

On Studying Religion at Princeton

1. On Studying Religion in a Humanities Department

The Department. Princeton University has long been committed to the idea that religion, like politics or art, is an important sphere of life and merits systematic attention within the curriculum. The primary responsibility for instruction in this area has, for more than half a century, been entrusted to the Department of Religion, which belongs to the Division of the Humanities. Our charge is to do our best to examine religious life, the diverse forms it has taken in different cultures and historical periods, and the questions it poses for theoretical, ethical, and political reflection. As a humanities department, we appeal to the same standards of historical and philosophical scholarship found in neighboring disciplines.

The Religion Department differs from certain other contexts in which religion is studied, such as a seminary, where fellow inquirers might have reason to take more for granted. The Religion Department does not expect students to abandon their commitments or to pretend that they don't have any while engaging in the academic study of religion. But we do expect students to reflect on those commitments critically--to become aware of what they are, how they might influence their findings, and why others might see fit to reject them.

What do religion majors do after majoring in religion? They do the same things that other humanities majors do, in roughly the same proportions. Many go to medical school, law school, or business school. A handful of them pursue advanced degrees in the study of religion or a neighboring discipline. Fewer still enter religious vocations. Majoring in religion is not, for most students, a route to a religious career, any more than majoring in English typically puts someone on a path toward becoming a novelist, a poet, or a literary critic. Like other forms of humanistic discipline, it does, however, have a tendency to broaden and deepen a student's understanding of the world and to sharpen his or her mind.

2. How the Department Judges Academic Performance

Academic proficiency in religion courses is demonstrated primarily in three ways: contributions to classroom discussion, performance on examinations, and the quality of papers. Instructors are responsible for producing a syllabus for each course, specifying which of these factors will be taken into account in grading.

Oral contributions. A student's contribution to discussion tends to carry relatively more weight in a three-hour weekly seminar than in courses taught in other formats. In all cases, however, a student's oral contributions are judged according to the following 3 criteria:

- ◆ the degree to which they manifest preparedness and understanding of the material being discussed;
- ◆ the degree to which they succeed in advancing the discussion by responding meaningfully

- ◆ to what others have said; and
- ◆ the degree to which they articulate coherent, interesting, thoughtful, plausible, and original claims, questions, and arguments.

Examinations. Many examinations are designed simply to test comprehension of the subject matter treated in the course: the ability to recall important facts, to define specialized terminology, to analyze data, and to interpret texts, images, practices, codes, and institutions. Some are also designed to test a student's capacity for synthetic, creative, or theoretical reasoning. Those that include essay questions often test a student's ability to argue for a thesis in much the way that some papers do. Because examinations come in many different forms, it is difficult to generalize about how they are evaluated, but students should always feel free to ask their instructors which kinds of skill will be tested in a given course's examinations, so that they can prepare prudently. In most cases, the kinds of skill being tested determine the form of the examination.

Papers. The two most common types of papers assigned in the religion curriculum are *response* papers and *thesis-defense* papers. Response papers express a student's thoughts about a given assignment. Such papers test whether a student has done the assignment and thought about it before the material is discussed in class, but they do not necessarily aspire to same scholarly or argumentative rigor as a more formal paper. For this reason they are evaluated in roughly the way that oral contributions are. The junior project, the senior thesis, and most term papers, on the other hand, are expected to present a coherent argument or analysis. If you are assigned a paper in a religion course, you should assume, unless explicitly told otherwise, that this is the kind of paper you are expected to write.

3. Formal Papers

They are meant:

- ◆ to be carefully written,
- ◆ to be based on independent research and thinking, and
- ◆ to state, clarify, and defend a thesis (that is, an argument) of interest to students of religion.

The department's standards for judging a paper's quality are all implicit in the components of this simple formula.

Stating and clarifying a thesis. A paper can hardly succeed in defending an argument if it either lacks a thesis entirely or fails to state it clearly. Readers will be asking, "What are you saying?" and "What do you mean by that?" A successful paper anticipates those questions and answers them appropriately. Sometimes this is a simple matter to be handled straightforwardly in the paper's introductory and concluding paragraphs. But when the paper's thesis is murky for some intellectually interesting reason--for example, because it includes ideas that are important but resistant to analysis --clear and precise statement of it can require painstaking work.

Defending a thesis. The defense of thesis consists of an argument for its acceptance--a reasonably detailed answer to the reader's question, "Why should I believe that?" The nature of the argument will depend on the kind of thesis being asserted. For example, if the paper's thesis is a historical claim about why something happened, the argument for it might present evidence procured in archival research as well as an account of why the paper's thesis offers a better explanation of the available evidence than alternate hypotheses could provide. An interpretive thesis, to take another example, might be defended by showing that one reading of a text accounts more plausibly for more details of the text, its context, and its author's apparent pretext than competing readings would. A philosophically critical thesis to the effect that a given bishop's argument against nuclear disarmament is invalid might be defended by reconstructing that argument in relation to the bishop's pronouncements and pastoral letters and then adducing logical considerations to show that the conclusion does not follow even if the bishop's premises are true.

It is easy to increase the interest of a paper's thesis. All one has to do is assert something more controversial--and therefore harder to defend. But students should take care, when formulating and refining a thesis, to consider their own scholarly capacities, the time and resources at their disposal, and the length of the assignment. It is a student's responsibility to frame a thesis that can be defended adequately in a paper of the assigned length. A valiant attempt to defend an overly ambitious thesis is more likely to be judged unsuccessful than given credit for being bold. By the same token, it is easy to make a paper's thesis extremely defensible, at a cost. If one asserts something no one would ever think of disagreeing with, for example, the claim is unlikely to be interesting. The art of writing good papers consists largely in knowing how to frame a thesis that strikes the best possible balance between interest and defensibility.

The question of style. The first criterion for judging style in academic writing is clarity of expression. A reader needs to be able to grasp exactly what is being claimed in the main thesis and exactly what is being claimed at each stage of the argument offered in support of it. Lack of clarity at any point tends to undermine the act of communication. Since a thesis-defense aims to persuade a reader to accept its thesis, the writing should be free of clutter and distractions.

The difference between critical evaluations and grades. When students receive written evaluations of their papers, the point is rarely to explain or to justify a grade. The point is rather to specify the strengths and weaknesses of the paper when judged in light of the standards of competence and excellence that belong to the practice of scholarship in the humanities. Grading is a separate matter. It is primarily an institutional matter, albeit an important one. Critical evaluation draws fine distinctions in order to help a student performing at any given level to discern exactly what would be involved in rising to the next level. Grading draws rough distinctions among levels of performance.

What the letter grades mean. The Undergraduate Announcement assigns each letter grade a verbal equivalent: "A" means *excellent*, "B" means *very good*, "C" means *satisfactory*,

"D" means *minimally acceptable*, and "F" means *failure*. When grading religion papers, the faculty takes these stipulations seriously. This entails awarding "A's" only to those papers that the grader can honestly claim to be excellent examples of humanistic scholarship, when judged by standards appropriate to undergraduate work--and so on, for the other grades on the scale. The standards being applied are the ones implicit in the notion that thesis-defense papers are meant to be *carefully written, to be based on independent research and thinking, and to state, clarify, and defend a thesis of interest to students of religion.*

What an "A" paper is like. An "A" paper is excellent in the sense that it satisfies all of the standards implicit in the basic formula and does so to a high degree. Such a paper would therefore be elegantly written, based on research and thinking of a highly original kind, state and clarify a highly interesting thesis, and defend that thesis with especially persuasive argumentation. An "A+" paper would have all of these features while also displaying at least one characteristic that lifts it above the level of most excellent work by undergraduates over the years. An "A-" paper would be truly excellent in most respects but slightly flawed in one or more respects. For example, an "A-" paper might be elegantly written, based on research and thinking of a highly original kind, state a highly interesting thesis in a clear way, and include a good deal of impressive argumentation, but not succeed in responding appropriately to one of the more important objections that could be raised against the main thesis. Or it might be excellent in most respects but fail to qualify its main thesis in the way that would be required to secure the perfection of the paper's argument. Or it might be excellent in most respects while falling short of elegance stylistically.

What a "B" paper is like. A "B" paper is very good in the sense that it satisfies all of the standards implicit in the basic formula and does so to a respectable degree. Such a paper would typically include careful but not elegant writing. It would be based on research and thinking that shows some originality. It would state and clarify a reasonably interesting thesis. And it would seriously engage with potential objections. A paper that had most of these traits but also had some flashes of excellence would qualify for a "B+." A paper that had most of these traits but also had some more serious flaws would merit a "B-." Such flaws might include occasional infelicities of style, excessive dependence on suggestions made by the instructor or advisor, some degree of confusion in the interpretation of evidence, or discernible gaps in the argumentation.

What a "C" paper is like. A "C" paper is satisfactory in the sense that it shows evidence of sustained effort to inquire into the subject matter and to write a serious paper about it. But a C paper shows only modest or uneven success in meeting the standards implicit in the basic formula. Most such papers are marred by somewhat awkward, stilted, or unclear writing, an ill-chosen main thesis that is either relatively uninteresting or too ambitious to defend adequately, and an argument that has trouble withstanding close scrutiny. A paper that had most of these traits but a few of the traits associated with "B" papers would deserve a "C+." A paper that had most of these traits but one or two more serious flaws would call for a "C-."

What a "D" paper is like. A "D" paper is minimally acceptable in the sense that it barely

counts as completion of the assignment. For a paper to receive a "D," it must show some evidence of an attempt to satisfy the standards implicit in the basic formula. For example, the student must have studied the materials being discussed with some understanding. The paper must be of roughly the expected length and pertain to a topic in the study of religion. But "D" papers are seriously flawed in some way and perhaps in more than one way. They may be carelessly written, lack a clearly identifiable thesis, fail to anticipate possible objections, or suffer from some combination of these weaknesses.

What an "F" paper is like. An "F" paper is a failure in the sense that it falls entirely short of satisfying the standards implicit in the basic formula.

Easy and hard cases. Most papers are relatively easy to grade when judged in terms of the Department's standards. One reason for this is that most papers that are excellent in some respects are at least very good in the remaining respects, whereas most that are very good in some respects are at least satisfactory in the remaining respects. The easiest cases involve a paper that is excellent, very good, or satisfactory in most respects, and can be placed in the "A," "B," or "C" range on that basis. One then adjusts the grade up or down a notch on the basis of one's judgment concerning the other factors. Uncertainty can arise, however, when a paper appears to fall on the boundary between two grading categories--for example, because it is excellent in several respects but very good in just as many respects. Would such a case deserve an "A-" or a "B+"? When readers disagree over such a case, they rarely differ over the respects in which the paper is excellent or very good. They are typically giving slightly different weights to the same clusters of traits, with one reader giving more weight, say, to creativity and the other giving more weight to scholarly care.

The Department is not inclined to overturn the grading decisions, provided they are carefully considered and within the range other graders would recognize as fair and defensible.

4. Independent Work

Independent work for religion majors consists of the following units:

- **the junior colloquium** (fall term)--a seminar intended to introduce junior majors to the department, to assist them in defining a focus of study within the department and in thinking about their junior papers, and to encourage awareness of important issues in the study of religion as reflected in recent works on a selected theme;
- **the junior project** (due in late April)--a paper, roughly 30 pages in length, on a topic in the student's expected focus of study, undertaken with the assistance of a faculty advisor;
- **the junior conversation** (mid May)--a half-hour meeting involving the student, his or her junior project advisor, and an additional member of the faculty, for the purpose of discussing the student's progress in the department, the definition of his or her focus of study, and plans for the senior year, including both course selection and senior thesis topic;
- **the focus-of-study statement** (due in September of the senior year)--a brief description

of the student's focus of study in the department, including a designation of the area the student proposes to focus on (such as "philosophy of religion" or "East Asian Religions"), a list of several courses falling within the area that the student either has taken or intends to take, and a description of the connection between those courses and his or her junior project and senior thesis;

- **the senior thesis** (due in mid April)--a paper, roughly 65 pages in length and in no cases longer than 85 pages, on a topic in the student's area of study, undertaken with the assistance of a faculty advisor;
- **the senior comprehensive statement** (due in early May)--a several page overview of the student's attempt to achieve both breadth in the study of religion generally and depth in his or her focus of study, including a complete list of departmental courses, an indication of how the department's distribution requirements were satisfied, and an expanded and revised description of the focus of study;
- **the senior comprehensive examination** (mid May)--an oral examination, lasting approximately 90 minutes, involving the student, his or her senior thesis advisor, and the second reader of the thesis, with the first half of the discussion devoted to the senior thesis itself and the second half devoted to the questions of breadth and depth discussed in the senior comprehensive statement.

How junior projects and senior theses are judged. The main components of independent work in the Religion Department--the junior project and the senior thesis--are typically papers in the thesis-defense format. They are judged according to the same criteria that govern the grading and evaluation of other papers of the same kind (see section 3 above), except that the standards being applied are considerably higher. The first reason that the standards rise is that a student is expected to devote much more time to the paper. The second reason is that a student ought to be able to achieve higher degrees of competence and excellence when drawing on the other work involved in a well-designed focus of study.

What advisees can expect of their advisors. Advisees can expect to meet with their advisors at least once every two weeks, to have drafts read within a reasonable, agreed-upon amount of time, to receive detailed and constructive feedback, to stay in regular contact with their advisors, and to meet with other members of the Princeton faculty during their office hours.

What advisors can expect of their advisees. Advisors can expect an advisee to take the initiative, to cooperate in setting up a detailed work schedule, to keep to the general departmental schedule for the completion of independent work, to show up punctually for scheduled meetings, and to be given a reasonable amount of time to read and comment on drafts.

What creative theses are. Creative theses are exceptions to the rule requiring senior theses to conform completely to the thesis-defense format. A "creative thesis" may be defined as a senior paper including some component that does not consist of a thesis-defense--for example, a play or some other piece of so-called creative writing. To write a creative thesis, a student must receive formal permission from the Departmental Representative after demonstrating the

following things: first, that a qualified member of the Princeton University faculty is available to advise and evaluate the non-argumentative component of the senior paper; second, that the proposed project fits in with the student's primary concentration within the department; and third, that the proposed project is likely to be more beneficial, educationally, than the standard alternatives. In all cases, however, creative theses must include a thesis-defense component of at least 30 pages. This may consist of critical commentary, historical background, or theoretical orientation of some kind, but it must include both a thesis and a supporting argument, and it must pertain to a topic of interest to students of religion. The two components are graded separately and then averaged to determine the final grade.

How senior theses are graded when readers disagree. When the two readers of a senior thesis find themselves a third of a grade apart, the Department urges them to talk the matter through, resolving the difference, if possible, between themselves. If that doesn't work, we ask them to reconsider their judgments while discussing the matter in a meeting of the faculty, so that a broader range of comparisons can be considered. If a compromise is not reached between the two readers, the grade is determined by the sense of the meeting. If two readers find themselves more than a third of a grade apart when deciding such a case, and are unwilling to compromise, the department chair assigns a third reader, and the three grades are then averaged to determine the final grade.

Common reasons for disagreement. Here are some of the things that students in all departments say when they are disappointed or resentful after receiving an unwelcome grade on their senior thesis. "I've put a full year into this. I worked twice as hard as my roommate. I know my thesis is miles ahead of the papers I've gotten A's on in the past. How can they give me a B+? It's so unfair.." A student writing a senior thesis makes a heavy investment of time and energy, and tends to identify strongly with the finished product. A senior thesis is typically the single piece of work in which a college student takes the most pride and to which he or she feels most strongly connected. The topic may express interests and concerns that are close to the heart. The research and writing are often the most difficult task the student has undertaken--especially if the work builds in the right way on a well-designed focus of study. A student who has taken the work seriously, handed in multiple drafts, and revised those drafts meticulously is apt to feel disappointed, resentful, or even crushed if the final grade is lower than an "A." But in the end, the readers are obligated to look at the final product dispassionately and judge it in light of the Department's standards for independent work. If it turns out not to be excellent in certain respects, when judged by standards appropriate to a senior thesis, the paper will not merit an "A," no matter how much work has gone into it or how far it advances beyond the student's term papers. A senior thesis *should* be much better than a term paper. For one thing, it is supposed to be based on a full year's work. For another, it is supposed to reap the benefits of solid preparation in related course work and a junior project within the same focus of study. So the bar is considerably higher.

What if the advisor's suggestions have all been followed? If the advisor's suggestions have all been followed carefully, this might mean that the stylistic glitches have been corrected,

the major discrepancies between thesis and argument have been removed, and the gaping holes in the argument have been filled in. But it doesn't mean that the paper's style is truly elegant, that its main thesis shows signs of originality, or that the argument is imaginative or artful. No advisor knows how to inject these latter characteristics into a paper by making comments on a draft. A paper that displays them is a great credit to its author, and truly deserves an "A." A paper that lacks them might still be a very good senior thesis indeed and an accomplishment in which a student should take pride. According to the Undergraduate Announcement, however, a "very good" senior thesis deserves a "B."

Independence and excellence. Students who charge that they have been graded unfairly, and support the charge by emphasizing the thoroughness with which they have followed their advisor's advice, unwittingly show how little they understand about the concept of *independent* work and the forms of *excellence* that the best senior theses exemplify. Working hard and following a mentor's advice rigorously can often bring students into the neighborhood of excellence, but the spark of true distinction can be supplied only by the imaginative and intellectual powers they themselves possess. An advisor can nourish those powers, stimulate their development, and encourage their expression but cannot supply them when they are absent or restore them when they momentarily flag. While independent work always rests on help and collaboration, the achievement of excellence in it is always the student's own doing. That is why pride in the accomplishment means something and also why being told that one has narrowly missed achieving it can be painful.

5. Grade Inflation

Fair grading. Justice in grading actually involves two quite different values: equity (similar treatment of similar cases throughout the educational system) and merit (correspondence between the judgment expressed in a grade and the performance being graded). When grade inflation occurs, these two values come into conflict, and it becomes difficult to achieve both types of justice at once. Occasionally, two members of the faculty will be divided on the relative weight to be given to equity (which tends to push grades up to the level one expects to find in other departments and peer institutions) and desert (which tends to push grades down to the level at which "A" really means excellent, "B" really means very good, and so on). The resulting disagreement is not a conflict between the soft-hearted and the intellectually serious or between the kind and the cruel. It derives from the tension between two genuine goods that all fair-minded graders take into consideration.

Why students are worried. Many students are worried that if we buck the trend toward inflated grades too zealously, under circumstances in which the general inflationary trend is likely to continue whatever we do, an injustice will be done to them relative to their competitors for admission to graduate and professional schools and for access to jobs. This is a legitimate worry in part because it is connected to what they deserve down the road. Some students fear that low grades can deprive them of opportunities they deserve in the future.

Why grade inflation should nonetheless be resisted. Grades are normally taken to express an instructor's judgment that the student's performance was indeed excellent, very good, satisfactory, poor, or a failure. When instructors give "A's" to students whose performance they cannot honestly describe as excellent, they convey false information. To do so intentionally is tantamount to lying, because it misrepresents both the student's performance and the grader's judgment of it. To do so repeatedly is to devalue the symbolic currency of grading altogether. Every inflated grade, whether awarded out of concern for equity or not, contributes further to the inflationary spiral, thus diminishing the significance of the grades being awarded. If awarding an "A" does not commit the grader publicly to the judgment that its recipient has done excellent work, it ceases to have meaning or value. No student will have reason to feel proud of earning such an "A" and no future employer or admissions committee can infer anything from the fact that it was awarded. Teachers who cannot use agreed-upon verbal definitions of grades as touchstones during the grading process are likely to end up grading their students in a completely arbitrary way. There would be no justice in that.

Curving grades is not the answer. One way to resist grade inflation is to impose a statistical "bell" curve. This means requiring that at most a small percentage of students in a given course (or a given cohort of religion majors) receive high and low grades, while a higher percentage receive grades in the range between a "B" and a "C." But even if we could establish that Princeton students generally tended to display something like this pattern of success and failure when doing their academic work, which is itself questionable, there is little reason to believe that the students taking any particular course (or the students who choose at any given moment to major in religion) will conform to the pattern. Highly intelligent, strongly motivated students have been known to gravitate toward highly demanding courses and departments. It would be unfair to penalize genuinely excellent students when an number of them find their way into the same religion course or decide to major in religion. By the same token, drones have been known to travel in swarms, searching for lax requirements and easy graders. When they turn up in large numbers in a particular course or department, and perform dronishly, they should all get dronish grades. Just grading is always done one assignment or one student at a time. It concerns the relation between an individual's performance and the standards being applied. If an "A" implies a judgment of excellence, then a student who has done excellent work should receive his or her "A," regardless of how many others in the same class or cohort happen to have performed similarly.

The Department's policy on grade inflation. The Department is committed to taking both equity and desert seriously in every grading decision. We can promote equity within our own grading practices by periodically cross-reading papers from one another's courses, occasionally precepting for one another, and continuing the extensive discussion of senior-thesis grading that we conduct every spring. By keeping track of our grading habits statistically, we can also become aware of worrisome tendencies and then reflect on their causes. But the most important thing we can do in responding to grade inflation, and what we have tried to do in this document, is to say explicitly what our standards are. In this way faculty and students alike can have the standards more clearly in mind throughout the process. Given that the faculty intends to

apply those standards deliberately, case by case, students have every right to know what they are.