



## FACULTY SCHOLARSHIP HIGHLIGHTS

Religious Studies

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### Faculty

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**Suzanne M. Bessenger**, Chair and Associate Professor, B.A., Mills College; M.A., Ph.D. University of Virginia

I became fascinated with the academic study of religion as an undergraduate at Mills College in Oakland, California, where I designed a major in Anthropology and Asian studies, immersed myself in the study of Tibetan Buddhism in India, Nepal, and Tibet with the School for International Training (SIT), and explored the intersections of Buddhism and social justice movements in a senior thesis on the “Free Tibet” movement in the Bay Area. Following graduation, I traversed Buddhist and Hindu pilgrimage sites in northern India and Nepal, and lived at Dolma Ling Nunnery in Himachal Pradesh, India. I went on to earn a Masters and Doctorate in the History of Religions at the University of Virginia, where I focused on Buddhist Studies, particularly Tibetan Buddhism, as well as Hinduism and Chinese religions.

During graduate school, I studied Tibetan intensively at Tibet University in Lhasa, Tibet for one year, and received a FulbrightHayes fellowship to spend another year conducting research among Tibetan exile communities in India and Nepal. My research focuses on the 14th century Tibetan saint Sönam Peldren and her husband Rinchen Pel, and most recently culminated in the book *Echoes of Enlightenment: The Lives of Sönam Peldren* (Oxford, 2016). At Randolph College, I impart my passion for understanding the role of religion and religious thought on our individual and collective identities with courses on the history and auto/biographical literature of Buddhism, death and dying, gender and religion, the history and visual culture of Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhist culture, and Chinese religions. In moments of repose, I love playing board games with my family, swimming, and hiking Virginia’s beautiful terrain.

"To study the way is the study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things." Eihei Dogen (1200-1253).

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**Gordon Blaine Steffey**, *Barbara Boyle Lemon '57 and William J. Lemon Professor of Religion and Philosophy*, B.A., St. Olaf College; M.Div., Yale University; M.A., Ph.D., University of Virginia

My commitment to the study of religion was born in the old city of Jerusalem and reared in an ecumenical monastery in the Saône-et-Loire department of the Bourgogne region of France. I have shared hot chocolate with the late Frère Roger of Taizé and blood cake with a Miao shaman in Guizhou province, China. I have rubbed the elephant’s back at Wannian Temple on Mount Emei Shan in Sichuan province and surveyed the Dead Sea from amid the ruins atop Mount Masada. These experiences are not incidental to what/how I teach. Religious Studies is a discipline for travelers, for those resolved to fathom lands near and far and break bread with strangers in pursuit of insight. It is a discipline especially for those who welcome dislocation and the crumbling of old securities. I encourage my students to take to the road and tutor them in the arts of traveling well.

My teaching interests are sweeping and include the study of religious autobiography, Abrahamic apocalypticism, spiritual exercises, text criticism and historical Jesus research, religion in film, women and gender in late antiquity, classical and Continental philosophy, and modern religious thought. My cross-disciplinary scholarship has been published in *Critical Muslim*, *East-West Affairs*, and elsewhere. When at rest, I may be found solving dilemmas terrestrial and otherwise in the company of friends, cultivating cosmic consciousness, plotting the founding of the philosophical commune Platonopolis, and cheering on Chelsea FC.

“Do not rely on following the degree of understanding that you have discovered, but simply think, ‘This is not enough.’”  
*Hagakure*, Yamamoto Jōchō (1659-1719).

## How will a Religious Studies Degree benefit me?

**Religious Studies at Randolph** helps you to fathom in close detail the captivating and critical data of global and local religious traditions. Religions are sources of meaning, engagement, and hope for persons and societies near and far. It is crucial in our networked world to come to terms with the worldviews and material cultures shaping how religious folk think about and practice basic elements of human life, from racial justice and sex to political power and death.

### Academic Offerings

- Bachelor of Arts Degree in Religious Studies
- Minor in Religious Studies

### Religious Studies is not a faith-based path!

While some majors and minors are persons of faith, many express no religious affiliation. Former US Senator and Secretary of State John Kerry recently confessed that “if I headed back to college today, **I would major in comparative religions** rather than political science. That is because religious actors and institutions are playing an influential role in every region of the world and on nearly every issue central to U.S. foreign policy.” He concludes that “leaders in public life need to recognize that in a world where people of all religious traditions are migrating and mingling like never before, **we ignore the global impact of religion at our peril.**” In this, Kerry echoes another former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, who argues that American ignorance about religions “poses one of the greatest challenges to our public diplomacy.” Your degree of intercultural competence will be defined in large measure by your knowledge of global religions. How much do you know about Islam? About Muslim communities in the United States, Saudi Arabia, or China? About the Muslim community in Lynchburg? Do these communities differ in outlook and practice? Is Buddhism here the same as Buddhism there and everywhere?

Our course offerings reflect a multidisciplinary approach to religious forms of life, past and present, with an eye for the cultivation of informed, thoughtful engagement in our domestic and global public square. The life more abundant is impossible without knowledge of how religions form and inform notions and pursuits of abundance.

### Our graduates discover that it is an exceptional foundation for success in a variety of careers.

Some choose public service and community action, others medicine, others law, others the corporate world, and some continue their education at top schools around the country like Yale, Harvard, UVA, Wake Forest, and elsewhere.

Possible additional pathways include:

- International aid and relief organizations
- Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), (e.g., Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch)
- Nonprofit and not-for-profit organizations (e.g., Vital Voices or Habitat for Humanity)
- Federal government agencies with an international focus (e.g., Peace Corps, USAID and the Foreign Service)
- Humanitarian organizations (e.g., International Red Cross and CARE)
- Community organization
- Think tanks like Pew and Rand

In May 2017, the median annual wages for a spectrum of some religious studies related professions were as follows:

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|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| Attorneys                             | \$119,250 |
| Emergency management directors        | \$87,500  |
| Social and community service managers | \$64,100  |
| Public relations specialists          | \$59,300  |

*According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook [bls.gov/ooh](http://bls.gov/ooh)*