Prepare for complete living.

~Spencer
Last spring, the University of Wyoming Trustees approved the new religious studies degree. As with other liberal arts degrees, religious studies helps students develop critical thinking and analytical skills that lay the foundation for various career paths and life choices.

Religious Studies helps to prepare students to live in a global world

By Diana Marie Waggener

Throughout the course of history, religious beliefs have helped to shape societies and influence their leaders, and religious philosophies often are the foundations of accepted moral and ethical behavior within a culture. Religion continues to be important in the modern world, both from a cultural and political standpoint, and the Religious Studies program offers courses that cover a range of faith systems, from Buddhism to Judaism to Christianity to Islam. An academic approach to these varying religions acquaints students with beliefs and forms of worship, as well as an understanding of how these faith systems create a world view for their believers.

Other students have no religious affiliation or background and are interested in discovering new ideas and philosophies. Many students become interested in religions as a result of analyzing literature or learning the history of music and art in the ancient world. No matter the reason for entering the program, students leave with a much broader sense of the world around them as it pertains to religious thought.

A self-described military brat, Kaitlin Harper-Loendorf is the first UW student to earn a bachelor’s degree in religious studies, having graduated in December 2010. She began her undergraduate work at UW before the religious studies degree was approved. “I took classes in several different departments and only took religious studies classes as electives,” she says. “I worked closely with Dr. Quincy Newell and decided in 2009 that religious studies were by far my favorite classes and that I wanted to get my degree in something that actually moved me.”

Harper-Loendorf’s favorite course in the program was Theory of Religious Studies, where she learned a widerange of theory and mastered how to interpret different theorists. “My final semester, I took an independent study with Dr. Newell to study religious theory more intensely,” she notes. “I ended up writing a final paper using a book called The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth by Wendy Doniger, which I presented at the religious studies conference. I applied her theory [the power of myth to convey shared human experience] to first-person research I did concerning pastoral views of heaven. I worked with the Laramie Harvest Christian Center, a conservative Evangelical Four-Square Gospel church. I really enjoyed the project, and that paper was one of my favorites.”
With a degree concentration split between theory and American religion, specifically contemporary conservative evangelical Christianity, Harper-Loendorf completed several research projects, including abortion policy in the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and Pat Robertson’s 1986 presidential bid. “I am grateful to Religious Studies faculty members for being supportive and accommodating in allowing me to study exactly what interested me,” she says. “I believe that understanding contemporary religious movements is vital in order to comprehend American culture and politics. I can’t say exactly why this area in particular interested me, as I was not raised in this kind of church. However, many people misunderstand the study of religion in that it must be driven either by personal belief or an agenda to disprove religion. Through my studies, I have found that religion is an important aspect of people’s lives, and that is what I wanted to understand. I would say that my studies at UW have allowed me to formulate a better personal theory concerning religion.”

Currently, Harper-Loendorf is working toward a master’s degree in international relations in the UW Department of Political Science with a minor in Gender and Women’s Studies. “I have thought a lot about my academic choices,” she says, “and it is clear to me that what I really want to learn overall is: why do people do the things they do? I don’t think there is any better way to understand that than by studying religion and politics.”

Associate Professor Paul Flesher, founding director of the Religious Studies program, which began in 1993, also sees the connection between understanding religious beliefs and improving relations among people. “Given the interconnected character of today’s world,” he explains, “our students need to study the religions of the world to understand people who are now linked to us but who are different from us. How do their religions motivate their interactions? When we ship our products, our knowledge, or our technology overseas, understanding the religion of the country to which it is going will help us predict how it will be received.”

Flesher adds, “In a few years, our students will be the ones who will be making those predictions. They will be in the companies, the universities, or the diplomatic core, making those decisions. The more they understand the motivations of the people with whom they interact, the better they will compete. Because of the upheaval in the Muslim world, our students will be impacted by Islam for the rest of their lives. They should understand the dynamics of that influence. Because of the economic importance of India and China, our students and the world they enter after graduation will be shaped by decision makers whose religious upbringing is Hindu or Confucian or Buddhist.”

Besides preparing students for engagement with the global society within the contexts of business, politics, and education, religious

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studies also can stir within students an aspiration to apply their knowledge in a religious setting.

Cheyenne native Erik Pederson changed his major from art to religious studies when he noticed that his artwork began to reflect a deeper desire to pursue a religious existence. “I discovered my spiritual aspirations through art,” he explains. “Religion revolves around a reality that is deeper than rational calculation and mysteries that baffle the literal thinker. Art, in all its subjectivity, is, therefore, a perfect way to express religious sentiment.”

After investigating and practicing several religions, which culminated with an excursion in Hinduism, Pederson decided to join the Roman Catholic Church. “Immediately afterward,” he says, “I knew that I should change my major to something more directly related to my spiritual life, so religious studies was the obvious choice.”

The first Religious Studies course that Pederson took was Old Testament Studies in spring 2009. “This was my initial exposure to critical examination of religion and was largely influential on my personal exploration of religion at that time,” he says. “In the fall of 2010, I took Judaism at the Dawn of Christianity, which helped me to understand Christianity better and also to realize that religion is never a static institution, but rather a dynamic entity.”

Some Religious Studies courses compare aspects of different religions, while others focus on interpreting a single religion in a particular time period. Pederson’s primary focus is on Christianity, which he acknowledges is due to his own particular faith, but he also has studied other Christian denominations, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and their worldviews. “Perhaps the most valuable thing that I have learned thus far in my studies is that every religion perceives a problem within the world and poses a solution to that problem,” Pederson notes. “Most religions, however, perceive different problems and, therefore, arrive at much different solutions. So understanding this phenomenon is absolutely essential to studying religion objectively.”

Besides comparing religions and offering exegesis of religious texts and cultures, some Religious Studies courses focus on how religious beliefs are represented in literature, film, art, and music. Pederson took Film and Religion last spring. “This class really exposed just how influential religion is, not only in movies, but in culture in general,” he says. “I think that many of my peers were undoubtedly surprised at how much can be learned through this less-than-traditional means.”

“When I started college three years ago,” Pederson says, “I had no clue what I wanted to do in life. Now, I’m discerning a call to become a Franciscan Friar—go figure! A degree in religious studies will be a great starting point, no matter if I go on to study theology, more comparative religion, or if I am just answering the countless questions that are sure to be directed at a guy in a brown habit.”