Religious Studies is a modern discipline that emerged in the 19th century West, but the historical roots that made the discipline possible extend back into the early modern period. Between 1450 and 1750 there was a revolution in the way Europeans viewed the world. As a result of the recovery of classical texts, the voyages of discovery, and the spread of print culture, people began to realize that the past was different from the present and that cultures differed dramatically in terms of customs and beliefs. The Reformation and the Scientific Revolution further undermined traditional ways of thinking by discrediting the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic worldview, which had been in place for a thousand years, and the ideal of a united Christendom. As we shall see magic, witchcraft, and esoteric thought of various kinds (alchemy, Kabbalah, Hermeticism) also played their part in challenging the conviction that Christianity offered the only valid religion for all people at all times. It was within this context that the idea of religion as a distinct and culturally-conditioned aspect of human experience developed. The goal of this course is to understand how these developments laid the foundation for the secular study of religion and why these developments occurred in the West and not in other parts of the world. An emphasis will be placed on reading primary texts.

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