

# RELIGION MATTERS

## Message from the Chair: Inside and Outside Religion

April DeConick

Isla Carroll & Percy E. Turner Professor of Biblical Studies

Those of us who teach about religion have all experienced it. The perennial question from a student, “Professor, what religion are you?” I have often wondered about professors in other fields, like music or chemistry or psychology. Do their students ask them the same question? Probably not. So why are we bombarded by our students with questions about whether we are Christian or Muslim or Buddhist? Whether we believe in God, or not? Whether we attend church or synagogue? Whether we are believers?

When I first began teaching, I thought the question was innocent. But over the years, I have come to see that the question is not simple curiosity. It is set forth to verify my authority to speak about religion, regardless of my academic credentials. It naively assumes that people who are religious – who are devoted insiders – know more about religion than outsiders studying it, because insiders have experienced the religion firsthand. Outsiders must reflect on religion only from a distance, which insiders argue, put them at a disadvantage.

This is a perennial problem facing the study of religion. The closest analogy to this problem is found in anthropology, with its debate about whether it is more effective to observe a culture from the outside, or to go native and learn about the culture from the inside. The elephant in the room in both these cases is subjectivity, what to do with it. In the case of anthropology, the elephant is called ethnocentrism, which is our natural propensity to evaluate other cultures according to the preconceptions and standards of our own culture. What is more, this propensity emerges out of our belief that our own culture is superior to other cultures, providing us with the norm to measure and judge others. This makes us the center, while everything else is weighed and rated with reference to us. When mobilized politically, it can result in the rise of nationalistic movements.

This propensity does not go away when we study religion. In fact we have recognized of late that the pioneering scholars in the academic study of religion (who were also prominent Christian theologians) constructed the field in such a way that their own religion, Christianity, served as the model for what religion is and should be. Origin stories about Christianity were created that devalued or disregarded its Jewish roots. Historical studies of early Judaism and Christianity were defined by the literature in the Bible, ignoring or marginalizing other ancient Jewish and Christian literature – what we call extra-canonical or parabiblical literature – that tells a different story.



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When it comes down to it, for me, the question of inside and outside is not about whether participation in a particular religion might give us additional knowledge about the religion – it may or may not depending on the circumstances and questions being asked. The question is about ethnocentrism and how easily it carves up the object of its study so that the scholar’s own religion defines the project and fosters false assumptions, misunderstandings, and attitudes of religious supremacy.

What I have come to understand over time is that the inside and the outside are never really separate. It is like Jesus’ description of us in a famous saying found in many variations in old Christian sources: “For your inside is not different from the outside, nor the outside from the inside” (Liber Graduum 253.23-5). We can never truly get away from our ethnocentrism, our insider preferences. They will deeply affect the outsider perspective we hope as scholars to maintain and the critical tools we use. The best we can hope for is an acute awareness of our own subjectivities and preferences and a persistent commitment to control for them when we work to study religion critically from the outside.

## Department & Faculty News

### RELI 101 and the World We Live In



**Jeffrey Kripal, J. Newton Chair in Philosophy & Religious Thought; Director of Undergraduate Studies**

Former Secretary of State John Kerry realized that at the base of everything that happens on the local and geopolitical stage lies a basic set of cognitive acts that we might well call “comparative.”

*In fact, if I went back to college today, I think I would probably major in comparative religion, because that’s how integrated it is in everything that we are working on and deciding and thinking about in life today.*

*U.S. Secretary of State  
John Kerry  
7 August 2013*

These cognitive acts come down to two simple but immensely consequential processes: (1) the formation of religious, ethnic, and national identities through language, child-rearing

practices, religious ritual, sacred story, law and so forth; and (2) the strategies through which individuals and communities negotiate these constructed identities vis-à-vis others that are different or not like them. Comparative practices, at their most fundamental, are those cognitive and imaginative acts that attempt to negotiate sameness and difference in the world.

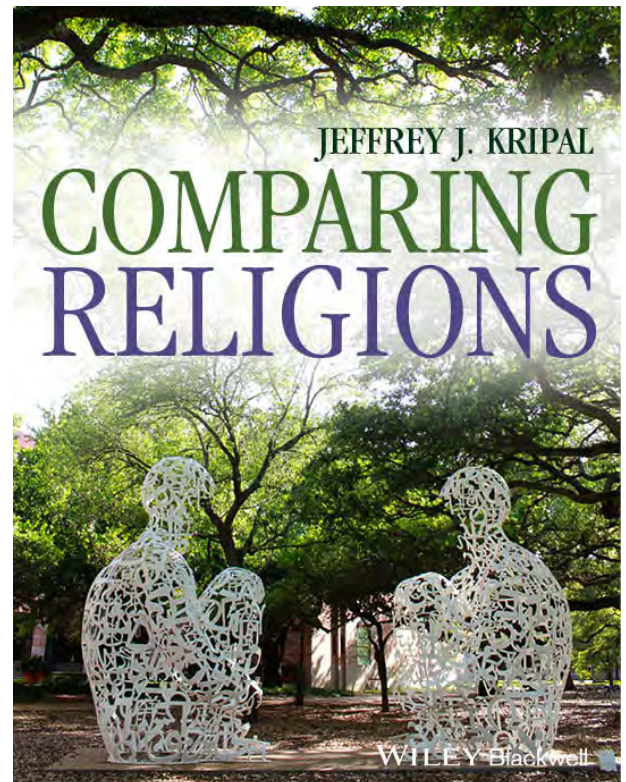
It has to be said that we are not doing this very well at the moment, and perhaps we have never done it very well. Building walls are forms of comparison (“They are not like us, so we must keep them out”). So are welcoming refugees (“They are like us, so we must welcome them”). Terrorist acts are comparative acts (“Their worldview is a threat to our own and so must be destroyed”). So are peace treaties, trade negotiations, race relations, gender norms, and climate accords. This is all comparison, that is, this all comes down to how we compare one another and decide if we are the same or different, or somewhere in between. Comparison is everything.

So why are not we trained to compare worldviews and religions? Why do we not have courses on comparative strategies and comparative consequences in our high schools? And why are there so few courses even in our colleges and universities on the same set of cognitive and imaginative skills? You would think that these are some of the most important and basic intellectual skills individuals and communities can learn.

I certainly do. This is why I teach RELI 101 each fall with as many Ph.D. students as I can convince to join me. Last fall, Justine Bakker, Learned Foote, Charles Schmidt, and Cleve Tinsley IV took part as Teaching Assistants. Most of the faculty gave guest lectures on their chosen expertise areas. We also had a number of other lecturers come in, including Nathanael Homewood on “African Christianity,

Pentecostalism, and Sex” and Dr. Zahra Jamal on “Islam and Islamophobia in America.” It was an especially rich fall, I think.

We also tried something new. We played pop music as the students entered. More specifically, we played songs that bore some relationship to the material we would discuss that day. For example, the day we discussed the immense role the American and British countercultures had on the development of the comparative study of religion in the 1960s and 70s, we played George Harrison’s “My Sweet Lord,” his famous devotional ballad to Krishna (he had



converted to this form of the Hindu tradition). On the day we discussed anomalies, angels and aliens (in short, the paranormal), we played Katy Perry and Kanye West’s “ET” and showed the music video, which features sex with an alien as a modern take on the ancient trope of divine-human hybrids. I am not sure it worked (I mean playing these songs, not the alien sex), not at least as well as I would have hoped. But we will try again this fall. We will see. And we will hear.



## Religious Studies at Rice Goes National: The Academic Study of Religion and K-12 Education



**Niki Clements, Watt J. & Lilly G. Jackson**  
Assistant Professor of Religion

Our department is committed to the academic study of religion, and we work to engage students in the critical, creative, and constructive possibilities that such study opens up. The rewards of such study are tied to the challenges students and faculty face both within and beyond the hedges of Rice University, as people carry firm assumptions about the role “religion” plays in contemporary society. As the understanding of religion in relation to political, social, economic, and cultural issues has become ever more fraught in the 21st century, so too has the need become amplified for religious literacy and the critical, comparative, and communicative skills honed in the study of religion.

Education does not start in college, however. And just as education in mathematics, sciences, social studies, and literature is both foundational to K-12 instruction and necessary preparation for college, so too might we recognize the study of religion as an integral part of K-12 education. This possibility has been recently recognized and embraced by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) in its July 2017 acceptance of a supplement on the study of religion to its College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework, a national policy document that guides social studies standards and curricular development at the state and district levels. Over the last year, I participated in a team of educators, school administrators, and scholars—in collaboration with the Religious

Freedom Center (RFC) in Washington, D.C. and the American Academy of Religion (AAR)—to envision and produce the “Religious Studies Companion Document for the C3 Framework” (from: College, Career, & Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards 2017).

As a supplement to the C3 Framework, the Religious Studies Companion Document affirms that “[t]he study of religion from an academic, non-devotional perspective in primary, middle and secondary school is critical for decreasing religious illiteracy and the bigotry and prejudice it fuels.” Building from decades of work, including the AAR’s Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States, we articulate religious studies approaches as recognizing how religions are diverse and dynamic, change over time, and are both affected by and affect culture in turn. We build from the juridical insight of Justice Tom Clark, who in 1963 paved the way for religious studies as a discipline by arguing that the study of religion is not only constitutionally defensible but even necessary for a “complete education.” We thus aim to promote a constitutionally sound way of educating about religion, without promoting or denigrating any particular religions, in order to prepare students for civic engagement in increasingly multicultural schools, workplaces, and the broad public sphere.

The document’s inclusion in the C3 Framework is a major step forward in the possibilities for K-12 education in the academic study of religion. And it’s a wonderful example of the way university, high school, and national institutional advocates can come together in order to collaboratively envision how best to conceive of the study of religion. Transforming how students and young citizens are educated about religion from an academic perspective will require collaboration and the support of civically-oriented communities that recognize the value of religious diversity and literacy to intellectual and social development. We’re excited to take this next step nationally while also working locally on Rice’s campus and in the Houston community through partnership with the Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance, to help educate the next generation of citizens, break negative assumptions about what “religion” is, and forge new ways of respecting religious diversity and liberty in theory and practice.

For more information, please visit:

<https://www.socialstudies.org/news/c3-framework-supplement-academic-study-religion>

<http://www.newseuminstitute.org/press-info/press-releases/?pr=74>

<https://www.socialstudies.org/c3>



 **National Council for the Social Studies**  
Preparing Students for College, Career, and Civic Life

## Experiential Learning: Jerusalem Seminar



**Matthias Henze, Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism; Director, Program in Jewish Studies**

This spring semester, Melissa Weinger, senior lecturer in the Program in Jewish Studies, and I co-taught RELI 392, “Jerusalem: Holy City in Time and Imagination.” Over thirty students applied for the class and we accepted eighteen. The class is structured around specific sites in and around Jerusalem. Each student is assigned a site and gives an in-class presentation on that site. Specifically, students were asked first to describe the significance of the site in the ancient world (looking at the archaeology, history, references

in the Bible, in Josephus, etc.) and then to comment on the role the site plays today in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A good example of such a site would be the City of David. The place of Jerusalem’s earliest settlement, the City of David is located just to the south of Jerusalem’s Old City and the Temple Mount. This is the part of the city King David conquered from the Jebusites to make Jerusalem the political and religious capital of his new kingdom. Today the City of David has a large visitor center. Tourists can walk through amazing archaeological excavations and see many places mentioned in the Bible. The City of David also happens to be located in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan, which continues to be a source of considerable tension and occasional violence. The site is managed by a Jewish organization called Elad, also known as the Ir David Foundation, with support from the Israeli government. Elad is a Jewish, right-leaning settler group that seeks to bolster Jewish claims to Jerusalem, particularly East Jerusalem, including Silwan.

Over spring break, on March 9-19, 2017, the class traveled to Jerusalem. We stayed in Jerusalem most of our time but also spent two days in the Dead Sea area, hiking one day in Ein Gedi and climbing the ancient fortress of Masada during the night to see the sunrise over the Jordanian mountains. It was moving to visit all the sites we had studied. Our Israeli tour guide, David, was incredibly knowledgeable and was willing to answer any question. Our students were particularly impressed by how the ancient and the modern are interconnected in Jerusalem: the ancient sites are not just ruins, as open-air museum, they are places of profound significance for the people of Jerusalem today, and also for Jews, Christians, and Muslims around the world.

While visiting the sites was an incredible experience, what impressed our students most were the personal encounters with the people whom we met. For almost every evening, Dr. Weinger and I had invited Jerusalemites to come and talk to our group: representatives of the Parents Circle, a group of Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost members of their family in the conflict ([www.theparentscircle.com](http://www.theparentscircle.com)), or a group called Ir Amim, that fights for equal rights of Israelis and Palestinians

([www.ir-amim.org.il/en](http://www.ir-amim.org.il/en)).

The class was subsidized by Rice’s Program in Jewish Studies ([jewishstudies.rice.edu](http://jewishstudies.rice.edu)) to keep the costs for students low. To read more about our trip, please visit our blog: <http://holycity2017.blogs.rice.edu>.



## Khyentse Foundation Grant



**Anne Klein, Professor of Religion**

I applied to the Khyentse Foundation for graduate student teaching support, and the GeoFamily Foundation awarded \$32,000 for support of Rice University's Department of Religion. These funds are awarded over four years (\$8,000 per year) and are intended to help the department build a solid foundation for courses in Tibetan language, literature, and culture as well as additional courses on Buddhist Studies. They funded six courses; Rice's Chao Center for Asian Studies funded a course during our first and third year, for a total of eight courses in four years. We have just completed our third year, during which Justin Kelley successfully taught two courses, including the Spring 2017 RELI/TIBT 233 course, engaging about sixteen students altogether, a handful of whom seek to continue into next year. About one-third of the course focused on Tibetan language, and the semester ended with a translation



University of Virginia Professor David Germano (left) visits Advanced Tibetan Class to prepare for mini-student conference, here with Justin Kelley (right).

project from a 20th century text entitled "Beautiful String of Jewels" by Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro. Justin reports that the achievements far exceeded his expectations. Please see Justin's own description of these courses in the Graduate section of the newsletter.

## Micro-Phenomenology Research/Mind and Life Europe

**Anne Klein, Professor of Religion**

I have, for several years, been in conversation with a group of scientists and humanists who work in connection with the emergent field of micro-phenomenology. Developed by Professor Claire Petitmengin, this is a precise method for recalling and reporting the usually untended details of everyday experience. The process turns a microscope on lived experience—such as hearing a sound, touching fabric, tasting fruit, designing costumes, meditation, or seeing a work of art.

In September, I traveled to Paris for a meeting in which the study of experience would focus on the renowned artist Olafur Eliasson's remarkable installations at Versailles. The group visited the multi-faceted installation, gazing into its enormous indoor mirrors and outdoor fountains amid the glittering halls and grounds of Versailles. Later we used the micro-phenomenology method, also known as an eliciting interview, to explore and narrate our own experience of the artful environ.



Pictured left to right: Antoine Lutz, Anne Klein, Claire Petitmengin, Martijn VanBeek. Paris, Micro-Phen meeting, September 2016

My work engages the epistemological underpinnings of micro-phenomenology, juxtaposing them with Tibetan texts and methods. I successfully partnered with Prof. Andreas Røepstorff of Aarhus University, and Prof. Claire Petitmengin of ENS, Paris for a two-day meeting of scholars from the humanities and sciences, as well as long-time meditators, to further the use of micro-phenomenology in the study, practice, and application of contemplative practice. The meeting, held in Paris in January 2017, included Prof. Bitbol, a philosopher of mind at ENS and member of its Archives Husserl; Prof. Martijn van Beek of Aarhus University; Prof. Donata Schoeller, University of Zurich, who is a leading philosopher on the works of Eugene Gendlin; neuroscientist Antoine Lutz from Université de Lyon; and others.

A core theme was the relationship between language and experience. I will present a further iteration of this reflection and research at the European Mind and Life Summer Institute in Chiemsee, Germany, in August 2017.

[www.mindandlife.org/phenotank-mind-life-think-tank-microphenomenology-contemplative-experience/](http://www.mindandlife.org/phenotank-mind-life-think-tank-microphenomenology-contemplative-experience/)

## Public Humanities Initiative: The Humanities of Care and the End of Life



**Marcia Brennan, Professor of Art History and Religion**

During the fall semester, I taught a new course entitled “The Humanities of Care and the End of Life.” This seminar was cross-listed with the Department of Religion and the Humanities Research Center and was developed as part of the latter’s Public Humanities Initiative, which is made possible by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The Initiative provides targeted support for interdisciplinary projects in Cultural Heritage and in the Medical Humanities, particularly those that incorporate an outreach component or a service orientation within an overall approach to humanistic subjects.

This multidisciplinary course brought the perspectives of medicine, bioethics, and medical humanities to bear on subjects ranging from art and literature to cinema and visual culture. Particular emphasis was placed on themes of listening and communication, hope and courage, comfort and dignity, humility and forgiveness, love and gratitude, grief and memory, compassion and dedication, and spirituality and the afterlife. Developed with the input of the Rice undergraduate community, the course engaged subjects that are applicable to everyone, but are particularly so for students who are planning to enter healthcare professions or who, one day, will serve as caregivers.

For the final class project, I assembled the individual student essays into a printed chapbook, and each student received several copies. The chapbook can be accessed as an e-book at: <http://hrc.rice.edu/publichumanities/node/33>. As I noted in my introduction:

*My interest in teaching this class stemmed directly from my conjoined scholarly and clinical work in the Texas Medical Center. In addition to being a Professor of Art History and Religious Studies at Rice, since early 2009 it has also been my privilege to serve as a literary Artist In Residence in the Department of Palliative Care and Rehabilitation Medicine at the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center. At the hospital, I work with people at the very end of life, patients with terminal cancer and their caregivers. In this context, I facilitate the production of poetic narratives that are based directly on individuals’ own words, as they describe imagery that is meaningful to them at this time. Working at the bedside, I inscribe the narratives into a handmade paper journal which the person is able to keep as a tangible gift for themselves and their family.*

*Throughout the narratives, fragments of everyday life become transfigured, and they appear radiant in any number of ways. Just as familiar objects reflect the actual vestiges of life itself, so too does life become invested with a unique type of afterglow. This was the distinctive quality that I wanted my students to see—and, to begin to understand—in the work we did together in our seminar.*

*At the heart of this volume are the students’ reflections on life and love, strength and vulnerability, humanity and mortality. Sometimes these subjects take the forms of empty vessels that overflow with intangible meanings, or unpublished papers that assume a suggestive afterlife, or “thin places” where cultural conceptions of mysticism become associated with the ancient stones that form a venerable urban necropolis. In all cases, many lives are brought together to form shared worlds of subtle presence.*

This course will be offered again during the Fall of 2017.



Cover Photo by Kathleen Francis:  
The Pathway Leading to the Gate of the Glasgow Necropolis, Scotland.

## ACLS Fellowship: Prophecy in Practice



**Claire Fanger, Associate Professor of Religion**

I have been fortunate to receive a fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies for the upcoming year which finances a professional leave to work on a project titled *Prophecy in Practice: The Everyday Life of Divine Knowledge in the Twelfth-Century*. This is an exploration of the practical context of prophecy in twelfth-century monasteries.

My interest in this topic is a direct offshoot of my last long-term project on the work of an early fourteenth-century monk named John

of Morigny, which resulted in an edition, in collaboration with Nicholas Watson, of John's magnum opus, a book of prayers and visionary autobiography called *The Flowers of Heavenly Teaching* (PIMS, 2015), as well as a monograph on the same topic, *Rewriting Magic* (Penn State, 2015), in which I interpreted, mainly through the lens of sacramental theology, John's intertwined practices of praying for visions, and using visions to generate prayers, as they coevolved in his book. As I wrote, I became increasingly interested in John's repeated claim to having received the gift of prophecy – a claim he kept distinct from the work of *The Flowers* per se, asserting that it would be the topic of another (so far undiscovered) book. I gained a sense that there was a robust connection in John's mind between prayers, prophecy, dreaming, and the monastic life as such. It was clear this connection was not one of John's idiosyncrasies, but, from the very fact that it was too obvious to need stating, was a nexus of ideas broadly shared in the early fourteenth century monastic community.

My work on John's *Flowers* thus paved the way for the present project because it gave me burning questions about the intellectual history that lay behind his thinking about prophecy for which I could not find fully satisfying answers in secondary sources. I resolved to delve deeper into the assumptions inbuilt into the monastic life about prophecy and practice, starting in the twelfth century (a time period in which much of John of Morigny's most informative reading was

composed) focusing on the personal everyday aspects of prophetic cognition in the lives of late medieval monks and nuns in their letters, in accounts or anecdotes about visions in the stories of their lives, and in their applications of biblical knowledge to real situations. By investigating links between large scale—biblical and exegetical—concepts of prophecy and smaller scale daily practices, such as prayer, reading, and the interpretation and sharing of dreams, as they facilitate or engender individual experiences of prophecy, I am developing an interestingly refreshed view of the conjunction of institutional and personal knowledge embodied in medieval religious experience. It is really exciting to be able to spend time working my way into the hearts and heads of my medieval intellectual subjects. Trying to understand the active building of such alien yet familiar forms of knowledge has taught me new things already, not just about medieval ways of thinking about dreams, but about the capacities of my own dreaming self.



## On Manuscripts and Crusaders



**David Cook, Associate Professor of Religion**

The past year has been an exciting one, as together with graduate student Abdulbasit Kassim, I completed the long-standing Boko Haram project, which involved translation and analysis of 72 of the group's primary documents and videos. This book is scheduled to appear with Hurst Publishers in October 2017. In order to complete this research, I traveled to Nigeria in Spring Break 2017, visiting professors in Lagos, Jos, Kano, Zaria, and Kaduna. During the course of my visit, I initiated what could be another project with Prof. Ahmad Murtala of Bayero University in Kano. This project, which still needs funding, will focus upon the digitization of the Arabic and Hausa manuscripts of Kano and surrounding area. For centuries, the northern Nigerian city of Kano has been a center of learning for Arabic and Hausa, and many of these precious manuscripts are presently in the possession of private owners. Because of Prof. Murtala's excellent connections

with many of these families, he and I both feel that here is an opportunity to make the heritage of Kano available to Nigeria and the rest of the world. This project should last several years.

Summer 2017, I will travel in the Middle East mainly to find books for my Crusader translation project. I have been translating accounts dealing with the later Crusader period (1279-94) focusing upon the Mamluk sultans Qalawun and his son al-Malik Ashraf. None of this material has been translated, but there are many texts that have been edited, and I will spend time tracking them down in Egypt and Jordan. Afterwards, I plan to travel in Turkey to see graduate student Reyhan Basaran, now writing her dissertation on the Turkish community of the Alevi and working on hitherto unknown manuscripts of their religious beliefs. I will also participate in workshops in Berlin and Florence and complete my trip in Morocco where I will meet with other Rice graduates.

## The Rice-Leipzig Doctoral Seminar Meets for the Third Time



**Matthias Henze, Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism; Director, Program in Jewish Studies**

In March of this year, Dr. Jens Herzer, Professor of New Testament at the University of Leipzig, Germany, came with a group of seven advanced students to Rice for our joint Rice-Leipzig doctoral seminar. For ten days, the eight visitors from Leipzig and a group of students from our department studied together. This was our third meeting together. We had begun our seminar in 2015, when Professor Herzer and his students

came to Houston for the first time, and we later traveled to Leipzig, Germany in spring 2016.

The idea of the seminar is to study the New Testament in its Jewish context. The first half of our meetings is typically devoted to the Jewish literature of the late Second Temple period, and during the second half we move to the texts from the New Testament. During our first meeting we studied “The Messiah and Messianic Expectations”; the second meeting was devoted to “The Law/Torah”; and in March our topic was “The Holy Spirit.” For each meeting, Dr. Herzer and I prepared an extensive electronic reader with both primary and secondary readings that all students were expected to read prior to our meeting, so that we could use all of our class time together for discussion.

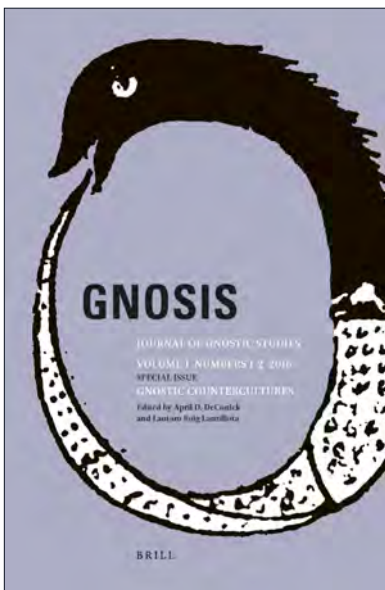
It has been quite wonderful to see the two groups grow together. Initially, the differences between the two cultures of learning were more noticeable: the German students are very well trained in the ancient languages and in biblical exegesis, but they are less familiar with the extra-canonical writings of ancient Judaism that are not part of their usual curriculum; our students are more at ease to move freely in between the

canonical and non-canonical texts, but they do not have the same level of exposure to modern biblical scholarship on the New Testament and theological studies in general.

Over the years, friendships have begun to form. We have come to appreciate what each side brings to the classroom. I hope to return to Leipzig with a group of Rice students for our fourth meeting in the spring or early summer of 2018. The seminar is open to all advanced Rice students who have a basic knowledge of ancient Greek and who are interested in New Testament exegesis.



## Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies



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

We have published this year our second volume of the journal in two issues with the help of our student editorial team (Cindy Dawson, Victor Nardo, CJ Schmidt, and Oihane Iglesias Telleria) led by Erin Prophet. The first issue features articles covering Sethian baptismal figures Michaeus and Michar (Riemer Roukma, Protestant Theological University in Groningen), understandings of the human being in gnostic literature (Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, University of

Groningen), the necessity of celibacy for salvation in one Nag Hammadi text (Bas van Os, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), Pachomian monks and ascension (Kimberley A. Fowler, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique Aix-Marseille Université), and *A Course of Miracles* as neo-gnostic literature (Simon J. Joseph, California Lutheran University).

The second issue contains studies on visions and ritual in Hermetic literature (Christian H. Bull, University of Oslo), pseudonymous authors and the concept of the self in gnostic writings (David Brakke, The Ohio State University), a gnostic baptismal liturgy of ascent (Michael S. Domeracki, Rice University), and Iamblichus' concept of gnosis (Gregory Shaw, Stonehill College).

We also published reviews of a number of books including Frances L. Flannery, *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism: Countering the Radical Mindset* (Kelley Coblenz Bautch, St. Edward's University) and April D. DeConick, ed., *Religion: Secret Religion* (Nicholas Marshall, University of Aarhus).

Next year we look forward to publishing a special issue on Hermetism (edited by Christian H. Bull, University of Oslo). More details about the journal, as well as subscription information, can be found on the Brill website at [www.brill.com](http://www.brill.com).



## Religious Studies Review



**Elias Kifon Bongmba**  
**The Harry and Hazel**  
**Chavanne Chair in Christian**  
**Theology and Professor of**  
**Religion; Managing Editor,**  
**Religious Studies Review**

**Maya Reine, Coordinator,**  
**Religious Studies Review**

The Editorial Board met during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Biblical Literature in San Antonio on Friday, November 18, 2016 at the Marriott River Center. The meeting was chaired by Mark

MacWilliams, Executive Editor; Jeremy Biles, Short Review Editor; and Elias Kifon Bongmba, Managing Editor, assisting. The Editorial Board adopted new proposals for revamping review essays and theme issues submitted by the editors. The editorial staff has implemented new formats that have increased the number of review essays. Beginning with volume 42, numbers 3 and 4, we have published more and longer review essays. Our first special issue was volume 43, number 1 and focuses on *Norton Anthology of World Religions* with essays by John H. Young on Christianity, Claire E. Sufrin on Judaism, Fatih Harpci on Islam, Julius Lipner on Hinduism, David Gray on Buddhism, and Grégoire Espeset on Daoism. The objective of the special issues is to provide our readers with a critical overview of major works that focuses on selected religious traditions such as the *Norton Anthology* does, or to provide critical

perspectives on works and series that address different theoretical and thematic issues that have an impact on the study of religion, or to offer new approaches to the study of religion. Our next special issue will focus on the *Oxford Handbooks Series*.

Richard Ascough, one of our longest serving area editors and reviewers is retiring. We are deeply grateful to Professor Ascough for the many years he has served as area editor and contributor. We will miss him. We are delighted to welcome the following editors to the Editorial Board: J. Sage Elwell, Digital Material and Media; D. Boscaljon, Religion, Arts and Culture; and Joshua A. Sabih, Islam. Bradley Johnson continues to serve as Graduate Student Assistant. We will be recruiting new Graduate Assistants in the fall of 2017. Our condolences to the family of Dr. Iain Maclean, Professor of Religious Studies, James Madison University and RSR Americas section editor. We thank you for your service to the journal.

We congratulate Maya Reine, the Coordinator of *Religious Studies Review* on her 10th anniversary at RSR and at Rice University. Maya has overseen the move of the office twice, expedited the process of ordering books, organized international shipping, improved communications with our large busy editorial staff, and also attended the annual editorial board meetings at the AAR and SBL. Maya's longest ongoing assignment has been to oversee the development of a new database for RSR in collaboration with the Information Technology Department of Rice University. When completed, area editors will have access to the website and will be able to assign books that are available for review at the Houston office. We are thankful to the Department of Religion and the Chair, Professor April DeConick; Dean Nicolas Shumway of Humanities for funding this development; and Associate Dean Lora Wildenthal for overseeing the progress of the project. More information about the journal may be found at [rsr.rice.edu](http://rsr.rice.edu).

## Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft



**Claire Fanger, Associate**  
**Professor of Religion**

*Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* was founded over a decade ago, in 2006. Up to this point issues have come out twice yearly. Lately, however, so much incoming material has been high quality work of major interest, so we have found ourselves wanting more space to publish it all. In particular, we have received a large number of proposals for special issues. Thus, we take great satisfaction in making 2017 the journal's first triannual year.

While the third issue will be a normal open issue, the two that open our triannual year are both special issues that explore somewhat new thematic focuses for us. The first, just released in April 2017, entitled *Characterizing Astrology in the Pre-Modern Islamic World*, was brought together by guest editors Elizabeth

Sartell and Shandra Lamaute who culled the material from a conference they organized at the University of Chicago. The articles collected explore different aspects of an important nexus of intercultural and interreligious connection on topics ranging from the influence of Islam on medieval Jewish astrology to astrology in early modern Ottoman Istanbul, all showing in different ways how knowledge is formed and spread by a multiplicity of cultural processes.

Now in press, the second issue of this year, *Shimmering Magic*, is comprised of essays in the areas of anthropology and folklore. Raquel Romberg, one of the associate editors of *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft*, volunteered as guest editor for this issue and arranged a lively discussion of shimmering materials, substances, and objects as they are deployed in ritual situations around the globe. Geographically, the contributors draw on material that comes from the southern United States, India, and the East and West coasts of Africa. Articles are thematically linked in their preoccupation with the productive capacity of shimmering materials to flip perception and to baffle and enhance vision, allowing for personal transformation as they move viewers in and out of parallel worlds.

We are proud of these issues and hope they will be exciting for readers. As always, we welcome discussion of any ideas readers of this newsletter may have either for individual articles or special issues as we move forward. The author guide and other information about the journal can be found at the Penn Press website <http://magic.pennpress.org/home/>.

## Annual Awards Dinner

This year at our annual awards dinner we not only honored our graduating PhD and GEM students, but we also recognized the outstanding service that Professor Niki Clements has accomplished over the last three years as Director of Undergraduate Studies for Religion. She has reached out to our undergraduate majors developing and growing a tight-knit community of majors through direct advising, special events and dinners, and mentor matching with some of our graduate students. We appreciate all of her creativity and loads of hard work, and were delighted to give her the Outstanding Service Award for 2017.

### 2017 AWARD RECIPIENTS

#### PhD 2017

Elliot Berger - Matthew Dillon

Biko Gray - Rachel C. Schneider

**Vaughn Fellowship** - Erin Prophet

**GEM Certificate** - Simon Cox

**Alumni Flame Award** - Margarita Guillory

**Recognition of Outstanding Service** - Niki Clements



Professors Anthony Pinn and April DeConick with new PhD recipient Rachel C. Schneider



Graduate students Oihane Iglesias Telleria, Mark Schmanko, & Simon Cox



Graduate Student Erin Prophet, Professor Elias Kifon Bongma, and Sravana Borkatakya-Varma (PhD, 2016)

## Celebratory Symposium: September 15-16, 2017

### Beyond Hard Knocks: Creative Buddhist Voices on Learning from Experience

A Celebratory Symposium from the research institute of Dawn Mountain, Rice Department of Religion, and The Chao Center for Asian Studies. Join four of today's most compelling Buddhist scholar-practitioners to investigate the art of being spiritual amid chaos. Professor **Anne C. Klein** along with **Harvey B. Aronson**, PhD, will host short talks from and dynamic exchanges with:

**Professor Marcia Brennan**, Rice University  
author of *The Heart of the Hereafter* on end of life learning

**Professor Guy Newland**, Central Michigan University  
author of *A Buddhist Grief Observed* on grieving deep loss

**Professor Dan Cozort**, Dickinson College  
author of *Buddhist Philosophy* and editor of *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* on living one's values

**Professor Sarah Jacoby**, Northwestern University  
author of *Love and Liberation* on a woman's journey, focusing on Tibetan visionary Sera Khandro

**Buddhist Teacher Ken McLeod**  
author of *Wake Up to Your Life* and *A Trackless Path* on taking care of what's missing in your life

More details and registration at <http://tinyurl.com/BeyondHardKnocks>  
Friday - Saturday, September 15-16, 2017 | McMurtry Auditorium and Martel Hall, Rice University



Sarasvati, by Ang Tsherin Sherpa

## Current Faculty, Department of Religion

**Elias Kifon Bongmba**, Harry and Hazel Chavanne Chair in Christian Theology and Professor of Religion (University of Denver and the Liff School of Theology, 1995): African and African diaspora religions, African Christianity/Theology hermeneutics and theology, contemporary theology and ethics

**Marcia Brennan**, Professor of Art History & Religion (Brown University, 1997): modern and contemporary art history and museum studies, gender theory, mysticism and comparative religion, medical humanities

**David Cook**, Associate Professor (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**, Watt J. & Lilly G. Jackson Assistant Professor of Religion (Brown University, 2014): Christianity in late antiquity, asceticism and mysticism, religious ethics, theories and methods in the study of religion

**April D. DeConick**, Isla Carroll & Percy E. Turner Professor of New Testament & Early Christianity; Chair of Department of Religion (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**, Associate Professor of Religion (University of Toronto, 1994): medieval Christian thought, devotional literature, saints' lives, history of magic, modern occultism, esotericism

**Matthias Henze**, Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism; Director, Program in Jewish Studies (Harvard University, 1997): Hebrew Bible, Second Temple Judaism, apocalyptic literature

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

**Jeffrey J. Kripal**, J. Newton Chair in Philosophy & Religious Thought; Director of Undergraduate Studies (University of Chicago, 1993): history of religions, colonial and western Hinduism, comparative erotics and ethics of mysticism, western esotericism

**Brian Ogren**, Anna Smith Fine Assistant Professor of Judaic Studies (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008): early modern Jewish thought, philosophy and kabbalah during the Italian Renaissance

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

**Anthony B. Pinn**, Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religion; Director of Graduate Studies (Harvard University, 1994): African American religious thought, liberation theologies, African American humanism, religion, and popular culture

**John M. Stroup**, Harry and Hazel Chavanne Professor of Religion (Yale University, 1980): history of Christianity, Protestantism and modernity, New Age and contemporary eschatology

## Conferences

### Nicolas Shumway on Borges: Rockwell Lecture

**Oihane Iglesias Telleria**  
Graduate Student, Religion

On the 11th of April, the Dean of Humanities, Nicolas Shumway, gave the Rockwell Lecture hosted by the Department of Religion about "Borges and God." Jorge Luis Borges was an Argentinian short-story writer, essayist, poet and translator, a key figure in Spanish language literature.

Dean Shumway focused his talk on three of Borges' short stories where the main theme is God. He started his lecture reminding us that Borges argued that to be educated you have to know about theology, but that to know about theology doesn't mean you have to believe in God. Borges saw theology as an aesthetic field from which it is possible to take certain elements to build his stories. Also, the idea of an encounter with God (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, etc.) is relevant to his literature. Dean Shumway remarked that Borges was able to abandon God in an intellectual way, but he was never able to abandon the theme of God. He couldn't leave God alone.

The first Borgean essay that he mentioned is entitled "De alguien a nadie." In it, we can find a "real" God, a God that speaks with people, that argues sometimes, that makes promises. He is a God with presence. After that, Dean Shumway turned his attention to three short stories: "El Zahir", "La escritura de Dios," and "El Aleph". In the first story, "El Zahir," the main character is Borges. He gets a coin with the face of "El Zahir," one of the 99 names of God. He

becomes obsessed with the idea that the contemplation of this coin could mean an encounter with God. The story ends with a Borges who is completely mad with this idea, turning him anti-social. Thus, the underlying idea of this story is that an encounter with God is a dangerous, risky meeting. It can even make a person crazy.

In the second short story, "La escritura de Dios," something similar happens.

Here, Borges perceives that the message of God is present in the spots of a jaguar. Once he finds the message of God, the same thing happens: he becomes crazy. With the message that he has found in the spots of the jaguar, he can change the world and history. Thus, once again, the encounter with God is dangerous.

Finally, Dean Shumway ended with "El Aleph," one of the Argentinian writer's most famous stories. In it, the main character, Carlos Argentino Daneri, has an encounter with the divine via the aleph, a letter inscribed in his basement. He believes this to be an encounter with the intelligence of God. Suddenly, Carlos Argentino perceives everything; he understands everything. In this story, Borges proposes a mystical experience, the union between the human being and God. However, after this, when he is asked about this union, he denies his experience, because to confess that experience doesn't allow him to be the skeptical man that he usually is. So, to continue being human, the mystical experience must be denied. Once again, the encounter with God is risky, dangerous.



Hosted by the Department of Religion with the support of the Rockwell Fund

RELIGION

TRULY UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM

## Borges and God

A special Rockwell Luncheon Lecture

### Dean Nicolas Shumway



Tuesday, April 11, 2017, 11:30-1:30 (lecture runs 12-1)

Cohen House, Esther Room, lunch provided, RSVP requested, <http://tinyurl.com/ShumwayLecture>

## Visit by Bob Erlewine, Rice PhD 2007

### Matthias Henze, Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism; Director, Program in Jewish Studies

Erlewine's presentation examined Heschel's dissertation, published as "Die Prophetie" [On Prophecy] in 1936. In particular, he explored Heschel's unconventional engagement with Biblical Studies in his attempt to not merely describe the prophetic 'experience' but also to secure the possibility for prophecy as such in a God of pathos. Significant attention was devoted to Heschel's unconventional method and conclusions by situating them amongst the resurgent popularity of the Marcionite heresy among Protestant theologians in early 20th century Germany.

Robert Erlewine is the author of two books, *Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason* and most recently, *Judaism and the West: From Hermann Cohen to Joseph Soloveitchik*. Both are published with Indiana University Press. He is Associate Professor and chair of the Religion Department at Illinois Wesleyan University.



## The Rice Religion Department Welcomes Dr. Philip Wexler

### William Parsons, Professor of Religion

On April 27th the Department of Religion, in conjunction with the Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance and the Rice University Program in Jewish Studies, welcomed Philip Wexler to Rice. Dr. Wexler is currently Executive Director at the Institute of Jewish Spirituality and Society ([www.spiritualityandsociety.org](http://www.spiritualityandsociety.org)) and Professor (emeritus) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Previously, Dr. Wexler was a professor at the University of Rochester, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, CUNY- Queens College, and a visiting professor at Brandeis as well as universities in Germany and Australia. He is known for publishing a range of books in several languages, his main areas of research and teaching being social theory, critical social theory, sociology of education, and the sociology of religion. His most recent work is *Jewish Spirituality and Social Transformation*.

Dr. Wexler presented a lecture entitled "The Social is Spiritual: Beyond the Critique of Tolerance." In that talk, Dr. Wexler surveyed a few classic essays that argue for contextualizing the meaning of tolerance in society with the aim of situating understanding of tolerance in how we think about the "social." These various critiques of tolerance were presented as having a "macro-structural" societal vantage point for their dissent from the common sense view of individual tolerance. From there, Wexler went on to re-think the social in terms of social interaction, more than structure, and how tolerance is embedded in the relation between self and other. From



the earlier societal critiques, contemporary critical theory is brought forward in the "new" third-generation of German Critical Theory that emphasizes the "struggle for recognition" as socially central. This pathway, of rethinking tolerance in terms of the changing meanings of "the social", was then carried forward by going deeper into the "other" in self-other interactions in the work of Jewish existentialists like Buber, Levinas, and Rosenzweig, where the importance of taking responsibility and care for the other becomes socially central. This trajectory of "otherness" led to a consideration of its place in Hasidism, now framed as an example of how spiritual traditions, across religions,

can offer social understanding and explanatory discourses relevant to contemporary social issues, such as tolerance. The Hasidic tradition was explored in the works of the masters in the Habad lineage, arguing that Jewish existentialism is a way-station to rethinking social relations, especially the self-other relation, through an examination of original texts in the Jewish spiritual tradition. In a discussion of brief excerpts from the masters, Wexler framed otherness as a portal to seeing the unity rather than the differences among people, moving tolerance from an emphasis on difference and pluralism to the work of

uncovering awareness of sameness and the reduction of egotism, both of which enables oneness rather than pluralism to become the antidote to intolerance.

It was an honor for all to hear this erudite lecture and we thank Dr. Wexler for taking the time to come and deliver this wisdom to us!

## Faculty Publications and Achievements

### Recent Faculty Fellowships and Awards

**Niki Clements** received a Faculty Fellowship from HRC (Humanities Research Center) for her proposal entitled "Foucault the Confessor: Christianity and Critique in Foucault's Ethical Turn."

**April D. DeConick** received the Figure Foundation Book Award for best book published in 2016 on philosophy and religion by University Press, for her book, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Columbia University Press).

**Claire Fanger** received a fellowship from ACLS (American Council of Learned Societies) for her book project *Prophecy in Practice: The Everyday Life of Divine Knowledge in the 12th Century*.

**Brian Ogren** received the Sid and Ruth Lapidus Fellowship to use the archive and collections at the American Jewish Historical Society in New York. This fellowship supports his newest book project *Jewish Thought and Jewish-Christian Exchange in Eighteenth Century America*.

**William B. Parsons** received a Faculty Fellowship from HRC for his proposal entitled "Of Chariots, Navels, and Winged Steeds- Psychoanalytic Encounters with Buddhism."

**Anthony B. Pinn** has received a grant from the Yale Center for Faith and Culture for comparative research in ethics and religion on the subject Theology of Joy and the Good Life; his subject is "Humanism." Dr. Pinn was also named the Humanist of the Year (2017) by the Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association.

### Witchcraft as Social Diagnosis



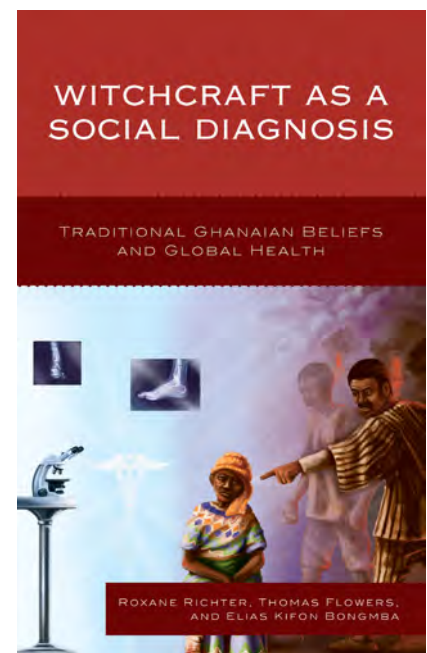
**Elias Kifon Bongmba, The Harry and Hazel Chavanne Chair in Christian Theology and Professor of Religion**

**Witchcraft as Social Diagnosis: Traditional Ghanaian Beliefs and Global Health**  
Roxane Richter, Thomas Flowers, and Elias Kifon Bongmba (Lexington Books, 2017)

*Witchcraft as Social Diagnosis* is an interdisciplinary study of witchcraft that focuses on one of the witches' villages of Gnani in Northern Ghana, one of several in the region. For many years, women suspected

and accused of practicing witchcraft have been exiled to certain villages where, separated from their families, they live under very difficult conditions. Our study is based in Gnani, where World Mission Possible has done medical work for several years. We conducted interviews in the village on two different occasions and talked with 95 women about their lives, family history, the accusations, exile, and their lives now in the witches' village. The women were accused of using witchcraft to cause harm or kill someone and were taken to Gnani Village to live there in exile. Some of the women escaped to the village to avoid physical torture and other forms of retribution from the villagers. Our study examines the phenomenon of witches' village as a gender-based violence which overwhelmingly targets and stigmatizes women. We argue that disease, injury, and other maladies should not be seen as human-made misfortune which cause fear and accusations that result in the expulsion of women from their homes and force them to live in the witches' village, but instead are social and biological conditions which could be addressed through other forms of medical intervention. We also argue that expanding knowledge of disease causation could offer an opportunity to address the illness and other social problems that are not currently attributed to witchcraft. While our immediate goal is to call attention to the injustice done to the residents of the

witches' village, our broader goal is to invite a broad conversation on discrimination against women in a context where beliefs about witchcraft remain strong in the hopes that an interdisciplinary approach could provide opportunities for a dialogue that understands the impact of medical science and social beliefs as an important step forward in eradicating witches' villages in Northern Ghana.



## The Beginning of the World



**Brian Ogren, Anna Smith Fine Assistant Professor of Judaic Studies**

**The Beginning of the World in Renaissance Jewish Thought: Ma'aseh Bereshit in Italian Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah, 1492-1535 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016).**

*The Beginning of the World in Renaissance Jewish Thought* was published by Brill Academic Publishers in 2016. As suggested by its title, this book is an exploration into fifteenth century Italian Jewish thought concerning the creation of the world and the beginning of time. The act of creation, known in Hebrew as Ma'aseh Bereshit (literally, “the implementation of the beginning”), has acted as one of the pillars of Jewish esoteric thought since Talmudic times. Notions of the beginning of time have perplexed Jewish thinkers and have acted as springboards for grappling with concepts of God, of truth, and of existence. This is no different for thinkers of the late fifteenth century.

Within this book, I utilize the concept of “the beginning” in its esoteric sense as a point from which to understand novel Renaissance confrontations between particularism and universalism. I discuss four prominent figures who were writing commentaries on the creation of the world and the beginning of time in late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Italy, and who were all using common philosophical and Jewish textual sources in order to



The author in Florence, Italy for a Fellowship at Villa I Tatti

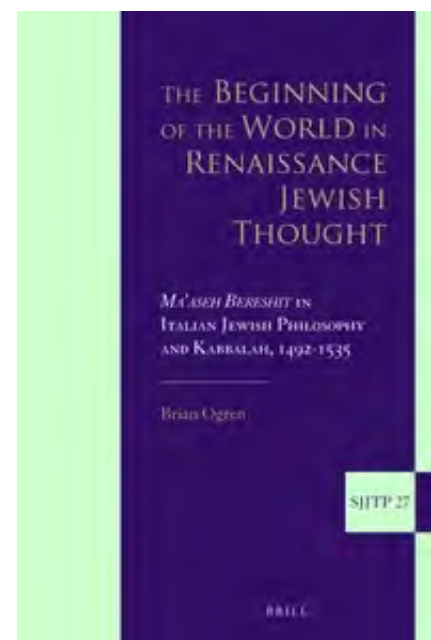
flesh out their ideas. These are the prominent Italian Jewish syncretic philosopher Yohanan Alemanno, the famed Humanist and Christian Kabbalist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, the celebrated statesman and biblical exegete Isaac Abravanel, and Isaac’s accomplished son Judah, who was an illustrious Platonic philosopher in his own right.

Basing myself within this cluster of four thinkers who all overlapped in time and space, who were all writing important commentaries on the first chapter of Genesis, and who all seemed to me to be making very similar philosophical claims regarding the notion of the beginning of time, I set out in my book to examine whether late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Italy possibly marked new directions in Jewish thought. My working hypothesis was that the Renaissance was itself a new “beginning” in certain modes of thought concerning the beginning. My final claim after examining the textual evidence is that there was novelty in Renaissance Jewish thought; but this was a subtle and gradual new beginning, that lay in clear continuity with medieval textual and hermeneutical traditions. The novelty was in new syntheses of older sources and fresh presentations as based on a diversification of both resources and of audiences.

The seeming paradox of a new beginning that represents a continuity is not so strange for these four thinkers, nor is it strange for the period in which they were all active. In fact, it relates to a tradition known as *prisca sapientia* (“ancient wisdom”), which sought to find true insight into abstract matters, such as “the beginning,” in the ancient past. According to this tradition, there is a pristine wisdom that permeates all true forms of knowledge, whether Indian, Greek, Hebrew, Chaldean or Egyptian. In my case studies especially, the fact that these

ancient sources were closer to “the beginning” gives them an even stronger sense of authority.

As a vigorous campaign to retrieve ancient forms of wisdom of various kinds, the *prisca sapientia* tradition of which my four thinkers were a part sought to unify wisdom. I argue that this brought forth the corollary consequence of a multiplicity of valid heterogeneous voices and thus, the beginning of new attempts to deal with a greater pluralism of thought. The focus throughout my book is upon the Jewish voice within the cacophony, and I argue that my four thinkers were posed with the challenge of reconciling the universal with the particular.



For all four authors, the particular emerges as an expression of the universal and the universal can only be known through the particular. This is similar to the very discourse on the beginning that I discuss throughout, in which the universal, infinite God as Source can only be made manifest through imperfect, finite particulars that mark the beginning. Conversely, it is only through such finite particulars that one can come to know and understand the infinite universal. Such metaphysical understandings of truth lie at the heart of the thought of my four thinkers, making my focus on treatments of “the beginning” a multilayered paradigm. Through this paradigm, I seek to understand how ancient Hebraic sources on the beginning were perceived, while simultaneously fleshing out a new beginning to Western thought in Renaissance notions of a plurality of truths.

## When Colorblindness Isn't the Answer



**Anthony B. Pinn, Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities; Director of Graduate Studies**

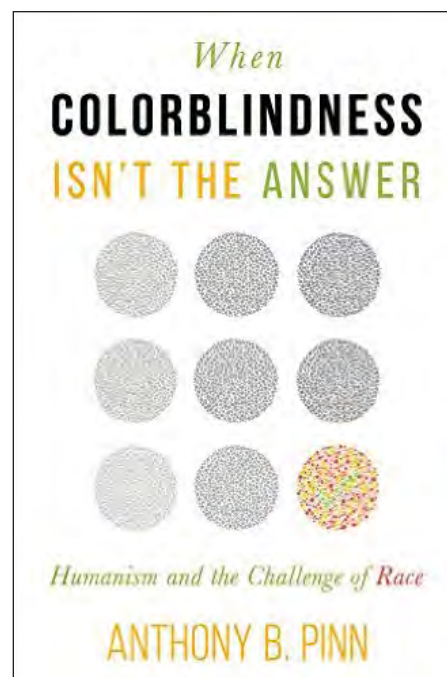
**When Colorblindness Isn't the Answer: Humanism and the Challenge of Race (Pitchstone Publishing, 2017)**

I've been working with humanist organizations and communities for a good number of years and, despite intent, race and racism are misunderstood too often within humanist circles. There is a tendency, I would argue, within humanist communities to assume the social construction nature of race makes racism an illogical proposition promulgated by the religious who, by the very nature of their belief structures, are open to illogical and unreasonable thinking and "doing."

I was invited often to speak on issues of race, but the outcome was seldom to my liking. The growth and impact of the Black Lives Matter movement only amplified the urgency of a more robust discussion on race/racism. And so, a few years ago, when I was asked by the American Humanist Association to put together a panel dealing with race I took it as an opportunity to speak more explicitly about "dos and don'ts" regarding race and racism. The response to that presentation and the resulting article in *The Humanist Magazine* suggested the need for a more thorough presentation in the form of this book.

My aim with this book is to provide a reader friendly and straightforward challenge to problematic thinking on the part of humanists, and in this way to offer an opportunity for reorientation and better thinking and activism regarding to race and racism. The basic premise is this: The future of the United States rests in many ways on how the ongoing challenge of racial injustice in the country is addressed. Yet, humanists remain divided over what if any agenda should guide humanist thought and action toward questions of race. And so, I make a case for why humanism should embrace racial justice as part of its commitment to the well-being of life in general and human flourishing in particular. As a first step, humanists should stop asking why so many racial minorities remain committed to religious traditions that have destroyed lives, perverted justice, and justified racial discrimination. I argue humanists must first confront a more pertinent and pressing question: why has humanism failed to provide a more compelling alternative to theism for so many minority groups?

This discussion concerning race and humanism's problematic relationship to it is only one issue demanding greater attention. Mindful of this, my book is only the first in a series I am editing for Pitchstone Publishing. Others will address issues such as gender and humanism as well as sexuality and humanism. The series as a whole attempts to provide a balanced perspective on social justice issues by bringing readers books authored by academics as well as volumes by community activist. In this way, as a whole, the series offers both progressive ways to think about humanism and justice as well as how to do humanism to advance justice work.



## Department Launches New Website



Visit [reli.rice.edu](http://reli.rice.edu)



# Selected Department of Religion Faculty Books



## Undergraduate News

### Undergraduates Speak: Studying Religion at Rice



**Niki Clements, Watt J. & Lilly G. Jackson Assistant Professor of Religion; Director of Undergraduate Studies (Outgoing)**

Speaking with undergraduate majors in Religion, I hear many reasons for what drew them to their studies. “The Religion Major is exactly the kind of education Rice advertises,” **Chris Brehm '18** enthuses, “Small classes taught by professors who are not only experts in their field, but also committed to student learning. Moreover, the study of Religion is a unique synthesis of a variety of other academic disciplines (including History, Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Literature, and Art History among others), meaning that even for non-majors there’s something for everyone to enjoy.” On an academic level, the study of religion allows for (even calls for) interdisciplinary engagement with other disciplines,

“providing comparative contexts and insights” as **Chloe Wilson '19** notes, and **Andrew Dunlap '17** attributes the uniqueness of the major to professors’ incorporation of “other disciplines (Philosophy, History, Psychology, Film, to name a few) into their courses.” Majors and non-majors alike are able to gain insight into the complex ways religious practices, beliefs, and traditions shape and are shaped by political, social, economic, psychological, and cultural factors.

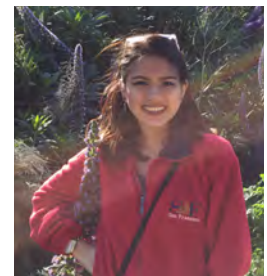
Religion professors bring students into a world of scholarly excellence, committed both to critical research and pedagogical care for students’ learning and growth. “Professors are not only effective teachers but also fantastic people to learn from. In every class, I have been challenged to grow and be a better person,” declares **Sharon Cho '19**. And Religion is a major that appeals to students fascinated with particular phenomena for both intellectual and personal reasons. Of her coursework, **Neomi Fletcher '18** explains, “the course material requires us to enter a certain level of vulnerability as we explore the basis of religious practice for others and challenge the origins of our own.” Fostering critical and empathetic openness not only enables one to engage others with different views but also to clarify the strengths of one’s own position. “If you are willing to challenge yourself, your beliefs, and further broaden your perspective of the world,” **Demetrie Luke '18** exhorts, “you should take some religious studies classes. It is the most doable major and probably one of the most diverse, relatable, and entertaining majors there is.”

Such bold and reflective work flourishes when supported by community, and we have been cultivating such a community by building on the expertise of the faculty, speaking to the interests of the undergrads, and incorporating the strengths of the graduate students. Through monthly gatherings, open houses, majors’ dinners, guest presenters, and a mentorship program pairing undergrads with graduate student mentors, we continue to forge spaces for conversations and engagement. **Sunee Kate Quirante '20** notes her “respect and admiration for the RELI students and professors” and **Viviano Solano '18** even “became interested in the study of religion by proximity,” as his RELI major roommate inspired him through his studies. The Religion community brings students together from across the residential colleges, with ten out of eleven colleges represented in Spring 2017 (no Martel...but lots of Jonesians!).

Beyond the honing of analytical skills necessary for any profession, RELI majors also keenly note how their studies foster “a broader and more interesting worldview” as **Abby Schulman '19** articulates, and **Jake Blumenkranz '18** credits the major with helping him “see the world through a better lens.” “Religion has taught me the importance of looking inward to better understand the world around you,” **Isaac Schultz '18** similarly notes, “as well as the importance of tolerance and acceptance in order to have a productive dialogue with those with whom you may not agree.” Studying Religion at Rice, then, not only prepares students for various professions and helps them develop their own voices, it also helps students better understand the world in all its complexity and helps them navigate its challenges and contradictions.



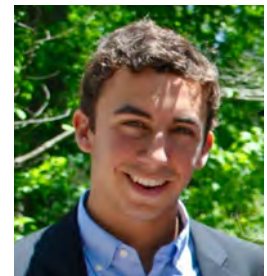
Chris Brehm '18



Sunee Kate Quirante '20



Sharon Cho '19



Isaac Schultz '18



Andrew Dunlap '17



Abby Shulman '19



Neomi Fletcher '18



Viviano Solano '18



Demetrie Luke '18



Chloe Mirinda Wilson '19

## 2016-2017 Undergraduate Awards

### Aparicio Prize: John Hagele

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 exceedingly proud to bequeath that award to John Hagele for his paper “The Rites of Frank-N-Furter: Rocky Horror as Mystical Text and Mystery Cult.”



In this original and insightful paper, John centers his analysis on the 1970s movie *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and its subsequent cultish following. Unpacking the various ritual elements that it has organically spawned, John draws parallels with the ancient mystery traditions and their ability to evoke mystical experiences. He then brings modern psychological sensibilities (particularly those of William James and Carl Jung) to clarify the nature of those experiences. A paper that needs to be read before the next midnight showing! Kudos to John!

### Saba Prize: Sparrow Gates & Zoe Tao

The Saba Prize is the most prestigious award bestowed by the Department of Religion. It is given as a result of departmental consideration/ majority vote, carries with it a substantial financial gift, and designates that graduating senior and religious studies major who has demonstrated the highest form of academic excellence over a four-year period. This year, the faculty voted to jointly award the Saba to **Sparrow Gates**, whose concentration was in Jewish Studies, and **Zoe Tao**, whose concentration was in human spirituality and the medical humanities.

### Distinction in Research & Creative Works

Distinction in Research and Creative Works is a university award for select undergraduates, granted at commencement, which appears on the transcript and diploma. Students must apply to be considered for the award, and the application must be supported by a letter from a faculty member.

### Sparrow Gates

“Glorious Heaven: The Ascension of Isaiah Vision and its Ontological Perspectives”

*My research project was a close reading and analysis of the author’s ontological understanding of the heavens in the text “The Ascension of Isaiah.” Through working closely with the text I gained an even deeper appreciation for just how interdisciplinary the field is, as well as how hazy the lines between Judaism and Christianity were in the time the text was written. Seeing a transmission of ideas, having an understanding of historical context, and an interest in the author’s argument and rhetoric allowed me to dive into questions of the author’s message behind the words. I am continuing to work on “The Ascension of Isaiah” this summer, and I see my research as the first step in a lifelong interest.*



### Adam Jordahl

“Meme Wars: Pepe, the Alt-Right, and Metapolitics”

*As both a millennial and a political junkie, I am interested in the communicative tools (social media) and cultural forms (internet memes) favored by those in my generation and their applicability to contemporary politics. The flood of online support for Donald Trump during the 2016 election presented a perfect opportunity to integrate many of my interests and to examine new methods and emerging movements as they took shape.*



### Zoe Tao

“Shame: a Public Feelings Project”

*Through the RELI department, my seemingly disparate interests in Psychology, human spirituality, Biomedicine and the Medical Humanities, Music, Hospice Care, Queer and Gender Theory, and broadly, social justice, culminated in a 115-page thesis project that I could not have dreamed of doing in any other place. Entitled “Shame: a Public Feelings Project,” it explored questions of affective and existential suffering, societal constructions of stigma which coerce and marginalize individuals into positions of shamed subjectivity due to their sexuality, disability, or illness, and relational understandings of healing and overcoming shame through ethical formation and artistic creation. This research project was written from both personal and theoretical standpoints, as I combined readings of Foucault and assorted theorists in social and developmental psychology as well as queer and gender theory with case studies from my artist volunteer work in a local hospice. I could not have done it without extensive support along the way, even before the formal thesis process took place, and am extremely grateful for my advisor Dr. Niki Clements in guiding my writing, being at the same time encouraging and critical, and ensuring my personal voice was always in the work, as well as Dr. Marcia Brennan for her advice in expressing and formulating case studies in hospice care. I hope to continue this brand of work as a medical student, and will take many lessons from my RELI thesis with me in both clinical and academic work.*



## 2017 Department of Religion Graduates



**Luis De Las Cuevas**, Wiess Religion  
Senior Risk Analyst at a firm trading energy products



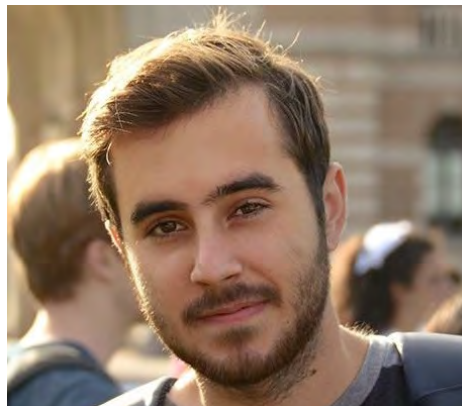
**Sparrow Gates**, McMurtry Religion; Jewish Studies minor graduate study in Religion at Yale Divinity School  
*Saba Prize; Distinction*



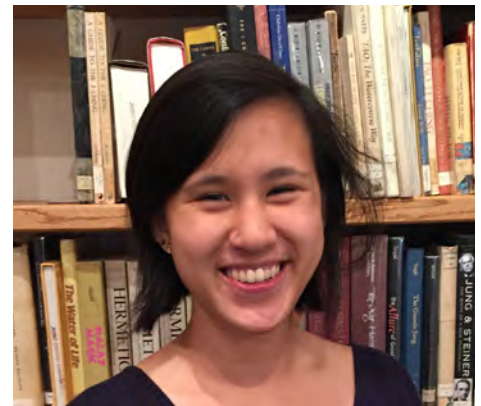
**Alexander Haer**, Will Rice Religion & Political Science working with United Way to support economic and labor mobility through AmeriCorps  
*Distinction*



**John Hagele**, Jones Religion  
museum industry and art curation  
*Aparicio Prize*



**Adam Ross Jordahl**, Sid Richardson Religion  
political journalism and public policy with Ballotpedia.org



**Zoe Tao**, Jones Religion, Psychology; minor Biochemistry UT Southwestern Medical School  
*Saba Prize; Distinction*

Not pictured: **Charles Warren**, Brown (Religion & Kinesiology)

### Current Religion Majors

**Kathlyn Anthony**: Religion & VADA (Duncan, 2018)

**Jacob Blumencranz**: Religion & Policy Studies (Brown, 2018)

**Chris Brehm**: Religion & Statistics (Baker, 2018)

**Isaac James Carroo**: Religion & Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (Hanszen, 2019)

**Sharon Cho**: Religion, Economics; Jewish Studies minor (McMurtry, 2019)

**Elizabeth Denton**: Religion VADA - Studio Art (Duncan, 2018)

**Andrew Dunlap**: Religion (Hanszen, Dec. 2017)

**Neomi Fletcher**: Religion and Policy Studies: Urban and Social Change (Brown, 2018)

**Robbie Harris**: Religion & Economics (Hanszen, 2018)

**Demetrie Luke**: Religion & Philosophy (Lovett, 2018)

**Hunter Ponder**: Religion, History, & Political Sci (Hanszen, 2018)

**Sunee Kate Quirante**: Religion (Lovett, 2020)

**Isaac Schultz**: Religion; Sociology minor, Politics, Law, and Social Thought minor (Duncan, 2018)

**Abby Shulman**: Religion and Cognitive Sciences (Lovett, 2019)

**Viviano Solano**: Religion, Sociology; Politics, Law, and Social Thought minor (Sid Richardson, 2018)

**Chloe Mirinda Wilson**: Religion, Political Science; Jewish Studies minor (Lovett, 2019)

## Graduate News

### The Study of Religion at Rice University



**Anthony B. Pinn**, Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religion; Director of Graduate Studies

It's the end of the academic year, and time to celebrate our collective success. Another year done, and our graduate concentrations continue to grow and thrive. From dissertations and dissertation proposals defended, to comprehensive examinations taken and defended, to language training and second-year reviews, the year has been marked by challenges but also a great deal of success.

Despite a less than "friendly" job market, our current students and graduates are securing jobs. For example, we celebrate the following this year:

**Jonathan Chism** – Assistant Professor of History at the University of Houston (Downtown)

**Matthew Dillon** – Post-Doctoral Scholar & Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, DePauw University

**Biko Gray** – Assistant Professor of Religion at Syracuse University

**Mike Heyes** – Assistant Professor of Religion at Lycoming College

**David Kline** – Lecturer in Religion, Race, and Ethnicity in the Americas at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville

**Chad Pevateaux** – Assistant Professor of Religion and Coordinator of Liberal Studies at Texas Wesleyan University

In addition to jobs, the strength of our program was also displayed this year through numerous grants and fellowships won by students:

**Nathanael Homewood** was awarded a Center for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality Visionary Partner Dissertation Fellowship and also won the Best Graduate Student Essay in a competition held by the Center for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality.

**Itohan Idumwonyi** received both a Center for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality Visionary Partner Dissertation Fellowship and a Forum for Theological Education 2017-18 Doctoral Fellowship.

**Erin Prophet** was awarded a Vaughn Fellowship and a Humanist Fellowship in Medical Humanities from the Humanities Research Center.

**Mark Schmanko** was awarded a Civic Humanist Fellowship from the Humanities Research Center.

Through new course offerings and revamping the "mechanics" of our graduate program, we've worked this year to make the PhD experience as positive and rewarding as possible. Congratulations to our students and faculty.

### Current Graduate Students

**Justine Bakker** - African American Religion; GEM

**Reyhan E. Basaran** - Sunni-Shiite polemics

**Linda Ceriello** - Dissertation topic: The Accidental Mystic:  
Contemporary Narratives of Western Secular  
Spiritual Encounters

**Shardé Chapman** - African American Religion

**Konner Childers** - Bible & Beyond

**Simon Cox** - Gnosticism, Esotericism, and Mysticism (GEM)

**DeAnna Daniels** - African American Religion

**Jessica Davenport** - Dissertation topic: Multiplicity in Text  
and Image: Carrie Mae Weems' Visual Art and the Quest  
for Complex Subjectivity

**Cindy Dawson** - Bible & Beyond

**Mark DeYoung** - African American Religion

**Learned Foote** - Buddhist Thought; GEM

**Jason Ford** - Bible & Beyond

**Renée Ford** - Buddhist Thought; GEM

**Timothy Grieve-Carlson** - History of Religion in America; GEM

**Rebecca Harris** - Bible & Beyond

**Nathanael Homewood** - African Religions

**Itohan Idumwonyi** - African Religion, Gender Influence  
on Contemporary Nigerian Christianity

**Oihane Iglesias Telleria** - Gnosticism and literature

**Jason Jeffries** - Dissertation topic: African American Religion  
and the Aesthetics of Body Modification

**Naamleela Free Jones** - GEM

**Bradley Johnson** - African Religions

**Abdulbasit Kassim** - Islamic Studies, African Religions

**Justin Kelley** - Buddhist Thought

**David A. Kline** - African American Religious Studies

**Minji Lee** - Dissertation topic: The Medieval Woman's Body:  
Evil and Holy

**Benjamin J. Mayo** - Gnosticism, Esotericism, Mysticism (GEM)

**Victor Nardo** - Gnosticism, Esotericism, Mysticism (GEM);  
Modern Christianity in Thought & Popular Culture

**Anne O. Parker** - Contemplative Studies, Buddhist Thought

**Gregory Perron** - GEM; Religion & Psychology

**Erin Prophet** - American Metaphysical Religion, Millennialism,  
New Religions

**Waleed Rikab** - Sunni Islam

**Mark Schmanko** - Philosophy of Religion, Anthropology, and  
History of Religions

**C.J. Schmidt** - Bible & Beyond

**Christopher Senn** - Contemplative Studies

**Kyle Smith** - History of Religions in America

**Tommy Symmes** - Religion & Psychology; GEM

**Ross A. Tiekens** - Modern Christianity in Thought &  
Popular Culture

**Cleve V. Tinsley IV** - African American Religious Studies;  
Religion and Identity

**Elizabeth A. Wallett** - Dissertation topic: Tibetan Buddhism in  
the U.S. Academy, 1965-2010

## Launching a Master of Arts Program

**April D. DeConick**

We are very pleased to announce that our department will soon have a terminal M.A. degree program. This degree will provide a broad background in the study of religious currents, including the marginal and transnational, within a strong theoretical framework of the academic study of religion. The M.A. program will be designed to assist students in (1) acquiring the necessary background and credentials for admittance in competitive divinity and doctoral programs, or (2) developing the skills necessary for other vocational or professional options that do not require a Ph.D., or (3) exploring personal and professional interests.

When available, students will apply for admittance to the M.A. program via the Rice Grad Apps webpage. M.A. students enroll in a two-semester course on History and Methods in the Study of Religion for 19th and 20th centuries. In addition to 30 hours of coursework, students are required to pass a French or German secondary language reading exam, pass a comprehensive exam on History and Methods in the Study of Religion, and write and orally defend their M.A. thesis. For more information, contact the graduate program administrator, Lydia Westbrook, at [lydiaw@rice.edu](mailto:lydiaw@rice.edu).



## Simon Cox Receives GEM Certificate



**Simon Cox**

I was first drawn to Rice largely on account of the GEM program. The prospect of going to graduate school to study gnosticism, esotericism, and mysticism motivated my application and mollified anxieties I had about the potentially stifling capacities of academic discipline - visions of myself drowning in footnotes. My experience in the program has justified my initial excitement, and far from being stifled by the academic methodologies the program has introduced me to, I have learned to thrive; to express myself with a newfound rigor and clarity.

On a formal level, the GEM courses have provided me with a theoretical framework (historical) and methodology (historical-criticism) through which I can fruitfully and precisely address the minutiae of my subdisciplines. On a content level, the courses have provided me with a wealth of historical knowledge - mostly Euro-American - concerning the historical development of our field and the foundational assumptions on which it is based, facilitating reflexivity in my own scholarship.

In addition to the coursework, the monthly GEM forums peopled by the GEM Collective have expanded the horizons of my own research (who knew Tibetan sleep yogas bore a striking resemblance to Catholic dream incubation?) and socialized me into the unspoken mores of cross-disciplinary conversation. In addition to this, the recent Rockwell Conferences - "Gnostic Countercultures" (2015) and "Spiritual but not Religious" (2016) - have brought me into the vibrant international community of scholars who study gnosticism, esotericism, and mysticism. The program has provided me with a trajectory, a community, and numerous opportunities for presenting and publishing. GEM is truly the jewel in the crown of our department, and I feel incredibly fortunate to be a part of it.

### Graduate Areas of Concentration

African American Religion  
 African Religions  
 Bible & Beyond  
 Buddhist Thought  
 Contemplative Studies  
 GEM Certificate

Global Christianity  
 History of Religions in America  
 Jewish Thought & Philosophy  
 Modern Christianity in Thought & Popular Culture  
 New Testament & Early Christian Studies  
 Psychology & Religion

## Gnostic Film Festival

### Timothy Grieve-Carlson

The Department of Religion was pleased to host the very first Gnostic Film Festival throughout the weekend of March 24th. Held at our own Rice Cinema, the event was free and open to the public. The festival was funded by a public humanities grant from Rice’s Humanities Research Center and was organized and led by Professor April DeConick’s Spring 2017 Gnosticism Seminar. The idea for the festival sprang from a broad theme in Dr. DeConick’s 2016 book *The Gnostic New Age*: that the metaphysical orientation found in ancient Gnosticism permeates contemporary spirituality and even popular culture--especially film, and especially science fiction film. The film festival was able to showcase these films as examples of religious thought in popular culture, critically examine them from a religious studies perspective, and then discuss them with an engaged audience.

The festival opened on Friday evening with the Wachowski’s 1999 film *The Matrix*, whose Gnostic themes include a depiction of an unreal world created by a pernicious intelligence and a salvific hero who can travel between the worlds. Saturday began with *The Truman Show*, in which the titular character is unknowingly trapped in an artificial world for the entertainment of others. The next film on Saturday was *Pleasantville*, a touching sci-fi drama in which two teenagers from the 1990s are transported to an idyllic 1950s sitcom world a la “Leave It To Beaver.” *Pleasantville* provides a transgressive reinterpretation of Genesis in which the fruit of the tree of knowledge represents a boon to humanity, rather than a fall into sin--an interpretation the film shares with ancient Gnostic texts like “The Apocryphon of John.” Saturday concluded with an evening showing of James Cameron’s *Avatar*, in which human beings are able to commune with divine reality through their “avatars,” not unlike the divine twins of ancient Gnostic belief. Sunday began with a matinee showing of *Dark City*, whose depiction of an endarkened world built by alien beings recalled both *The Matrix* and ancient Gnosticism. Finally, the festival concluded on Sunday evening with a showing of *Altered States*, which portrays a psychology professor’s dangerous obsession with revelatory religious experience, or gnosis. Each film was introduced by a graduate student expert from the seminar, and graduate students held panels following each film which facilitated audience discussion and fielded questions. Following the panels, each showing concluded with Dr. DeConick reading a relevant passage about the film from *The Gnostic New Age*.



### Gnostic Film Festival at Rice Cinema

March 24-26, 2017 free and open to the public  
 Showing *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, *Pleasantville*, *Avatar*, *Dark City*, *Altered States*

<b>March 24</b>	<b>7 pm</b>	<b>The Matrix</b> <small>Awareness of an opposing reality that liberates us from servitude and ignorance</small>
<b>March 25</b>	<b>10 am</b>	<b>The Truman Show</b> <small>Awakening of the true self and its liberation from a world of illusion and slavery</small>
	<b>1 pm</b>	<b>Pleasantville</b> <small>Retelling the story of the fall of Adam and Eve as a gnostic awakening of the self</small>
	<b>7 pm</b>	<b>Avatar</b> <small>Union of the human self or mind with its divine angelic counterpart</small>
<b>March 26</b>	<b>1 pm</b>	<b>Dark City</b> <small>Overthrow of alien overlords controlling the human soul by a divine human</small>
	<b>5 pm</b>	<b>Altered States</b> <small>Search for origin of the self and a remedy for its incarceration and suffering</small>

Snacks provided  
 Q & A graduate-led discussions following each film and readings by April D. DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age* (Columbia)

The Gnostic Film Festival presented Religion graduate students with a unique opportunity to engage the public on topics of popular esotericism, and to apply their studies in unique fields to present popular material in new critical light. The Gnostic Film Festival was an exciting foray into public events by the Rice Department of Religion.



## In Search of the Gnostic Conference

### Learned Foote

On April 19, 2017, the Department of Religion hosted a graduate student research symposium titled "In Search of the Gnostic." The conference, in which ten PhD students presented their work, was held under the auspices of Professor April DeConick's Gnosticism seminar.

The focus of the seminar which inspired the conference was Gnosticism: the study of texts, communities, and rituals from the first few centuries of the common era, which have recently been recovered through the Nag Hammadi library among other archaeological finds. Gnosticism emerged roughly contemporaneous to (and often overlapping with) early Christianity, but often preserves more antinomian and subversive readings of religious tradition. Starting from this specific historical context, students researched diverse manifestations of Gnosticism.

Several students focused on how Gnosticism manifested in the ancient world. Naamleela Free Jones presented research on John the Baptist considered through the light of ritual studies (the water baptisms innovated by John the Baptist continue to be used by Gnostic communities such as the Mandaeans up to the present day). Cindy Dawson conducted a feminist analysis of the character of Sophia in Gnostic mythology, in which she traced the fate of this character in diverse Gnostic texts, and placed these texts into the context of a historical patriarchy, in which women's bodies were considered vessels to be used or abused. Charles J. Schmidt and Gregory Perron also explored ancient figures, linking Gnostic texts to contemporary discourses of physiological health and deification. Learned Foote examined the prophetic figure of Mani and the use of visionary practices in Manichaean communities, and Simon Cox gave a historical overview of the way Manichaeism was developed into numerous Asian communities in the centuries after Mani's death.

Along with this focus on ancient times, numerous students explored how Gnosticism has manifested in more recent times. Tim Grieve-Carlson presented on the religious ideology of a commune in colonial Pennsylvania, which had mystical strains influenced by the Gnostic Sophia mythology. Oihane Iglesias Telleria examined the way Jorge Luis Borges used Gnostic motifs and images in his fiction and explored how the Argentinian author came to his information of Gnosticism. Victor Nardo presented on how Gnostic liturgies are adapted by contemporary religious communities in modern organized iterations of a Gnostic religion. Justin James Kelley also used a comparative approach, exploring the theme of purification so prevalent in the Gnostic texts, considered specifically through the lens of Tibetan philosopher Longchen Rabjam.

After every three presentations, the floor opened to a Q&A session. The conference was attended by individuals from the Department of Religion, the broader Rice community, as well as visitors to campus. Many of these people took the opportunity to ask questions about the research presented by the students. The students made connections exploring their various topics of study.

The conference spoke to the diverse range of interests across the graduate student population at Rice, through research that spanned many languages, centuries, continents, and religious systems: all in search of the Gnostic.

**In Search of the Gnostic**  
Graduate Student Research Symposium 2017  
Wednesday, April 19, 8 am-12 pm  
Kyle Morrow Room, Fondren Library, Rice University

8:00 Victor Nardo, *Use of Valentinian Scripture in A Contemporary Gnostic Liturgy*  
8:20 Naamleela Free Jones, *John the Baptist as Ritual Innovator*  
8:40 Cindy Dawson, *Hiding Sophia to Preserve the Value of Female Bodies*  
9:00 Q&A  
9:10 Charles J. Schmidt, *The Physiology of Gnostic Salvation*  
9:30 Gregory Perron, *Evagrius of Pontus on Gnosis and Deification*  
9:50 Learned Foote, *The Spiritual Body in Manichaean Mythology and Practice*  
10:10 Q&A  
10:20 Simon Cox, *Translating Manichaean Gnosis Along the Silk Road*  
10:40 Justin James Kelley, *Longchen Rabjam's Gnostic Purification*  
11:00 Tim Grieve-Carlson, *A Gnostic Utopia in Colonial Pennsylvania*  
11:20 Oihane Iglesias Telleria, *Jorge Luis Borges and Fictionalized Gnosticism*  
11:40 Q&A

Sponsored by RELI 481/581 Gnosticism Seminar, Professor April D. DeConick, Department of Religion, Rice University



2017 PhD Graduates Rachel C. Schneider, Biko Gray, and Matthew Dillon with Drs. April DeConick and Niki Clements



## Hermeneutics and the Christian Story

### C.J. Schmidt

During the fall semester of 2016, Department of Religion Professor April D. DeConick led a graduate research seminar entitled “Beginnings of Christianity” which focused on the writings of the New Testament and other texts from the first three generations of the emergent Christian movement (c. 30–110 CE). Together, the class sought to explore the ways in which Christianity had emerged as a new religious movement within the Roman Empire. This included investigating issues of authority and leadership, the rise of regional instantiations of Christianity, and the formation of distinct Christian identities.

The seminar culminated in the 2016 New Testament and Early Christian Studies Symposium on November 30th at Fondren Library’s Kyle Morrow Room. The topic of the symposium was Hermeneutics and the Christian Story which featured 20-minute presentations of students’ respective research projects. The talks covered a range of topics including functions of the divine spirit in Stoic physics, reception history of Paul among Marcion and Valentinians, angelology and the Sinai event, non-human environments in the Synoptics, necromancy, late antique Syrian mystics, and biblical metacriticism.

Participants included Cindy Dawson, Tim Grieve-Carlson, Rebecca Harris, Victor Nardo, Gregory Perrin, C.J. Schmidt, Oihane Iglesias Telleria, and Senior Undergraduate History Major Tia Liu.



### HERMENEUTICS AND THE CHRISTIAN STORY



Rice University, Kyle Morrow Room, Fondren Library  
Wednesday, November 30, 8 am–12 pm

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| 8-8:30   | <b>Charles J. Schmidt</b><br><i>Pneuma and Power: The Physics of Spirit in Greco-Roman Antiquity</i>  |
| 8:30-9   | <b>Rebecca Harris</b><br><i>Living in the Liminal: Conceptions of the Present in Early Christian Literature</i>                               |
| 9-9:30   | <b>Tim Grieve-Carlson</b><br><i>The Non-Human Environment in Early Christianity</i>   |
| 9:30-10  | <b>Cindy Dawson</b><br><i>The Angel in the Middle in Early Judaism and Christianity</i>   |
| 10-10:30 | <b>Oihane Iglesias Telleria</b><br><i>The Miracle of Lazarus: Greek Magical Papyri and Apollonius of Tyana</i>                                |
| 10:30-11 | <b>Victor Nardo</b><br><i>Paul as Understood by Marcion and the Valentinians</i>  |
| 11-11:30 | <b>Gregory Perrin</b><br><i>Stephen bar Sudhaili: An Interpretative Inquiry into a Syrian Mystic</i>  |
| 11:30-12 | <b>Tianwei Liu</b><br><i>Biblical Criticism and Victorian Cultural Anthropology: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Approaches to Early Christianity</i> |

New Testament and Early Christian Studies Symposium 2016

Hosted by the Department of Religion, “Beginnings of Christianity Seminar”

## Recent Graduate Student Awards & Achievements

**Linda Ceriello** published her first peer-reviewed publication in a new Italian journal on esotericism: “Encoded Ambiguities, Embodied Ontologies: The Transformative Speech of Transgressive Female Figures in Gnosticism and Tantra.” Special issue, *The Eternal Esoteric Feminine*. La Rosa di Paracelso, 2017.

**Nathanael Homewood** received CSWGS Visionary Partner Dissertation Fellowship; Best Graduate Student Essay from CSWGS.

**Itohan Idumwonyi** CSWGS Visionary Partner Dissertation Fellowship; Forum for Theological Education 2017-18 Doctoral Fellow.

**Abdulbasit Kassim** published his paper (co-authored with Jacob Zenn): “Justifying War: The Salafi-Jihadi Appropriation of Sufi Jihad in the Sahel-Sahara,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 21.

**David Kline** published “The Pragmatics of Resistance: Framing Anti-Blackness and the Limits of Political Ontology” in *Critical Philosophy of Race* 5 (2017).

**Minji Lee** published “Women Overcoming the Boundaries: Hildegard of Bingen’s Mystical Representation of the Porous Womb” on Rice Feminist Forum.

**Erin Prophet** received a Vaughn Fellowship and a Humanist Fellowship in Medical Humanities from HRC.

**Mark Schmanko** awarded Civic Humanist Fellow from Humanities Research Center (HRC).

## Graduate Student Instructors



### RELI 378 Buddhist Art and Literature (Fall 2016) Justin Kelley, PhD Candidate

Through generous funding from the Khyentse Foundation, I had the privilege of teaching “Buddhist Art and Literature” this past fall semester. With a total of twelve students from a variety of backgrounds and with diverse interests, the course focused on important written and artistic works from Indian and Tibetan Buddhism as well as the Tibetan language.

From the outset, we engaged in conversation about the materials in small-group activities and classroom discussions. This dual-focus allowed for both learning about historical Buddhist lineages, traditions, and individuals, as well as engaging with students in conversation and drawing out how these topics are applicable in a contemporary setting. The final two weeks of the course were entirely student-driven and participants democratically selected topics and activities that were most interesting to them. Ultimately, the course provided students with both a deeper understanding of Buddhism as a historical and lived tradition, as well as methodological tools for investigating cultural-religious phenomena in general.

### RELI 300 Visions of the Afterlife: Religious and Secular Approaches to Life After Death (Spring 2017) Matthew J. Dillon, PhD Candidate

In the spring 2017 semester I taught a course entitled “Visions of the Afterlife: Religious and Secular Approaches to Life After Death.” As the name suggests, the course surveys afterlife beliefs and experiences from a range of religious traditions and contemporary secular disciplines. Having taught other courses, I can say, without hesitation, that this was the most fun, eye-opening, and energetic course I have had the pleasure to be a part of.

In terms of content, the course spanned world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), ancient mystery religions (e.g., Hermetism), dualisms (Zoroastrianism), African tribal religions, and new religions (e.g., the Church of Latter Day Saints, the Nation of Islam, Spiritualism). In addition to religious views, the students and I analyzed visions of the afterlife from contemporary anthropologists, neuroscientists, physicists, philosophers, and popular culture. The students and I analyzed these “visions of the afterlife” sociologically, comparatively, and philosophically. That is, we asked questions like: what does this model of the afterlife tell us about the social world it arose from? What impact(s) do concepts of the afterlife have on individuals and cultures? And what do afterlife models tell us about the nature of consciousness and ethics?

The class found that while traditional religions utilize afterlife models to preserve certain values and morals, new religions that seek to change the social world invoke new models of the afterlife. For instance, the 19th century American religious phenomenon known as Spiritualism featured (mostly) females as “mediums” for a recently deceased person. The messages brought over by these emissaries of the afterlife were univocally critical of the conditions of women in the 19th century. These spirits informed listeners that in heaven, men and women were equal and marriage was of the utmost import. By extension, these spirits critiqued the fact women had no economic agency at this time, no ability to initiate divorce, and no opportunity to vote. The women’s suffrage movement, we learned, had its roots in Spiritualism. Similarly, apocalyptic beliefs serve to critique the values and power structures at a given time. We analyzed how apocalyptic served as a culture-critique in the ancient world (1 Enoch, Revelation) and how we see this same role for apocalyptic in the present (Left Behind, Nation of Islam, Zombie fiction).

At the end of the semester students wrote and presented on a topic of their choosing. All presentations were of the highest quality. Standout papers include a comparative analysis of the role nonviolence plays in the afterlife beliefs of Jains and Quakers, the shifting apocalyptic beliefs of the Japanese new religion Aum Shinriki, the notion of consciousness in Scientology and UFO religions, and a comparative analysis of the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the film *The Matrix*. In all, these students showcased exceptional imagination, critical acumen, and intellectual flexibility in analyzing these visions of the afterlife.



Ascent of the Blessed, Bosch

## Graduate Student Instructors

### RELI 381 The Messiah (Fall 2016)

Jason Ford, PhD Candidate

In the fall of 2016, I taught a class entitled “The Messiah” (RELI 381). This course was a small seminar with upper-level undergraduate students. Our task was to study and understand the historical origins of messianism—the expectation of a coming anointed one. I organized the material around texts from three historical periods: those collected in the Hebrew Bible, those composed during Second Temple Judaism, and those produced by the early Christian movement. By studying this rich variety of documents, students were able to identify different themes related to messianic expectation and to articulate the intellectual history of the messiah in early Jewish and Christian history.

The course had three primary learning objectives. The first was that students become familiar with the content of important texts surrounding the historical origins of the concept of the messiah. Students studied passages from the Hebrew Bible, the Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and both canonical and non-canonical Christian writings.

The students’ second objective was to continue to develop their critical reading skills with regards to these ancient religious texts. The majority of our meetings centered around discussions of interpretation and analysis. Students were asked to offer their own interpretations in our class discussions and place these interpretations into conversations with each other and the secondary materials we read.

In developing the syllabus, it was my expectation that the third objective (to become better writers) was the course’s most important transferable skill. It is essential that as students go forward in their academic and future careers, they are equipped to communicate their ideas and arguments accessibly and effectively. Because of this, each student received extensive individual feedback on their work in order to highlight strengths and identify opportunities for growth. Students wrote three in-depth papers for the course, and I was impressed with the quality and creativity of each student’s work.

Teaching the students of the 2016 The Messiah course was one of the highlights of my time at Rice.



David in prayer, Pieter de Grebber (c.1637)



### RELI 158 Introduction to Liberation Theologies (Spring 2017)

Justine Bakker, PhD Candidate

In the spring of 2017, I taught “Introduction to Liberation Theologies.” First introduced in the United States in the form of James Cone’s black theology, liberation theologies are religious (predominantly Christian) expressions of socio-political quests for freedom, justice and equality. We covered a wide variety of liberation theologies, from Delores Williams’ womanist theology to Nancy Eiesland’s theology of disability, and from Mary Daly’s feminist theology to Vine Deloria’s Native American theology. My goal in this course was two-fold: to offer students an introduction to the sociopolitical context, history, form and content of a diverse set of US-based liberation theologies, and to work with them such that they become better writers, readers, and critical thinkers. Towards that end, we read full books—eight in total— which we discussed together in class, concentrating primarily on the overall argument of the text: what does the author try to say? And how does s/he achieve this goal?

The students were wonderful: they came to class prepared, fully engaged, enthusiastic, and were not afraid to ask difficult questions—from the authors, me and each other. Moreover, they took their assignments—which consisted of weekly reading responses, two short personal papers about their definitions of God and liberation, and a final paper—very seriously, and made frequent use of the option to revise their work. This gave them the opportunity to not only earn a better grade but, much more importantly, to improve their writing and critical reflection skills. They also deserve a shout out for their creativity: as part of their assignment to bring artifacts related to the readings to class, they brought interesting, beautiful, fun, and poignant songs, books, and articles that helped further our discussion. In a semester that saw the inauguration of Donald Trump as 45th president of the United States, whose policies and discourse highlight the continued significance of and need for liberation theology even more, I could not have asked for a better group of students to critically reflect on oppression and the possibilities of freedom in the United States.

## Graduate Student Instructors

### RELI 233/TIBT 233

#### Tibetan Language, Literature, and Culture (Spring 2017) Justin Kelley, PhD Candidate

In the spring of 2017, with the generous support of the Chao Center for Asian Studies, I taught “Tibetan Language, Literature, and Culture.” Drawing on a wealth of Tibetan-related materials, including both primary and secondary sources, this course focused on philosophical, cultural, and historical factors involved in the development of Tibet. Topics included: the mind-body connection; meditative arts; ritual practice; biographical literature; traditional Tibetan medicine; major political developments; contemporary Tibetan-Chinese relations; and more. This broad assortment of topics allowed each student to focus on a particular section of the syllabus and dig deeper into it for their papers, which ranged from the role of espionage in the formulation of the 19th century Tibetan state, to the place of sex and gender in tantric formations of Tibetan Buddhism.

Additionally, roughly one-third of the course focused on Tibetan language, and the semester ended with a translation project from a 20th century text entitled “Beautiful String of Jewels” by Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro. The students really excelled in this section of the course, far exceeding my expectations. And, much to my surprise, three students plan to continue to study Tibetan in the fall semester.

Overall, this course was tremendous. The group came together beautifully and the classroom setting was simultaneously charitable and critical. On most days, students stayed afterwards, continuing our discussion, indicative of the classroom space that we created together. Once again, thank you to the Chao Center for their generous support.



Pictured, from left to right: Josephine Chen, Vishnu Kumar, Yao-Hsiang Yang, Riley Robertson, Ilya Marchenka, Justin Kelley, Adam Jordahl, Yizhou Gao, and Neomi Fletcher.

## Graduate Student Conference Presentations

### Erin Prophet

#### Exploring Sexuality and Spirituality Conference | Oxford, England | July 2016

Many conferences claim to be interdisciplinary but I recently attended one which I felt truly lived up to the name. The conference, “Exploring Sexuality and Spirituality,” was held at Mansfield College at Oxford University July 5 - 8, 2016. Two Catholic theologians, one religious studies PhD candidate (myself), a yoga teacher, a landscape architect, a criminologist, and several scholars of literature, gender, and culture studies, presented papers. The result was a dialogue that pushed the boundaries of academic discourse and engaged theoretical concepts across the spectrum from literature to culture to ontology, philosophy, and theology.



My paper, entitled “Repression or Empowerment? Tensions in Women’s Spirituality and Sexuality in the Teachings of Yogi Bhajan and 3HO-Sikh Dharma” evaluated Harbhajan Singh (1929-2004), better known as Yogi Bhajan, who innovated by transforming Indian yogic techniques for an American audience, but who also perpetuated traditional gender roles.

The conference was organized by Interdisciplinary.net, founded in 1999 by Rob Fisher, formerly Head of Philosophy at Westminster College, Oxford. ID.net, as it is called, requires each participant to attend the entire conference so that each paper receives equal attention. A volunteer moderator—a delightful Irish professor of philosophy, Seán Moran, ensured that each person participated in the discussion. We also shared meals in the college chapel. As a result, we got to know one another really well, and built foundations for future research. I recommend ID.net conferences as a unique academic experience. See [www.inter-disciplinary.net](http://www.inter-disciplinary.net) for more information.

## Graduate Student Conference Presentations



### **Nathanael Homewood**

**African Association for the Study of Religion (AASR) Conference | Accra, Ghana | July 2016**

In July of 2016 I had the good fortune of attending the biannual conference of the African Association for the Study of Religion (AASR) in Accra, Ghana. The AASR is a groundbreaking association led by our own Dr. Elias K. Bongmba. Dr. Bongmba fearlessly guides the association, ensuring that it takes seriously contemporary issues of import in the various religions that populate the African continent.

The theme of this particular conference was timely and important: Religion, Sexuality and Identity in Africa. Dr. Bongmba opened the conference with a rousing speech, challenging participants on the import of the theme and outlining that the conference had the potential to inaugurate or generate conversation that was too often stifled on the continent. Much of the conference lived up to Dr. Bongmba's words.

Participants presented a variety of papers from diverse points of views: papers that sometimes conflicted with one another, but ultimately represented the difficulty and challenge of talking about sexuality and religion. My particular paper argued that in a climate that can too often be dismissed as homophobic, scholars look for the subtle, implicit ways in which resistance can be articulated. Sometimes, as was the case in my paper, resistance is embodied. I used a case study of lesbian deliverance to show that even amidst scripts that are explicitly homophobic and heteronormative, there are signs of resistance, embodied refusals of the hoary scripts that religious institutions attempt to inculcate.

I consider it a great privilege to have been involved in this conference and deeply appreciate Dr. Bongmba's leadership on difficult topics such as sexuality and religion in Africa.



### **Reyhan Erdogdu-Basaran**

**Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA) Conference  
Washington D.C. | October 2016**

I was awarded a travel fund by the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA) to present a paper "The Assessment of the Current Scholarship that Links Alevis either with Shi'ism or Sunnism," in the ASMEA Conference in Washington DC, 2016. I also presented a part of my dissertation project entitled "The Sectarian Inquiry: The Position of Alevi Islam Within the Sunni-Shi'ite Split" in the American Academy of Religion Conference, Study of Islam section, 2016. For the AAR Conference, I received a travel award from the Department of Religion. Additionally, I published two book reviews in the *Religious Studies Review Journal*, June 2016.



### **Mark Schmanko**

**Southwest Regional American Academy of Religion (AAR) Conference | Irving, TX | March 2017**

This year's Southwest Regional AAR conference—hosted by The Southwest Commission on Religious Studies (SWCRS)—took place in Irving Texas from March 10-12 (Fri - Sun), and was held at the lovely Marriot Hotel. This was my first year attending the SWCRS conference. It was a relatively small but intimate gathering of scholars of religion and theologians. Together we explored the main theme of the conference: namely, "Religion Matters."

I presented a paper for the Philosophy of Religion and Theology section called "Ontology Matters in Religious Studies." Here I argued for a realist approach to religion that, on the one hand, is rooted in a maximally inclusive philosophical anthropology of religious life and thought and, on the other hand, contributes to alternative histories of religion, particularly those revealing the deep and complex interconnections between secular and religious traditions or forms of life. I also suggested that religious studies as a professional field is a fascinating site for both contestation and constructive work, given that it practically and historically inhabits a "middle way" between theological and rational-critical modes of analysis and evaluation.

The conference was a stimulating occasion, a time to develop academic friendships (a phrase much preferred over 'networking'), have meaningful discussion (with fellow Rice alumni and beyond), and reflect seriously on the future of religion with colleagues in a dynamic spirit of inquiry and debate. The occasion was thus a demonstration, albeit on a very small scale, that indeed religion matters, and that scholars of religion have their work cut out for them, all the more in the complex "post-secular" milieu of the twenty-first century. Thank you Irving, Texas for being a wonderful host!

## Graduate Student Conference Presentations



**David Kline**

**American Academy of Religion (AAR) Annual Meeting | San Antonio, TX | November 2016**

On November 19, I presented a paper at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting in San Antonio. Part of the Continental Philosophy and Theology group session “Race, Capital, and Resistance,” my paper was titled “Resisting White American Immunity: Genre, System, Observation.” In the paper, I engaged the work of Sylvia Wynter and Niklas Luhmann in order to analyze “White American Identity” as a self-referential and self-reproducing religious system held together around violent processes of social and political immunization--i.e. self protective action.



**CJ Schmidt**

**Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) Annual Meeting | San Antonio, TX | November 2016**

Last year I received a travel award from the department to attend the annual meeting for the Society of Biblical Literature. My paper, “Medicinal Baptism in Clement of Alexandria’s *Paidagōgos*,” was selected to be part of a panel on Ancient Medicine in Early Christianity for the Health Care and Disability in Antiquity section unit. The abstract of my paper is provided here in full:

*Although scholars in recent years have examined the use of medical metaphors in Clement’s works, little of it has examined Clement’s use of these metaphors to describe the function and efficacy of baptism in the *Paidagōgos* and how this particular metaphor is connected to others in his overall construction of salvation as both spiritual and bodily health throughout the treatise. As a result, we fail to understand the ways in which ancient therapeutics informs Clement’s particular conception of baptism, conversion, and salvation. Without an adequate analysis of Clement’s description of baptism as medicine within this broader context of ancient therapeutics, we fail to notice a prominent thematic connection between book one and the two subsequent volumes of the treatise. My project remedies this gap by mapping Clement’s medical metaphors—particularly in relation to baptism—onto the general, tripartite therapeutic method found in the ancient medical theories and practices of his contemporaries. This process entails, first, “surgery” (i.e., confession and acknowledgement) to root out the source of the ‘illness’ (i.e., the passions of the soul); second, “healing drugs” (i.e., baptism) to purge any residual infection (i.e., sins); and third, adhering to a dietetic regimen in order to maintain the state of one’s newly (re-) established health.*

I would like to thank the Department of Religion for providing financial assistance to help me cover the costs of conference travel.



## Graduate Student Conference Presentations



**Rachel C. Schneider**

**American Academy of Religion (AAR) Annual Meeting | San Antonio, TX | November 2016**

In November of 2016, I presented “Race and Emerging Christianity: A View from South Africa” at the American Academy of Religion conference in San Antonio. The paper was part of the Emerging Church, Religion, and Millennials Seminar, which is a three-year seminar dedicated to understanding emerging modes of religion and spirituality among millennials. My paper, which will be published as a chapter in a forthcoming volume, explores the role of race within the Emerging Church Movement (ECM). I examine the influence of this Anglo-American Protestant reform movement in South Africa and in Africa more broadly, focusing on the late 1990s and early 2000s. Drawing on ten months of fieldwork in Johannesburg (2013-2014), I discuss how the ECM travelled from the US and the UK to Africa and how progressive white Christians in South Africa were influenced by the ECM’s critique of white suburban culture and religion. I then reflect on the broader implications of these efforts in relation to questions of racism and racial justice in the ECM. While the ECM’s roots are undeniably white, middle-class, well-educated, Global Northern, and Western, I argue that an interest in social justice, pluralism, and the reconfiguration of personal and social relationships, both within and beyond Christian ecclesial spaces, remains a driving force of the ECM. This impulse holds the potential for critiquing systems of white power and privilege, but certain attributes of the ECM, such as an emphasis on experimentation and reflexivity, can also render such critiques unstable.

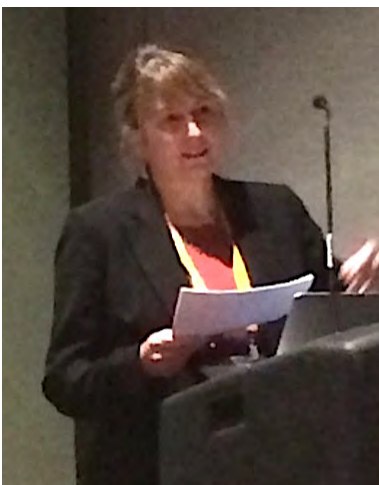


**Matthew Dillon**

**American Academy of Religion (AAR) Annual Meeting | San Antonio, TX | November 2016**

I presented a paper on the modern reception of the Nag Hammadi writings at the 2016 meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Antonio, TX. I argued that the reception of the Nag Hammadi writings has fueled the development of counter-memories of the historical Jesus. Readers utilize these gnostic texts in order to challenge orthodox constructions of history and legitimize their own new religious readings of the past. I presented three case studies: Bagwan Shree Rajneesh, aka Osho (1931-1990), John M. Newman (B: 1952), and Jonathan Talat Phillips (B: 1975). These three individuals use the Gospel of Thomas to argue that Jesus of Nazareth preached Eastern Tantra. Osho argues that Jesus spent his “lost years” – from the age of twelve to the beginning of his ministry as recorded in the New Testament gospels – in Egypt and India, learning Tantra under a guru. Jesus’ mystical teaching were, according to Osho, suppressed by the nascent Catholic Church. John Newman argues that Jesus intended to present a series of exercises his disciples could use to cultivate consciousness of the “kingdom of Heaven,” akin to sammadhi, but his followers misunderstood his teachings and interpreted them apocalyptically. Phillips maintains Jesus never existed. However, his story is imprinted with Tantric wisdom, such as energy healing, out-of-body rituals, and sexual practices to achieve enlightenment. None of these counter-memories are historically verifiable. Yet this is not the point. What is important is how individuals use the Nag Hammadi writings to

reimagine what ancient Christianity was in order to argue what it can be in the present. While the community behind The Gospel of Thomas would be puzzled by how these three authors are reading their text, the counter-memories Osho, Newman, and Phillips offer speak directly to an American counterculture influenced by democracy, religious pluralism, and the sexual revolution.



**Linda Ceriello**

**American Academy of Religion (AAR) Annual Meeting | San Antonio, TX | November 2016**

I received department funding to attend the AAR Annual Meeting in November 2016 in San Antonio. My paper was entitled “Russell Brand’s Dialectic Of Comedy, Spirituality and Political Activism As Metamodern Soteriology.” Also at the meeting, I facilitated a panel in the Religion and Popular Culture section on Singing the Sacred: Moral Communities of Popular Music. I appreciate the department’s support and assistance.

*Abstract: For comedian, actor, activist and Eastern spirituality aficionado, Russell Brand, performing is a transgressive act. Unique among contemporary secular comedians in unapologetically integrating religious truth claims in both his stage act and public persona, Brand utilizes several identity markers associated with the spiritual-but-not-religious (SBNR), including concepts from Tantra and other Eastern spiritualities, to present his social and spiritual views to a largely secular audience, while managing to avoid being dismissed as “woo-woo,” --a feat best understood using theorization of the SBNR’s “metamodern” cultural shift. I will examine how his social-political interventions of resistance, met by an invitation to universalist spirituality, reflect current secular-spiritual sensibilities, by analyzing two recent performances: Brand’s comedy show, Messiah Complex, and an appearance onstage with the Dalai Lama.*

*Here we see spirituality and political activism directly mediating one another through performance that includes a large, and necessary (in Brand’s view), dose of bawdy humor.*

## 2016 - 2017 Doctoral Graduates

### Elliot Berger “Billy Graham and the Age of Anxiety”



#### Elliot Berger, PhD

My research interests were the psychology of religion and American evangelicalism. In particular, my work focused on the life and career of Billy Graham. Graham is one of the most popular and influential religious figures of the American 20th century. My dissertation examined the reasons for this popularity by considering the relationship between key aspects of Graham’s message and the cultural anxieties that were present in America in the 1950s and 1960s. Focusing on the theme of Graham’s conversion narratives and using theories derived from the social sciences, I argued that Graham’s success stemmed from his ability to tap into prevailing anxieties and provide a therapeutic response to them. My project outlined a genealogy of both the history of conversion narratives in the United States and the development of social scientific

theories to understand those narratives. I then gave an account of Graham’s third conversion narrative, the Forest Home story, and demonstrate the ways in which the story encapsulates Graham’s fundamental message: certainty in the face of doubt. I examined Graham’s teachings on gender and sex, and link his message to the anxiety over shifting gender roles in post-War America. Lastly, I strayed from the theme of conversion to examine Graham’s eschatology and how it informed his views on race, politics, and civil religion. On the broadest level, my dissertation contributes to the discussion of the relationship between religious leaders and their culture - more specifically, the ways that religious leaders embody, address, and attempt to defuse cultural anxiety. The narrower objective of the dissertation is to bring to light the ways Graham addressed the anxieties of the 1950s and 60s to obtain fame and power.

### Matthew J. Dillon “The Heretical Revival: The Nag Hammadi Library in American Religion and Culture”



#### Matthew J. Dillon, PhD

In December 1945, in the shadow of the towering cliffs of the Jabl al-Tariff, Egyptian peasant Muhammad Ali struck upon an antique jar while digging for fertilizer. The subsequent tale of treasures exhumed, blood feuds, black

market intrigue, and scholars smuggling texts across national borders has become a modern legend, while the twelve codices found and collectively referred to as the Nag Hammadi Library have revolutionized our understanding of early Christian history. Yet while numerous scholarly texts have theorized how the Nag Hammadi find has altered our understanding of the ancient Mediterranean, there has been comparatively little analysis of how these same texts have impacted, transformed, or inspired contemporary religion.

My dissertation, “The Heretical Revival: The Nag Hammadi Library in American Religion and Culture,” is the first book-length study of the reception of the Nag Hammadi Codices (NHC) as religious documents. In it, I analyze interpretations of the NHC within orthodox congregations, Gnostic churches, media, the arts, and “spiritual but not religious” individuals. I argue that the publication of the NHC has inspired two related lines of interpretation in America. First, the NHC have been met as a “return of the repressed” Christian memory that has generated debates about the true Christian history. Groups, individuals and media use the NHC to assert competing interpretations of the Christian past

that contend for authority over Christianity in the present. Secondly, many individuals in this reception history read the NHC after having been alienated from mainstream Christianity. In an effort to reconnect to the Christian tradition, these individuals use the NHC to reinterpret Christian symbols along psychological, feminist, and metaphysical lines. I offer two conclusions. One, that the reception of the NHC exposes a reconfiguration of Christian memory in America that began within new religions and culture (media, art, and academia), but is now entering traditional, mainline churches. Two, that this reconfiguration of memory is itself an attempt to adapt Christianity to fit an America influenced by the counterculture, secularization, and religious pluralization.

I defended my dissertation on April 18th, 2017. My foremost gratitude goes to my stellar committee, without whom this dissertation would never have come to fruition: Jeffrey Kripal, April DeConick, and Hilary Mackie (Classics). I will be revising “The Heretical Revival” into a monograph over the next year in order to bring it to publishers sometime in late 2018.



## Biko Gray “Enfleshing the Subject: Race and Religion in the Development of Subjectivity”

**Biko Gray, PhD**

My research revolves around questions of subjectivity, race, religion, embodiment, and social justice. My dissertation, entitled “Enfleshing the Subject: Race and Religion in the Development of Subjectivity” argues that subjectivity is a necessarily religious question that must take seriously the reality of the flesh. Drawing upon the recent spate of violent and often lethal activity between law enforcement officers and African Americans, the project ultimately argues that those we’ve lost were lost as flesh—that is, as an indeterminate, affective, and relational space that conditions the emergence and development of subjectivity; in the space of the flesh, religion and race speak to the other, disclosing a horizon of engagement beyond cognitive, categorical, and rational dimensions of subjectivity. Moreover, the beyond of the flesh speaks to an other-oriented horizon of engagement for life, movement, and being, as well as a way of living, moving, and being that speaks to ethical responsibility and communal love and care. In fall 2017, I will be joining the faculty at Syracuse as an Assistant Professor of Religion.



## Rachel C. Schneider “The Ethics of Whiteness: Race, Religion, and Social Transformation in South Africa”

**Rachel C. Schneider, PhD**

In April 2017, I successfully defended my dissertation with distinction. This achievement culminated my time at Rice, where I was grateful to have received expert mentorship, to have taught several undergraduate courses, and to have received the opportunity to conduct fieldwork in South Africa. My dissertation was supervised by Elias K. Bongmba (Religion) and James Faubion (Anthropology). Anthony Pinn (Religion) also served on my committee.

The central question driving my work is how religious commitments shape ethical and political practice and inspire social change. My dissertation, which focuses on South Africa, explores how religion impacts racial justice movements. Not only do I show the role of religion in shaping the anti-apartheid movement and its utopian ideal of a non-racial, democratic South Africa, I also show how religion continues to inspire political activism, civic engagement, and community development in the post-apartheid era.

My dissertation, “The Ethics of Whiteness: Race, Religion, and Social Transformation in South Africa,” is an ethnographic study of progressive white Christians living in Johannesburg who sought to engage with histories of racism, contemporary racial inequality, and calls for racial redress. After apartheid, many whites attempted to preserve

their privileged way of life through strategies of withdrawal, isolation, and emigration. In this context, Christian churches became key sites for maintaining elite white cultural norms. The individuals and groups I studied chose an alternate path: one which sought to embrace, rather than resist, sociopolitical and racial change. My interlocutors intentionally lived and worked in poor, black spaces and were involved in experimental social and spiritual communities aimed at bridging race and class divides. Seeking to challenge dominant white norms, they strove to cultivate lives of simplicity, service, and “downward mobility.” Such actions, while not unproblematic, were legitimated through a plurality of secular and religious ideals that framed authentic South Africanness, authentic humanness, and authentic Christianity as bound up with lived sacrifice and struggle.

At the heart of this study is what I call the ethics of whiteness—the beliefs, practices, and values that motivated those I studied to engage in efforts to think and act otherwise in relation to their conservative white peers. I develop the concept of the ethics of whiteness in dialogue with concerns and methodological approaches found in the anthropology of ethics, which focuses on the empirical and qualitative study of ethical life.

Though they were wary of traditional religious institutions, I discovered that my interlocutors drew from a number of religious sources and histories to develop their socially engaged form of Christian spirituality, including 1) Black Theology and South Africa’s history of multiracial religious activism against apartheid; 2) liberal Protestantism and its focus on social development and civic engagement; and 3) the Emerging Church Movement, an Anglo-American reform movement that began in the late 1990s in opposition to conservative white evangelicalism. The confluence of these movements, I suggest, ultimately allowed my interlocutors to understand themselves simultaneously as political activists, development workers, and Christian revolutionaries engaged in the work of building a “new” non-racial, democratic South Africa where white and black alike could find a dwelling place.

I am grateful for all the support that the Department of Religion at Rice has provided me and I look forward to transforming my dissertation into a full-length book manuscript and peer-reviewed articles in the next phase of my academic career.

## Alumni News

### Guillory Honored with Alumni Flame Award as Outstanding Graduate



**Margarita Simon Guillory**  
**Assistant Professor of Religion**  
**University of Rochester**

I would like to thank Dr. April DeConick (chair) and the department of Religion for this award. I am truly humbled by this kind act. Over the last six years, I have been fortunate enough to receive departmental research awards and university-level teaching awards at the University of Rochester. However, this Alumni Flame Award is one that I will dearly treasure because it comes from an esteemed group of scholars who provided me with fantastic training in religious studies. Accordingly, the words that follow seek to summarize my “Rice Experience.”

Circuitousness is a term that best describes my professional path. This pathway started in secondary public education where I taught high school chemistry and physics. I had the pleasure of combining my love for physical sciences with teaching for almost a decade. During this time, I also worked with the Human Genome Sequencing Center at Baylor College of Medicine. However, it was an underlying desire to answer a childhood question that ultimately led me away from the sciences and nudged me towards studying religion at Rice University. Specifically, it was in the department of Religion that I would finally have the opportunity to grapple with a question that I have asked myself since I was seven years old: What was it about religion that allowed African American people in my neighborhood to survive the sometimes harsh realities of life?

My concentration in African American Religion allowed me to unpack this very complex question. Courses that covered the diverse religious experiences of people of the African Diaspora conjoined with an exposure to various methodologies to explore such realities were vital components of this specialization. More importantly, under the guidance of Dr. Anthony Pinn, I ascertained an analytical sophistication that allowed me to examine African American Religion with both a critical eye and a sympathetic orientation. Additionally, as a graduate student in African American Religion, I learned the art of multi-tasking the three pillars of academic life: research, teaching, and service.

During my graduate tenure, I published essays on African American Spiritualism and Religion in Hip Hop Culture, co-taught and independently instructed courses both at Rice and the University of Houston, and served as a productive citizen in the department.

In addition to these experiences, my graduate school experience at Rice was enriched by the department’s commitment to interdisciplinary approaches to the study of religion. While I specialized in African American Religion, my social scientific approach to examining this diverse terrain came to fruition in courses taught by Drs. Parsons, Kripal, and Emerson (a professor in the department of Sociology). Using interpretative tools drawn from psychoanalysis, ethnography, and urban sociology allowed me to view African American religious experience using, what I call, “scientific” eyes. This move returned me back to my love of science. The circuitousness of my career path, then, suddenly took on a circular nature in that my Rice experience allowed me to combine my passion for science, religion, and teaching.

In this way, the department of Religion at Rice served as an outlet of “freedom”. Various degrees of topical and methodological freedom are, I would argue, the jewels of this program. Ergo, I encourage current students to mine their graduate education at Rice, treasuring the valuable experiences gained from each layer of the process. Also, I invite perspective students, no matter where you are in your professional life, to *experience* Rice for yourselves.



Courtney Applewhite '14, B.A.



Jonathan Chism '14, PhD



Michael Heyes '15, PhD

## Department of Religion Alumni Announcements

### Courtney Applewhite (B.A., 2014)

After graduating from Rice in 2014 with degrees in religious studies and cognitive sciences, I knew I would eventually return to academia. Rice's Religious Studies faculty has offered endless resources and is one of the reasons I have continued to pursue this path. I am pleased to be joining the University of California-Santa Barbara Religious Studies department this September to pursue a MA/PhD in Religious Studies with an emphasis in Cognitive Science. My advisor, Dr. Ann Taves, is currently working on many fascinating projects and I am thrilled to have the opportunity to delve into and contribute to the emerging field of cognitive science of religion.

### Jonathan Chism (PhD, 2014)

Since completing his doctor of philosophy degree in Religious Studies from Rice University in 2014, Dr. Jonathan Chism has served as a lecturer of History at the University of Houston-Downtown. He recently received two offers for tenure track positions, including an offer for a position in African American Church History from the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia and an offer for a position in twentieth-century African American History from the History Program at the University of Houston-Downtown. He has accepted the offer from the University of Houston-Downtown and will be an assistant professor of African-American History (20th

century) starting August 2017. He will continue to serve as a fellow for the Center for Critical Race Studies and teach a wide array of history courses including but not limited to History of Religion in the United States, History of the New South, History of the Civil Rights Movement, and History of Hip Hop in the United States. He is enthusiastic about completing his first major book, *Saints in the Struggle*, under contract with Lexington Books, this fall semester.

### Michael Heyes (PhD, 2015)

In fall of 2017, Michael Heyes will be joining the faculty of the Religion department at Lycoming College in Williamsport, PA as a tenure-track assistant professor. He joins the college with two years on the tenure clock. He looks forward to restructuring the major and coursework to bring the department into the comparative model as well as lending his talents to the Medieval Studies major and growing undergraduate research focus of the institution.

### Derek Hicks (PhD, 2009)

Derek Hicks was promoted to the rank of Associate with tenure at Wake Forest University. He will be the first African American to earn tenure in the school of Divinity.

### Andrea R. Jain (PhD 2010)

I recently organized an exploratory session on the Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) to be held at the annual meeting of the American

Academy of Religion in November. The session will appear in the program as: Exploratory Session on the Spiritual But Not Religious: A Roundtable Discussion on the Past, Present, and Future(s) of Research. I hope this will be the first step toward establishing a permanent program unit at the AAR dedicated to this topic. Panelists include: Joy Bostic (Case Western Reserve Univ), Robert Fuller (Bradley Univ), Matthew Hedstrom (Univ of Virginia), Linda Mercadante (Methodist Theological School, Ohio), William Parsons (Rice Univ), and Jodie Vann (Arizona State Univ). I have the honor of presiding over what we can all trust will be an incredible start to an ongoing conversation on the SBNR. Dr. Jain is currently Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University School of Liberal Arts.

### Chad Pevateaux (PhD, 2013)

Chad Pevateaux was promoted, after two years in a visiting role, to the tenure-track position of Assistant Professor of Religion and Coordinator of Liberal Studies at Texas Wesleyan University. At Texas Wesleyan, Chad teaches comparative religions, philosophy, and humanities. Previously, he taught for three years as visiting assistant professor of religious studies at St. Mary's College of Maryland. He is thrilled to be teaching in Texas, his home state, and grateful for the opportunity to promote critical thinking and help make the world a better place, one class at a time.

*Alumni, please send information about your current activities to [reli@rice.edu](mailto:reli@rice.edu) to be included in future newsletters*



Derek Hicks '09, PhD



Andrea Jain '10, PhD



Chad Pevateaux '13, PhD



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Houston, TX 77251-1892

## Become a Department Partner

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.

The Department of Religion gratefully acknowledges the financial support of our donors including Dr. Ben Worsley (B.A., 1991) & Mrs. Monika Worsley, Dr. Mary Ann Clark (PhD, 1999), Sylvia Y. Louie (retired Religion Department Administrator for more than 40 years), and the many anonymous donors who are supporting our department as Partners on all levels.

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### What are our immediate needs?

#### **Become an Undergraduate Partner \$100**

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.

#### **Become a Graduate Partner \$200**

We also need to increase our support for graduate students so that they have more opportunities to share their knowledge globally.

#### **Become a Faculty Partner \$500**

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.

#### **Become a Scholar Partner \$1000**

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.