

Before you apply for admission to the University of Florida graduate-level program in the academic study of religion, please consider what motivates you to undertake advanced work in this field. What intellectual or professional goal do you have in mind?

Is your motivation primarily religious or spiritual? Are you on a quest to clarify your own personal faith or religious orientation or ethnic heritage, perhaps in relation to the tradition of your birth? Although that is a worthy and indeed vital task; it may not be well served by study of religion at the graduate level in a public, government-supported university. An institution for religious education may be a more suitable place for that kind of inquiry.

To learn more about the role of a Department of Religion in a public university, read *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* by Russell T. McCutcheon and a book that he edited that is titled *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*. McCutcheon's web pages at the University of Alabama's Department of Religion are useful, too. See <http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/home.html>

If your background in the academic study of religion as an undergraduate at the college or university level is less than a major concentration, then you may need to prepare yourself by taking additional courses before you make application to a graduate program in Religion. Preparation in three areas of knowledge is particularly relevant.

(1) **Content** – Knowledge of the history and philosophy of the world's major religious traditions is required, along with a more specialized knowledge of the history and philosophy one or two major religious traditions that are likely to be relevant to further study. World religions textbooks provide a starting point. See, for example, the two-volume textbook edited by the late Willard Oxtoby, *World Religions: Western Traditions* and *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*. In addition, read *Ten Essential Texts in the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Steven M. Cahn or *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, edited by William J. Wainwright, especially Part Two (Approaches). These few books can enable a student to acquire a basic vocabulary and conceptual maps that are needed for more advanced study. The process would be supported by occasional reference to the *Harper-Collins Dictionary of Religion*, edited by Jonathan Z. Smith as part of a project sponsored by the American Academy of Religion.

(2) **Tools** – A graduate student must know where and how to get reliable and relevant information to support their studies. That would include acquaintance with at least a dozen academic journals in the field. Among them should be

*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*

*Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*

*Nova Religio*

*NUMEN*

*Religion*

*History of Religions*

*Journal of Religion*

*Journal of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion*

*Sociology of Religion*  
*Zygon*

Some academic journals are published by scholarly societies. A prospective graduate student ought to join one or more of them as a student member. The largest and most important is the American Academy of Religion. See <http://www.aarweb.org/> There are a number of other smaller, and more narrowly focused societies, too. One example is the North American Association for Study of Religion. See <http://www.as.ua.edu/naast/>

Specialized dictionaries and encyclopedias (such as the *Harper-Collins Dictionary of Religion* and the revised second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*) as well as handbooks (*Critical Terms for Religious Studies* edited by Mark C. Taylor and the *Guide to the Study of Religion* edited by Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon are examples) should be familiar to you, too.

Languages for research and reading in one or more religious traditions is an important basic skill that a graduate student will be expected to have or to be willing to attain by intensive study that may involve travel to another campus during the summer. The ability to read key texts in relevant foreign languages, the skills needed to complete periods of research in special-purpose libraries and in limited-access archives, and the ability to conduct participant-observation fieldwork are important tools, too.

(3) ***Perspectives*** – Think of the *Contents* as what you see through various lenses. Think of *Perspectives* as those lenses. Think of *Tools* as ways to get your hands on the lenses and put your eyes behind them.

The "lenses" in the academic study of religion are various kinds of theories, interpretive strategies, and questions currently under discussion by leading scholars, local faculty, and graduate student peers in this wide-ranging and highly dispersed field of interest.

It is important to know the history, major debates, and heroic figures, along with the fools or villains currently out of favor who created this area of research and study. Many of them are figures borrowed from other academic disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences, such as comparative literature, history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. A simple starting point for getting acquainted with some of them can be found in the book by Daniel C. Pals titled *Eight Theories of Religion*.

***Summary***

In short, a graduate student in religion will need to know about (1) what they're looking at, (2) how to get the most appropriate and effective equipment to assist them in looking at it, and (3) how it looks when they look at it in that particular way – and what alternative ways of looking at it are "in play" or are under discussion among scholarly peers and influential leaders in the academic study of religion and in various other fields of study that have relevance for understanding religious institutions, practices, beliefs, groups, and individuals.