Religion and Society Program

Two Conceptual Foci

The Religion and Society Program promotes interdisciplinary reflection that critically examines religious and social life. With “the religious” and “the social” as its two foci, the program equips both master's and doctoral students with theoretical resources and diverse perspectives that enhance and deepen their theological studies and understanding of Christian practices in church and society. These foci are important for structuring the program’s conceptual field and, especially at the PhD level, its qualifying exams.

Scope of the Program

Faculty currently participating in the Religion and Society Program teach in the academic departments of the Seminary, and bring to the program different types of theoretical expertise and skills from the following range of areas:

- Religious Studies (e.g. sociology of religion, history of religion, philosophy of religion)
- Social Sciences (e.g. sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, critical theory)
- Humanities (e.g. history, religion and literature)
- Ethics (e.g. religious, social, theological)
- Theology (e.g. systematic, doctrinal, constructive, practical)

Faculty Research Areas

Faculty currently participating in the Religion and Society Program invite proposals from doctoral candidates in their respective areas of research, including the following:

- Church and Society (especially their future in the North American context)
- Diaspora Christianities (including migration and immigration)
- Environmental Studies
- Ethics and Social Criticism
- Political Theologies
- Race, Gender, and Sexuality
- Religion and Literature

Interdisciplinary Ethos

The Religion and Society Program fosters an interdisciplinary ethos at the master's level by supporting instruction on religious and social issues in the course offerings of all departments, and by sponsoring special campus events and ongoing seminars on key religious and social themes. The purpose of these efforts at the master's level is to help promote reflection on religion and social life as they are informed by theological perspectives. This interdisciplinary ethos is more formally structured as a PhD degree program in religion and society. PhD students are expected to pass four comprehensive examinations. One of these exams should be selected by examinees as their “theory and methods exam,” in which they include special attention to theoretical and methodological options and debates pertinent to that exam.

- Religion and Religions (demonstrates excellence in knowledge of religious studies and at least one non-Christian tradition)
- Social Sciences, the Humanities, or Religion and Literature (demonstrates excellence in one theoretical perspective on “the social” in either social science or the humanities)
- Ethics (demonstrates excellence in the knowledge of religious, social, or theological ethics)
• A Dissertation-related Theme or Problematic (demonstrates excellence in analyzing a theme or problem that will be significant in the writing of the dissertation)

The first two exams enable disciplined attention to the aforementioned two foci of the conceptual field of religion and society. The third exam, in ethics, is required because analysis of the moral life and ethical reflection upon it has been a key site wherein religious and social themes often intersect in theological studies and Christian practice. The fourth exam enables students to focus research and thinking about their dissertations. While the nomenclature of "comprehensive examinations" is used by the Seminary in accordance with language used by its accreditors, these exams may be understood to be "qualifying exams" in the sense that, while wide-ranging, they certify readiness to proceed to the dissertation proposal and writing phases of the program.

Seminary and University Scholarship

PhD students are expected to learn from disciplines of the university, even as they focus those disciplines for the distinctive concerns and contexts of Christian theological traditions. This program not only enables scholarship at the Seminary to sustain its own community of research into religious and social issues, it also serves a liaison function between the Seminary and Princeton University and, occasionally, between the Seminary and other institutions.

U.S. and International Scholarship

The dual focus on religion and society, and its distinctive interdisciplinary work, has traditionally made the Religion and Society Program an important resource for international as well as U.S. scholars. The program places a high value on a functioning diversity of scholars from this country and abroad, who come together to reflect critically on issues of justice and peace, and on human differences that are not only religious, social and theological, but also cultural, political, and economic. Thus, the Religion and Society Program has traditionally sought to fuse rigorous reflection with social criticism and prophetic discourse.