own assumptions and biases and how these inform one's understanding of religion's texts, practices, histories, theologies, and ethics
5. Beginning facility with academic tools and methods within a disciplinary area (e.g., contextual study of texts, practices, histories, theologies, and ethics)

*Students in upper-division courses should be able to:*

1. Identify and pursue a question or problem independently, using the library and other sources.
2. Identify and describe the vision, theme, or argument in primary and secondary sources
3. Expand and deepen one's description and interpretation of texts by locating them within their larger social, cultural, and geographic contexts

**b. Knowledge**

1. To know the academic tools and methods within a disciplinary area
2. To be familiar with seminal thinkers who shape the academic study of religion within a disciplinary area or on a topic in the field of religion
3. To gain a capacity for critical and empathetic understanding of the texts, practices, histories, theologies, and/or ethics within Christian Traditions and Global Religious Traditions
4. To recognize religion's role in shaping human purpose and meaning

**c. Values and beliefs**

1. Develop awareness of and critical empathy for a variety of religious traditions as sources of meaning and purpose in the world
2. Develop a capacity to hold one's convictions and learn from the texts, practices, histories, theologies, and ethics of religious traditions
3. Develop intellectual humility and charity when engaged with others who hold religious convictions different than one's own
4. Develop the ability to think existentially, religiously, and theologically about the meaning of human existence from the perspective of Christian Traditions and Global Religious Traditions
5. Demonstrate maturing understanding of multiple religious perspectives through critical thinking about and interaction with major religious traditions
6. Engage in dialog regarding questions of religious faith and values; this includes encounter with other disciplines and contemporary society
7. Develop greater consistency between self-conscious beliefs and behavior in the area of religion

**Student Learning Outcomes in the Religion Major and Minor**

The Religion Department requires four courses for the minor, [in 2009] two drawn from Christian Traditions and two from Global Religious Traditions. Other than this four-course requirement spread across Christian Traditions and Global Religious Traditions, no other requirements are made of minors in religion.

The Religion Department requires two majors-only upper-division courses in addition to six other courses. The first course, *Research in Religion*, builds on and enriches departmental learning objectives by guiding majors in the study of disciplinary methods (i.e., textual, historical, theological, comparative, ethical) and research skills appropriate for undergraduate majors. Majors are introduced to the goal of research in religion at a liberal arts university: the advancement of knowledge in the discipline through the use of methods appropriate to the various fields which comprise the academic study of religion. In this course, students construct a critical narrative review of literature and present the results of their research through a class presentation which is evaluated by the instructor.

This first course, *Research in Religion*, leads to the second required course, the *Capstone Research Seminar*. In this class, majors study the construction of a research question and the appropriate means to create and then produce a major research paper which draws on the skills, content, and

the values listed above. Majors are challenged to exercise skills at a more refined and sophisticated level, identify and pursue a question or problem independently and in collaboration with faculty and library research staff, and recognize the open-ended nature of questions which command the attention of scholars in the field.

Majors are also required to write and publicly present a major research paper of 25-30 pages in which a thesis is set forth, supported through sound reasoning and in conversation with scholars in the field, and sustained with appropriate and effective use of evidence. The course instructor and the student's disciplinary adviser (drawn from department faculty) evaluate written and verbal presentations in the capstone seminar.

In addition to these two required, majors-only courses, *majors take six other courses drawn from offerings in Christian Traditions and Global Religious Traditions*. At the completion of their major, students will have had five upper-division courses out of a total of eight required for the major.

The following learning outcomes build on growing mastery of the skills, knowledge, values and beliefs developed in lower-division courses which contribute to the major:

**a. Skills:**

The student who majors in religion will thus be able to demonstrate the capacity to:

1. Read, critically and empathetically, the works of scholars in the field of religion
2. Construct a well-organized research paper which offers a persuasive argument
3. Receive and respond to constructive criticisms of their written and verbal presentations
4. Demonstrate, in writing and speaking, their assumptions and biases
5. Use, with growing sophistication, the scholarly tools and methods of the discipline
6. Demonstrate their mastery of factual and conceptual frameworks within the field of religion
7. Publicly present their study and research in an engaging and persuasive manner
8. Identify and pursue a question or problem independently, using library and other resources
9. Demonstrate advanced undergraduate writing abilities
10. Demonstrate competence in discussing and evaluating complex ideas

**b. Knowledge:**

1. Articulate the role of religion in human communities, both historically and globally
2. Possess a capacity for critical and empathetic understanding of the texts, practices, histories, theologies, and/or ethics within Christian Traditions and Global Religious Traditions
3. Recognize and be able to critically appreciate and evaluate religion's role in shaping human purpose and meaning
4. Engage and master the work of various scholars of religion on a single topic, as evidenced in the Capstone Research Seminar
5. Demonstrate mastery of factual and conceptual information basic to a particular discipline or area in the field of religion and be able to identify the significance of facts, concepts and methodologies for the study of religion
6. To know the academic tools and methods utilized in various disciplines within the field of religion

**c. Beliefs and Values:**

1. To develop critical sensitivity to the importance of religious aspects of human life
2. To further develop the values described for General Education courses (above)

**Sources for this statement**

1. Department of Religion Integrated Learning Objectives
2. Doug Oakman, "Model Integrating Religion Department and University Integrated Learning Objectives with Bloom's Taxonomy" (1998)
3. Department of Religion Proposal to General Education Committee
4. Departmental rationale for curricular revision
5. Assessment Criteria for the senior seminar in Religion (1998)
6. Points on Consensus for Expectations for Courses (1995 and 2003)
7. Appendix A: Assessment – Department of Religion Annual Report 2007-2008, Samuel Torvend