

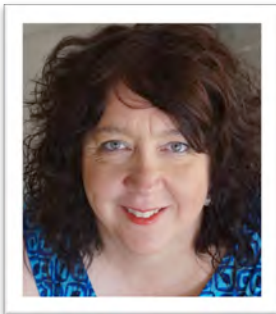
RELIGION MATTERS

Message From the Chair:

Questions or Answers? What Would You Choose?

April DeConick

Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Biblical Studies



Senior Rabbi Oren Hayon from Congregation Emanu El started the 2015 Rice Commencement with a prayer. In that prayer, he told a story of a sixteenth century rabbi and mystic, Elijah of Vilna. As the story goes, Elijah sees himself standing before God. In that moment, Elijah is put to the test. God offers him a choice between all the world’s questions and all its answers. Elijah responds to God’s offer, “Without hesitation, I choose the questions.”

This story struck me to the bone with its raw beauty to condense the deliberate life into a few words and to compel me to stand the test myself. A choice between questions or answers. What is my choice?

When I was younger, I was after the answers. It is why I went to graduate school. It is why I studied early Christianity and became a professor. Professors are supposed to know things, to profess them. I wanted to know things about the religion I had inherited from my parents, whether my faith was reasonable or not, whether it reflected historical fact or not, whether the stories from the pulpit were real stories or not. I was certain that my commitment to studying the ancient world and learning Hebrew and Greek in order to read the Bible for myself would provide me with the answers I so desperately wanted.

But here is the paradox. The more I studied, the less I knew for certain. Yes, some answers I got. Like the Bible contains writings from different time periods written by different people for different audiences and for different reasons.

But mostly what I got were more questions. And these questions led me to study more languages, more literature, more artifacts. They led me to more libraries and museums, more archaeological sites, more countries. They led to me to more people, more reflection, more writing. For every question, I was faced with ten more. With every new question, my self and my world were expanding exponentially.

When I stand up before a classroom now or write a book, it is with the full realization that I don’t have all the answers, and the ones I have are not what is really interesting. It is the questions that blow the mind, that expand our selves, that transport us to places we never knew existed. It is the questions (for they are only questions, right?) that allow us to suspend our judgments and convictions about ourselves and others long enough to really see and appreciate our commonalities and differences. The questions make us sensitive to things that might not be obvious at first glance. They get us beyond stereotypes into the subtleties that matter. It is the questions that give us the opportunity to explore what lies underneath what we think we know. It is the questions that allow us to evaluate what society presents to us as the way things are (or should be).

The study of religion, I have come to see all these years later, is not about finding the answers. It is about seeking answers, while finding more and more questions that stir us up, surprise us and propel us forward. It is what I imagine the saying of Jesus means, “Don’t stop seeking until you find. And when you find, you will be troubled. And when you are troubled, you will be amazed” (cf. *Gospel of Thomas* 2).

The study of religion is more about an orientation to the way we live our lives deliberately and meaningfully, as people who are courageous enough and passionate enough to ask the tough questions about our humanity and Ultimate Reality, race and gender, suffering and death, poverty and violence, community and the collective life, the environment and global ethics. It is about learning to look at our histories and our futures with different lens, to step into another’s shoes and wear them a while. It is about embracing different ways of being together in order to become better together.

In the end, it is all about choosing the questions over the answers. While this deliberate orientation to life’s questions leaves us with a certain uncertainty, it also leaves us perpetually transformed and invigorated. It leaves us open to any future we can possibly imagine.

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Department and Faculty News

African American Religion at Rice

Anthony Pinn, Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities: “RELI 157: Religion and Hip Hop” has been part of the Religion Department curriculum for a good number of years now, and over the past four years it has been taught with a twist. Bernard “Bun B” Freeman, the CERCL Distinguished Lecturer has co-taught it with me. As part of the course, we’ve worked to take students off campus, including sessions held at a church and in a nightclub. Emails, phone calls, and other contact from people off-campus and outside Houston, forced us to think about ways to get this information to a broader audience. “Rice Online” and the development of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) on campus offered a way to address our interest in pedagogical innovation as well as our concern to provide this information to a more expansive audience. And so, using the edX platform, we took the course online: “RELI 157X.” The course ran from early February through May 12. People from 139 countries signed up for the course, and the age of students ranged from teens to seniors. Some took the course because they consider themselves fans of hip hop; others had friends and family who embraced hip hop culture and so they wanted to know more concerning the cultural developments that influenced those close to them. Still others were suspicious of hip hop culture and wanted to get some clarity regarding its actual content. Finally, others took the course simply because they were life-long learners wanting to explore something unfamiliar.



Bernard “Bun B” Freeman and Dr. Antony Pinn

The course was organized into six self-paced sessions. Each session contained short lectures (all filmed at off-campus locations), readings (all available online at no cost), assignments such as quizzes and 50 word essays,

listening labs, and short videos by the teaching assistants that unpack some of the more difficult course concepts.

Using the above structure, and understanding religion as traditions with doctrines and practice, but more importantly as the “Quest for Complex Subjectivity” or more simply the effort to make life meaningful in complex ways, the course explored the relationship between hip hop culture and religion. This was accomplished by: (1) discussion of the history and content of rap music; (2) examination of religion in rap music; (3) exploration of the religious sensibilities of rap artists; and (4) exploration of the implications of the connection between rap and religion.

Assuming no prior knowledge, the course was meant to provide a general audience with an introduction to the intersections of religion and hip hop culture in the United States. Connected to this goal were four objectives: (1) Develop a general sense of hip hop cultural development and purpose by demonstrating the ability to interpret and discuss this history in writing. (2) Identify and synthesize key concepts, terms, and developments related to the nature and meaning of religion with attention to (a) traditions such as Christianity and Islam, and (b) the fundamental questions of human existence and life meaning (i.e., who, what, when, where, and why are we?). And, (3) Identify and critique key examples of rap music’s influence on hip hop culture and religious traditions such as Christianity. Finally, (4) Illustrate “the quest for complex subjectivity” within an analysis that outlines how hip hop culture serves as a religious orientation.

Boko Haram

David Cook, Associate Professor of Islam: Working on Boko Haram, the Salafi-jihadi group that has dominated northeastern Nigeria for the past 4 years, has been a roller-coaster for the last year. From mass murders and kidnappings a year ago, to proclamation of a caliphate in August 2014, to Boko Haram's takeover of much of northeastern Nigeria, it seemed that every day the news was going from bad to worse. In December 2014, when I published “Boko Haram: A New Islamic State in Nigeria” for the Baker Institute, sometimes I wondered whether Boko Haram would be able to take over the entirety of northern Nigeria as a result of the inaction of the Nigerian government and army. Even as recently as Jan. 2015, Boko Haram was able to carry out mass assaults upon the major city of Maiduguri (where I had visited in 2009, just weeks before the beginning of the Boko Haram uprising).

However, hope was actually in sight. As a result of the public pressure brought on by the Nigerian elections (postponed until March 25), the government of President Goodluck Jonathan finally decided to carry out a full-scale military response to Boko Haram. This had not come without some prodding, as the armies of both Chad and Niger were actually delivering substantial blows against the group. But obviously, it was impossible to decisively defeat a Nigerian group without the participation of the Nigerian army. So late in the day, the Nigerian army did get its act together, and within a few short dramatic weeks in February and March, much of the northeast was liberated.

And what a change that has rendered in northeastern Nigeria! Almost every day now there are chilling accounts of women and girls, freed from Boko Haram's sexual slavery, who have described the horrific lives the radicals foisted upon them. Time after time, newspaper accounts have described women forced to abandon their children, dead or dying of malnutrition, beatings and torture inflicted upon those who refused to convert to Islam, and many having seen their husbands and male relatives murdered in front of them. Of the some 700 liberated women thus far, no fewer than 215 (latest estimate) are pregnant.

Boko Haram's reign of terror is coming to a close at this time, thanks to a decisive response, just in the nick of time. However, there remains a grave danger that the group will not be entirely eliminated due to government disagreements (concerning boundaries and rights of hot pursuit of Boko Haram across them). The danger from Boko Haram's many suicide attacks inside northern Nigerian cities has not been addressed at all, as the cells that carried these attacks out have not been targeted by the army. However, it has been profoundly satisfying to hear that Boko Haram is at least on the run, if only for the moment. What a change a year has wrought!

Finding Jesus: CNN Special Series

April DeConick, Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity:

In August, just before school started, my phone rang. The display showed an unknown number. Curious, I answered. The man identified himself as a TV show producer from London working on a series of six shows examining artifacts about Jesus. As the man continued talking, I was drawn in, impressed by his knowledge of the Gospel of Judas, one of the artifacts the CNN TV series would cover.

The Gospel of Judas is an ancient Christian Gnostic writing from the middle of the second century. A fourth century copy of it written in Coptic had been recovered



from a tomb in Egypt and was restored and translated by the National Geographic Society in 2006.

Once the Coptic transcripts of the gospel were released in 2006 and then the photographs, I went to work on the text myself, discovering that the original translation work done by the National Geographic Society team was erroneous throughout. Their translation and interpretation presented Judas as a heroic figure much like Martin Scorsese's Judas in his film "The Last Temptation of Christ," when in fact the gospel identified Judas with an evil power called the *Thirteenth Demon*. This figure is not only demonic, it is a known figure from Gnostic literature, the dark Lord of the twelve demons who rule the world. Judas is no hero in this gospel. He is as evil as ever.

To get word out, in 2007 I wrote a book called *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* and published an Op. Ed. in the New York Times, "The Gospel Truth." I also hosted *The Codex Judas Congress*, an international scholastic conference in 2008 at Rice University and published the proceedings in 2010. While word spread among scholars, it never seemed to penetrate the public mind, which had been saturated initially with heroic images of Judas from the National Geographic media campaign and DVD film.

Now, as I spoke with this TV show producer, I realized that his team wanted to get word out. They wanted to tell the whole story about the Gospel of Judas, and they wanted me to fly to Geneva where the Gospel of Judas is housed, to take them through the Coptic text and capture this on film.

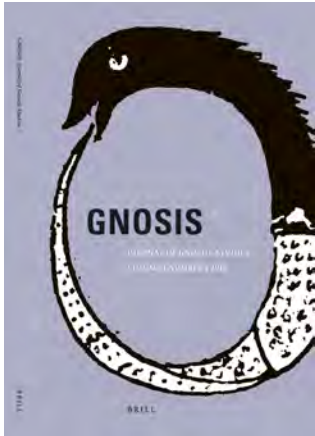
So in October, I traveled to the Bodmer Library and saw the relic for the first time. Emotion rushed through me. This had been a sacred text for a Christian Gnostic some two thousand years ago. In it, Jesus indicted Judas for the part he would play in his death. As the camera fixed on me, I went through the gospel page by page, explaining what the gospel actually says.

The film series aired in the spring on CNN. "The Gospel of Judas" was shown on March 15th. It is the third episode in a six-part series, "Finding Jesus. Faith. Fact. Forgery." The series blends science and archaeology to examine six Christian relics. To retell "the greatest story ever told" using state-of-the-art scientific techniques and

archaeological research, the series covers the Shroud of Turin, True Cross relics, the Gospel of Judas, John the Baptist relics, the ossuary of James Jesus' brother, and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene. A companion book to the film, *Finding Jesus. Faith. Fact. Forgery*, written by David Gibson and Michael McKinley, was released too.

GNOSIS: The Journal of Gnostic Studies

April DeConick, Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner
Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity:



Professor April DeConick, in collaboration with Professor F.L. Roig Lanzillotta of the University of Groningen, have launched a new journal with the internationally distinguished E.J. Brill Publishers in Leiden.

GNOSIS: Journal of Gnostic Studies is a peer-reviewed publication devoted to the study of Gnostic religious currents from the ancient

world to the modern, where 'Gnostic' is broadly conceived as a reference to special direct knowledge of the divine, which either transcends or transgresses conventional religious knowledge.

DeConick, Executive Editor of *GNOSIS*, has been concerned for some time about two trends in academia. First is the push to erase the Gnostic as a category from the history of religions and see Gnostics as just alternative Christians. This ends up erasing the Gnostic as a unique transgressive religious identity, which critiqued traditional religions like Judaism and Christianity. This unique identity is transparent in Gnostic texts like the *Apocryphon of John* or the *Gospel of Judas*, she says. Second is the academic move to limit the Gnostic to a small group of now dead Sethians (the dead Gnostic is the one who can't object, she points out) from the second and third centuries. This does us no good in explaining the Gnostic's broad application in the ancient world, the continued emergence of the Gnostic historically, and its modern vibrancy.

DeConick thinks that creating a journal like *GNOSIS* is a natural way to push back on these trends and challenge us to reconsider the Gnostic as a category that marks a unique religious orientation to knowledge. It is an orientation that critiques conventional religions and objects their claims to knowledge.

GNOSIS aims to publish academic papers on: the

emergence of the Gnostic, in its many different historical and local contexts; the Gnostic strands that persisted in the middle ages; and modern interpretations of Gnosticism - with the goal of establishing cross-cultural and trans-historical conversations, together with more localized historical analyses.

The corpus of Gnostic materials includes (but is not restricted to) testimonies from outsiders as well as insider literature such as the Nag Hammadi collection, the Hermetica, Neoplatonic texts, the Pistis Sophia, the books of Jeu, the Berlin and Tchacos codices, Manichaean documents, Mandaean scriptures, and contemporary Gnostic fiction/film and 'revealed' literature. The journal will publish the best of traditional historical and comparative scholarship while also featuring newer approaches that have received less attention in the established literature, such as cognitive science, cognitive linguistics, social memory, psychology, ethnography, sociology, and literary theory. The journal is published twice annually and is available for purchase by individual or library subscription at www.brill.com.

Journal of Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft

Claire Fanger, Assistant Professor of Religion: *Magic,*



Ritual and Witchcraft is a semiannual journal founded in 2006 by the medieval and early modern historians Michael Bailey and Brian Copenhaver, and edited since 2010 by Claire Fanger and Richard Kieckhefer. The journal is published by the University of Pennsylvania Press, with the primary editorial and production work now centered in the Rice Religion Department under Fanger's direction. Assistance

has been provided by Rice graduate students, initially Erik Davis (Department of Religion), and now Ben Mayo (Religion) and Ian Lowrie (Anthropology), who manage book reviews and help with copyediting and other routine tasks.

The journal was always intended to have a broad range. To quote from the mission statement, *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* "draws from a broad spectrum of perspectives, methods, and disciplines, offering the widest possible geographical scope and chronological range, from prehistory to the modern era and from the Old World to the New." Despite its expansive goals, the journal has tended to draw most submissions from European historians, since the editorial expertise has

always been rooted in medieval and early modern Europe. Encouraging submissions by scholars of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, has always been more of a challenge and taken more work.

However this last academic year has been a productive one in opening up the desired range of the journal. Two interesting articles in Tibetan studies have appeared in recent issues. One is a historical piece on Tibetan esoteric religion by Rice Religion PhD Claire Villarreal called “Shaman, Lama, Buddha: ‘Occult Techniques’ and the Popularization of Tantric Ritual in Tibet,” which came out in summer issue of 2014. The other, which just saw print in May, is an article relying on original fieldwork among Tibetan fortune tellers, “Prognostic Structure and the Use of Trumps in Tibetan Pebble Divination” by Alexander K. Smith, a PhD candidate in anthropology at the *École pratique des hautes études*.

There is more interesting work in the pipeline, and schemes are afoot for further development of scholarship outside Europe. In the next issue, a forum is planned on the recent book by Stephan Palmié, *The Cooking of History: how not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion*, wherein interested readers may find responses, accolades and challenges to Palmié’s work by six prominent writers in Caribbean studies and anthropology. And to assist with our ongoing project of encouraging more submissions in African studies, Elias Bongmba has recently agreed to join the editorial board with the next issue.

The journal is always looking for original, high quality scholarship in all areas, and particularly if you can pull in material involving ethnographic or historical work on Africa, Asia, or Latin America, the editors will be happy to hear from you. The author guide and other information about the journal can be found at the Penn Press website <http://magic.pennpress.org/home/>.

RSR: Religious Studies Review

Elias Bongmba, Managing Editor for the Religious Studies Review, and Maya Reine, RSR Coordinator: *Religious Studies Review* (RSR) welcomes Professor Mark MacWilliams, as the incoming Executive Editor and Review Essay Editor. He takes over from Professor David Gray who has stepped down. We thank Professor Gray for the many years he has devoted to RSR and are glad that he will remain an area editor. This year, Department of Religion Graduate students, Nathanael Homewood and Bradley Johnson currently serve as editorial assistants for the journal.

The Department of Religion and the editors of RSR constantly work to ensure that the journal remains true to its mission of bringing the best reviews in religion and



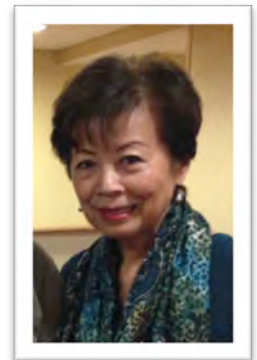
that the reviews that are published reflect critical and diverse perspectives in the discipline. Our current plans include expanding our web presence and restructuring the editorial process by creating an online work space that would allow editors, authors, and publishers to communicate and interact easily.

We are currently discussing design and looking at the most cost effective way of achieving these goals. To this end, Elias Bongmba, Managing Editor and Maya Reine, RSR Coordinator will welcome Mark MacWilliams, incoming and Executive Editor and Review Essay Editor, his predecessor, David Gray, and Book Note (Shorter Review) Editor Jeremy Biles to Rice for a “Way Forward” meeting this month. In November, the larger editorial board will meet at the AAR/SBL conference in Atlanta for RSR’s annual editorial meeting.

We thank all our editors and reviewers who continue to serve RSR. As we start a new school year, we invite readers who are interested in reviewing books for RSR by writing major review essays or shorter reviews which we call booknotes, to contact Maya Reine, Coordinator of RSR at rsr@rice.edu.

Department Coordinator Reflection

Sylvia Louie, Senior Department Coordinator for the Department of Religion: Each fall semester we experience exciting changes: faces of new graduate students with aspirations and goals, new course offerings, and return of faculty and students from summer break. This time of year also signals a seasonal change with cooler temperatures, transition to fall colors, and hopes for a good football year.



While sitting in this chair, forty years in this department happened with lightening speed as I saw many changes especially with the increase in faculty and graduate students. It has been a privilege working with April DeConick, Jeffrey Kripal, Bill Parsons, Jerry McKenny, Anne Klein, Werner Kelber, and Niels Nielsen, who all chaired the department at one time or another, and are dear friends. Most importantly, all of you enriched my life and made it fun to come to Rice. This journey has been very gratifying. As you probably guessed, I plan to retire early next year and look forward to spending more time with family and friends, who are calling me to play,

dance, and travel. Just know that my car is on automatic pilot to campus, so I expect to pop in from time-to-time.

Program in Jewish Studies

Katrina Hubbard, Administrative Coordinator for the Program in Jewish Studies:

January 2015 marked my one-year anniversary at Rice. Though my time here has been brief (especially when compared to Sylvia Louie's impressive 40 years!), I feel privileged to be part of Rice's welcoming community and enriching culture. I express my gratitude to all in the Department of Religion for such a warm welcome.



It has been particularly rewarding to see growth in the Program in Jewish Studies. Though a relatively new program (established in 2009), Matthias Henze has been able to increase its presence significantly. Most recently, the Program has upgraded its website to a fresher look and user-friendly feel (jewishstudies.rice.edu). We are pleased to invite a series of speakers for "Lunch & Learn" lectures throughout the semester, providing an opportunity for Rice University students, staff, and alumni to learn more about the Program in Jewish Studies and Judaism in general.

Thanks to collaboration of faculty from various departments, students interested in the Program in Jewish Studies can take a variety of courses. A new course was introduced in Spring Semester 2015, focused on the many cultural aspects of Jerusalem. Through this course, students had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem and see the city they had studied for themselves. Similarly, a new course is being introduced in Spring Semester 2016-- GERM 351/HART 387: Holocaust Memory in Modern Germany, which will provide students with an opportunity to visit Berlin.

It is wonderful to see the potential in the Program in Jewish Studies, and I look forward to seeing it expand even further in the coming years.

Faculty Awards and Achievements

Elias Bongmba: Reelected President of the African Association for the Study of Religion

Elias Bongmba, Professor of Religion: Elias Bongmba and Erin Prophet attended the XXI World Congress of The International Association of the History of Religions (IAHR) at Erfurt University, Erfurt Germany August 23-29. The theme of this year's Quinquennial World Congress was titled "Dynamics of Religion: Past and Present." Scholars of religion presented papers and discussed artistic

works in four areas of the congress which included religious communities in society focusing on adaptation and transformation; practices and discourses focusing on innovation and transformation; the individual focusing on religiosity spiritualities and individualization; and methodology in the study of religion focusing on representation and interpretations.

Bongmba made a presentation on a panel that discussed the film "Voices of Islamic Women" written and produced by Professor Maha Marouan of Penn State University, and Prophet presented a paper titled. . . . The African Association for the Study of Religion AASR, which is a member of IAHR held its business meeting during the Congress and Bongmba presented a five year report of the association at that business meeting. Bongmba was reelected to another five year term as president of the African Association for the Study of Religion. AASR will hold its 7th Biannual Conference at the University of Ghana in July 2016.

Matthias Henze: Graduate Student Association Teaching/Mentor Award and George R. Brown Award for Superior Teaching

Michael Domeracki, Ph.D. Candidate: Our very own Matthias Henze, already the recipient of three teaching awards in previous years, received two more in recognition of his outstanding commitment to students. As the Isla Carroll and Perry E. Turner Professor of Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism, Professor Henze is responsible for teaching both undergraduate and graduate students, and this year was honored by each. Henze received the Graduate Student Association Teaching/Mentoring Award which is given to two



outstanding faculty members annually in honor of their dedication and contribution to graduate student education. Faculty members from all schools and disciplines at Rice are eligible, and the award is determined by a graduate student committee who evaluate letters of recommendation from students. Not only was Henze recognized by the entire graduate student body, he also received one of the most prestigious teaching awards at Rice, the George R. Brown Award for Superior Teaching, which is voted on by alumni. The award, which he has won twice before, recognizes the most influential professors at Rice through a nomination process of recent alumni who graduated two and five years ago. It is with great appreciation and excitement that we congratulate Professor Henze on winning these distinguished awards. His service is a benefit to all and he truly exemplifies the care and devotion of the Religion faculty for their students. *Written by Michael S. Domeracki*

Anne Klein: Khyentse Foundation Grant

Anne Klein, Professor of Religion: We are in the second year of a four-year grant from the Khyentse Foundation to support the teaching of six classes by graduate students on matters related to Buddhist thought, culture, language, and/or art.



The expectation is that during this four-year period Rice will also fund two courses. Last year one of the courses that

Claire Villarreal taught was funded by the Chao Center. This year both courses are funded by the Khyentse Foundation and are being taught by Renée Ford. In addition, some funds are being allocated to invite native Tibetan scholars. We look forward again to welcoming Lama Tenzin Samphel, a highly regarded scholar who in addition to his extensive studies at the Nyingma Institute of Nepal also gained a degree in philosophy from the Sorbonne. He lives outside Paris, teaches at his own and other Buddhist Institutes in France. He has also done archival manuscript work at Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris and is currently working to develop a thematic French-Tibetan dictionary (CNRS - EPHE, on science and religion, U.M.R./847). He will be visiting Rice in November to work with graduate students in my classes.

In other matters my first peer-reviewed and multi-authored article in a science journal came out this summer, "Interoception, contemplative practice, and health" in *Frontiers in Psychology*, June. Co-authors with Norman Farb, Jenniver Daubemeir, Cynthia J. Price, Tim Gard, Catherine Kerr, Barnaby D. Dunn, Martin Paulus, Wolf E. Mehling.

Matthias Henze: Mellon Doctoral Seminar on Passage of Time

Matthias Henze, Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism: Each



year Rice's Humanities Research Center provides generous funding for a faculty member to teach a year-long doctoral seminar on a subject of general interest in the Humanities. The faculty member gets to choose five (or, in my case, six) doctoral students, who participate in the seminar. The Center also provides funding to bring in

guest speakers. In the past, several of my colleagues have taught the Mellon Seminar, and they have all described it as one of their best teaching experiences at Rice. During the academic year 2014/15 I was fortunate to teach the seminar myself.

The seminar, titled "About Time," was a yearlong exploration of various conceptual models, implicit and explicit, by thinkers from late antiquity about the passage of time. Few topics have captured the imagination of philosophers, theologians, authors, and scientists alike in the same way as time has. And yet, for those who have taken up Saint Augustine's challenge to try and explain exactly what time is, the notion of time has proven frustratingly elusive and difficult to grasp.

Our group consisted of two philosophy and four religion graduate students, who explored diverse attempts to give meaning to the passage of time, primarily in late antiquity. The seminar was writing intensive: each student wrote a brief paper for every meeting, and we spent a lot of time reading and improving each other's papers. Our year ended with a two-day workshop on the Rice campus. We brought in three out-of-town guests, a theologian, a philosopher, and a poet, and we all presented our final project to each other. It was a wonderful teaching experience, and I am most grateful to the Mellon Foundation, and particularly to the Humanities Research Center, for supporting such innovative graduate level training here at Rice.

Brian Ogren: Villa I Tatti Fellowship

Brian Ogren, Anna Smith Fine Assistant Professor in

Judaic Studies: During the 2015-2016 academic year, Brian Ogren, the Anna Smith Fine Assistant Professor in Judaic Studies in the Department of Religion, will be taking up residency in Florence, Italy as a fellow at Harvard University's Villa I Tatti. The Villa is a world-renowned center for advanced Italian Renaissance Studies. Perched atop a hill between Florence and the Tuscan town of Fiesole, the Villa boasts of a library of nearly 175,000 holdings related to scholarship on the Italian Renaissance. Every year the Villa hosts fifteen full-time residential fellows, who are experts on the Italian Renaissance from around the world. The Villa regularly hosts conferences, seminars, lectures, and concerts, which are in place to provide the opportunity for appointees to share and discuss their work with each other and the broader community.



Dr. Ogren was awarded the prestigious and competitive Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fellowship. His time at the Villa will be spent finishing his current monograph, on ideas of creation in late fifteenth century Italian kabbalistic thought. It is his contention that novel syntheses of philosophy and Kabbalah during this period introduced new ideas leading to early modernity. These include religious ideas related to creation and drawn from the Jewish tradition, such as the infinity of the universe, the expansion of the cosmos, and the continual creation and destruction of worlds. Aside from what Harvard's Villa I Tatti has to offer in itself, Dr. Ogren is looking forward to spending time in the rich libraries of Italy and to taking in the local culture of Florence.

April DeConick: Boniuk Institute Small Grant

**April DeConick, Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner
Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity:**

The Boniuk Institute awarded me a small grant to seed a new generation undergraduate textbook called *Comparing Christianities: How the first Christian battles to*



define the faith led to the rise of religious intolerance and the emergence of a new religion. The book will be designed to expose the roots of religious intolerance in the West by examining the emergence and

formation of Christianity prior to the council of Nicaea. The book will examine the plurality of Christian movements in this period and the process that defined and consolidated the faith. It will be shown that the process of consolidation and emergence of the Christian religion from many earlier movements resulted in the rise of religious intolerance toward the Jews and toward Christians whose opinions were identified as heretical.

The book will be organized by chapters addressing major questions that the early Christians faced. Each chapter will proceed to outline the wide range of responses (conceptual and performative) across the different Christian groups, beginning with the first Jewish Christians who followed Jesus' brother James and ending with the catholic Christians supported by Constantine. The nature of the question will determine the selection of the exemplar Christian groups in each chapter. Each chapter will conclude with a discussion of what was at stake, how the range of acceptable responses was narrowed, and why.

The closing of the book will address the consolidation of Christianity as multiple groups battled for the faith and intolerance rises among them. Three areas will be defined, like the peeling of an onion, from the surface to the core. First, what are the issues that were the most intense for the early Christians? Second, what underlies these issues that makes them so intense? Put another way, what are root causes, social and psychological? Third, what are the strategies of intolerance that the early Christians employ, and what are the strategies of survival employed by those who are threatened? It will be shown that these battles are fought from the human tribal mind, which in the course of evolution gave us the cognitive and social advantages of survival. But the downside is intolerance and violence towards those we dehumanize, demonize, decivilize, and destabilize.

The final chapter will move us to the pinnacle. What have we learned from this exploration of our past? Is there hope for religion and religious people today? Can we curtail our evolutionary tribal impulses? A discussion of religious pluralism will be the finale's focus. Pluralism is not about apathy. It is not about merely tolerating religions other than our own. It is also not soft perennialism, which advocates the position that all religions are local expressions of the same Ultimate Reality. True pluralism is a critical stance, a stance that asks the people of faith to view their own religions through the same critical lens that they view all other religions. It asks us to see how religions are human constructions meant to concretize human experiences of the sacred transcendent beyond all religions, and, in doing so, to express our deepest values and our deepest fears. Reconciliation may only be found when we transcend our separate faiths and embrace the religious journey at the foundational level of our shared values and fears.

With the assistance of this grant, I was able to write and submit a proposal for the textbook to Wiley-Blackwell. The proposal was successful and the project is now under contract. I began working on initial research questions in Spring 2015 by offering a new seminar called "Early Christian Controversies" where I began working through relevant primary and secondary literature and writing the chapter on theology.

Conferences

American Society for the Study of Religion Annual Meeting



Founder's Room, Lovett Hall—site of the 2015 ASSR Conference, was also the location of a G-7 Economic Summit attended by world leaders (seen here in 1990).

Erin Prophet, PhD Student: A selective interdisciplinary body of scholars known as the American Society for the Study of Religion (ASSR) met this April beneath the tall windows of the Founder's Room in Lovett Hall to evaluate myth from a variety of perspectives. The society, a small group of established scholars which includes classicists, historians, sociologists and anthropologists as well as scholars of religion, meets annually, usually for the purpose of discussing a specific theme.

Rice professors Jeffrey Kripal and April DeConick were among those invited to present on the topic of myth. Kripal, a member of the society, discussed the religious aspects of popular UFO mythology and his view that "aliens are modern gods." He evaluates them as part of an "emergent mythology" as "biological gods," examining the way they "collapse our assumed boundaries between the humanistic and the scientific, between the subjective and the objective registers of human experience." DeConick presented on the Gnostic care of the soul in myth and performance, demonstrating how the Gnostic map to "eternal bliss" provided a framework for belief and practice. The society is currently chaired by the classicist Sarah Iles Johnston, who presented her current work on myths as networks.

The ASSR was founded in 1959 for the purpose of promoting the scholarly study of religion. It is a small society with less than two hundred members (including Religion faculty members Elias Bongmba, April DeConick, Anne Klein, and Jeff Kripal), who must be

nominated by an existing member and elected by the group. Members in attendance at Rice included Thomas Tweed, 2015 president of the American Academy of Religion, Tomoko Masuzawa, professor of history and comparative literature at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and Courtney Bender, chair of the department of religion at Columbia University. During each annual meeting, the society elects several new members. At the 2015 meeting, the members elected Anthony Pinn, the Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religion at Rice University.

Together with my colleague Mohammad Reza Hashemitaba, an anthropology PhD student, I volunteered to handle logistics for this group and in exchange was able to sit in on the sessions and meet the scholars.

I felt as if we were sitting in on discussions that could lead to the next edition of *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, which I am currently reading in preparation for my comprehensive exams. I enjoyed listening to their discussions, but also the chance to experience the Founder's Room in Lovett Hall, built in 1912, which has a storied past. Originally the faculty chamber, it has been remodeled several times, and served most notably as the site for the 1990 G-7 Economic Summit, in which world leaders including British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and American president George H. W. Bush sat around the same conference table used by the ASSR members. More information about the ASSR can be found at the website: www.assr-religion.org

Early Christian Controversies Conference



Charles Schmidt, PhD Student: In spring 2015, Department Chair April D. DeConick led a graduate research seminar in which students read an extensive amount of early Christian literature from the second- to

fourth century CE. The seminar's focus was to track the development of critical issues and disputes within early Christian communities and expose students to a "big picture" approach to the development of early Christianity.

The seminar culminated in the Early Christian Controversies Research Conference on April 22 at Fondren Library's Kyle Morrow Room, with students and invited lecturers giving presentations of their respective research projects and interests. Student presentations included discussion on the various conceptions of Mary as virgin and mother, second century Christians forming their identities by integrating social memories of Paul, baptismal ritual as a means of medicinal deification, and Origen of Alexandria's construction of a divine temporal-spatial reality.

Dr. DeConick delivered the Inaugural Lecture, entitled "Traumatic Mysteries: Modes of Mysticism among the Early Christians," in which she outlined a brief history of her research on mystical traditions in antiquity and mapped out the various forms in which early Jewish and Christian mystical experiences occurred. Dr. Kelley Coblentz Bautch of St. Edwards University delivered the Keynote Lecture on the topic of "Eve and the Feminine Mystique/Mystic," and Dr. Franklin Trammell (Ph.D., Rice 2014) gave the Rockwell Post-Doctoral Lecture on "The Shepherd of *Hermas* and the Jerusalem Church." Student participants included Ph.D. Students Michael S. Domeracki, Rebecca Harris, and C.J. Schmidt, and Undergraduate Religion Major Emily Higgs.

Religious Pluralism in Africa and the African Diaspora

Elias Bongmba, Professor of Religion: The Department of Religion held a symposium on Religious Pluralism in Africa and the African Diaspora March 18, 2015. The Keynote lecture was presented by Professor Mary N. Getui, the Chairperson of the National AIDS Control Council of the Republic of Kenya and Professor of Religious Studies at the Catholic University of East Africa. The Symposium was made possible by generous support from The Rockwell Fund, the Department of Religion and the Humanities Research



Professor Mary Getui

Center.

Welcoming participants, Professor Elias Bongmba, organizer of the symposium, told the participants that the purpose of the conference was to reflect on the theme of pluralism contemporary Africa and the African Diaspora, by exploring in depth the prospects and challenges scholars and members of different religious communities face. The papers that were presented at the symposium addressed aspects of pluralism by focusing on Boko Haram in Nigeria, The Mungiki Movement in Kenya, Religious rituals in Nigeria, religion and gender, the African church and homosexuality, Charismatic movements, HIV AIDS and public policy, and race relations in a post Mandela South Africa and religious identity in the African Diaspora.

In her presentation, Professor Getui reminded participants that HIV/AIDS remains a major threat to the health and wellbeing of many in Kenya and Africa. She outlined the history of HIV/AIDS in Kenya and said that after many deliberate steps by the government and other stake holders in public health in Kenya, the rate of prevalence in 2013 stood at 6%. The rate among women remains very high due to discrimination which women face socially, economically, and politically which renders many women less effective in fighting against social actions which place them at risk. Getui pointed out that the introduction of Anti-retroviral drugs has strengthened the fight against HIV/AIDS and given hope to many people who are living with the disease. Getui also outlined further steps the Kenyan Government and global partners are taking to further reduce new infections and bring down the rate of prevalence, and provide treatment for the people living with AIDS.

Other presenters included Professor David Cook, Elias Bongmba, Visiting scholar Michael Mwankpa, Rice alumni, Dr. Mickie Nwanzia of University of Texas Tyler and Dr. Enoch Gbadegesin of Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria, Rice Graduate students Rachel Schneider, Itohan Odunwonyi and Biko Mandela Gray. The symposium was dedicated to the memory of Dr. Israel Ahimbisibwe, His wife Dorcas and their son Israel Jr. "Jay."

Gnostic Countercultures Conference

Matt Dillon, Ph.D. Student: On March 26th-28th the Religion Department hosted the "Gnostic Countercultures: Terror and Intrigue." The fourth conference sponsored by the Rockwell Fund, this conference offered a corrective to what the organizers April DeConick and Jeffrey Kripal see as a flaw in current scholarship on the "Gnostic." To wit, since the late-1990's it has become fashionable within religious



studies to reframe groups, individuals and literature that had once been classified as “Gnostic” (e.g. The Sethians, Valentinus, and The Nag Hammadi Codices) as simply “alternative Christian.” By extension, “Gnostic” was abandoned as a term that does comparative work. Though this hypothesis has produced insights into the early 2nd and 3rd centuries, conference organizers find this perspective unnecessarily limiting. Namely, it misses the comparative power in the category “Gnostic” – how the category allows scholars to compare phenomenologically similar experiences, myths and rituals across time – as well as how the “Gnostic” transgresses or transcends of orthodox religion requires different lenses of interpretation. Participants were asked to reflect on these concerns through study of religious groups and figures from antiquity to the contemporary new age. What an event it was!

Eminent scholars were invited from Berkeley to Berlin and everywhere in between. Of the 18 invitees, prominent scholars of the ancient world included Nag Hammadi Library doyen John Turner (U. Nebraska), classicist Fritz Graf (Ohio State University), and President of the American Society for the Study of Religion Sarah Iles Johnston (OSU). Equally luminous scholars of contemporary religions included Professor of Hermetic Currents Wouter Hanegraaff (U. of Amsterdam) and keynote speaker Victoria Nelson. The papers were of the highest quality and a number of them were groundbreaking. Dylan Burns’ (U. of Leipzig) paper, for example, found evidence for libertine forms of Gnosticism within “The Paraphrase of Shem,” a text from the Nag Hammadi Codices. If his thesis is accepted, this challenges the notion libertinism is merely a projection of ancient heresiologists. In contemporary religion, Brent Landau’s work on the interpretation of the apocryphal text *Revelation of the Magi* in UFO circles broke entirely new ground in reception studies. Rice alum and current LSU professor Stephen Finley’s

important contribution on African-American religion as prototypically Gnostic further offered a vital and imaginative rereading of an immensely complex phenomenon.

Miguel Conner of the popular podcast Aeon Byte was present throughout the proceedings and kept a “live blog” of the papers given. Those interested can read these capsules of talks at <http://thegodabovegod.com/live-blog-gnostic-counter-culture/>. Moreover, all papers from the conference will be published in the inaugural issues of April DeConick and Lautaro Lanzillota’s new *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies*. Published by Brill, this journal offers the ideal venue for the rigorous and imaginative scholarship delivered at Gnostic Countercultures.

Rockwell Post-Doctoral Lecture: Daniel Brubaker

Daniel Brubaker, Ph.D. Graduate: Working with early Qur’an manuscripts is truly amazing and four years after my first opportunity to handle them directly, it still takes my breath away. The Qur’an has an interesting early history marked by, according to traditional accounts first written down about two and a half after the events they record, at least two major campaigns of standardization within the first century of the book’s written transmission. The really great thing for someone like me is that until now there are only a relative handful of people in the whole world who have closely studied the Qur’an manuscripts of the earliest period, the first two to three centuries. These Qur’an manuscripts, almost entirely written on parchment and in many cases remarkably well-preserved (unlike papyrus, parchment is quite durable) have so much to tell us.



There are literally thousands of Qur’an manuscripts from the first several centuries but obviously fewer the further back we go. Many of these reside today in western libraries that are mostly very good at giving access to scholars; many more still are held in the very regions where they were produced (though it is important to understand that they in many cases have moved from place to place within these regions!): the heartlands of the Arab/Muslim empire

during the 7th and 8th centuries, stretching from today's Iran in the East to today's Morocco in the West. Some of these collections and museums are very accommodating to scholars as well, though many remain reticent.

Given the later date of the earliest secondary writings about the Qur'an's early transmission, my work on scribal corrections continues to reveal bits of information that can shed new light on what happened in this period. Combined with advancements in paleography (the dating of manuscripts using what we know about developments in writing styles), as well as other scientific dating techniques - there is a lab that can now tell what type of animal (cow, goat, sheep, rabbit, etc.) a piece of parchment was made from without even destroying any portion of the page! - the work I do promises to help sharpen the picture and in some cases to even challenge long-held assumptions.

This year on the Rockwell Scholarship, I gathered many more instances of scribal correction and reviewed many more pages of these thousand-plus-year-old Qur'ans. I recently made another 10-day trip visiting manuscripts held at Oxford and Cambridge. The Cambridge manuscripts are in process of being digitized and will be gradually withdrawn from access for scholars; I was told that I was to be the last scholar permitted to directly view one particular early Qur'an.

This research will feed into my book, an expanded version of my Rice doctoral dissertation, that is on track for submission by the end of 2015. I hope to soon publish another book dealing with this material geared toward non-specialists.

Rockwell Post-Doctoral Lecture: Franklin Trammell

Franklin Trammell: Rockwell Lecture, "The Shepherd of Hermas and the Jerusalem Church"



My Rockwell Post-Doctoral Lecture was entitled "The Shepherd of Hermas and the Jerusalem Church" and was presented at the Early Christian Controversies Research conference at Rice University on April 22, 2015. The paper was a summary of my post-

dissertation work as a Rockwell Post-Doctoral Award Recipient. What I presented were major points of contact between the late first century Christian apocalypse, the

Shepherd of Hermas, and two documents which I argued can be associated with the Mother Church of Jerusalem: the Q source (an old collection of the sayings of Jesus) and the Revelation of John. I also included some observations from sayings in the Gospel of Thomas which originate from the Jerusalem Church led by James, brother of Jesus. My intention was to show that the correspondences between Hermas, Q, and the Revelation of John are indicative of the influence of Jerusalem based Jewish Christianity in Rome at the end of the 1st century. They add to those shared features Hermas has with the letter of James and the Didache to provide further evidence of Hermas' knowledge of traditions of the Jerusalem church and as a transmitter of Jerusalem traditions.

A major focus of my post-dissertation work has been to create a general profile of the earliest Christianity associated with the Mother Church based on affinities between sources and demonstrable lines of transmission. In the Fall I will be teaching a course on the Jerusalem Church and Jewish Christianity at UNC Charlotte through which I will be continuing this work. I hope to publish the results initially in the form of a series of articles.

Faculty Publications 2014-2015

Marcia Brennan, Professor of Religion and Art History: *Heart of the Hereafter: Love Stories from the End of Life*



The Heart of the Hereafter can help to serve as a life review for the living. The stories can change not only how we view the end of life, but how we view life itself, and thus how we actively live our lives, particularly when we encounter the part of ourselves that is nothing but love. The end of life is almost never pretty, but it can be almost overwhelmingly beautiful. This book features a moving

selection of poetic and visual artworks that are based on the author's experiences as an Artist In Residence in palliative medicine at the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center. Emphasizing mystical and spiritual themes, the stories showcase the different types of love that emerge both in life and at the end of life. They range from philanthropy, self-respect (amour propre), familial love (agape and storge), and romantic love (eros) to various expressions of spiritual love including charity (caritas), grace, enlightenment, and transcendence. By engaging these themes, this book sheds valuable light on both the promises and the complications associated with constructing an ars moriendi, or guide to the art of dying, in our contemporary world.

Time and Eternity in Jewish Mysticism: That Which is Before and That Which is After, Edited by Brian Ogren, Anna Smith Fine Assistant Professor of Judaic Studies

Time and eternity are concepts that have occupied an important place within Jewish mystical thought. This present volume gives pride of place to these concepts, and is one of the first works to bring together diverse voices on the subject. It offers a multivalent picture of the topic of time and eternity, not only

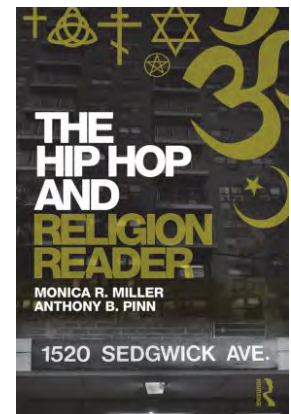


overwhelmingly beautiful. This book features a moving

by including contributions from an array of academics who are leaders in their fields, but by proposing six diverse approaches to time and eternity in Jewish mysticism: the theoretical approach to temporality, philosophical definitions, the idea of time and pre-existence, the idea of historical time, the idea of experiential time, and finally, the idea of eternity beyond time. This multivocal treatment of Jewish mysticism and time as based on variant academic approaches is novel, and it should lay the groundwork for further discussion and exploration.

Anthony Pinn, Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Religion: *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader*

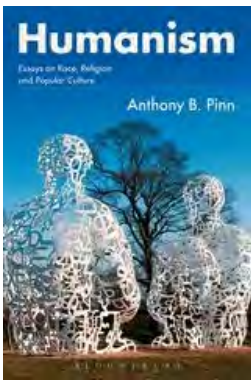
Edited by two recognized scholars of African-American religion and culture, this reader, the first of its kind, provides the essential texts for an important and emerging field of study – religion and hip hop. Until now, the discipline of religious studies lacked a consistent and coherent text that highlights the developing work at the intersections of hip hop, religion and theology. Moving beyond an institutional understanding of religion and offering a multidimensional assortment of essays, this new volume charts new ground by bringing together voices who, to this point, have been a disparate and scattered few. Comprehensively organized with the foundational and most influential works that continue to provide a base for current scholarship, *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader* frames the lively and expanding conversation on hip hop's influence on the academic study of religion



Anthony Pinn: *Humanism: Essays on Race, Religion, and Popular Culture*

Who are the "Nones"? What does humanism say about race, religion and popular culture? How do race, religion and popular culture inform and affect humanism?

The demographics of the United States are changing, marked most profoundly by the religiously unaffiliated, or what we have to come to call the "Nones". Spread across generations in the United States, this group encompasses a wide range of philosophical and ideological perspectives, from some in line with various

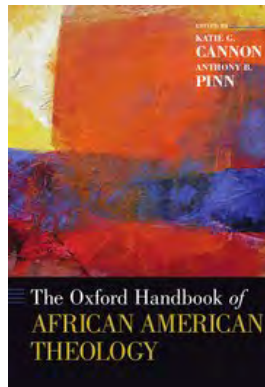


forms of theism to those who are atheistic, and all sorts of combinations in between. Similar changes to demographics are taking place in Europe and elsewhere.

Humanism: Essays on Race, Religion and Popular Culture provides a much-needed humanities-based analysis and description of humanism in relation to these cultural markers. Whereas most existing analysis attempts to explain humanism through the natural and social sciences (the "what" of life), Anthony B. Pinn explores humanism in relation to "how" life is arranged, socialized, ritualized, and framed. This ground-breaking publication brings together old and new essays on a wide range of topics and themes, from the African-American experience, to the development of humanist churches, and the lyrics of Jay Z.

Anthony Pinn, and Katie Cannon: *The Oxford University Press Handbook of African American Theology*

African American Theology as an academic enterprise, primarily lodged within institutions of higher learning, is some forty-years old. Beginning in the late 1960s through the effort of African American scholars and progressive pastors to shape the nature and meaning of social transformation in the years after the major successes of the civil rights movement had come to an end, this theological discourse continues to grow and evolve in light of the changing nature of religion and life in the United States. Dr. Cannon and I saw the need to provide an opportunity to think through this development. This handbook is the outcome of that process.



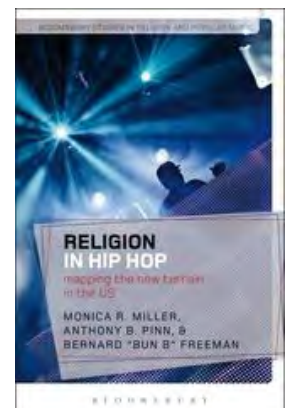
Based on a thematic and topical structure, our handbook provides scholars and advanced students detailed description, analysis, and constructive discussions concerning African American Theology. The 34 essays in the volume survey the academic content of African American Theology by highlighting its (1) sources; (2) doctrines; (3) internal debates; (4) current challenges; (5) future prospects, in order to present key topics related to the wider palette of Black Religion in a sustained scholarly format.

The first section describes the sources used in the development of African American theology. The second section presents the major theological categories and concerns that define this modality of theology. This section is followed by a third in which attention is given to the internal conversation – the charged issues debated by those producing African American theology. The fourth section explores some of the more significant areas requiring continued attention – current challenges confronting theologians committed to this particular discourse. The final section presents developing directions in African American theology. These are not challenges as opposed in the fourth section, but rather new and emerging areas of interest. For example, does the growth of the prosperity gospel challenge and/or alter African American Theology in significant ways? What do we do when the story of liberation that the church needs to hear in order to survive meaningfully in the 21st century – indeed, the life-affirming story that the academy needs to tell—is a message that never reaches the masses in the Black Church community? In essence, how do we bridge the gap between town and gown?

With the completion of this project, as is the case with all book projects, the press developed a list of potential awards for which the volume qualifies. One of those for which the book qualified was offered by the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, Inc. Formed in 1970, the BCALA “The Black Caucus of the American Library Association serves as an advocate for the development, promotion, and improvement of library services and resources to the nation's African American community; and provides leadership for the recruitment and professional development of African American librarians.” We were delighted to receive notification in February, that our volume was named one of the Honor Books for the year. The award ceremony was held in June 2015, in San Francisco.

Anthony Pinn: *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the U.S.*

Now a global and transnational phenomenon, hip hop culture continues to affect and be affected by the institutional, cultural, religious, social, economic and political landscape of American society and beyond. Over the past two decades, numerous disciplines have taken up hip hop culture for its intellectual weight and contributions to the cultural life and self-understanding of the United States. More recently, the academic study of religion has given hip hop culture closer and more



critical attention, yet this conversation is often limited to discussions of hip hop and traditional understandings of religion and a methodological hyper-focus on lyrical and textual analyses.

Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the Terrain provides an important step in advancing and mapping this new field of Religion and Hip Hop Studies. The volume features 14 original contributions representative of this new terrain within three sections representing major thematic issues over the past two decades. The Preface is written by one of the most prolific and founding scholars of this area of study, Michael Eric Dyson, and the inclusion of and collaboration with Bernard 'Bun B' Freeman fosters a perspective internal to Hip Hop and encourages conversation between artists and academics.

Current Faculty

Elias K. Bongmba (University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology, 1995): African and African diaspora religions, African Christianity/Theology Hermeneutics and Theology, contemporary theology and ethics

Marcia Brennan (Brown University, 1997): modern and contemporary art history and museum studies, gender theory, mysticism and comparative religion, medical humanities

David Cook (University of Chicago, 2001): early Islam, Muslim apocalyptic literature and movements for radical social change, dreams, historical astronomy, Judeo-Arabic literature and West African Islam

Niki Clements (Brown University, 2014): Christianity in late antiquity, asceticism and mysticism, religious ethics, theories and methods in the study of religion

April D. DeConick (University of Michigan, 1994): New Testament, Christian origins, early Christianities, apocryphal literature, history of Christian thought, sexuality and Christianity, early Christian mysticism, Nag Hammadi literature, classic gnostic studies, coptic language

Claire Fanger (University of Toronto, 1994): medieval Christian thought, devotional literature, saints' lives, history of magic, modern occultism, esotericism

Matthias Henze (Harvard University, 1997): Hebrew Bible, Second Temple Judaism, apocalyptic literature

Anne C. Klein (University of Virginia, 1981): Tibetan Buddhism, comparative contemplative epistemologies, Buddhism and feminism, esoteric views of embodiment

Jeffrey J. Kripal (University of Chicago, 1993): history of religions, colonial and western Hinduism, comparative erotics and ethics of mysticism, western esotericism

Brian Ogren (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008): early modern Jewish thought, philosophy and kabbalah during the Italian Renaissance

William B. Parsons (University of Chicago, 1993): comparative mysticism, psychology of religion, social scientific interpretations of religion, religion and culture, religion and gender

Anthony B. Pinn (Harvard University, 1994): African American religious thought, liberation theologies, African American humanism, religion and popular culture

John M. Stroup (Yale University, 1980): history of Christianity, Protestantism and modernity, New Age and contemporary eschatology

Betsy Barre (Florida State University, 2009): Adjunct Assistant Professor of Religion. Comparative Religious Ethics, Christian Ethics, Muslim Ethics, Method and Theory in the Study of Religion, Religion and Law.

Undergraduate News

The Religion Major at Rice

Niki Clements, Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies, and Jeffrey Kripal, Director of Undergraduate Studies:

The undergraduate majors embody the boldness of the Department of Religion's riff on Rice



University's motto. In their pursuit of "Truly Unconventional Wisdom," some current students come to Religion with another major (or two) including Anthropology, Asian Studies, Cognitive Science, Economics, English, Kinesiology, Policy Studies, and Psychology. In their interdisciplinary work in Religion, all students find

surprising ways of framing problems (and sometimes even solutions!) from different perspectives.

Majors value the Department of Religion as a place to "geek out about ancient texts in near-dead languages, about strange customs that don't exist anymore" (Sparrow Gates '17) and as "an academic community where people can safely explore what lies in the deepest part of themselves and others" (Sharon Cho '17). The Department is "full of professors who are passionate both about their research and their students" (John Hagele '17).

To continue fostering a dynamic community, we are advancing an Undergraduate Initiative that has a two-fold goal. First, we are nurturing new community for majors and other students taking Religion courses. Socials, panels, and lectures are all a part of this community building. Second, within the broader university community now, we are planning events that can communicate what it is we do and why it is so important and relevant to what other people do in global health, medicine, law, government, and education, for example. We seek to address the most perennial questions human beings have asked, but we also seek to address the most immediate challenges and problems of the modern world.

Emily Higgs '16 speaks to the major's dual utility:

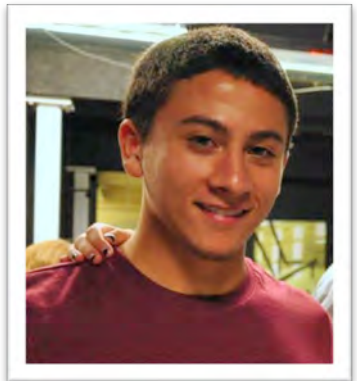


"As a Religion major, I have developed research and analytical skills that are invaluable to my future career in libraries and archives. The incredibly diverse offerings of the Religion department have also allowed me to develop my academic interests in areas that I may have never encountered otherwise." Ashley Buchanan '16 similarly frames her training, "as an aspiring clinical psychologist, delving into a study of ... how belief systems and intrinsic values effect one's view on the maintenance of the 'self,' I learn way more about understanding the human mind (on a therapeutic level) than any neuroscience class could teach me."

Helping students in their practical development includes moving them "beyond the hedges," that is, into the larger Houston community. We are in the process of forging internships and research opportunities in the Houston area, connecting undergraduate majors with friends and alumni of the Department of Religion at the Institute for Spirituality and Health at the Texas Medical Center, the Jung Center, and the McGovern Center for Humanities and Ethics at the University of Texas Medical School. We're always open to new possibilities, so let us know if you would like to get more engaged with our undergraduate intellectual community.

Allen Simon: Aparicio Prize for Undergraduates

Bill Parsons, Professor of Religion: In 1985 Professor Francis R. Aparicio bequeathed a fund to the Department of Religion (and then Chair Niels C. Nielsen) to honor her late husband. Each year the fund has been used to award what has come to be known as the Aparicio Prize to a deserving member of the undergraduate class. The prize, voted on by the entire Department of Religion, celebrates the most outstanding paper on religion (with preference going to those written in the psychology of religion). This year we are proud and happy to announce the winner as Allen Simon for his paper "*Brave New World's* World State: A Poor Society."



Brave New World, published in 1932 by Aldous Huxley, is widely considered to be one of the most influential dystopian novels written in the past century. It depicts a future totalitarian society centered on "Ford" and "Freud" (which is to say a hedonistic (hence Freud),

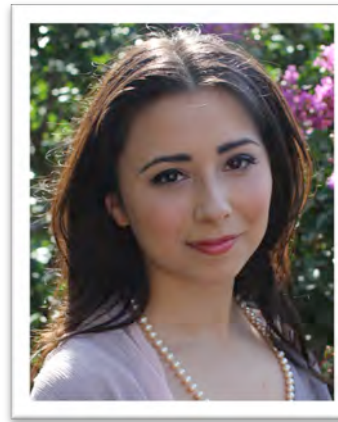
industrial (hence Ford) complex). This “dystopia” (the inverse of a “utopia”) is one in which past and future are abrogated in favor of a hedonistic “now”; a collective in which individual actions and differences are discouraged; and stability maintained through psychological mind control and the administration of a mind altering, pleasure inducing drug (the famous “soma”). The question Allen asked is this: can such a society be maintained for any sustained length of time? His answer is a resounding “No.”

To marshal his case Allen draws from the ideas of a number of social theorists (including Peter Berger, Erich From, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and, in particular, Erik Erikson) to lay down a fundamental law, namely, that the most successful societies are those that foster meaning, stability and individuation; that they allow social spaces, rituals, and techniques for creative adaptation, newness, uniqueness, and growth. Given this, the World State (as described by Huxley in *Brave New World*), which eschews individualism, natural procreation, family life, religion, therapeutic processes, and achieves stability through conformity, mind control and soma, can only be a failed project.

In adding subtlety to his argument Allen then turns to Erikson’s notion of identity formation: a life-cycle task that is, in the modern west, associated with adolescence. Rice students may well understand this notion from the inside out, for what is the university if not what Erikson would call a “moratorium” (a social institution designed for experimenting with multiple future identities). And, as is well known, Erikson also spoke of how both religion and the therapeutic social space were similarly cultural creations for the formation of identity and individuation. By engaging in the psychobiography of some of the major characters in the novel (particularly those of Bernard Marx, Lenina Crowne, Helmholtz Watson, and John the Savage), Allen expertly illustrates how Huxley’s World State cannot perform the function of establishing workable (and uniquely individual) identities in its youth. What one could say is that, from this perspective, religion, psychology and the university are instrumental to the continued success of a given society. All-in-all a wonderful paper. Congratulations Allen!!

Sarah Long: Saba Prize and Award of Distinction in Research for Undergraduates

Claire Fanger, Assistant Professor of Religion: This year the Saba prize, which recognizes outstanding undergraduate work, as well as the Award of Distinction in Research and Creative Work, both went by unanimous acclaim to senior Sarah M. Long. The Distinction in Research was awarded for her honors



thesis, *Twining the Maiden’s Wreath: Origins of the Good Death in Charlotte Salomon’s Life? or Theater?*

Sarah’s thesis had its roots in a course she took in her junior year, Marcia Brennan’s End of Life seminar, where Sarah first encountered the work of German Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon.

Life? or Theatre? is the title of a series of 769 gouaches and transparencies that Salomon composed in 1941 and 1942, shortly before she was apprehended by the Nazis. The themes of this work are personal, as Charlotte draws on experiences, both imagined and real, of her mother and grandmothers’ suicides, but also universal, in her consideration of the ways individuals rise to the challenge of dealing with human processes of dying and mourning. In her thesis, Sarah produced a nuanced poetic and scholarly meditation on what she calls, following the late medieval tradition, “the good death” – the death that culminates a life well-lived.

It is not just Sarah’s writing style and artistic sensibility that distinguish this thesis, but especially her deep and broad reading. Sarah’s meditation on Salomon’s work draws in various landmark discussions on the intersections between death and art, from the late medieval *Book of the Craft of Dying* to modern German philosophy, glancing throughout at the ways expressions of “the good death” constitute an art historical tradition as well as a textual one. For Sarah, the value of Salomon’s work lies in the way it transforms her experiences of family suicide into something that models a spiritually disciplined approach to death in a secular world.

It does this in part, as Sarah notes in her conclusion, by building a community between the living and the dead. In this way it replicates the work of the late medieval *Book of the Craft of Dying*. As Sarah puts it, *Life? or Theatre?* becomes “a body that holds the memories of corporeal fragility and houses the voices of those who have passed.” Like the *Book of the Craft of Dying*, it frames a consecrated space that helps bridge the chasm between the dying and the living, the dead and the bereaved.

Sarah’s knack for thoughtful, flexible engagement with diverse writings in an array of areas and disciplines has marked all her work at Rice. And while it may be too early to know how her career will develop, we can rest assured that her deep coverage of books promises her a distinguished future in the world of words.

Current Undergraduate Students

Demitrios Anastasiadis: Religion & Psychology
(Senior at Martel)

Kathlyn Anthony: Religion & Computational
Applied Mathematics (Sophomore at Duncan)

Jacob Blumencranz: Religion & Policy Studies
(Sophomore at Brown)

Ashley Buchanan: Cognitive Sciences, Psychology,
& Religion (Senior at Duncan)

Sharon Cho: Economics & Religion (Junior at
McMurtry)

Andrew Dunlap: Religion (Sophomore at
Hanszen)

Sparrow Gates: Religion & Jewish Studies (minor)
(Junior at McMurtry)

John Hagele: Religion (Junior at Jones)

Brandon Terrell Hamilton: Religion (Junior at Sid
Richardson)

Emily Higgs: Religion (Senior at Lovett)

Daniel McNamara: Religion & Economics (Senior
at McMurtry)

Rio O'Mary: Religion (Senior at Lovett)

Allen Simon: Religion (Senior at Lovett)

Zoe Tao: Psychology, Religion, & Biochemistry
(minor) (Junior at Jones)

Tabish Virani: English & Religion (Senior at
Brown)

Charles Warren: Kinesiology & Religion (Junior at
Brown)

Daniel Wellman: Asian Studies, Religion, &
Anthropology (Senior at Brown)

Brandon Zheng: Religion (Senior at Sid
Richardson)

Graduate News

Lodieska Stockbridge Vaughn Fellowship

Matt Dillon, Ph.D. Student: For the 2014 - 2015 school year I was granted the extraordinary honor of receiving the Lodieska Stockbridge Vaughn Fellowship. This dissertation writing fellowship offered through the Humanities Research Center helped fund my work on "The Gnostic Renaissance: The Nag Hammadi Library in American Religion and Culture."



In it, I trace the reception of the Nag Hammadi Codices (NHC), twelve ancient books (2nd-4th CE) written in Coptic and discovered in Upper Egypt in 1945. In these texts, the figure of Jesus from the New Testament is cast in a radically new light. Jesus here is often featured as a revealer sent from the heavens to awaken the sparks below to "gnosis." Historical study of these texts has yielded tremendous insight into the diverse ideas and practices of early Christianity. Comparatively, however, very little attention has been paid to how the new ideas found in the NHC have impacted or influenced contemporary religion and culture.

My dissertation traces the impact of the NHC across five domains from 1945 to the present: orthodox Christianity, organized Gnostic churches, sexuality and gender, media, and creative writers. The historical study of the NHC has challenged two pillars of orthodox Christian self-understanding, specifically Historical Jesus and Christian Origins. In terms of historical Jesus research, texts such as *The Gospel of Thomas* offer potentially new data on the study of the historical Jesus not available in the canonical gospels. In terms of church history, the codices show early Christianity was much more diverse and contentious than had been previously conceived, and that many of early groups were influenced by "gnostic" ideas. Each of these historical findings has required contemporary orthodox churches to expand or strategically protect their beliefs. Secondly, some individuals have chosen to form new churches that use texts from the NHC as scripture. These texts are then taken up in their liturgies, sacramental calendars, and homilies. Third, the NHC and affiliated literature feature strong female characters such as Mary Magdalene, featured as the first and most insightful disciple of Christ in *The Gospel of Mary*. These new conceptions of

Mary in the early Church have impacted debates within contemporary Christianity over the role of women in the priesthood and the gender roles in the church. Fourth, a variety of ideas surrounding the NHC circulate through various forms of media - newspapers, magazines, documentaries, podcasts - and these depictions have influenced how individuals conceive these texts. Similarly, many creative writers read the NHC and produced writings influenced by the NHC that later condition cultural responses to the ancient texts themselves, such as Dan Brown's (in-)famous *The Da Vinci Code*.

The Fellowship allowed me not only to devote more time and effort to writing these chapters, but also to expand my research. More specifically, with this funding I was able to include interviews with particularly influential contemporaries. Such individuals range from priests of churches both Gnostic (Stephan Hoeller, Bishop of the *Ecclesia Gnostica*) and Orthodox (Hal Taussig) to podcast hosts (Miguel Conner), artists (Laurence Caruana) and channelers (Gloria Amendola).

Louisville Institute Dissertation Fellowship

Darrius Hills, Ph.D. Student: I was awarded both the Louisville Institute Dissertation Fellowship and the Dempster Graduate Fellowship for 2014-2015.

The Louisville Institute Dissertation Fellowship program is designed to support the final year Ph.D. or Th.D. dissertation writing for students engaged in research pertaining to North American Christianity, especially projects with the potential to strengthen the religious life of North American Christians and their institutions, including seminaries, while simultaneously advancing American religious and theological scholarship. The Dempster Graduate Fellowship assists worthy Ph.D. students who are committed to serving the church through theological education. The awards are made annually to graduate students selected on the basis of intellectual excellence, academic achievement, promise of usefulness in teaching careers, personal qualities, and commitment to Christian ministry and the preparation of pastoral leadership for the church.



Marilyn Marrs Gillet Fellowship

Linda Ceriello, Ph.D. Student: In 2014, I received a fellowship award from the *Marilyn Marrs Gillet endowment* for research conducted in Europe. In the summer of 2014, I travelled to several countries in Europe to advance my dissertation research in comparative mystical experience and the influence of Asian religions on the “spiritual-but-not-religious” identity.



With additional funding from the HRC’s Mellon seminar program, my six-week trip took me first to Wales, where I spent time accessing documents at the *Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Center* at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD). UWTSD hosts an archive containing over 6000 first-person accounts of religious experience in 7 languages. I met with the archivist and with members of the Alister Hardy Society to learn the history of this phenomenal resource. In addition, I spoke with members of the UWTSD Department of Religious Studies faculty about their unique Masters of Research program in *Religious Experience*.

Next, I participated in a Vedanta study retreat, led by Professor Carol Whitfield of the California Institute for Integral Studies and held annually in Dagsas, Sweden. While immersing myself in traditional Indian Vedanta textual study and Sanskrit chanting, I also interviewed other participants toward my research in the impact of the West on Asian spiritual traditions.

Traveling next to the Netherlands, I presented a paper at the *International Society for Humor Studies* annual conference, held at the University of Utrecht. The paper was entitled, “*Exploding the Serenity of the Moment: Russell Brand’s Comedy as a Contemporary Metaphysics of Transgression*.” There I encountered scholarship on the burgeoning field of *awe and wonder studies*, as well as other research applicable to aspects of my dissertation examining popular culture’s impact on spirituality.

Also in the Netherlands, I made fruitful visits to two more universities: I was excited to drop in on our *Gnosticism, Esotericism and Mysticism* track’s sister program at the University of Groningen. There I met with faculty member in Theology and Religious Studies, Kocku von Stuckrad. Finally, I was pleased to have the

opportunity to meet and discuss my research with Wouter Hanegraaff, faculty in Humanities and Hermetic Philosophy at University of Amsterdam.

One of my goals in doing this research in Europe was to get a sense for how contemporary Europeans’ engagements with Asian spiritualities may be similar or different as compared to the trends I have noted in the U.S. This was indeed a productive and rich opportunity to extend that scope.

Graduate Student Recent Accomplishments

- **Itohan Idumwonyi** is the recipient of a 2015 Forum for Theological Exploration Fellowship (ftheaders.org) for Doctoral Students of African Descent. This will provide a stipend of up to \$20,000 to support her doctoral studies. Idumwonyi’s research is at the intersection of African religions, Pentecostalism, women and gender studies. Additionally, she published the following chapter: “Igue Festival Among the Benin People: Response and Resilience of Indigenous Religion.” In David O. Ogungbile (ed.) *African Indigenous Religious Traditions in Local and Global Contexts: Perspectives on Nigeria (A Festschrift in Honour of Jacob K. Olupona)* Lagos: Malthouse Press, 2015. pp. 227-244.
- **Abdulbasit Kassim** published the paper, “Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy of Salafism and the Ideology of Boko Haram,” *Journal of Politics, Religion & Ideology*.
- **Erin Prophet** presented two papers, “*California Science Fiction, Atlantis and New Age Apocalypticism: the Construction and Influence of Frederick S. Oliver’s Dweller on Two Planets by Phyllos the Thibetan*,” (presented at the American Academy of Religion, New Religious Movements section, November 2014), and “*Revisionism in Church Universal and Triumphant and Related Groups*” (presented at the panel Revisionism and Diversification in New Religious Movements, International Association for the History of Religions XXI World Congress, August 2015, Erfurt, Germany). Additionally, Erin published a paper entitled, “*Deconstructing the Scientology ‘Monster’ of Popular Imagination*.” *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 2014 (peer-reviewed). *Note: this article will also be published in a forthcoming Brill volume on Scientology*. She also received a travel award from the Humanities Research Center.
- **Mark Schmanko** received two Mellon-Funded Civic Humanist Fellowships from the Humanities Research Center at Rice (in December 2014 for one

semester, and in May 2016 for two semesters). He also completed the 3CT Certificate in May 2015. Additionally, Mark presented at two conferences: *Ways of Knowing, Graduate Student Conference*, Harvard Divinity School, Oct 2014, (Title of piece: *Reconsidering the Insider/Outsider Phenomenon in the Study of Religion*) and *Engaging Particulars XIII: Boston College's Graduate Student Conference on Comparative Theology and Interreligious Dialogue* (Title of piece: *Toward a Radical New Theology*).

Modern Christianity in Thought & Popular Culture: Ross Tieken

Religion & Psychology: Elliot Berger, Mark Schmanko, Sravana Varma

GEM (Gnosticism, Esotericism, Mysticism) Certificate: Justine Bakker, Simon Cox, Renée Ford, Benjamin Mayo, Erin Prophet, Mark Schmanko

Incoming Graduate Students (2015)

Cindy Dawson: Bible & Beyond

Zora Hamsa: African American Religion

Abdulbasit Kassim: Islamic Studies, African Religions

Justin Kelley: Buddhist Thought

Victor Nardo: GEM, Modern Christianity in Thought & Popular Culture

Gregory Perron: GEM, Religion & Psychology

Tommy Symmes: Religion & Psychology, GEM

Current Graduate Students and Areas of Study

African American Religion: Justine Bakker, Shardé Chapman, Jessica Davenport, Mark DeYoung, Biko Gray, Darrius Hills, Jason Jeffries, David Kline, Aundrea Matthews, Cleve Tinsley IV

African Religions: Nathanael Homewood, Itohan Idumwonyi, Bradley Johnson, Rachel Vlachos

American Metaphysical Religion: Linda Ceriello, Erik Davis, Matt Dillon, Benjamin Mayo, Erin Prophet, Mark Schmanko

Bible & Beyond: Michael Domeracki, Jason Ford, Rebecca Harris, C.J. Schmidt

Buddhist Thought: Renée Ford, Anne Parker, Elizabeth Wallett

Islamic Studies: Reyhan Erdogan Basaran

Medieval Christianity: Minji Lee

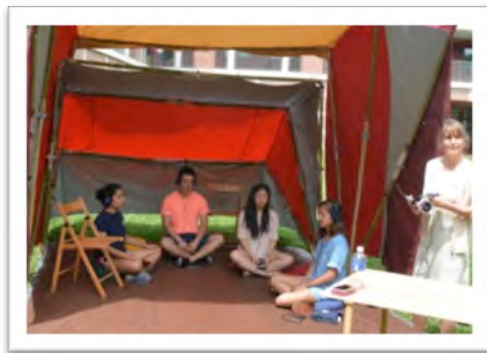
Graduate Student Instructors

RELI 230: Asian Religions in America

Linda Ceriello, Ph.D. Student: During spring semester 2015, I was pleased to have the opportunity to teach Asian Religions in America (RELI 230). This course explored key beliefs of Asian philosophical and religious traditions, and specific moments of their impact in the West. Especially of interest to us was how intersecting East/West historical movements have and continue to result in an array of new—and new versions of old—spiritual forms. One example of the western penchant toward innovating when it comes to Eastern contemplative practices came right to our door, when the *Meditation Station* visited our class.

The Meditation Station, the result of a recent collaboration between *Dawn Mountain Buddhist Temple* (founded by our own Dr. Anne Klein) and Houston's *Institute for Spirituality and Health* (ISH), is a mobile unit offering a comfortable space for anyone to try out various types of contemplative practice. Each individual user can select from recorded versions of many different meditations, ranging from 5 to 50 minutes.

The idea for a mobile space that could bring opportunities for contemplative practice on the road to all sorts of users in a variety of venues came originally from MaryScott Hagle, Dawn Mountain's Executive Director, and Stuart Nelson, 2011 Rice RELI department graduate and current Vice President of ISH. Recent RELI PhD graduate Claire Villarreal is also among those who have worked on its implementation and helped to bring it to campus. After this first successful trial, in which students of RELI 230 (pictured here) enjoyed sampling from the menu of different meditation options available through headphones, the Meditation Station came again to Rice for the benefit of students during finals week in May.



RELI 230 students enjoying Meditation Station, with instructor Linda Ceriello

RELI 334: Psychology of Religion

Matt Dillon, Ph.D. Student: In the Fall 2014 semester I had the pleasure of teaching Psychology of Religion. Unlike a course in a particular tradition, such as early Christianity, or a geographical location, such as America, students entering such a course have little idea what to expect.



In this iteration, students learned that the psychology of religion arose out of debates between 19th century medical science and religious persons about the nature of certain experiences: visions, mediumship, and mysticism. The course then proceeded to study the writings of four paradigmatic figures who helped establish the field, namely William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Erik Erikson. To better understand and apply each of their theories we analyzed products of popular culture, such as the films *American Beauty* and *Pan's Labyrinth*. Through such applied analysis students found themselves better able to understand how these thinkers approached religious texts and phenomena.

Over the second half of the semester we expanded our survey dramatically. Through various psychological lenses we analyzed everything from the psychoanalytic dynamics at work at Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church here in Houston to Buddhist Vipassana meditation and the biography of Sri Ramakrishna. Rather than simply read foreign religions as objects of psychological investigation, however, we approached these eastern traditions as though their models of the mind and explanations of religious experience could also teach the contemporary psychological sciences. This comparativist-dialogical perspective is essential for students to recognize that western forms of epistemology are not the only possible explanation of facts and phenomena.

To close the course we turned deep inside, to the brain itself. The study of cognitive-neuroscience can be jarring since it tends to make living psychological reality and the phenomenology of being into a mere epiphenomenon of intricately firing neurons. Yet it also yields tremendous insights into the nature of religious belief and experience. The human brain evolved for us to survive on the African savannah and developed heuristics, similar to computer programs, which interpret social and environmental stimuli in ways that

promote survival. Interestingly enough, such programs can misinterpret incoming stimuli that produce gods and goddesses that have certain universal characteristics. Moreover, we learned how neural aspects of sexuality help us to understand religious myths, and how near-death-experiences might be tied to specific neural responses to physiological conditions approaching death.

What has made the course the most rewarding I have taught, though, is the outpouring of enthusiasm for it expressed by the students. As one anonymous student commented, "This is the most incredible course I have ever taken. It has actually changed my life. The ideas we encountered were so strange, beautiful, meaningful, and controversial. Take this if you aren't afraid of reading a lot and questioning everything you've ever known." Such comments are why many of us chose to enter this profession. Several of the students have kept in touch. Serving as a mentor, I have had the honor of assisting several of them in their goals of entering graduate school in medicine, the psychological sciences, religious studies, and even video game design.

RELI 243: The Book of Genesis

Jason Ford, Ph.D. Student: This past semester (spring 2015) I taught The Book of Genesis (Reli 243). The class was made up of twenty-six undergraduate students from various majors. Genesis (Gen) is the first book of both the Hebrew and Christian bibles and is filled with fascinating narratives that explore existential, religious, and societal issues. The book of



Genesis is a rich text and allows much room for discussion and debate over the meaning and purpose of the different narratives therein.

The course had three primary learning objectives. The first was straightforward: that the students get to know the content of the entire fifty chapters of Genesis. The book of Genesis is composed of three units of material: 1) the stories that range from the well-known story of the creation of the world up to Noah's flood (Gen 1-11); 2) the story of the foundational figures in Israelite religion (Gen 12-36); and 3) the story of Joseph's captivity in Egypt (Gen 37-50).

The second objective for the students was that they develop in their reading of the biblical text. We spent much of our class time analyzing and discussing the

different stories of Genesis. Students were asked to identify themes and recognize different emphases in the narratives. The group of students was thoughtful and provided nuanced interpretations of the text. Over the course of the semester, our reading of the text became more critical and better informed.

Even though the size of my Genesis course was large, it was primarily a discussion based course. Students were encouraged to share their thoughts and interpretations of the text, and often we were able to build a fruitful back-and-forth discussion that revolved around the material. The students were excellent and provided incisive commentary on both the primary and secondary readings each class. Students also got to flesh out their arguments in the three papers for the course. The third objective of the course was that students would become better at articulating and defending their written arguments about certain passages. Each of the students developed as a writer and it was a pleasure reading their final papers.

One of the fun aspects of studying the Bible is that so many of the texts explore themes and issues pertinent to human life—even us reading the stories thousands of years after they were written. The Book of Genesis was a Monday, Wednesday, Friday course. Built in to the syllabus was a certain rhythm where on Mondays and Wednesdays we performed close readings of the texts from Genesis. On Fridays we discussed various adaptations and re-creations of the biblical stories and themes in popular culture. This allowed us to see how other storytellers were interpreting and using the same biblical material and motifs that we were studying.

As a graduate student, it was a tremendous opportunity to teach the talented group of undergraduates from the Book of Genesis course. I learned much from the experience and found a real joy in teaching.

RELI 270: Introduction to the Black Church in the United States

Darrius Hills, Ph.D. Student: In the Fall 2014 semester, I taught Reli 270: Introduction to the Black Church in the U.S. It was a survey of the major religious and theological movements within the history of African American Christianity and major denominations from slavery to the present. Additionally, the course analyzed contemporary African American religious culture(s) and black church experiences in Houston.

RELI 214: Religious Tolerance and Beyond

Claire Villarreal, 2015 Graduate: How can people with deep religious convictions practice true tolerance for others with incompatible beliefs? Is there such a thing as an overly tolerant society—and if there is, at what point did it cross the line? Is it true that all religions share the same core beliefs?



In RELI 214, Religious Tolerance and Beyond, six students and I explored these questions and others by examining two remarkable cultural moments: The nonsectarian movement in Eastern Tibet in the 19th century, led by Jamgön Kongtrül and a small cohort of remarkable yogi/scholars; and the Second Vatican Council, called by Pope John XXIII in 1959, that produced (among other groundbreaking documents) the “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” or “Nostra Aetate.”

Having two concrete, historical examples of leaders who chose to embrace religious tolerance allowed us to think in greater detail about what “tolerance” means in the context of groups with different religious commitments and convictions. We began the course with a sense that tolerance is a more appropriate starting place than final destination for diverse communities, and we considered together the students’ values and assumptions regarding tolerance, mutual respect, and the celebration of diversity. We also problematized the project of religious tolerance, and the students learned a basic vocabulary for thinking more critically through the questions that arise when persons and groups with mutually exclusive truth claims intersect in a (supposedly) secular society like our own. In the end, the students left the course with greater religious literacy, and I was deeply impressed by how much of the work done in this class was an education of the heart as well as of the head.

2014 – 2015 Ph.D. Graduates

Benjamin Brochstein: “Double Entendre and the Mask of Privilege”



In the same way that adults can communicate in ways that youngsters don't understand, the privileged class in Restoration England used sophisticated language and symbols to keep “elite secrets.” One “secret” was how elites shifted political alliances by supporting

both sides of an issue at the same time, like contributing to both candidates in a political race, regardless of who won they had friends in power.

The Protestant doctrine that miracles stopped happening after biblical times was hotly debated in the seventeenth century and was a direct assault on Catholicism. Because the Church of England held that miracles could not happen, and the monarch was head of both church and state, the issue was religious *and* political. Conforming (at least publicly) to the Church's doctrines was a political necessity with economic benefits, and often outward appearances were more important than a person's actual beliefs.

Religious double standards were common for the upper class, but dangerous for the poor. Seventeenth century England's social structure was built upon double standards. Practicing Catholicism was a serious criminal offense for the underclass. The Queen was openly Catholic while other Catholic elites pretended to conform with the law. They hid their true beliefs and practices in the privacy of their castles and manor homes. Even if the best educated English elites believed they had actually seen a miracle, they would deny it for political and social reasons. The result was a double-faced society and the creation of a certain mask of privilege.

Words with double meanings were often used to hide a writer's beliefs, allowing her or him to change with the prevailing political wind. This can be seen in the way that the word “extraordinary” conveyed two completely different meanings in the 1666 pamphlet *The Miraculous Conformist*. This document uses the word both as miraculous and not miraculous in describing Valentine Greatrakes (1629–1683), who healed people by merely touching them. Intriguingly, one of the greatest scientists of that time, Robert Boyle (1627–1691), enthusiastically

endorsed Greatrakes' effectiveness and carefully documented his observations to subtly convey a strong implication that they were miraculous while also asserting a physical theory to explain them—another kind of double-speak.

Using such ambiguous, if not outright duplicitous tactics, Boyle, Greatrakes, and many of their contemporaries maintained privilege and status through one of the most volatile economic periods of English history. Many who were outwardly committed to their religious ideas lost everything as political power violently shifted from Royalists to Republicans, then back to the Royalists after the Restoration in 1660.

My project traces subtle ambiguous expressions and terms from alchemical roots in Hellenistic times into the modern era. One example is the term modern “placebo effect.” It gained traction in the twentieth century to describe inexplicable healing after “extraordinary” had acquired too much of an implication of miraculous. Perhaps unintentionally, this removed inexplicable healing from the potentially troublesome arena of public scientific discourse.

Enoch Gbadegesin: Comparative Analysis of Gift Exchange Among a Pentecostal Christian Denomination and an Indigenous Religious Tradition in Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Enoch Gbadegesin, 2014 Graduate: This dissertation is a comparative analysis of the gift and how it impacts on interpersonal relationship among the Yoruba of Nigeria. The dissertation examines gift exchange as it is practiced among the worshippers of Ògún deity usually commemorated as an annual Olójó festival in comparison with Christ Way Church International a member of Pentecostal Charismatic group in Ilé-Ifè. In particular, the dissertation analyses (a) the gift, its definition and the theoretical propositions by the anthropologists and sociologists and the principles that govern its practice; (b) ethnographically, the Yoruba experience and expression of the gift, at the social,



political, economic and ritual levels of interaction among immediate group and with other group of people; (c) the patterns of interpersonal relationship that exists between the Òrìsà worshippers and Pentecostal Charismatic Christians using the two focused religious groups in Ilé-Ifè as test case; d) how gift exchange practices can be means of creating and maintaining boundaries, and how that can lead to identity formation between different religious groups; in short how gift and reciprocity can be means of exclusion by bringing Annette Weiner's *Inalienable Possessions* in conversation with Marcel Mauss's *The Gift*; e) the different senses and contexts in which the religious groups can use gift exchange practices to bring about solidarity and harmony in the Yorùbá society.

Michael Heyes: "The Metamorphosis of Monsters: Christian Identity in Medieval England and the Life of St. Margaret"

My dissertation – "The Metamorphosis of Monsters: Christian Identity in Medieval England and the Life of St. Margaret" – examines several late medieval *Lives of St. Margaret* written in England to show that the monsters of the *Life* offer perspective on the construction of Christian sexual identity in both professional religious and lay communities in medieval England.



As one of the most popular saints in medieval England, Margaret's *Life* was widely known and consumed. Monsters play a key role throughout her narrative: a demonic prefect accosts her, a hungry dragon swallows her, and a talkative black demon divulges bits of demonological lore. After she defeats each monster, she is then taken to the place of her martyrdom where she prays for supernatural boons for her adherents, boons whose rationale draws on her conflict with the aforementioned monsters.

Despite the amount of space devoted to Margaret's interactions with monsters in the narrative, scholarship has paid comparatively little attention to analyzing these monsters. Previous scholarship has focused on Margaret's resistance to Olibrius as a means to understand her impact on the identities of her virginal

or maternal adherents, and on Margaret's speech and deeds as important data that scholars can use to inform the context of Margaret's medieval readers.

This dissertation also treats each version in question as a source for information on Margaret's medieval audience, but rather than concentrating upon Margaret's speech and actions, this dissertation instead analyzes the monsters that populate Margaret's *Life*. This focus allows a new evaluation of Margaret's simultaneous appeal to virgins and mothers through the multivalent figure of the dragon, the didactic elements of the black demon's speech, the competing claims of religious identity in the figure of Olibrius, and the importance and content of the prayers at the end of Margaret's *Life* for her maternal adherents. Equally important is that the diachronic focus of the dissertation reveals that while Margaret herself seems to change little over time – showing a slow metamorphosis from an adversary of demons to a saintly women's advocate – the monsters are more volatile, changing character as needed to create a narrative that constantly exists in the reader's present. In effect, Margaret's narrative is not the story of someone who died long ago, but an account grounded in contemporary concerns and advice relevant to the reader. These conclusions provide scholars not only with a more nuanced picture of Margaret's narrative but also show the important part that Saints' Lives literature played in creating and maintaining Christian identities in medieval England.

Terri Laws: "'At the Cross-Roads': African American Spirituality, Clinical Trials, and Patient-Subject Decision-Making"

My dissertation is titled, "'At the Cross-Roads': African American Spirituality, Clinical Trials, and Patient-Subject Decision-Making." It is a qualitative research project that explores religious influences of African American prostate cancer patients who are making a decision about whether to participate in a clinical trial related to their diagnosis.

Social scientific research shows that African Americans tend to participate in religious activity at higher rates than whites. Public health research shows that African Americans participate in cancer clinical trials at one-half or less the rate as whites. At the same time, there is disparity in the health of African Americans compared to whites including lower life expectancy and disproportionately higher death rates from diagnoses including prostate cancer. Some public health scholars argue that African American participation in medical research is one strategy to decrease gaps by identifying



religious studies.

This health gap as the human experience of a particular social group has many contributing factors, the majority of which lie in social and cultural rather than medical treatment reasons. Since religion is formed within cultural contexts, I wanted to examine the problem through that lens. I wanted to know whether there might be factors in blacks' religious concerns that might influence their low participation rate in clinical trials.

Rice's location near the Texas Medical Center helped greatly. I learned that a health disparities group at MD Anderson Cancer Center had received a grant to conduct bioethical research to understand moral components of racial and ethnic group under-representation in clinical trials; it was perfect timing and a perfect match. I was paired with physicians in urology who were conducting research with prostate cancer patients; they agreed to refer patients to me. I interviewed African American patients who were considering volunteering for a prostate cancer clinical trial.

The patients in my study credited the acceptance of medical science with their decisions to enter the trial they were offered, and their spirituality gave them the confidence to stick with their decisions, and to participate in the research to benefit others. An older cultural story about black medical mistrust based on the history of the exploitation of blacks in medical research remains, but these patients were focused on saving their lives. Racism in the medical system continues to produce systemic inequities such as less access to clinical studies, but, where they are offered the opportunity these patients use both science and religion to make the best decision they can for a good quality of life in spite of a frightening diagnosis.

I plan to continue research in religion and health and medicine with African Americans. Effective September 1, 2015, I have accepted a position as assistant professor of African and African American Studies and Health and Human Services at the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

the most effective treatments and by producing data needed for culturally relevant solutions. This cycle of higher death rates and lower inclusion and participation in medical research suggests to me a form of resolvable human suffering, thus making it a subject for

Claire Villarreal: "To Know a Buddha: A Tibetan Contemplative History and Its Implications for Religious Studies"

Fourteenth-century Tibet saw a great burst of creative work among practitioner-scholars synthesizing the various Indian Buddhist doctrines of emptiness that had been transmitted to the Land of Snows since the eighth century AD. My dissertation examines one system for describing emptiness that originated in the fourteenth century with Dölpopa, his brilliantly unconventional "other-emptiness" that



emphasized the permanence and true existence of buddha nature and the transience of all that obstructs that nature. By exploring Dölpopa's philosophical and meditative system of other-emptiness, the great scholar and yogi Tsongkhapa's reaction against it, and the nineteenth century master Jamgön Kongtrül's revitalization of other-emptiness, my project explores the value of Tibetan epistemologies and what they can offer the contemporary Western study of religion.

I was fascinated with Dölpopa's other-emptiness in part because when he wrote his key texts, he was very much bucking the trend at his time in Tibetan philosophy of describing ultimate truth in terms of the absence of conventional phenomena. Many of the most influential texts during Dölpopa's time used negation to describe reality: impermanent, lacking in a substantial self, with no truly existent substrate that could support a permanent self. Dölpopa, following a different line of Indian Buddhist thought, called buddha-nature permanent, the "true self" of all beings. For him, negating relative reality was a necessary step on the path toward realizing one's essence as an awakened buddha.

In the fifteenth century, one of Tibet's great luminaries, Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa, reacted vehemently against Dölpopa's other-emptiness because (he felt) ultimate reality had no permanent, stable substrate. Buddha-nature, in Tsongkhapa's view, was synonymous with the sheer absence of anything whatsoever that could be called inherently existent. In the seventeenth century, Tsongkhapa's followers crushed Dölpopa's lineage in Central Tibet, banning texts on other-emptiness and forcibly converting the monastics who maintained the contemplative practices necessary to realize reality through that system.

In nineteenth century Eastern Tibet, one of the great

modern masters of the tradition, Jamgön Kongtrül, reintroduced other-emptiness and in fact used it as a key part of his philosophical system. His formulation of other-emptiness, though, was informed by the important authors who had commented on it since Dölpopa's time. Also, Kongtrül felt that he was an incarnation of the mind-stream of Dölpopa's most important successor who lived shortly before the suppression of other-emptiness.

Perhaps the most important conclusion I reached during the course of writing the dissertation is that all of these Tibetan authors made sophisticated distinctions between philosophical systems—which can be articulated in words and defended in debate—and the direct, nondual experience of the truths those systems describe. Such an experience, Tibetan epistemology tells us, is reached *through* language and conventional reality, even as it *transcends* such means.

Alumni Updates

Alumni Flame Award: Outstanding Graduate

Recipient: Sean Fitzpatrick, Executive Director of the Jung Center: What I didn't understand when I started



my master's degree in religious studies at Rice in 1997 is that it was an initiation, one for which I was wholly unprepared. After the two-day interview (its own initiation), I had a dream in which Anne Klein, the chair at the time, told me: "Don't worry about getting into the program. You should worry about what will happen afterwards."

She was right about that.

Academic religious studies was not my career path. I enrolled because I wanted formal study—the rhythms of reading, seminars, papers, deadlines—to keep me attentive to the questions I could not avoid. It was also a way of hiding from those questions, in the safety of the classroom. I did not expect to wrestle with the gods.

The psychiatrist C.G. Jung understood the gods to be psychological phenomena, a way of talking about deep movements in the human psyche. Whether or not the motivating narratives of specific religious traditions contain actual gods, sitting with these stories relocates us to the edge of the mystery of existence. In his book *The Serpent's Gift*, Jeff Kripal writes eloquently about what he calls the gnostic classroom, where "people are rewarded for being uncertain and for asking questions that cannot be answered with any of the categories, beliefs, or ideas that we have inherited from our pasts." For me, the gnostic classroom at Rice was also the wellspring of spiritual experiences that challenged those categories, beliefs, and ideas. My dream of Anne was a warning in form and content. I'd entered an impossible space in which the rules were suspended and the foundations of my soul were suddenly quite shaky.

In psychotherapy we describe the therapist's office as a container, a discrete space where the unspoken can be spoken. The therapist's psyche, too, is a container, in which the experiences of the client are held in confidence. The religious studies department was a container for me in a critical moment in my life. I was fundamentally different when I left Rice, though a chemical engineer probably could say the same thing about her PhD. The workload is immense, the hours

long, the loneliness can be intense. If it works well, you get reduced, condensed, hopefully clarified. What is different about religious studies is that it is not just the form that changes you. We do wrestle with the gods, with the mystery of existence.

Many times, I've watched eyes glaze over as I described the topic of my master's thesis. It can be easy to feel that what we care about so deeply has isolated us. But never doubt that your path and your project will change lives. In religious studies, we ask questions that few others in our culture feel permission to ask. We explore the ground of meaning. Never diminish that. As a therapist, I have the privilege of witnessing the struggles of individuals whose lives are at stake because they find themselves on the edge of the abyss of meaning. The learners who walk through The Jung Center's doors do not come for grades or degrees. They come because their lives are addressing unavoidable questions to them. You stand in a lineage of exceptional, marginal people who have lived those questions. And you can't answer them for others, but you can share the power to ask them, and the courage to live them.

Postdoctoral Fellow in Program in Writing and Communication

Grant Adamson, 2014 Graduate and Program in Writing and Communication Instructor: Before they

start school at Rice, new undergraduates take an English composition exam during the summer, followed by a writing-intensive seminar in the Fall or Spring semester, where they develop their skills of critical thinking, reading, writing, and oral communication.



These skills can be taught through the study of many different topics in many different fields. So each year, a variety of professors, lecturers, postdoctoral fellows, and advanced graduate students from various colleges and departments across campus teach in the Program in Writing and Communication (<http://pwc.rice.edu/>). This was my first year working as a postdoctoral teaching fellow in the program.

My seminars were on topics in biblical and related

literature from the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. In one seminar, “Rewriting Creation: The Apocryphon of John,” my students and I discussed the Apocryphon or Secret Book of John, which functions as a kind of sequel to the Gospel of John and contains a radical reinterpretation of the creation accounts in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis and in Plato’s *Timaeus*. In another seminar, “Famous Fakes in Early Christian Literature,” we discussed Paul’s undisputed and disputed letters, then the Gospel of Mark plus fragments of a Secret Gospel of Mark published in the 1970s, then the Gospel of Judas published in 2006, and finally a fragment known as the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife published in 2014.

I designed the seminars so that my students wrote three argumentative essays, each time focusing on a certain aspect of writing: first their argument and evidence, second the organization and flow of their essays, third their intro and conclusion. They wrote their essays in response to the prompts that I gave them. I created these prompts in order to teach my students that academic readings of religious literature are generally not the same as confessional readings since they have other objectives and are governed by other rules of engagement. We discussed each prompt in class, and the discussions culminated with formal presentations. Each student prepared and delivered a 5-minute oral presentation based on one of their papers then fielded questions during a Q&A period lasting 10-15 minutes.

Besides teaching writing-intensive seminars to new undergraduates, I also led writing workshops for graduate students, many of them international students, and I had the opportunity to contribute to some of the program’s special projects. For instance, I made plans for implementing an earlier proposal for best essay awards. So as awards coordinator this year, I issued the first call for nominations and arranged for judges to select the winning essays. The awards for Best Expository and Analytical Essay of 2014-2015 will be announced in the Fall. I’m excited to see who wins from last year, and I look forward to another year of discussion with my new students. I’ll be teaching “Famous Fakes in Early Christian Literature” again and another seminar on the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, and Thomas, especially the issue of how they were written.

- **Grant Adamson** is in his second year as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Program in Writing and Communication at Rice University
- **Christopher Driscoll** is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Lehigh University.

Alumni Recent Accomplishments

- **Stephen Finley** has recently been promoted to tenure, Associate Professor and Section Head of Religions Studies at Louisiana State University
- **Enoch Gbadegesin** has been appointed as a Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria.
- **Michael Heyes** has accepted a contract position as Visiting Instructor in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Southern Florida
- **Terri Laws** has taken a new position as Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan at Dearborn.
- **Chad Pevateaux** has finished three years working at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, where he taught Christianity and comparative religion. Dr. Pevateaux begins this fall at Texas Wesleyan University as Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion, teaching comparative religion and ethics.
- **Franklin Trammell** is an Adjunct Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte

In Remembrance: The Ahimbisibwes



The Department of Religion joined the Episcopal Diocese of Houston in mourning the death of our alumni, The Reverend Dr.

Israel Ahimbisibwe, his wife Dorcas Ahimbisibwe, and their son Israel Ahimbisibwe Jr. also called Jay. They were found dead at their Houston apartment on February 2, 2015.

Following an intensive investigation, police arrested and charged their son Isaac Tiharihondi with their deaths.

The Department of Religion and the Rice University Community held a memorial for Israel, Dorcas, and Jay on February 5, 2015 at the Rice Memorial Chapel. Professor April DeConick, Chair of the Department of Religion led the service, The Right Rev. Andrew Doyle, the IX Bishop of Texas and the Diocese of Texas, spoke at the service, remembering the Ahimbisibwe family. He encouraged the Rice community and attendees that it was normal to “feel both joy and love as well as sadness and grief” during this “personally painful” time. Bishop Doyle said that he hoped they will all “keep telling stories of Israel.” Other speakers included Professor Matthias Henze who directed Israel’s dissertation, Professor Elias Bongmba, and fellow graduate students Aundrea Matthews, Rachel Vlachos and Claire Villarreal who all remembered Israel as a friendly colleague who had big smile and encouraged all in the department. A funeral service was held for the Ahimbisibwes at the St. John the Divine Episcopal Church in Houston on February 19, 2015, with Bishop Doyle presiding.

Dr. Ahimbisibwe grew up in Uganda. Before attending seminary, he taught chemistry and biology. On graduation from seminary he was ordained as a priest in the Church of Uganda (The Anglican Communion). He received an international scholarship and studied at Princeton Theological Seminary. He later earned a masters degree from Harvard Divinity School. Ahimbisibwe graduated from Rice University in 2011 with a doctorate after completing a dissertation that compared The Gacaca System of justice in Rwanda and justice in the Hebrew Bible. He also studied at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Dr. Ahimbisibwe served as the Vicar of the Church of the Redeemer in Houston and was Episcopal Chaplain at the University of Houston. While at Rice he was an active member of the African Student Association, Black Graduate Student Association and Rice Graduate Christian Fellowship. He was also active in the Society for Biblical Literature and caucused with the African Religions Group at the Society for Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion.



Professor Matthias Henze, lighting a candle at the Memorial Service for the Ahimbisibwes. Photo by Rice News.

If you are an alumni of the Department of Religion at Rice University, we would love to hear from you. Send us information about your current activities to be included in future newsletters.

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Religion Matters

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Call for Donations

The work of our department, from its teaching mission to its published research, explores vital questions of religion, human diversity, and meaning in our complex world. Our aim as an intellectual community is unified as we seek to help individuals and communities overcome religious intolerance by learning about other religions and viewpoints, challenging religious stereotypes and addressing fears that can lead to hostility and violence.

We equip undergraduate and graduate students with insight, reason and compassion, hoping that, as they go into their own communities, they will pay it forward and positively impact the way we live together.

The vision of our students and faculty is imaginative and bold. But we need financial support to make it real.

Please donate today by visiting
reli.rice.edu/donate.aspx

What are our immediate needs?

- Please consider supporting the future of the study of religion at Rice as we seek to provide undergraduate students with new academic and experiential learning opportunities, including research internships in the Houston community and abroad.
- We also need to increase our support for graduate students so that they have more opportunities to share their knowledge globally.
- We ask too for help in supporting the research of our faculty, especially their travel to archives and conferences, and their increasing need for subventions for publications and exhibitions.
- To continue developing the programming in our department, we would like to bring in a post-doctoral scholar each year.
- With financial support, we would be able to bring to campus more guest scholars and to organize more conferences on Rice's beautiful campus, so that we can share knowledge more directly with the Houston community.