Welcome!

I understand that you have been accepted for admission to Carleton and have expressed an interest in the study of religion. A few words here, going beyond what the College catalog says about our department, may be helpful as you approach your decision about college this fall.

The study of religion, in the context of a liberal arts education, draws upon multiple disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. We offer courses that deal with various historic traditions (including Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Native American religions, Chinese and Japanese religions, Hinduism, and Buddhism) as well as with the problems and issues involving those traditions in today’s world. This is reflected in the variety of courses offered within the department: some introduce a religious tradition and trace its development historically; others examine in a cross-cultural context the issues faced by various religious communities and individuals; and still others explore and compare diverse theories and methods employed in the study of religions. The department is concerned with traditional and contemporary forms of both major and more marginal religions, and with both the textual and the lived, daily forms of religious expression. We examine the existential, intellectual, and social problems to which religions respond, and probe the dynamic and often ambiguous relationship between religious beliefs and practices and the social order in which they are embedded. Throughout the curriculum, religion is approached as a significant and pervasive expression of human culture, both past and present.

In the newspapers and television, one gets the impression that religious groups are always at odds. At Carleton we deal with this question by respecting the integrity, diversity, and richness of the traditions we study. Our aim is not to convert students to any religion but to invite them into the difficult and exciting task of understanding religion. We cultivate an attitude of studious and critical empathy in order to understand how religious traditions work on their own terms. At the same time, we recognize that many students who take religion courses have significant religious questions of their own; some also come with deep religious commitments that have stimulated their interest in the study of religion. At Carleton, we honor the personal religious, and non-religious, beliefs and values of our students and maintain that these need not interfere with the academic study of religion. Indeed, for some students, this academic work deepens their personal engagement with religious life.

A popular course among first year students is our main introductory course Understanding Religion, which takes an exciting tour through selected themes and puzzles related to the fascinating and diverse expressions of religion throughout the world. From politics and pop culture, to religious philosophies and spiritual practices, to rituals and gender, and more, students will explore how these issues emerge in a variety of practices, places, and historical moments in the U.S. and across the globe. Entering students may also enroll in our department’s Argument and Inquiry seminars, or in any course about the history of a particular religious tradition or the presence of a theme in numerous religions, such as gender, power, or politics.
Despite predictions of its demise, religion remains a vital component of most human cultures in the world of the twenty-first century. Understanding of religious texts, persons, and practices is indispensable for appreciating not just the human quest for meaning in life, but the ways in which current social and political movements and institutions have developed and new ones continue to appear. Most Carleton students take our courses out of deep curiosity about the dynamic, rich, and complicated dimensions of religion in the past and present. Our students move on to successful careers in non-profit social justice organizations, law, medicine and public health, community service, politics, and even money management and tech companies. I’d be glad to be in touch with you about any of your interests. If you have questions about the study of religion at Carleton, feel free to write me or email me at the College.

Sincerely yours,

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