Courses in Religious Studies examine all parts of the world, and studying religions “on site” in other cultures facilitates a deeper understanding of practices and diversity. This session features four Religious Studies undergraduate majors discussing how their study abroad experiences in China, El Salvador, India and Jordan furthered their educations.
Religion is a fundamental part of human experience and meaning. It informs all aspects of human society, from individual and collective identity to personal relationships to political sympathies to scientific investigation to artistic creativity. The study of religion, as a result, ranges widely across human experience and the various academic disciplines.

The interdepartmental religious studies major brings together perspectives, approaches, questions, and expertise from many disciplines. Students in the major focus their work on a specific theme, religious tradition, region, or time period, while also gaining a breadth of knowledge across different traditions.

Study abroad provides Religious Studies students with extraordinary opportunities for examining religious traditions across the globe. The student presenters here all pursued research projects aimed at fulfilling their Religious Studies requirements, including, in some cases, their Senior theses.
Four pieces from a larger Stations of the Cross series featuring Salvadorans in the place of Christ - and bearing the evidence of the tortures so frequently used by the Salvadoran government against its own people during the 1970s and 80s. (This series was mounted in the chapel at the University of Central America, where the six Jesuit priests, their colleague, and her daughter were assassinated by the military. Its addition in the chapel is considered one of the final straws that sealed their fates.)

From the same night (ie, the night during which the eight people were killed at the UCA), a copy of El Dios Crucificado, both bloodstained and burned. The military set the residence on fire, given the orders to 'leave no witnesses.'

The hospital chapel in which Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated. He was celebrating the one-year-anniversary mass for the death of a friend. During the mass, a car pulled up and a trained sharpshooter fired one shot, killing Romero.

A poster of Padre Juan Jose Gerardi at the language school in Guatemala. Padre Gerardi was the bishop who led the commission that reported, following the 36-year Guatemalan civil war that 96% of the atrocities were committed by the government. He was beaten to death the following day by a father and son who hid in his garage. Both were members of the military.
Caitlin Priem
India

This was taken on Eid, the last day of Ramadan at the Taj Mahal mosque. Unaware that it was Eid, I found the scene which unfolded next to the Taj Mahal incredible to witness: thousands of Muslims coming together in one place worshipping in unison.

The NGO I interned with created two tribal girl’s education camps in an effort to promote education and well-being in girls from villages. All the girls and teachers lived at the camp for seven months and at the end would try to mainstream into government schools. Because the girls were illiterate in Hindi, I did much observing of teaching and taught some English poems when possible. These girls and teachers, who otherwise were not given a chance by society, were some of the most impressive, self-sufficient people I have ever met.

Taken at a tribal girl’s education camp, this picture shows the girls and teachers eating breakfast in the open-air kitchen a walk down from the school. It was my favorite place because everybody sat together, served each other, and there was constant companionship. The cook and his family were as much a family to the girls as were the teachers. Even though nobody spoke English, somehow the best communication happened when sharing meals together.

On Sundays, there was no school so everybody walked through the village and up a hill to this temple. We had free reign of the temple and we sat on the side-roof and the girls danced and sang.
Eid al-Fitr is an important Muslim holiday, which marks the end of the Ramadan fast. While most of my neighbors in Jordan celebrated it for the religious tradition and the chance to share meals with family, I celebrated a few days off of school by visiting Jerusalem. My time there was highly enjoyable and was a highlight of my study abroad experience.

For four months I lived in Amman, Jordan, with a Palestinian Christian family with roots in Jerusalem. The family patriarch, who was forced out in 1948, spoke longingly of the city when I told him I planned to visit. After I spent a few days there, I understood why. It is the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Wailing Wall, the Dome of the Rock, and the Mount of Olives, each of which are gorgeous and sacred.

Jerusalem is now also the primary point of contention in the longest-running political conflict in the world. I was able to spend a day exploring the Mount of Olives, (where Jesus ascended to heaven, and near where Muhammad embarked on his Night Journey), and while I was there, I met a Palestinian family whose house had been destroyed by Israeli bulldozers. I spoke with the family’s best English speaker, and throughout our discussion, he remained unusually positive: “Oppression never lasts”, “Peace will come”, “Injustice always ends,” he told me. Such spirit in a place where I could only see anger made me think: perhaps the Mount of Olives is still where God is most connected with Earth.

Although my trip to Jerusalem lasted only three days, I think I wrung the best possible experience out of it. And while my time in the Middle East only amounted to four months, I hope that I made good on my opportunity to explore.
Daniel explored how the category of "religion" is understood in contemporary Chinese society. The question is one of significant concern, given recent critiques of "religion" as a normative category created by Christians and scholars in the Western world. From these perspectives, the term was used either to designate difference (from what was understood as "real" religion, i.e. Judaism and Christianity) or understood as a "universal" human behavior. Neither of these perspectives is legitimate in a global context, yet the term remains popular.

Daniel’s study uses ethnographic means – personal interviews and an e-mail survey – to gather information on how Chinese people of a number of religious perspectives understand the term “religion.”