The modern field of religious studies is an important part of a liberal arts education, allowing for the study of religious thought, ritual, culture, history and texts, often in a comparative context. At Brandeis, there has long been a fine program in Judaic studies, but students here felt a need to consider other religious traditions as well. The program in Religious Studies was therefore initiated by a group of students seeking to expand the range of religious studies courses at Brandeis in order to deepen their understanding of a multitude of religions and their manifestations through the perspectives of different disciplines and departments.

The goal of the Program in Religious Studies (PRS) is to expose students to different scholarly and pedagogical approaches to a variety of religious teachings. For example, the study of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam will bring great depth to one’s understanding of the historical development of individual traditions during a given epoch, as well as of the related art, literature, and politics of the societies practicing these religions. Similarly studies in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism will provide deeper appreciation not only of the relevant texts, but also of East-West cultural encounters and fundamental topics such as enlightenment and the possibility of rebirth.

In this program, which is currently available only as a minor, students survey a variety of approaches to religious studies in an introductory core course (REL 107a), which provides an overview of the range of possible religions. This course serves as an extremely important basis for the subsequent studies in religion. Students must also complete courses in at least two different religious traditions. These traditions currently include Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Students must also complete two elective courses from a list of specified courses which complement these traditions. Some students choose, in addition, to do an independent study in a particular area that is not covered by the available courses. Students can also write a senior honors thesis as approved by the chair of the program.

Core Skills: As an interdisciplinary program, PRS helps its students to gain a broad understanding of religions, the peoples who practice them, and their modes of belief, particularly of those religions outside the student’s usual experience. Students analyze texts, histories, and the
ways in which human beings have understood their world as reflected in their beliefs, ethics, rituals, artifacts, and organizations of religions. Students also investigate the changing relationships between religion and elements of the wider culture, and learn the theories and methods used in the study of religion.

Knowledge: The exposure to a wide range of religions often opens whole new fields of inquiry to the student: some extend their studies into languages, literature, history, law, and even the sciences. The Program in Religious Studies, through its unique and dynamic interdepartmental course work, strives to deliver a deep understanding of the multi-faceted nature of religion.

Some of the majors and minors with which our students have combined their studies in religion include: Biology, Neuroscience, Psychology, Film/Television/Interactive Media, Health Science, Society & Policy, Environmental Studies, Peace and Conflict Studies, Music, Theater Arts, Art History, Classical Studies, Philosophy, History, Politics, Anthropology, Sociology, English, Comparative Literature, Medieval & Renaissance Studies, International & Global Studies, American Studies, East Asian Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, Near Eastern & Judaic Studies, European Cultural Studies, Medieval & Renaissance Studies, Classical Architecture & Ancient History, Islamic & Middle Eastern Studies, and Interfaith Chaplaincy.

After Brandeis: Some students continue their study of religion after graduating, in seminaries, in graduate programs, or in other related programs. For others, it remains an experience that deepens their education at Brandeis and enriches their work in other fields.