

THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGION  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

THE SENIOR HONORS THESIS

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## I. Introduction

The thesis is an extended essay that deals in a sustained way with a focused topic that is of particular interest to the student and that raises broader questions for the study of religion. Thesis writers should keep in mind the meaning of the word *essay*; the thesis should be a careful effort to develop and test the writer's analytical, interpretative, and expressive powers. Ideally the project should address a question that has a future, i.e., that is capable of sustaining interest and generating dialogue over an extended period of time. An effective thesis will address such a question by focusing on a specific, manageable aspect of it. Students are encouraged to build on ideas they have already explored in a junior tutorial or other coursework. The senior thesis is the capstone of the undergraduate curriculum in the Study of Religion, and has the potential to be a significant experience of intellectual and personal growth.

The subject matter of the theses will naturally vary widely, by virtue of the nature of the field of religion. In every case, the subject should be specific enough to allow for depth of treatment. At the same time, however, it should not be so narrowly and technically construed as to allow the writer to lose sight of its relations to broader issues in the study of religion and related fields of inquiry. Approval of the topic will be based upon its cogency and its suitability as subject matter for an honors thesis in the Study of Religion.

The thesis will also vary according to a student's overall plan of study within the concentration. Students pursuing a plan of study in Two Major Traditions or One Major Tradition and One Theme (Option A) will usually craft theses that involve the two traditions, or the tradition and theme, that they have examined during the course of their undergraduate work. Thesis writers following One Major Tradition (Option B) will focus their theses primarily upon the tradition they have examined during the course of their undergraduate work. Students who are pursuing a joint concentration in Religion and another field (Option C) are required to center their theses on the tradition they have studied within the Comparative Study of Religion, while also engaging the other field. Finally, joint concentrators for whom the Comparative Study of Religion is the secondary field (Option D) will follow the thesis guidelines set by their primary concentration, but will also explore a topic that relates to the tradition they have studied within the Study of Religion. In all cases, students will deal with an issue that is connected to broader issues in the scholarly study of religion.

All concentrators are expected to designate the area or the general topic of the thesis in April of their Junior year. A prospectus approved and signed by the senior thesis advisor is due in September of the Senior year. Primary concentrators will also submit an outline of the thesis October, and a draft of each of their three chapters of the thesis: one in November, a second in December, and a third in January. The completed thesis is

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due in March of the Senior year. Drafts are due in electronic form to the Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies, and in either electronic or paper form to both the faculty and graduate student advisors (check with your advisors about which form they prefer).

## II. Calendar of Deadlines and Events for 2015-2016

**WEDNESDAY, September 23, by 5 p.m.:** A 2-page prospectus of the thesis, approved and signed by both the faculty and graduate thesis advisors, including a bibliography and working title.

**MONDAY, September 28, 12:00-2:00 p.m.:** A 20-minute individual meeting with members of the Faculty to discuss and review the prospectus. You will be assigned a specific time slot within the 2-hour period.

**FRIDAY, October 23, by 5 p.m.:** A detailed overview or outline of your three thesis chapters (no more than 6 pages total). You should also indicate which chapter you plan to draft for the November deadline.

**TUESDAY, November 24, by 5 p.m.:** A 12-15 page draft of one chapter of the thesis. Note: This deadline falls on a Tuesday, rather than a Friday, since Thanksgiving break begins on Wednesday of this week.

**FRIDAY, December 18, by 5 p.m.:** A 12-15 page draft of a second chapter of the thesis.

**FRIDAY, January 22, by 5 p.m.:** A 12-15 page draft of a third chapter of the thesis. Note: This deadline falls at the end of the January break, before the spring semester begins.

**FRIDAY, February 26, by 5 p.m.** A revised draft of all chapters of the thesis AND a draft of the introduction and conclusion.

**WEDNESDAY, March 9, by 5 p.m.:** Three bound copies of the thesis. Thesis length: 50-80 pages (double-spaced 12-point type).

**TUESDAY, April 12:** Public presentation of the theses as part of Advising Fortnight. Invite your friends!

**MONDAY, April 18 - THURSDAY, May 5:** A 1½-hour oral defense of the thesis with members of the thesis evaluation committee.

Please note:

- These dates apply for May degree candidates only.
- All drafts are due in hard copy or electronic form to the faculty and graduate advisors (ask them which form they prefer), and in electronic form to the Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies.
- Extensions will be granted only by written appeal to the Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies. There are NO EXTENSIONS for the March 9 deadline.

### III. Prospectus Guidelines

**Due Wednesday, September 23, by 5 p.m.**

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines a prospectus as "something (as a statement or situation) that forecasts the course or nature of something not yet existent or developed." As you begin to draft your prospectus, keep in mind that the purpose of this document is to provide yourself, your advisors, and the prospectus committee with a statement of your intentions for your thesis – a kind of road-map or blueprint for your project. It is very important to talk with your advisors and listen to their guidance at this point because it is difficult to know how much you can accomplish in a year. A prospectus is, by definition, a forecasting tool for a work in progress. It is neither final nor immutable. Your senior thesis prospectus should include the following elements:

1. A tentative thesis title
2. A 2-page statement of the thesis topic, argument, and methodology
3. A preliminary bibliography of 2-3 pages
4. Signatures of approval by both your graduate and faculty thesis advisors

Your prospectus should introduce the topic of your thesis and explain why the subject you have chosen is significant. A helpful way to begin thinking about your thesis, as well as to begin your thesis prospectus, is to formulate a question with which you plan to grapple in your thesis. Instead of beginning: "My thesis will examine the vrata tradition in India and its significance for Hindu women," try beginning: "What are vrata rites? What role do they play in the Hindu religious tradition? What significance do they have for Hindu women in particular?" Formulating your topic as a question, or series of questions, also sets you up to discuss how you propose to go about researching and answering these queries.

Although it is likely that you do not have a fully formulated thesis statement at this stage of the process, you should indicate how you intend to undertake the research that will help you to make an argument about the issues you have raised. What methodologies, or approaches will you use in your research? Will your project be based upon close, textual analysis? Will you be conducting ethnographic interviews? Will you be observing rituals? Comparing various historical phenomena? These are the kinds of questions you will want to ask yourself as you draft your prospectus. The prospectus should also indicate how your thesis topic and the questions it generates relate to broader issues in the study of religion. What kind of contribution to the field of religious studies do you hope to make? What conversations within the diverse field of religion will your project participate in? What kind of voice do you want to speak in? What kind of an argument do you hope to make – analytical? theological? ethical? historical? sociological? Please remember that these categories are only suggestions, and certainly not exhaustive or mutually exclusive.

Additional questions that you may find helpful as you formulate your prospectus include: Are you beginning with a question that is unresolved? What puzzles you? What do you want to find out? Do you care about the question? Are you clear about what you are asking? What observations have led you to ask this question? What hunches do you have about possible answers? Is the topic interesting? What interests you about it? Can it be made interesting to others? Can the topic be researched? How can it be researched? What kinds of information are needed to answer the questions posed? Does the topic present problems that can be explored or solved with analysis? Does it provide you with an opportunity to do some creative or original thinking? Examples of prospectuses from previous years may be found at the back of this booklet.

#### **IV. Prospectus Committee Meeting Guidelines**

After the prospectus has been submitted, it will be distributed to members of the prospectus committee. This committee is composed of the Director of Undergraduate Studies, the Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies, and several members of the Faculty. The purpose of the prospectus committee meeting is to provide you with comments on your prospectus. You should come prepared to answer questions from members of the committee regarding the suitability of your topic, the viability of your research plan, and the opportunities your project presents for addressing broader issues within the study of religion. Your prospectus committee meeting will be individually-scheduled, and should take approximately 20 minutes. The prospectus committee may request you to rewrite or append your prospectus in response to any concerns that are raised regarding your thesis project.

#### **V. Prospectus Guidelines For Joint Concentrators with Religion as a Secondary Field**

Joint concentrators for whom the Comparative Study of Religion is not the primary field are required to submit a copy of their senior thesis prospectus to the Director of Undergraduate Studies for the Study of Religion by the deadline set for other concentrators. Final approval of the prospectus will be at the discretion of the Director of Undergraduate Studies and the Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies. If the prospectus is not approved, the student will be asked to rewrite and resubmit the prospectus. In the event that the prospectus remains unapproved, the student will not be allowed to continue to pursue a joint concentration with religion as the secondary field.

## VI. Preliminary Outline

**Due Friday, October 23, by 5 p.m.**

This assignment differs from the thesis prospectus in several ways. First, it is assumed that you have undertaken a significant amount of research since writing the prospectus. This assignment provides you with an opportunity to begin to think through (in written form) how you will use the data you are collecting in your research to support, and perhaps to reformulate, the argument of your thesis. Second, this assignment should include preliminary, yet detailed overviews or outlines of each chapter that you envision. The goal of this requirement is to help you to begin the process of organizing your research in a coherent manner. You may structure this 6-page assignment in the format that seems most suitable to you. You may wish to submit an alpha-numeric outline; or, you may choose to submit a narrative overview; or, you may submit a graphically-structured flow chart! In any case, your submission must include detailed, thoughtful content that helps you and your advisors to begin to envision the thesis in its final form. While the purpose of this assignment is to encourage you to begin thinking systematically about your data and your argument, we do not expect or require that the final draft of your thesis conform to this preliminary outline.

## VII. Chapter Guidelines

- First Chapter Draft due **Tuesday, November 24, by 5 p.m.**
- Second Chapter Draft due **Friday, December 18, by 5 p.m.**
- Third Chapter Draft due **Friday, January 22, by 5 p.m.**
- Revised Draft of All Chapters AND Draft of Introduction and Conclusion due **Friday, February 26, by 5 p.m.**

Each chapter draft must present a coherent, focused, and structured argument that is supported by appropriate citations and analysis. Your submissions should represent carefully considered and researched drafts of the more polished arguments that you will produce in the final thesis. Freewriting, though very helpful in the process of producing these assignments, is not appropriate in this context. Please remember, however, that a draft is, by definition, preliminary. We do not expect these submissions to be in their final form, and assume that you will revise your work multiple times throughout the thesis-writing process. Additionally, these drafts need not follow a rigid chapter-by-chapter progression. For example, you may choose to submit a draft of what will ultimately become your third chapter at the first deadline. Each chapter draft should be roughly 12-15 pages, although you may submit longer drafts if you desire. It is essential to stick to the deadlines so that your advisors have time to give you comments, and so that you have time for revisions. Extensions will be granted only by written appeal to the Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies.

## VIII. Content and Style Guidelines

### *Format*

The thesis has three parts: preliminaries, text, and back matter. The title page, a table of contents, and a very brief preface (or simply acknowledgments) are ordinarily the only necessary preliminaries. The text is the thesis itself. The back matter comprises: (1) the bibliography, which is always necessary; and (2) appendices (including glossaries, charts, indices, maps, etc.) when they are needed. The bibliography must include full bibliographic information on every important source used in the preparation of the thesis. Whenever you make use of a book or other source – not simply when quoting directly from a text – you should include it in the bibliography.

### *Style*

Good theses not only present illuminating and original arguments, but do so in lucid language and polished prose. Attention to the quality of your prose style should not be reserved for the final stages of editing the thesis; be sure to take into account issues of style as you are drafting and revising your thesis, as well. Since you are devoting many months to examining and writing about a specific area of interest, you owe it to yourself to employ language that reflects your understanding of and enthusiasm for your topic. Please recognize, however, that you are addressing an audience that may not share your degree of expertise on your topic, so be careful to avoid jargon and to define clearly any technical terms that you feel are crucial to your argument. In the final stages of editing, be particularly attuned to misspellings, typographical and grammatical errors, and insufficient or inaccurate documentation. Errors of this kind, while they do not necessarily reflect the amount of work that has gone into the thesis, will distract your reader from the substance of your argument and suggest that the argument is as sloppy as the prose in which it is conveyed. *Style Manual The Chicago Manual of Style* (now in its 16th edition) is the most common citation and style guide in publications concerning religion, and unless another style is preferred in your sub-discipline, it should serve as the basic reference for your citations and bibliography. It can be found online (accessible through the Harvard University network) at <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org>.

### *Notes and Citations*

A footnote supplies the reader with a reference to the source(s) of factual information, specific ideas, or direct quotations used in the text of the thesis. A note may also provide supplemental information that is relevant but tangential to your argument. The tendency of many writers is to use the first kind of note too sparingly, and the latter kind too much. The rule for the former is simple: any passage or idea that is not your own should be credited to its source. To do otherwise is to plagiarize. As to the use of notes for supplemental information, the discretion of the writer must suffice. Note,



however, that the value of a piece of scholarship is not judged by the length and abundance of its notes. If particular information is necessary to the argument, incorporate it into the main text. For guidelines on notation, see the manuals described above.

#### *Direct Quotation*

Direct citations from other sources must be treated with the utmost care and precision. To misquote someone else is a serious fault in any kind of writing. Every direct quotation must be reproduced exactly as it stands in the original. Except where integration of a quotation in your own sentence structure requires a change of typecase or end punctuation, the capitalization and punctuation in the quoted passage must be carefully reproduced. Italics in the original must be retained in your quotation. When using ellipses to eliminate unneeded words or phrases from a quoted passage, be sure not to change or misrepresent the original author's intention and meaning. Any addition to a quoted passage must be enclosed in brackets (not parentheses).

#### *Foreign Words and Phrases*

Foreign words and phrases should be italicized. Passages in foreign languages should be given in English translation when used in the text. If the translation is not your own, the translator must be acknowledged. When it is important to do so, the text in its original language and wording should be given in a note, either in transliteration or in the appropriate script.

#### *Images, Illustrations and Photographs*

Images in a thesis may include graphs, charts, maps, line drawings, or photographs. These illustrations are normally placed on separate pages, with their legend typed either beneath the figure or on the front or back of the preceding page. Pages of illustrations and figures should be interleaved with the text of the thesis. If illustrations, as in the case of photographs, need to be mounted on the page, a good quality commercial paste or dry-mounting adhesive should be used. Like citations from other sources, illustrations must be credited to the appropriate sources.

### **IX. Format and Submission Guidelines**

#### *Length*

The minimum length of an honors thesis is 50 pages (in double-spaced, 12-point type). The maximum length is 80 pages (in double-spaced, 12 point type). These limits refer to the main text of the thesis (including introduction and conclusion), but do not include

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back matter such as appendices and bibliography. Within these limits, the length of the thesis should be determined by the demands of the particular topic. No thesis may fall outside of these limits without prior written permission from the Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies, on or before January 29, 2013.

*Copies*

Theses should be produced on a laser printer and should be printed in 12-point type. Three typescript copies on 8½ by 11 inch paper are required. One copy must be on archival-quality paper – the thesis paper sold at the Harvard Coop is recommended for this purpose. The other copies may be clear photocopies. All copies must be submitted in a black spring binder (no ring binders are acceptable). Binders are available at Bob Slate Stationer.

The title of the thesis, name of the author, and date of submission (e.g., March 2016) should appear on a label firmly fixed to the front cover and the spine of each binder (adhesive labels are preferable). The writer should retain a copy of the thesis for him- or herself. All theses that received grades of *summa* or *magna* will be placed in the University Archives, and the Committee on the Study of Religion will keep one copy of every thesis, regardless of the grade received. If the thesis is to be entered in competition for prizes (such as the Thomas Hoopes Prize), additional copies should be prepared.

*Format*

The thesis should be typed on one side of the page, double-spaced (except for indented quotation and footnotes) with margins of 1 inch at the top, bottom, and on the right hand side, and 1½ inches on the left hand side. Notes should be placed at the bottom of the page (footnotes). All pages should be numbered: preliminary matter with Roman numerals, and the remainder of the thesis, beginning with the first page of the Introduction and continuing to the last page of the bibliography, with Arabic numerals. The title page should conform exactly to the model on the following page. Three bound copies of the thesis are due Wednesday, March 9, by 5 p.m.

Theses must be submitted to the Study of Religion main office in the Barker Center before the 5 p.m. deadline in order to receive full credit.

Lateness Policy

Theses submitted after the March 9, 5 p.m. deadline will receive grade reductions as follows:

**If submitted by 5 p.m. Thursday, March 10:**

The evaluation for theses submitted between 5 p.m. March 9 and 5 p.m. March 10 will be lowered by a full grade. For example:

Grades of *summa* will be lowered to *magna*

Grades of *summa minus* will be lowered to *magna minus*

Grades of *magna plus*; will be lowered to *cum plus*

Grades of *magna* will be lowered to *cum*

Grades of *magna minus* will be lowered to *cum minus*

Grades of *cum plus*, *cum*, or *cum minus* will not be recommended for honors

**If submitted by 5 p.m. Wednesday, March 12:**

The evaluation for theses submitted between 5 p.m. March 12 and 5 p.m. March 13 will be lowered by two full grades. For example:

Grades of *summa* will be lowered to *cum*

Grades of *summa minus* will be lowered to *cum minus*

Grades of *magna plus* or below will not be recommended for honors

**Any thesis received after 5 p.m. on Wednesday, March 12 will receive a non-honors grade.**

[TITLE]

A Thesis Presented

By

[Full name, including middle name, of author]

To

The Committee on the Study of Religion

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Harvard University

[month and year of submission of the completed thesis]

## X. Evaluation of the Thesis

### *Thesis Evaluation Committee*

The thesis evaluation committee consists of the thesis readers. There are usually three readers of the thesis: the faculty thesis advisor, and two other outside faculty members (who may often be outside the student's sub-discipline). In the case of students in Option C, one of the readers will usually be a faculty member from the other field. Seniors are encouraged to suggest possible readers for their theses. The final choice of readers, however, is subject to approval by the Director of Undergraduate Studies and the Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies.

### *Evaluation*

Theses will be read and commented on by the members of the thesis evaluation committee. Readers' comments will be made available to the student prior to the oral examination. Theses will be graded on a scale of summa cum laude to cum laude minus, which corresponds to the letter grade range of A plus to B minus (with B minus being the lowest honors grade).

A summa-range essay (summa, summa minus) is equivalent to an A plus. It should make a significant contribution to knowledge, either by presenting successful research on a new or little studied problem, or providing an original and perceptive reassessment of familiar questions. A summa thesis should be based on rigorous and original research in appropriate primary sources, show a thorough command of the secondary literature on the topic, be well-written, provide a well-crafted argument, and offer incisive and first-rate creative thinking with respect to the problem(s) it addresses.

A magna-range essay (magna plus, magna, magna minus) is equivalent to an A or A minus. It is an excellent piece of undergraduate work, showing rigorous research, strong writing skills, a well-crafted argument, incisive and creative thinking, and a good grasp of the issues at stake.

A cum-range essay is equivalent to a B (cum plus = B plus, cum = B, cum minus = B minus). A cum-range thesis, considered worthy of "honor," must show serious thought and effort.

## XI. Advising Resources

### *Senior Thesis Advisors*

Students will meet regularly during the senior year both with a member of the Harvard faculty and with an advanced graduate student to discuss work-in-progress. Students are encouraged to meet at least once a month with their faculty advisors. The faculty advisor often assumes the role of “expert in the field,” helping the student to determine how his or her thesis contributes to current scholarship and identifying relevant secondary literature with which the student ought to be familiar. Students should take the initiative in scheduling appointments with faculty advisors.

Students are expected to meet with their graduate advisor for roughly one hour a week. (Some weeks may call for a slightly longer meeting, whereas in other weeks, a somewhat shorter meeting may be sufficient.) The graduate student advisor serves as a conversation partner who helps the student to focus and communicate her or his arguments through these weekly meetings and through comments on written drafts. At least three times a year, students are expected to schedule a joint meeting with both of their thesis advisors. These meetings usually take place in October, after the prospectus passes but before the outline is submitted, in December, just before the end of the term, and again in February, after three chapter drafts have been submitted but before they have been revised.

### *Senior Seminar: Religion 99*

The Senior Seminar is a year-long course, graded Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory, which culminates in the completion and submission of the senior honors thesis. In order to receive a Satisfactory in Religion 99 for the fall semester, a student must submit a thesis prospectus, a preliminary outline, and two draft chapters of the senior thesis by the stipulated due dates. Submission and acceptance of the senior thesis in March fulfills the Religion 99 requirement for the spring semester. The Senior Seminar is designed as a forum for discussing the thesis-writing process and as a workshop for developing research and writing skills. The syllabus for the Senior Seminar will be made available at the beginning of each semester. Regular attendance at the Senior Seminar is required to receive a grade of Satisfactory.

### *Other Professors*

Students may also find it helpful to discuss their thesis topics and progress with other professors in related fields of study. Although Harvard faculty can be quite busy, under-graduate education is the core of the activity of the University. Don't hesitate to

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make an appointment with a faculty member to discuss your ideas or to ask for reading recommendations.

### *Director of Undergraduate Studies and Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies*

As always, the Director of Undergraduate Studies and the Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies are willing to discuss any general questions or problems related to the creation of a senior thesis. Even if you are very unsure of your direction, it is better to communicate with one of us than to isolate yourself, which may tend to exacerbate the problem. Let us help you in whatever way we can. Just start by asking!

### *Libraries and Reference Librarians*

Harvard Libraries offer a wealth of print and electronic resources. The Widener and Andover-Harvard libraries are the primary locations for materials related to the Study of Religion, but you will probably use other libraries as well. Depending on your topic, you may want to consult ethnographic material in the Tozzer Library, material related to human rights in the Law School Library, or Buddhist texts in the Harvard-Yenching Library, just as a few examples. Whatever library you visit, Reference staff will be happy to help you understand the library's collections and to suggest approaches to your research.

In addition, you will find it helpful to consult with the librarians who serve as Harvard College Library liaisons to Study of Religion students:

Reed Lowrie, Reference Librarian, Cabot Science Library  
lowrie@fas.harvard.edu, (617) 496-5534

Ramona Islam, Reference Librarian, Widener Library  
rlislam@fas.harvard.edu, (617) 384-5848

In your required meeting with these liaisons during the fall semester, they will suggest print and electronic resources relevant to your topic. If possible, they will also show you additional resources and refer you to other librarians who are knowledgeable in the field you are investigating.

### *The Writing Center*

The Writing Center, part of the Harvard College Writing Program, is located in the basement of the Barker Center and offers individual consultations to senior thesis writers on an occasional or regular basis. The Writing Center advisors address the research and (especially) writing needs of thesis writers. Although they are not experts

in your specific field, they offer invaluable advice on writing strategies. Check out their website: <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr>.

*Bureau of Study Counsel*

“How can I learn if I'm not motivated?” “I'd like to change my habit of procrastination.” “I need to read more quickly.” “I'm feeling really stressed.” These are only a few of the hundreds of issues that the counselors at the Bureau of Study Counsel deal with. Feel free to approach anyone at the Bureau with any question of concern. You may initially want to speak with Sheila Reindl, who has worked with several of us in the Study of Religion (both students and faculty members). The Bureau has a large staff of counselors who deal with a broad range of issues. The website for the Bureau is <http://bsc.harvard.edu>.

**XII. Contact Information**

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