

# RELIGION MATTERS

## Message from the Chair: The Gift of the Humanities

April DeConick

Isla Carroll & Percy E. Turner Professor of Biblical Studies

What would we do without a past? This question has been on my mind lately as I witness an elderly parent facing dementia that has now crippled his ability to recall who I am, where he is, or what has been planned for the day. He is completely dependent on us to tell him who we are and what is happening to him. As I experience his gradual loss of memory, I am facing the reality that our personal identities, our sense of self, and our ability to carry forward with our lives are utterly dependent on knowing our past. Being conscious is not enough. Without a past, we don't know who we are or where we are going.

This insight has made me begin to look at "history" differently. While I have always advocated that one of the essential features of the humanities is its drive to pass on our history, whether literary, social, cultural, or religious, I am now keenly aware that knowing our history is so essential because history and the self are locked together. We are embedded in our history in ways that go beyond "it's nice to be literate" or "let's learn about our past so we don't repeat the same mistakes." History is a project of self-construction. History is not about reifying the past. It is about situating our selves in the present with an eye toward our future.

As an historian of religion, I no longer see the religious histories I study as linear accounts of things long ago, distanced or isolated from where I am today. Rather, I have come to regard the past as essential to the present. In order to generate and foster our identities, we rely on narratives of our past and their continual recalibrations. We live in a perpetual loop, aligning our past with who we are now and where we see ourselves going.

When students come to study religion, they are coming to face the power of the present past to shape the self. They become part of an age-old hermeneutical loop, part of a new generation of people with their own concerns, standards and dreams who engage religious texts, narratives, performances, art and other artifacts. As they engage this religious past, they not only have the opportunity to foster the religious present for the next generation, but to revolutionize it, to push toward a more global understanding of people and our common quest to understand ourselves and what transcends us.

While the sciences help us understand the physical world and its operations, and the social sciences point us to our lives as social creatures, it is only the humanities that pushes us toward engaging our cultural heritage in order to birth and transform our selves. We do this not just to be better human beings, but to be human beings capable of knowing who we are and capable of following our own paths.

The ancient gnostic Theodotus said something similar to his students who worried about the weight of fate. Theodotus said that our ability to decide our future depends on "the knowledge of who we were, what we have become, where we were, and whither we hasten." This he said is our birth and rebirth.

The gift of the humanities is the birth and rebirth of the self. It is the understanding that while we construct our selves from the knowledge of our past, we are not limited by the past. Rather it is from this knowledge that we are empowered to create any future we can imagine.



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## Department & Faculty News

### Brian Ogren Fellowship at Villa I Tatti in Florence, Italy



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

In July of 2015, my family and I took up residence in a ninth century Benedictine monastery turned apartment, overlooking olive groves and vineyards in the beautiful and idyllic hills of Florence, Italy. This was the beginning of our fellowship year at Villa I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies.

Villa I Tatti was bequeathed to Harvard University by the distinguished art historian Bernard Berenson, and since 1961, it has acted as one of the world's premier institutions for advanced research on the Italian Renaissance. Every year, fifteen fellows are selected to carry out advanced research on any aspect of the Italian Renaissance. This year saw fellows in areas as diverse as literature, art history, philosophy and social history, and from places as varied as Canada, Croatia, Australia, England, Scotland, Italy and the United States. We had

the privilege of socializing over fabulous lunches prepared by a team of Italian chefs. These lunches, as well as the Chianti produced by I Tatti's wonderful winemakers, helped my waistline to expand as much as the conversation helped to expand my horizons!

Throughout the year I was working on a book on the creation of the world and notions of the beginning of time in late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Italian Jewish thought. Many of the thinkers on whom I was writing were active in Florence, and it was inspiring to be able to write from the place of origin.

During the Renaissance, Florence was a major hub of humanist thought and of intellectual exchange. The Medici were patrons of learning as well as the arts, and under their watch, prominent rabbis were consulted for their philosophical knowledge. Presently, the Jewish congregation of Florence has about 500 active members, and the chief Rabbi, Joseph Levi, is still a philosopher. During my year here, I was invited by his wife Shulamit, who is also a scholar, to speak at an international conference in honor of his 70th birthday. It was exhilarating for me to honor the present with my research into the past.

Being in Florence also allowed me and my family to explore other parts of Italy. My three year old daughter Danielle enjoyed the unique experience of a gondola ride in Venice, while my wife Sharon and I were able to visit and appreciate the Venetian ghetto during the 500th anniversary of its establishment. A short research trip to Rome allowed me to seek out the manuscripts of one of my sixteenth century authors, while a trip to Genova allowed us to visit the largest aquarium in Europe.

This year has been a delightful and enriching experience. Moreover, the time afforded to me was invaluable, and I was able to bring my book project to completion. I am grateful to the dean's office and to my department for allowing me to spend the year away in Italy, and I know that I will be bringing a lot back with me to share with the Rice community.



## Department of Religion Administrators

**Sylvia Louie**

**Department Administrator, retired**

When I first arrived on campus, I was intimidated with the perception that at Rice everyone was super smart. Much to my surprise, I soon realized that this elite group of intellectuals didn't necessarily know everything. Thus, my role began first as big sister, Mother Hen, and then grandmother to the graduate students through the years.

Thankfully, in the eighties access to electronic medium made communicating super fast and easy to dispense gentle reminders for pending deadlines as well as other important data.

One of the rewards of being at Rice was all the friendships I made especially in the department, but also throughout the campus. It was a joy to come to the office every day. I was very fortunate to have supportive department chairs and faculty allowing me to manage the office my way. In fact, I often bragged about having the best faculty and graduate students on campus.

After being a fixture in the Department of Religion for over four decades with all seven department chairs, retirement loomed around the corner. However, before leaving Rice a big project was knocking on my door and that was to record the history of the department. So, for the first time I made the trek to the annual AAR/SBL reconnecting and interviewing former faculty and graduate students. I had been warned about the craziness of thousands of people rushing from one hotel to another attending presentations and meetings. Faculty and alums were very encouraging and cooperative in lending their voices to this monumental task. Finally, with the assignment completed the book about the history of the Department of Religion at Rice University will soon be available. Look for the announcement about ordering a copy with proceeds benefiting graduate student activities.



I moved to Religion when Sylvia Louie retired in February. I was a bit nervous stepping into Sylvia's shoes but the faculty, staff and students have made me feel quite welcomed. An added bonus is Sylvia has been a huge support during this transition.

A little about me, I have been at Rice for 16 years. Before coming to the Department of Religion, I was in the Art History Department. Prior to HART, I was in CSL (now CLIC) and my first job at Rice was in the Dean of Humanities Office. So, you can say, I am quite comfortable in my understanding of the School of Humanities and Rice at large. That is not to say that I know it all, there is still lots to learn about administration at Rice, but I am fortunate to have the support system of the women and men of the School of Humanities.

I also just completed a 7-year term as a Resident Associate at Sid Richardson College. This meant my husband, cats and I lived in a suite in one of the dorms on campus with roughly 250-300 students as our neighbors. During this time we learned a lot about the multitude of resources available to students in regards to academics, career planning, campus events, and well-being. The experience was one I will cherish for the rest of my life.

As you can see, I have arrived in the Department with experience in many different facets of life at Rice. I am excited to use my experience to continue to support the School of Humanities and most importantly the individuals in the Department of Religion.

## New Program Coordinator for Jewish Studies

**Laura Livingston**

**Administrative Coordinator, School of Humanities**

A native Houstonian, Laura remembers attending Summer Enrichment courses for middle schoolers at Rice University more than twenty years ago. Now, she's joined the staff in the School of Humanities and splits her time between the Department of English and the Department of Religion where she also serves as the new Program Coordinator for the Program in Jewish Studies. Herself a Liberal Arts graduate, Laura appreciates the value of an education in the Humanities.

In addition to providing coordination and support for Jewish Studies, she also manages publications, events, and outreach and will be responsible for the migration of department and program websites to the university's new hosting platform. "I am pleased to join the School of Humanities and look forward to being a part of the Rice community," says Laura.



## David Cook Translates Syrian Apocalyptic Text



**David Cook, Associate Professor of Religion**

During the course of the year I have been working mainly on translation projects, first, the translation of Nu`aym b. Hammad al-Marwazi (d. 844), *The Book of Tribulations*, the earliest known apocalyptic text to survive from the classical period. This is an amazing text, one that has so many different angles, as it is one of the few texts to survive from Syria during the pre-Crusader period, and it gives us a completely different view of the relations between Muslims and Christians

at that time. For me it was also a challenge because I had never translated a large-ish text before, and there are so many different unusual words, phrases and place-identifications in it. I am hypothesizing that Charlemagne, and maybe an early queen of England might be alluded to in it!

Nu`aym's present-day relevance is that it is regularly cited by the Islamic State, as the latter believes in the prophecies about an end-time battle (like that of Armageddon in the Bible) that will occur at Dabiq, in northern Syria. The interesting thing is that even though Nu`aym has some 60 pages of descriptions of the battles in the area of Dabiq, which date from the period when Dabiq was used by the Umayyad dynasty for a base to attack the Byzantines, Dabiq itself is not mentioned even once in Nu`aym. This was unexpected for me.

During the entire semester, my graduate student Abdulbasit Kassim and I have been working on the publication of the Boko Haram texts. Boko Haram is a local Salafi-jihadi Nigerian group operating in the northeastern section of the country since approximately 2006. The

book will be divided into two major sections, of which Abdulbasit has almost completed the first one--on the materials from before the July 2009 revolt. During this revolt the group's original leader, Muhammad Yusuf, was murdered by the Nigerian police. Fun fact, I was traveling through that region just two months before this happened in 2009 and it is amazing for me to be dating different texts seven years later to the time when I was physically present in the area. Had I known, I would have gone and listened to Yusuf!

Most of these initial texts are theological and social-critique, but some of the later ones focus on jihad. The second section of the Boko Haram texts will be a series of the group's videos during its violent stage. These contain highly interesting historical information about the group's operations. However, one has to say that translating Boko Haram is a challenge, because of the heavy theological citations that occur--these have taxed Abdulbasit's talents to the maximum. It is my and Abdulbasit's intention that the Boko Haram texts be used as the go-to source for knowledge about the group for years to come.

## 2016-2017 Department of Religion Events

**Friday, September 9** • 4:00 pm • Humanities Bldg, Room 226  
GEM: Marcia Brennan "A Rose From Two Gardens: Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and Images of the End of Life"

**Tuesday, September 13** • 4:00 pm • Brochstein Pavilion  
Tuesday Tea with RELI

**Tuesday, October 12** • 4:00 pm • Brochstein Pavilion  
Tuesday Tea with RELI

**Thursday, October 13** • 12:00 pm • Kyle Morrow Rm, Fondren  
Stuart A. Wright "Storming Zion: Government Raids on Religious Communities"

**Friday, October 14** • 4:00 pm • Humanities Bldg, Room 226  
GEM: April DeConick "The Gnostic New Age"

**Tuesday, November 8** • 4:00 pm • Brochstein Pavilion  
Tuesday Tea with RELI

**Friday, November 11** • 4:00 pm • Humanities Bldg, Room 226  
GEM: Brian Ogren "The Beginning of the World in Renaissance Jewish Thought"

**Thursday, November 17** • 3:00 pm • Kyle Morrow Rm, Fondren  
Rockwell Lecture: Drs. Vahakangas and Dr. Maddox  
"Religious Communities: A Resource or Liability for Development"

**Friday, November 18** • 8:00 am • Humanities, Room 117  
Erin Wilson: "Religion, Secularism, and the Politics of the Refugee Crisis"

**Tuesday, December 13** • 4:00 pm • Brochstein Pavilion  
Tuesday Tea with RELI

**Tuesday, January 10** • 4:00 pm • Brochstein Pavilion  
Tuesday Tea with RELI

**Friday, January 20** • 4:00 pm • Humanities Bldg, Room 226  
GEM: Claire Fanger "Divine Dreamwork in the Middle Ages"

**Tuesday, February 14** • 4:00 pm • Brochstein Pavilion  
Tuesday Tea with RELI

**Friday, February 17** • 4:00 pm • Humanities Bldg, Room 226  
GEM: Anne Klein "Longchenpa's Open Secret: Philosophy & Phenomenology in Contemplative Lives & Literatures"

**Tuesday, March 21** • 4:00 pm • Brochstein Pavilion  
Tuesday Tea with RELI

**Friday, March 24** • 4:00 pm • Humanities Bldg, Room 226  
GEM: Bill Parsons "Tracing the Dialogue Between Psychology and Buddhism from 1880s to Present"

**Thursday, April 6 - Saturday, April 8** • 9:00 am, daily  
Kyle Morrow Room, Fondren Library  
Rockwell Foundation Symposium: Future Religion

**Tuesday, April 11** • 4:00 pm • Brochstein Pavilion  
Tuesday Tea with RELI

## Department of Religion Journal Editors and Contributions



**Elias Bongmba,**  
Managing Editor,  
*Religious Studies Review*

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

The *Religious Studies Review* (RSR) Editorial team and Wiley-Blackwell worked together to design a new cover for the journal. The new cover maintains the general features such as use of perfect binding and size, but freshens the look, since our last redesign in 2007. The sub sections were reorganized and new sections for Gender

& Sexuality Studies, Religion & Law, Pedagogy, Digital Materials & Media, and Interviews were created. The scope of major review essays was expanded and several special issues are in the planning stages.

We thank all our editors and reviewers who continue to serve *RSR* and welcome the new editors who have joined the editorial board in the past year.

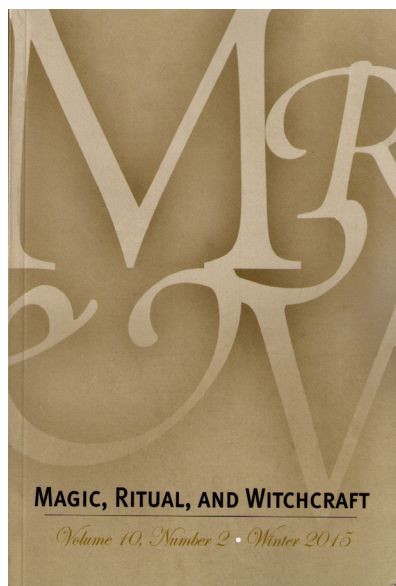
We look forward to *RSR*'s annual editorial meeting at the AAR/SBL conference in San Antonio in November. As we start a new school year, we invite readers who are interested in reviewing books for *RSR*, to contact us at [rsr@rice.edu](mailto:rsr@rice.edu).

### New Area Editors:

Sociology & Anthropology (co-editor) - Sarah King, Grand Valley State University  
Gender & Sexuality Studies - Charlotte Radler, Loyola Marymount University  
Philosophy of Religion - Charles Taliaferro, St Olaf College  
Ethics - Jim Bailey from Duquesne University  
Religion and Law - Richard Amesbury, Universitat Zurich  
Pedagogy - Constance Furey, Indiana University  
Digital Materials and Media - Rachel Wagner, Ithaca College  
History of Christianity: Modern/Global - Kristen Bloomer, Carleton College  
Judaism: Hellenistic to Late Antiquity - Loren Spielman, Portland State University  
Judaism: Medieval/Early Modern Jewish Studies - Flora Cassen, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Islam (co-editor) Maha Marouan, Pennsylvania State University  
Africa (co-editor) - Dianna Bell, Vanderbilt University  
East Asia - Lukas Pokorny, The University of Aberdeen  
Inner Asia - Matthew King, University of California Riverside  
Interviews - Adam Stewart, Crandall University

### New Editorial Advisory Board Members

Ellen Armour, Vanderbilt University  
David Gray, Santa Clara University  
Rosalind Hackett, World Parliament of Religion



**Claire Fanger, Associate Professor of Religion**

It has been a productive year for *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft*. First, at this time fourteen new scholars, from Departments of History, Anthropology and Religion, have agreed to join the editorial board, giving us a new array of expertise in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Near East. New editorial board members include Adam Ashforth, University of Michigan; Ana Mariella Bacigalupo, The University at Buffalo; Gideon Bohak, Tel Aviv University; Elias Bongmba, Rice University; Nils Bubant,

University of Aarhus; Peter Geschiere, University of Amsterdam; Laurel Kendall, American Museum of Natural History; Amira Mittermaier, University of Toronto; Isak Niehaus, Brunel University London; Michael Puett, Harvard University; Todd Sanders, University of Toronto; Emilie Savage-Smith, Oxford University; Paul Stoller, West Chester University; and Emma Varley, Brandon University.

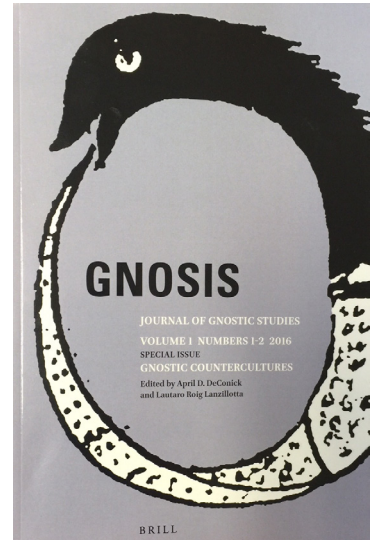
In addition, two former members of the editorial board, anthropologist Raquel Romberg and the journal's founding editor, historian Michael D. Bailey, have agreed to move higher up the masthead, creating a new larger and more interdisciplinary collective of general editors. This editorial collective is intended as part of a long term strategy to enhance the quality and scope of our submissions and to make the journal both more diverse in a disciplinary sense and more cohesive thematically. In line with this effort, we are focusing on developing special issues that draw together more specialized work on hot topics in history and anthropology.

We have six special issues currently in progress. The first, due out later in the month of June, comprises a thematically tight suite of articles on witch flight guest edited by the early modern historian Michael Ostling, and including important new work by Michael Ostling, Walter Stephens, Gerhild Scholz Williams, and Willem de Blécourt, with an afterword by Brian Levack. The number of special issues proposed in the last year has been gratifying and will help us to move more quickly towards triennial publication. As always, we welcome discussion of any ideas you 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/>.

## Rice Faculty & Graduate Students Edit and Contribute to New Journal

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

The first volume of *GNOSIS: Journal of Gnostic Studies* (Leiden: Brill) was published in July 2016. April D. DeConick is the Executive Editor and co-founder of this new academic journal. Several students from the Department of Religion serve as copy editors. Erin Prophet is the lead copy editor. Her copy editing team consists of Cindy Dawson, Vic Nardo, and CJ Schmidt. The premier volume is a special issue on the subject *Gnostic Countercultures*, edited by April D. DeConick and Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta. The contributions represent the best of the papers presented at the Gnostic Countercultures: Terror and Intrigue conference held at Rice University on March 26-28, 2015. The conference was financially made possible by the Rockwell Fund and hosted by the GEM Collective, a group of faculty and students at Rice who study together gnosticism, esotericism and mysticism. The papers in this volume of *GNOSIS* explore the concept of the gnostic in Western culture from the ancient world to the modern New Age. The gnostic is broadly conceived with reference to the claim to have special direct knowledge of the divine, which either transcends or transgresses conventional religious knowledge. The goal of the papers is to trace the emergence, persistence and disappearance of gnostic religious currents that are perceived to be countercultural, inverted, transgressive and/or subversive in their relationship to conventional religions and their claims to knowledge. Contributors include in order of the table of contents: April D. DeConick, Grant Adamson, John D. Turner, Zeke Mazur, Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, Dylan M. Burns, David Litwa, Greg Shaw, Brent Landau, Sarah Iles Johnson, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Victoria Nelson, Matthew J. Dillon, and Margarita Simon Guillory. Subscriptions to the print and electronic journal can be found at [www.brillonline.com](http://www.brillonline.com).



## Rice Students Collaborate in Joint Seminar in Leipzig, Germany



**Matthias Henze**

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

During the academic year 2015/16 I co-taught a doctoral seminar with my colleague Jens Herzer, professor for New Testament studies at the Institut für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft at the University of Leipzig, Germany. The course focused on Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity and was jointly offered by the Department of Protestant Theology at the University of Leipzig, Germany and the Religion Department at Rice University. The course consisted of two seminars, each one week long. The first seminar took place on the Rice campus October 4-11, 2015 on the topic "The Messiah of Israel: Messianic Expectations in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity." A group of seven German students from Leipzig came with Professor Herzer to Houston for an intensive week of study. For the second half of the seminar, six Rice graduate students traveled with me to Leipzig over spring break. The topic of that meeting was "The Torah/Law in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity."

It was fascinating for all participants to have experienced how the university works on the other end: a large, public university in Leipzig, and a small private university in Houston; a university more focused on theology in Leipzig, and a non-denominational religion department at Rice. We complemented each other rather well. Whereas the German doctoral students are very well trained in the New Testament, the Rice students are better informed about the Second Temple materials. The seminar was a great success and will continue. Now we are looking forward to the return of the Leipzig group to the Rice campus in March 2017.



## Conferences

### Annual Rockwell Series: “Spiritual but not Religious”



**William Parsons**  
Professor, Department of Religion

From March 18-20th of 2016, the Department of Religion, as part of our annual Rockwell conference series, brought together 17 scholars to discuss that emerging cultural phenomenon known as the “Spiritual but not Religious” movement.

Recent Pew polls tell us that over 20% of the U.S. population and over 70% of the 19-28 year old crowd self-describe as being “spiritual but not religious.” But what does “being” SBNR mean? It’s on dating sites, so it must be something! But is it clear-cut and easy to identify or is it more like what Gertrude Stein once said about Oakland, California, namely: “There is no there there.” It’s a good question. We can say what it’s not – it does not refer to those who have definitively settled in a particular institutionally-based religious tradition, are happy with its ethical and metaphysical postulates, and are consistent in observing its services and rituals. If this is the case, then it would suggest that being SBNR would refer to those who are not wedded to a particular tradition – those who, on the one hand, are disillusioned with traditional institutional religion and, on the other hand, feel that those same traditions contain deep wisdom about the human condition. To say “I’m spiritual but not religious” would then indicate that a person seeks to integrate religious wisdom without fully committing to what is perceived to be the false trappings and mendacity of religious accouterments of all kinds (i.e., dogma, ideologies, rituals, hierarchies, etc.). At the same time, befitting spiritual shoppers, it also speaks to those who canvass multiple religious traditions, mining their spiritual wisdom and introspective

techniques not for dry dogma but the juice of peak experience in order to foster a spiritual journey tailored to their individual needs. But much more can be said. So it is that the scholars we brought down looked much more closely at its present characteristics, its past cultural determinants, and its possible future directions. The name of the conference, “Being Spiritual but not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s),” was designed expressly for that purpose. What we unearthed was the scholars’ version of a treasure trove of goodies.

Turns out that the “what” of the SBNR is complicated. The typical SBNRer contests any claim to absolute authority and points with regard to traditional institutional forms of religion, their complicity in sustaining structural gender inequalities, structural racism, and role in perpetuating unfair forms of economic, social and political power. In contrast, those who profess to being SBNR tend to valorize individualism, free creative choice and expression, egalitarianism, progressivism, a psychological/therapeutic approach to spiritual growth, and a seeker/quester/consumer mentality. They come from diverse educational, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, lean to the left politically, and, befitting a pluralistic culture, are eclectic in relation to socially regnant religious traditions. They see humans as basically good (and reject

notions of “original sin”), are more liable to devalue a traditional community in favor of participating in multiple, diverse, yet related institutional forms (think the local Jung Institute, the local Zen center and, yes, even the Catholic mass), are on the whole pantheistic/monistic in outlook, affirm a liberative (if undefined) ethic, and are likely to affirm reincarnation.

As for its “whence,” there were multiple contributions detailing a range of influences, ranging from the role of the decade of the 1960’s, the introduction of eastern religious techniques, and the entangled nature of social spaces like that of university departments of religion and that of the psycho-spiritual therapeutic social space. The various contributors, putting on the hat of the public intellectual, also engaged substantial debates (like charges that it fosters spiritual narcissism, a lack of community, a superficial consumerism, and lack of social activism), suggesting some possible future directions for those invested in being SBNR. While hardly exhaustive, the conference laid a solid ground for discussions going forward, and a good time was had by all.



## Faculty Publications and Achievements

### Anne Klein Translation & Commentary on Tibetan Teachings



**Anne Klein**  
Professor, Department of Religion

**Strand of Jewels: My Teachers' Essential Guidance on Dzogchen Text & Oral Commentary, Khetsun Sangpo (1920-2009). Translated, introduced, and compiled by Anne Carolyn Klein**

Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche is famous throughout the Tibetan world for his erudition as a historian—author of a Biographical Dictionary of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism—, scholar of Buddhist texts, poet, and master practitioner in the Dzogchen tradition of Tibet, esoteric pinnacle of the most ancient (Nyingma) school of Tibetan Buddhism. He was a Visiting Scholar at Stanford and then at Rice, visiting my classes and teaching in Rice's School of Continuing Studies in the late 90's and early 2000's. He passed away in Nepal at the end of 2009.

*The original text is written as one deliciously fluid mediation on the different iterations of reality in literary masterpieces that are part of the Heart Essence Dzogchen tradition at the center of this book.*

I first encountered him briefly in 1971, in Darjeeling India. A refugee from Tibet since 1960, he had recently returned from ten years in Japan representing the head of the Nyingma school, where he taught at several major

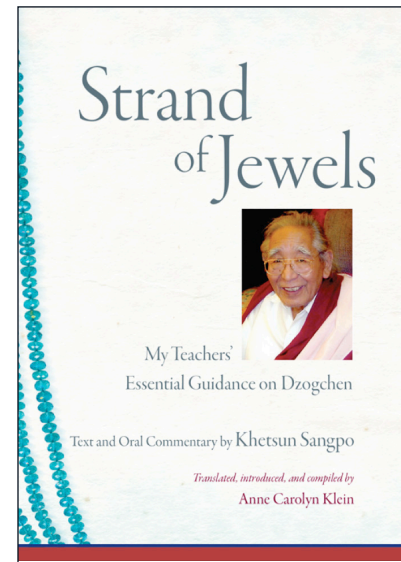
Universities, became fluent in Japanese, and the only Tibetan I've ever known to willingly eat fish.

In 1974 he accepted an invitation to visit the University of Virginia, where he taught over a hundred students in what was then the largest undergraduate class ever in the Department of Religious Studies. His visit sparked my determination to study the texts and practices of the esoteric Great Completeness (Dzogchen) tradition, whose origins to back to the 8th-10th centuries in Tibet, and which provides compelling counterpoints to Geluk school, dating from 14th century, which was the focus of my graduate studies and dissertation. Rinpoche himself, was also deeply studied in Geluk, and his Strand reflects his wide erudition in all four major schools of Buddhism in Tibet.

The book is in three parts. Part I is the Strand of Jewels text itself, my English translation on facing pages with the Tibetan original (a feat that delayed publication by a year, but is a great boon for Tibetan readers, as well as Western readers of Tibetan). Part II is the oral commentary, for which I was a real-time oral translator when it was taught and recorded in 1996 in California. Part III is Khetsun Rinpoche's own tale of the daunting challenges of his life in Tibet where his wish to study the Great Completeness tradition was challenged both by his family and a government official devoted to the Geluk school. It's an often electrifying tale from the very last days of traditional Tibet, and includes a description the literally luminous death of Khetsun Sangpo's beloved cave-reclusive teacher who chose him as a companion on that last journey.

When in 1999 Rinpoche taught a week-long retreat on his recently composed text, Strand of Jewels, I saw his generous oral commentary, as a tremendous resource entering the vast terrain of the Great Completeness. The retreat itself was restricted to seasoned practitioners, but Khetsun Sangpo, who all his life was strictly traditional in not sharing Great Completeness practices through public lectures or even in private except to persons who had done traditional preparation for them, became agreeable and then enthusiastic about my translating and publishing the text and commentary. It took a long time! The vocabulary is rich and technically precise, its practice perspectives

rooted in the Middle Way and Mind Only philosophical literature of India and Tibet. Like most Tibetan Buddhist literature, it is compact and dense with meaning, meant to be studied in connection with extensive oral commentary. Khetsun Rinpoche's own composition draws from a wide range of traditions and texts, and the oral commentary from a deep well of contemplative experience recounted to him by his teachers



The original text is written as one deliciously fluid mediation on the different iterations of reality in literary masterpieces that are part of the Heart Essence Dzogchen tradition at the center of this book. The challenge of rendering this nuanced material into reasonably felicitous English, included the challenge of how to subdivide the text into digestible segments that would accentuate, or at least not obstruct the natural fluidity of the original. I wrote an introduction to bridge the inevitable gaps between the world of the text and our modern world, distilling central points of the Dzogchen context so readers could follow those several threads through the book. The book was released this past January, has garnered one (very positive) review so far in Buddhistdoor Global and is being read mainly by Western and Tibetan students, scholars, and Dzogchen and affiliated traditions.

## Claire Fanger on 14th Century Esotericism



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

### **Rewriting Magic: An Exegesis of the Visionary Autobiography of a Fourteenth-Century French Monk. 2015.**

*Rewriting Magic* explores the implications of John of Morigny's *Flowers of Heavenly Teaching*, both for medieval history and for Fanger herself. While a substantial part of the content of John's book is an extended set of prayers for gaining knowledge, John's work is unusual among prayer books of its time because it includes a visionary autobiography with a quantity of intimate information about the book's inspiration and composition. Through the window of this record, we are privileged to witness how John reconstructs and re-consecrates another liturgy for knowledge acquisition, itself condemned as magical, the *Ars notoria* of Solomon, for which John's autobiography is the only surviving record of use.

Like John's book, the *Ars notoria* promised knowledge of the liberal arts, philosophy and theology through divine infusion. While John claims the ritual worked for acquisition of the arts, he also divined that certain unknown names in the *Ars notoria* were corrupt and encouraged demonic interference with the learning process. Leaving behind the *Ars notoria*, John petitioned the virgin Mary for license to compose a set of "thirty simple prayers" to complete what he called "the good part of his intent" in the acquisition of knowledge. Following John's receipt of this license, the prayers were composed over a three year period, and the work continued as he

added an expanding set of ritual instructions, additional prayers, and a compilation of figures to go with them, relating his ongoing visionary conversation with the virgin Mary all the while. By the end of the book, the "thirty simple prayers" no longer appeared so simple, as John engaged the last parts of his composition in the face of criticism and public scandal.

The trauma of these experiences left their imprint on the book, but in unexpected and sometimes baffling ways. Fanger decodes this imprint even as she relays the narrative of how she learned to understand it. She thus explores

the twin processes of knowledge in John's visionary autobiography and her own work of discovery as she reconstructed the background to his extraordinary book. Part theology, part historical anthropology, part bibliomemoir, *Rewriting Magic* relates a story that will have deep implications for the study of medieval life, monasticism, prayer, magic and religion.

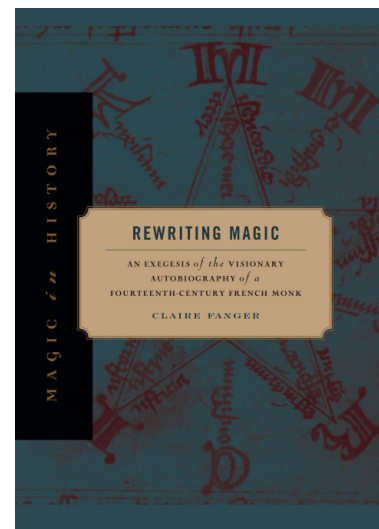
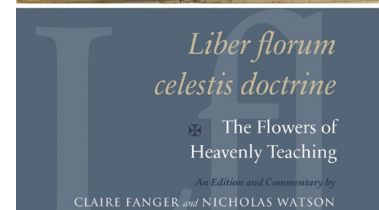
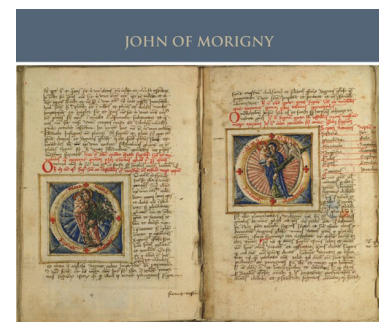
### **Claire Fanger with Nicholas Watson, John of Morigny *Liber florum celestis doctrine* (The Flowers of Heavenly Teaching): an Edition and Commentary. 2015.**

The publication of this edition and systematic study marks a significant event in this long term project by Claire Fanger and Nicholas Watson to edit, contextualize, and document the transmission history of the *Flowers of Heavenly Teaching* by the Benedictine monk John of Morigny. Until recently this work was known only through a chronicle report of its burning at Paris in 1323 on the grounds that it revived a condemned ritual called the *Ars notoria*. However, it survives in three versions in more than twenty copies from across Europe, few of which indicate doubt as to its orthodoxy.

A complex hybrid of magical, devotional, and visionary genres, the *Flowers* has at its core a Book of Prayers, written at the University of Orléans between 1301 and 1308, which models an angelic ascent to the court of heaven. The cycle of prayers promise infused knowledge of the liberal arts and other disciplines to operators who obtain the Virgin's license to use it. The prayers also enables them to petition the Virgin for visionary dreams in which she may respond to specific questions.

After assuming a high-ranking position as provost of Morigny in 1308, John continued to elaborate his work. By 1315 he had added two versions of a Book of Figures, sending out new materials in installments to a growing circle of followers, including secular priests as well as professional religious. He had also added a Book of Visions, which narrates his journey from sin to redemption as well as that of his sister, Bridget. Here he describes his first vision of the virgin Mary at Chartres, his later magical practices, his encounters with demons, and his ultimate rejection of magic arts under the Virgin's protection

The volume includes an edition of the New Compilation text with independent portions of the Old Compilation, extensive contextualizing introductions on John's work and its reception by Fanger and Watson, apparatus with variants and explanatory notes, and eight color plates.



## New book by Rice's DeConick explores the emergence and revolutionizing role of gnosticism

Jeff Falk, Rice University

Gnosticism is a countercultural spirituality that forever changed the practice of Christianity. This is the premise of a new book by April DeConick, the Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Biblical Studies at Rice and chair of the Department of Religion. -

"The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion From Antiquity to Today," published by Columbia University Press, will hit bookstores in September. The 392-page book has already been selected to receive a subvention award from the Figure Foundation, which very selectively supports publications, mainly in philosophy and religion.

Before gnosticism emerged in the second century, the belief was that passage to the afterlife required obedience to God and king, DeConick said. Gnosticism proposed that human beings were manifestations of the divine, unsettling the hierarchical foundations of the ancient world, she said.

"This book is a culmination of my studies of early gnostic texts, something that I have been undertaking for the last 25 years," said DeConick, who traveled to the various libraries and collections that house the manuscripts and studied them in their original languages, mainly Coptic, an old Egyptian language.

"While my previous studies have taken on individual gnostic texts and aspects of gnosticism, this book brings it all together,



explaining gnosticism as a countercultural spirituality that revolutionized religion in antiquity and continues to do so today," she said. "This is a big-picture book, a grand vision of gnosticism as a spirituality focused on experiencing a transcendent God beyond the gods of all the religions and the personal divinity of human beings who are innately connected to this God. This spirituality fused with various religious traditions, and many different social groups and even new religious movements emerged from this fusion.

"The spirituality is highly critical of conventional religions and their gods, including the biblical creator God. This critical stance and the gnostics' reliance on revelatory and mystical experiences put gnostics of all kinds at odds with conventional Christian leaders, causing their views to be characterized by traditional religions as deviant and dangerous," she said.

DeConick begins her exploration in ancient Egypt and follows with the rise of gnosticism from early Christianity to contemporary New Age spiritual philosophies. As these theories find expression in science fiction and fantasy films, she sees evidence of gnosticism's next incarnation.

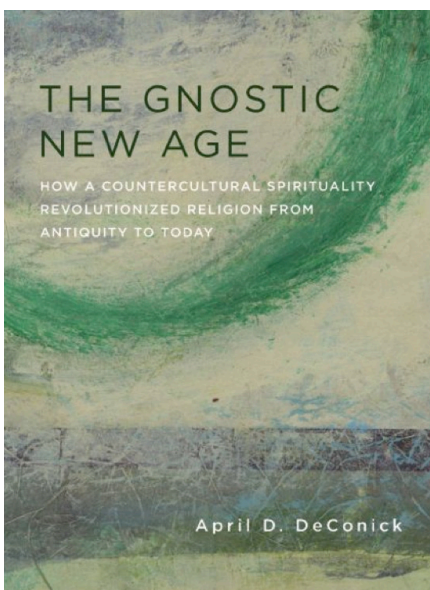
"I have been interested also in the survival and glorification of gnostic spirituality in contemporary American culture, so I have included in each chapter of my book a modern film that highlights various aspects of gnosticism that have come to dominate our

religious (and fantasy) views and have fueled the growth of the spiritual but not religious movement and the rise of the 'nones,'" said DeConick, who included analyses of "The Matrix," "The Truman Show," "Pleasantville," "Dark City" and "Dogma," among others.

"I think that the gnostic has been so glorified in our contemporary culture because of the recycling of ancient gnostic texts which were rediscovered in the 1940s and were highly publicized in the 1970s," DeConick said. "So my book is interested in the survival of gnosticism outside of traditional religious structures, within gnostic texts that are directly engaged by new generations of readers. Every time this happens (when gnostic texts are read by new people), there is an explosion of new religious ideas and critique of traditional religious structures. The New Age movement in America grew from this kind of engagement of modern people with ancient religious 'lost' texts."

DeConick is also the author of "Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter" (2013) and "The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says" (2009). She starred in the CNN special series "Finding Jesus" (2015).

This article originally appeared in *Rice News* (August 28, 2016).



## Anthony Pinn on Humanism and Hip Hop

**Anthony B. Pinn, Agnes Cullen Arnold  
Professor of Humanities**

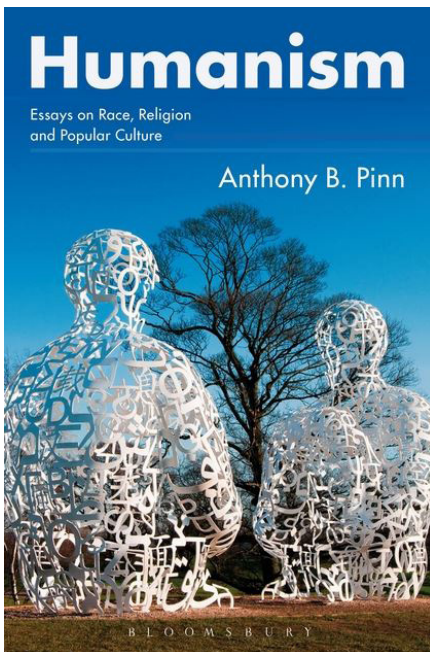
Three themes informing my work over the course of the past two decades continue to shape my scholarship. The first involves the intersections between religion and hip hop culture. The volume I co-edited with Monica Miller and Bernard “Bun B” Freeman (who also co-teaches the ‘Religion and Hip Hop Culture’ course) provides a range of essays tackling various issues related to what it means to argue for a connection between religion and hip hop. Pushing beyond apologetics, the essays give attention to three primary themes:

- (1) Hip Hop on Religion as/for the Embodied Self
- (2) Hip Hop on Religion and the ‘Other’
- (3) Approaches to Religion in Hip Hop on the Margins.

Taken together, the fourteen essays in the volume work to establish hip hop as a heuristic used within the context of the study of religion, but also as a modality of religious encounter worth consideration. The second theme within my scholarship expressed in my 2015 publication is humanism. This volume looks at three areas that have posed a significant challenge to scholars of humanism and the general humanist population. Race and racial justice remain the topic of heated exchange regarding how involved in social activism humanists and humanist organizations should be, over against the more traditional targets of “separation of church and state” and “science education” as ways to safe guard the rights of humanist citizens. Religion is generally discussed in humanist circles in a rather flat and uniformed manner. And, popular culture – e.g., hip hop culture – while significant on a global level receive limited consideration within humanist circles. This book offers new ways to think about how humanists



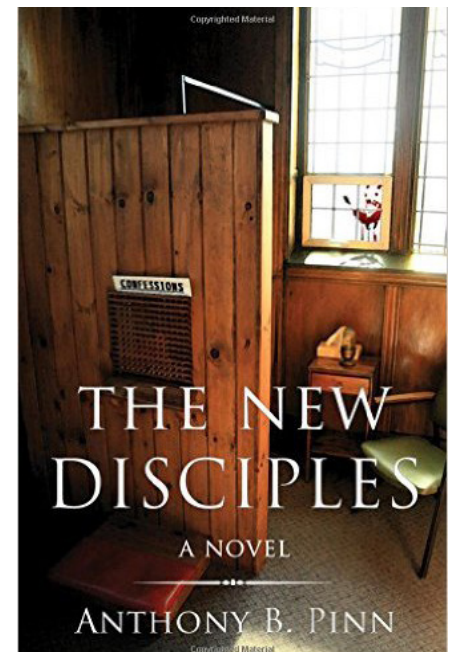
might address these three challenges. The final theme involves theological discourse on human suffering. However, rather than another academic text on theodicy, I decided to address the topic through story, through narrative in the form of fiction.



Anthony Pinn, *Humanism: Essays in Race, Religion, and Cultural Production*  
Bloomsbury Academic (2015)



Monica Miller, Anthony Pinn, Bernard “Bun B” Freeman, editors. *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the U.S.*  
Bloomsbury Publishing (2015)



Anthony, Pinn  
*The New Disciples: A Novel*  
Pitchstone Publishing (2015)

## Jeffrey Kripal: Religion, Myth, Folklore, and Modern Storytelling



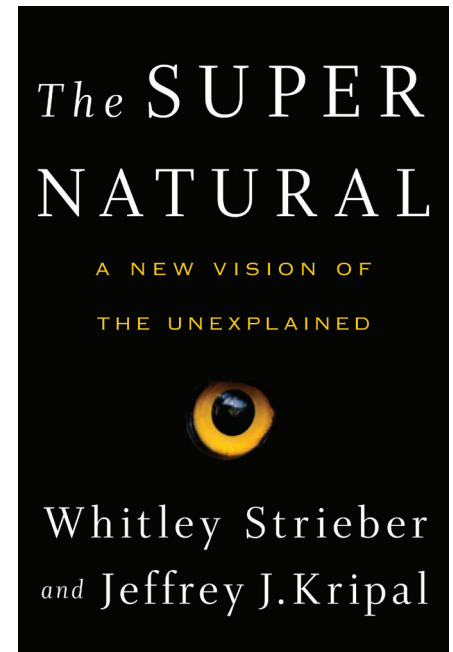
**Dr. Jeffrey Kripal, J. Newton Chair in Philosophy & Religious Thought**

Whitley Strieber, born and raised in San Antonio, Texas, is a well-known horror and science fiction writer. A number of films and television shows have been based on his work, including the most recent SyFy Channel “Hunters” series this last summer. Perhaps his most well known book, however, is a work of non-fiction, *Communion* (1987), a powerful retelling of an abduction experience he underwent on the evening of Christmas of 1985. The painting on the cover, by crime artist Ted Jacobs, features a large-headed, almond-eyed “visitor.” It was this image

that came to define the “alien” in the public imagination in the late 1980s and 90s, and this despite the facts that Strieber voices serious skepticism about the mythology of the alien and suggests in the book that his dramatic experiences had something to do with the furthest reaches of the human mind or soul.

When I read the book around 2008, I recognized a series of methodological reflections on religion encoded or implied in its pages. Strieber is not a scholar of religion, so he does not play these out as we might, but his anomalous experiences certainly left him with an entire set of convictions about religion, myth, folklore, human nature and transcendence, which he explores with impressive sophistication and reflexivity. It is these same reflections that we turn to in our recent book together, *The Super Natural* (Penguin/Tarcher, 2016). The title phrase is a reference to our central thesis that such anomalous experiences are part of the natural world, if only we could re-imagine the natural in more generous and less strictly materialist terms, that is, as fiercely alive and populated by various presences. Whitley writes of his experiences in alternating chapters, and I then reflect on them with the tools of the study of religion, particularly comparison, historical-criticism, phenomenology, different models of the imagination, and the categories of sexuality, magic, trauma, transcendence and myth.

My favorite review appeared last spring in *The Texas Monthly*. Its title, playing off the UFO, captured the book and this particular response just right: “Unidentified Scholarly Subject: Whitley Strieber’s Academic Communion Takes Shape.” That too was part of my own intention in writing the book with Whitley: to bring these marginalized subjects into the center of the study of religion, where I continue to think they belong.

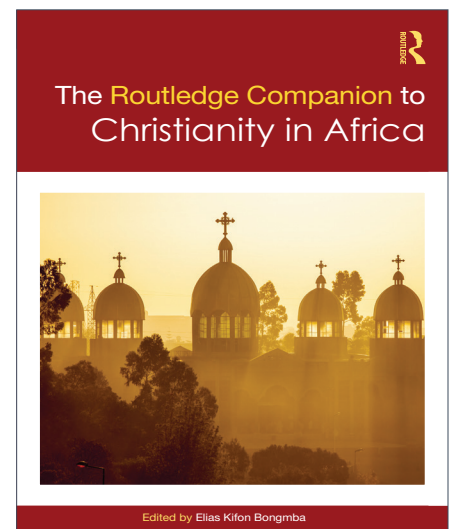


## Elias Bongmba: The Rutledge Companion to Christianity in Africa



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

Dr. Bongmba edited *The Rutledge Companion to Christianity in Africa* (RCCA). The RCCA brings together critical essays on the development of Christianity in different regions of Africa, explores modern developments focusing on missions, post Vatican II developments, interreligious dialogue, and Christian/Muslim relations in Africa. Other parts of the book discuss African Initiatives in Christianity, Christianity, politics and development and ecclesial life and lived experience in which the contributors address themes like music, sexuality, same sex relations, church health services and Christianity and healing, and religions and human rights.

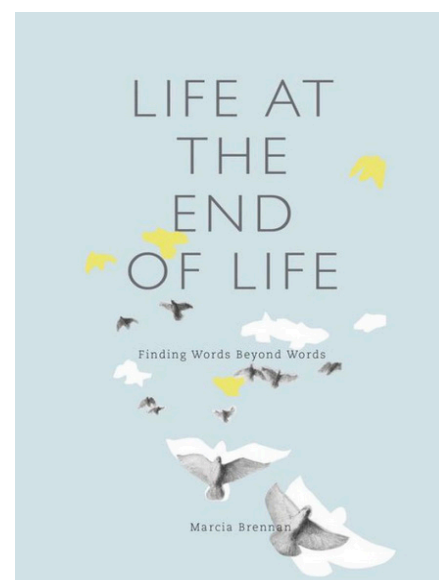


## Marcia Brennan Explores End of Life in New Book



Artist and scholar **Marcia Brennan** serves as Artist in Residence at the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, and the experience of seeing, close-up, the transitional states and transformational visions involved in the approaching end of life raised countless questions about the intersection of life, death, and art.

Those questions are at the heart of this unique book. Bridging disparate fields, including art history, medical humanities, and religious studies, *Life at the End of Life* explores the ways in which art can provide a means for rendering otherwise abstract, deeply personal, and spiritual experiences vividly concrete and communicable, even as they remain open-ended and transcendent. In the face of death, suffering, and uncertainty, Brennan shows how artistic expression can offer valuable aesthetic and metaphysical avenues for understanding and for making meaning.



### Current Faculty, Department of Religion

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

**Marcia Brennan**, 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; Director of Undergraduate Studies (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 Perry 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 (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

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

## Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks on Religion

**Jeffrey J. Kripal** (Editor in Chief), **April D. DeConick** (Associate Editor), and **Anthony B. Pinn** (Associate Editor) formulated, organized and edited the 10-volume series on Religion published by Macmillan this year. The series is written to be forward-thinking when it comes to addressing what the study of religion is and how we can go about studying religion. This handbook series, meant for students, ventures to answer these questions through interdisciplinary lenses. The ten handbooks bring together over two hundred gifted writers in order to provide the reader with a broad, generous, next-generation vision of how the study of religion thinks today on the cutting edge of tomorrow. Six of the ten volumes are edited by Rice faculty and numerous chapters within volumes are written by scholars associated with the Department of Religion at Rice University. The volumes include:

1. A history and overview of the field and its major methods: *Religion: Sources, Perspectives, and Methodologies*, edited by Jeffrey J. Kripal
2. The social scientific study of religion in fields such as anthropology, psychology, and history: *Social Religion*, edited by William B. Parsons

3. The complex interactions of secularism, atheism, law and religion within the modern nation-state: *Beyond Religion*, edited by Phil Zuckerman

4. Religion and social justice: *Just Religion*, edited by Anthony B. Pinn

5. The material, artistic, and architectural dimensions of religion: *Material Religion*, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona

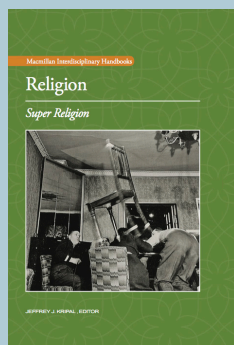
6. Religion and embodiment, race, gender, and sexuality: *Embodied Religion*, edited by Kent L. Brintnall

7. Esoteric and secret forms of religion throughout Western history and in contemporary scholarship: *Secret Religion*, edited by April D. DeConick

8. Religion and the brain: *Mental Religion*, edited by Niki Kasumi Clements

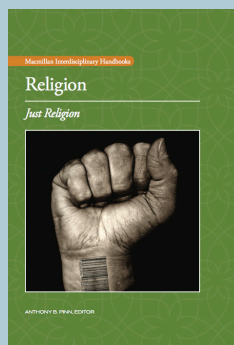
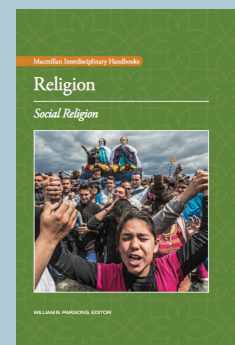
9. New understandings of the possible supernatural and transcendent dimension of religion: *Super Religion*, edited by Jeffrey J. Kripal

10. The narrative aspects of religion in ritual, myth and literature: *Narrating Religion*, edited by Sarah Iles Johnston



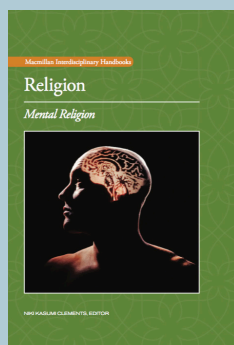
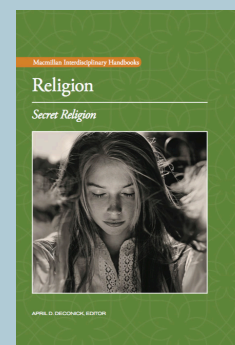
**Professor Jeff Kripal** comments about his volume, “*Super Religion* is a robust attempt on the part of 25 different writers to re-theorize transcendence and the supernatural for contemporary students and scholars of religion. I think it represents some of the most exciting, and provocative, currents in the field today. I mean, hey, it covers everything from the paranormal Jesus to possession and divination in African cultures to the supernatural origins of the modern entertainment industry.”

About his volume, **Professor William Parsons** says, “*Social Religion* looks at the intersection between, on the one hand, religious traditions of all kinds and types and, on the other a variety of social scientific models. It looks at human and cultural complicity in imagining religion, offers a hermeneutic for deconstructing our more pernicious projections, and avenues for letting the light of the divine, shorn of human overlay, shine with greater clarity and force.”



**Professor Anthony Pinn** comments about his volume, *Just Religion*, “From the founding of the United States to the present, the relationship between religion and issues of justice in public has been debated.” He says, “This volume explores the ways in which religion - thought and communities - gets positioned with respect to some of the most pressing issues of the contemporary moment. It gives readers a sense of what religious traditions may have gotten right and gotten wrong with respect to these issues.”

**Professor April DeConick** thinks that the volume she edited, *Secret Religion*, is particularly unique and necessary for the study of religion. “Where else,” she says, “do you find a book written by 25 scholars exploring religion in the margins? Where else do you find a serious treatment of religious texts and traditions that are not considered authoritative by orthodox communities? If you want to reflect on gnosticism, esotericism and mysticism, this volume is for you.”



**Professor Niki Clements** writes about her book: “*Mental Religion: The Brain, Cognition, and Culture* examines the complex relationship between the academic study of religion and the natural sciences, exploring its many modes of explanation, integration, and contestation. By discussing a variety of religious practices and beliefs in conjunction with diverse scientific approaches—including evolutionary psychology, anthropology, cognitive linguistics, and neuroscience—the volume engages the reader in multidisciplinary analysis of the relationship between human cognition and religious experience.”

## Undergraduate News

### Majoring in Religion at Rice University



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

From Jeff Kripal's ever-popular Introduction to the Study of Religion (RELI 101) to intimate seminars like Marcia Brennan's Seminar on The End of Life (RELI 344) and Elias Bongmba's Religion and Literature in Africa (RELI 426), RELI courses of all sizes continually capture the imaginations of students across Rice University. Students are often drawn to the Department of Religion for "the flexibility that came with the major, along with the very engaging, thought provoking classes and material," as **Robbie Harris '18** says. In addition to the "fascinating course material," writes **Isaac Schultz '18**, "the classes are small and student-teacher ratio allows one to really get the most out of every class." **Sparrow Gates '17**, a Religion major with a Jewish Studies minor says: "I'm studying religion because I think our world is in dire need of interfaith literacy and I want to be able to help facilitate that."

Training in the study of religion equips these majors to think dynamically, comparatively, and constructively about religious practices, beliefs, and traditions.

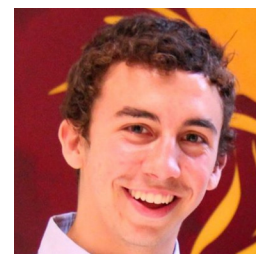
Department of Religion students both increase their understanding of the historical, cultural, textual, and social dimensions of religious phenomena, while constantly pushing the boundaries of what can be thought. Three '16 students receiving Distinction in Research for their Senior Honors Theses, for example, exemplify the connection between training in research and the possibilities for understanding the human: **Dan McNamara** for "Apocalypse or Caliphate: What ISIS Really Wants," **Rio O'Mary** for "Revolution and Relocation: An Analysis of the Disillusionment of Tunisian Youths with the Tunisian Revolution and their Desire to Relocate to the Islamic State" (both directed by David Cook), and **Brandon Zheng** for "Posthumanism and Potential: Philosophy and Spirituality beyond the Boundaries of the Human" (directed by Kripal).

So what exactly do Religion majors do after graduation? They go on to professions across the fields of medicine, law, journalism, education, politics, public policy, non-profits, and even the academic study of religion. **Brandon Zheng**, a Spring 2016 graduate, is teaching English in China; **Deitrios Anastasiadis** is traveling internationally and teaching literature online. Other recent graduates are pursuing advanced degrees in a representative host of disciplines: Clinical Psychology at Columbia University (**Ashley Buchanan**), religious studies at Harvard Divinity School (**Allen Simon**), Humanities at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in England (**Tabish Virani**), medical school at Mount Sinai (**Rio O'Mary**), business school at Rice University (**Dan McNamara**), and Library Science at the University of Texas, Austin (**Emily Higgs**).

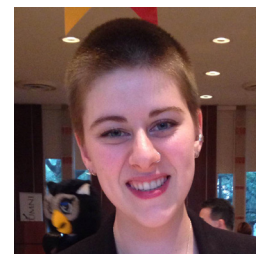
Culturally, politically, and socially, the time to "Get Smart About Religion" is now. And our Department of Religion is engaged in full outreach to the community. If you are willing to get involved as alumni—whether as a guest lecturer, to host a get-together, or to help students think "beyond the hedges"—please email me at [niki.clements@rice.edu](mailto:niki.clements@rice.edu). We'd love to connect you with current students.



Robbie Harris '18



Isaac Schultz '18



Sparrow Gates '17



Dan  
McNamara



Brandon  
Zheng



Tabish  
Virani



Rio  
O'Mary



Ashley  
Buchanan

Allen Simon and Emily Higgs  
pictured next page

## 2015-2016 Undergraduate Awards

### Aparicio Prize

In 1985, Professor Francis R. Aparicio bequeathed a fund to the Department of Religion (and then Chair Niels C. Nielsen) to honor her late husband. Each year the fund has been used to award what has come to be known as the Aparicio Prize to a deserving member of the undergraduate class. The prize, voted on by the entire Department of Religion, celebrates the most outstanding paper on religion (with preference going to those written in the psychology of religion). This year we are proud and happy to announce the winner as **Zoe Tao** for her paper "Music and Psychological Healing."

Zoe argued that various forms of music as found in religious traditions play an adaptive, healing role in human beings, be that of restructuring and releasing desires, aiding in emotional regulation, heightening religious proclivities, and even resulting in ecstatic states. Zoe expertly argued her case by marshaling evidence from religious texts and clinical case histories, all run through an impressive array of psychological theorists.

### Saba Prize

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 competition was fierce and several students demonstrated sustained excellence. The faculty voted to jointly award the Saba to **Emily Higgs**, whose concentration was in Jewish Studies, and **Allen Simon**, whose concentration was in the psychology of religion and GEM (Gnosticism, Esotericism, Mysticism).



**Zoe Tao '17**

Religion, Psychology, Biochemistry (minor)



**Emily Higgs '16**

Religion (Jewish Studies concentration)



**Allen Simon '16**

Psychology of Religion and GEM

## Current Religion Majors

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

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

**Chris Brehm:** Religion & Statistics (Junior, Lovett)

**Abril Maria Brugo:** Religion & Psychology (Senior, Wiess)

**Scott Carlsten:** Religion & Astrophysics (Senior, Wiess)

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

**Luis De Las Cuevas:** Religion (Senior, Wiess)

**Elizabeth Denton:** Religion & Environmental Studies (Junior, Duncan)

**Andrew Dunlap:** Religion (Junior, Hanszen)

**Sparrow Gates:** Religion; Jewish Studies min (Senior, McMurtry)

**Alexander Haer:** Religion & Political Science (Senior, Will Rice)

**John Hagele:** Religion (Senior, Jones)

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

**Adam Ross Jordahl:** Religion (Senior, Sid Richardson)

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

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

**Zoe Tao:** Religion, Psychology, and Biochemistry (minor) (Senior, Jones)

**Charles Warren:** Religion & Kinesiology (Senior, Brown)

## 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**

Each academic year comes with a host of challenges and opportunities. This past year was no different. From resource challenges, to questions concerning enrollments, to the need for new assessment strategies, we've had to rethink some of the old practices within the department. However, it has all worked out well. We've rethought the manner in which teaching opportunities are arranged and managed for graduate students and we've fine-tuned our review process at the second-year phase as well as the dissertation proposal and dissertation defense practices. We've also revised and formalized outcome strategies and assessment mechanisms. All this has made a great department with an outstanding campus, national and international reputation even better.

In addition to impressive students, our concentrations continue to impress. This year the GEM certificate was approved and this adds a unique dimension to graduate study that separates Rice from all other programs in the country. The number of perspective students applying to Rice because of the opportunities afforded through the GEM concentration is striking. We expect the certificate to further distinguish our graduates and faculty.

The size of the graduate program continues to grow, with more significant numbers at each phase of study. This past academic year, five students completed the second-year review; four students completed comprehensive examinations; and, four students defended dissertations and graduated. The tradition of our graduates securing exciting opportunities both within and outside the Academy continues and our ability to recruit both nationally and internationally continues to be a strength for the department. For example, this academic year, our incoming class consists of 6 students from outstanding institutions, representing both a national and international presence.

New students will arrive in the Fall and join a department on the move. For now, I'd like to take this opportunity to wish our recent graduates all the best. We know you will make major contributions. All best.

### Current Graduate Students

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

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

**Elliot Berger** - Dissertation topic: Billy Graham and the Age of Anxiety

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

**Shardé Chapman** - African American Religion

**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

**Matt Dillon** - Dissertation topic: The Gnostic Renaissance: The Nag Hammadi Library in American Religion and Culture

**Learned Foote** - Buddhist Thought; GEM

**Jason Ford** - Bible & Beyond

**Renée Ford** - Buddhist Thought; GEM

**Biko Gray** - Dissertation topic: Making-Life-Matter: A Philosophical Theory of African American Religion

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

**Emerson Zora Hamsa** - African American Religion

**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: More than Skin Deep: African American Religion and the Aesthetics of Body Modification

**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

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

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

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

**Rachel S. Vlachos** - Dissertation topic: The Ethics of Whiteness: Race, Religion and Social Transformation in Contemporary South America

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

## Current Graduate Student Reflections on the GEM Certificate



### My GEM Experience Minji Lee

I am happy to share my GEM experience with my dear colleagues. Now as a six-year student working on my dissertation, I cannot express my gratitude enough for your “extra”ordinary insights and supports. Looking back my undergraduate time, I could see myself as someone who was always interested in “weird” stuff in religions such as strange visions, painful practices, and severe bodily experience. However, it was only after my coming to Rice and joining in GEM studies that I could figure out my pursuits as more scholarly as a part of GEM interests. By engaging in the GEM courses, I was able to narrow down my scholastic interests and to focus into the mystical reproductive body of the late medieval saintly women, which became my major topic of the doctoral thesis. At the same time, by discussing GEM topics with my colleagues, I succeeded in connecting my specific topics with profound theoretical views on different GEM phenomena in religions. The GEM program for me is like to use the zoom function of the camera to take a right picture: I see my particular topic in active communication with other religious traditions and various relevant theories in the broader academia. It is my everlasting work, I think, to analyze the marginal parts of religions and to discover the proper ways to analyze them not only in my thesis but also in teaching and writing in future. And I know that I have my own GEM experience in my research and career.



### On Receiving the GEM Certificate Linda Ceriello

GEM was the concentration area that particularly drew me to study at Rice. I entered the RELI PhD program in 2010, when it was one of the newer concentration areas. I was initially interested in GEM mainly for the ‘M’—the mysticism area of study. At first I understood only vaguely what connected it to the ‘G’ and the ‘E’ --gnosticism and esotericism. GEM concepts garnered in my coursework quickly became a consistent influence on my research, and are now in fact central in my dissertation work and other projects. For example, I use esotericism as the historical scaffold for my work in American Metaphysical Traditions as a matter of course, and the categories of the gnostic/gnosis allow for the treatment of other theoretical categories important to my research in mysticisms, such as transgression and gender. I also use GEM concepts to frame my work on contemporary spirituality movements such as the Spiritual But Not Religious. I view these conceptual endeavors as crucial for carving space for the academic study of the non-ordinary in religion, such as has been described in work by my advisor, Dr. Jeffrey Kripal, and other GEM faculty.

Now as a certificate program, GEM provides more support, both collegial and monetary, that is so important for students. The certificate stipend will help fund my dissertation work and conference expenses this year. Perhaps most importantly for those of us approaching the job market and hoping to be hired to teach in subject areas that are still sometimes considered fringe, this certificate gives more visibility and more credibility to GEM as a cutting-edge manner of engaging religious phenomena.



### More than a Certificate—GEM as Academic “Happening” Erin Prophet

I was first attracted to Rice by the emphasis on hidden knowledge, particularly the opportunity to study gnosticism, esotericism and mysticism (known as GEM) in both ancient and modern contexts. Having spent my formative years in a new religion with gnostic overtones, I was thrilled to have access to the “GEM Collective,” the group of professors at Rice who study these traditions. Fulfilling the requirements for the GEM Certificate not only allowed me to explore my interests and to get a firm foundation in a new and growing academic discipline, it also made me feel part of an academic “happening.”

Through the GEM Research Forum, I have access to the current work of the GEM Collective, who have been generous in helping me to find the resources to pursue my own interests—for example, in how ideas from hidden traditions influence contemporary history and culture, as in the pyramid seal on the dollar bill.

I fell deeper into the “happening” during the spring of 2015 when I attended the Gnostic Countercultures conference at Rice and watched scholars from all over the world debate current topics. Not long after, I was invited to be copy editor for the new journal *Gnosis*, the first to deal with gnosticism in an ancient and modern context, whose inaugural issue will feature the conference papers. This work, as well as the unique access to the GEM Collective makes me feel even more a part of the academic “happening” underway in the Rice Department of Religion.



2016-2017

*A Rose From Two Gardens:  
Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and  
Images of the End of Life*

## *The Gnostic New Age*

*The Beginning of the World in  
Renaissance Jewish Thought*

## Divine Dreamwork in the Middle Ages

*Longchenpa's Open Secret:  
Philosophy & Phenomenology in  
Contemplative Lives & Literatures*

*Tracing the Dialogue Between  
Psychology and Buddhism from  
1880 to Now*

4-5:50 pm, 226 Humanities Building, Rice University  
open to public, refreshments served

## New Graduate Area of Concentration: History of Religions in America



The study of religion in the U.S. has traditionally focused on church history and has organized its historical archives and questions through the normative lenses of Catholic empire in the “New World” and the dominant Protestant tropes of the primacy of the Bible, the Puritan “City on the Hill,” the notion of a “manifest destiny,” and numerous civil religious themes (think, for example, of the “In God We Trust” motto, officially established in 1956). But this, of course, is only one way of studying religions in the Americas.

The graduate area of “History of Religions in America” takes up a different lens, one at once deeply historical and radically comparative. While paying very close attention to the biblical roots and normative European Christian traditions that did in fact come to dominate the public life, thought and rhetoric of the culture, this area of study privileges no particular religious narrative or form of religious experience. It does not see history as linear, but as circular, taking seriously the hermeneutical loop of “the future of the past,” that is, the awareness that future peoples read the past in ways that past peoples could not and did not, so that the future changes the past, and the past changes the future of religions in America. Thus, this area of study pays close attention to the concepts of the “present past” (the persistent return, uptake and recalibrating of the past to benefit the present religious communities) and “revelatory alignment” (aligning the past with new revelatory experiences).

This area of study relies on three basic sources for this vision of religions in America and their histories: (1) the religious literatures and hermeneutics that are foundational to these histories, whether traditional, newly revealed, or rediscovered; (2) the phenomenology of extreme or exceptional religious experiences, wherever and in whatever

form they appear (as scriptural revelation and prophecy, private vision, magical conjure, mystical encounter, New Age channeling); and (3) the fundamental religious pluralism of America—from the indigenous Hispanic and native cultures that preceded the European colonialists by hundreds or thousands of years, through the Atlantic slave trade that brought over a million Africans (and their religions) to the continent, to the steady influx of countless Hispanic, Asian, African and Middle Eastern immigrants, religions and refugees. The result is a historical and comparative vision of religion in the Americas that overflows, exceeds and destabilizes any existing today in the media or public discourse.

There are four required courses:

- Foundational Literature and Hermeneutics  
RELI 616: Beginnings of Christianity (April DeConick)  
RELI 581: Gnosticism Seminar (April DeConick)
- Comparative Method and Phenomenology  
RELI 588: History of Religions (Jeffrey J. Kripal)
- Religious Pluralism in America  
RELI 617: Religions in America (DeConick & Kripal)

Some focus areas within this concentration require proficiency in primary source research languages as determined on a case-by-case basis in consultation with the student’s advisor. Languages that can be studied at Rice include Greek (Hilary Mackie, Classics), Latin (Scott McGill, Classics; Claire Fanger), Coptic (April DeConick), Hebrew and Syriac (Matthias Henze), Arabic (David Cook), and Tibetan (Anne Klein).

Faculty Contacts: Jeffrey Kripal, April DeConick



### 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

## New Graduate Area of Concentration in Global Christianity

The concentration in Global Christianity seeks to provide doctoral training focused on the rise and growth of Christianity and its social and intercultural expression in a global context. The focus on the global embraces contemporary theoretical developments in religious and interpretation as well as theoretical and ethnographic approaches of the social sciences to study and research from a global perspective what has been described variously as the Christian tradition, the World Christian movement, or simply called by many in the academy World Christianity. The goal is to interrogate the Christian tradition as a global movement from its inception and practice.

The track will offer courses and specialization in historical studies including and not limited to Christian expansion around the world, Christian thought, philosophy of religion, Christianity and Social Movements, and contemporary issues in the Christian tradition such as gender, sexuality, church state relations, new religious movements within Christianity including the growth of Pentecostalism, peace, tolerance and reconciliation movements, and Christianity and culture.

A major focus of the track will include the development of specialization in at least one region such as Africa, North America, Latin America (the Caribbean, South America), Europe, and Asia. The goal of these areas is to train scholars who develop in-depth knowledge of the Christian tradition in any of these regions, through a robust methodology that embraces interdisciplinary approaches in religion and recent theories of transnationalism and postcolonial studies.

### Course Offerings:

RELI 271 - MEDIEVAL POPULAR CHRISTIANITY  
 RELI 309 - READING COPTIC TEXTS  
 RELI 312 - MLK AND MALCOLM X  
 RELI 338 - THE CHURCH OF AFRICA  
 RELI 340 - THEOLOGY IN AFRICA  
 RELI 342 - NEW RELIG MOVEMENTS IN AFRICA  
 RELI 348 - CHRISTIANITY & ISLAM IN AFRICA  
 HIST 558 - RELIGION, RACE, & DIFFERENCE  
 RELI 359 - RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE  
 RELI 391 - THE REFORMATION & ITS RESULTS  
 RELI 424 - RELIGION & POLITICS IN AFRICA  
 RELI 416 - BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY  
 RELI 449 - EARLY CHRISTIAN CONTROVERSIES  
 RELI 462 - ENGLISH SPIRITUALITY  
 RELI 548 - LIBERATION THEOLOGIES  
 RELI 575 - FREN RELI THOUGHT IN 20TH CENT  
 RELI 616 - BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY  
 RELI 604 - FROM DECOLONIZATION TO GLOBALIZATION

Faculty contact is Dr. Elias Kifon Bongmba

## New Graduate Area of Concentration in New Testament & Early Christian Studies

New Testament and Early Christian Studies at Rice is a Ph.D. area of concentration that covers the history, literature and material remains of the early Christians from their diverse beginnings to the fifth-century which codified an Augustinian prescriptive Christianity. Traditionally this area of concentration is taught as church history, which reinscribes the narrative of the orthodox and is apologetic when it comes to issues like theology, Christology, women's history, governance, and identity politics.

New Testament and Early Christians Studies at Rice, however, challenges this narrative by taking seriously all the literature and material remains of the early Christians, not just those of the orthodox or their account of religion. We study early Christianity at Rice by focusing on (1) Christian literature as representative of diverse populations of local forms of Christianity (Judaean; Samaritan; Asian; Antiochean; Mesopotamian; Roman; Egyptian; Carthaginian; Gallic); (2) Christian literature as inclusive, in all its richness and diversity, whether within or beyond the traditionally conceived Christian canon (New Testament; Nag Hammadi and other Gnostic literature; Apostolic Fathers; Christian Apocrypha; Patristic literature and other literature of late antiquity; Greco-Roman and other indigenous literatures); (3) Christian literature as indicative of identity construction and maintenance (discourse of heresy and orthodoxy; play of social memory; group dynamics; issues of authority); (4) Christian literature as generators of ideal lifestyle and practices (sexual dynamics; dietary practices; ethical formation); (5) Christian literature as interactive with religious experience, revelation and subjectivity; (6) Christian literature as reflective of diverse rituals and attitudes of worship.

Students in this concentration will become fluent in the history of the discipline, learning both traditional forms of interpretation (historical-critical) and newer methods (cognitive historical, cognitive linguistic, literary, philosophical, anthropological, and sociological).



Foundational Requirements for the New Testament and Early Christian Studies Concentration:

1. RELI 616: Beginnings of Christianity Seminar (DeConick)
2. RELI 518: Gnosticism Seminar (DeConick)
3. RELI 549: Early Christian Controversies (DeConick)
4. RELI 506: Christianity and Late Antiquity (Clements)
5. Must pass proficiency language exam in Greek (Mackie-Classics) and Coptic (DeConick) before comprehensive exams; whether the student should also pass a proficiency language exam in Latin, Hebrew, or Syriac will depend on the student's chosen specialization and is determined on a case-by-case basis in consultation with the student's advisor.

Faculty Contacts are Dr. April DeConick and Dr. Niki Clements

## Graduate Student Instructors



**RELI 365: Paul and the New Testament**  
**Michael S. Domeracki, PhD Candidate**  
**Orman Teaching Fellow**

I first would like to express my appreciation for being selected as the Orman Teaching Fellow. Teaching this class was a tremendous learning opportunity for me, and it would not have been possible without the generous donation from the Orman family and their devotion to student development. My course on Paul examined the growth of Christianity from its origins as a Jewish sect to an independent religion by the middle of the second century. The focus of the course was on Paul as a theologian and authority in the early church, and the role he played in the growth of Christianity. This class was structured chronologically to evaluate Paul in his Jewish context and his relationship with other forms of Jesus followers in the first century. We looked both at canonical and non-canonical texts of antiquity, as well as modern interpretations of Paul, to develop a more thorough understanding of his theology and role as a community leader and his impact on the growth of the church.



**RELI 355: American Christianity, Race, and Biology**  
**David Kline, PhD Candidate**  
**Humanities Research Center Instructor**

With generous funding from the Humanities Research Center, I had a great experience designing and teaching my Spring course, "American Christianity, Race, and Biology." I was very fortunate to have a great set of students who consistently engaged the material in thoughtful ways over the course of the semester. Using historical, scientific, philosophical, and religious texts, we examined the complex relations between American Christianity, modern conceptions of race, and biological knowledge of human difference. We explored how American understandings of race have been shaped, justified, and contested by a powerful resonance between two seemingly opposed traditions: religion and science.



**Religion and Politics in Africa**  
**FWIS 141 : When Religion and Culture Collide with the West**  
**Rachel Schneider, PhD Candidate**  
**First Year Writing Seminar Instructor**

In the fall of 2015, she was selected by the Department of Religion to teach "Religion and Politics in Africa." An upper division humanities course, this course provided a broad survey of religion and politics in colonial and postcolonial Africa, with special emphasis given to interactions between Christianity and Islam; missionary activity; development and democracy; contemporary influence of Pentecostalism, and social issues related to race, gender, sexuality, and the environment.

In spring 2016, Schneider was selected by the Program in Writing and Communication to teach a first year writing intensive seminar: "When Religion and Culture Collide with the West." This course explored a variety of case studies where differing systems of religious belief, practice, and values interacted, challenged, and also transformed each other. A key focus of the course was discussion of the West's relationship to Islam; the contemporary role of Muslims in European society; competing notions of secularism and religious pluralism; and challenges related to immigration and globalization.

In addition, Schneider had the privilege of serving as the lead teaching assistant/project manager for "America Through Foreign Eyes" in 2015. This course, taught by four Rice instructors, was a free, massive open online course that enrolled over 3,000 students. Schneider was actively involved in the process of course design, development, and execution, especially the "America through African Eyes" section, which explored American influence in Africa and how Africans understand and interact with American histories of slavery, racial categorization, and immigration.

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## Graduate Student Instructors

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**RELI 115: Religion in America**  
**Matthew J. Dillon, PhD Candidate**

During the Spring 2016 semester I had the pleasure of teaching Religion in America, a course new to the Religion curriculum. As a 100 level survey course the primary pedagogical goal was to introduce students to the diverse religious landscape of America. Being Rice students, however, these undergraduates were curious and intelligent enough to go far beyond standard introductions. As instructor, I was able to introduce theoretical perspectives in the study of religion that analyze not only the what of American religions, but the why and how.

Until 20-30 years ago, it was common for Religion in America courses to focus entirely on mainline Protestant denominations and Evangelical Christianity. Cutting edge programs might have taught Catholicism and Judaism. While our course recognized the import of these traditions and studied them for half of the semester, it also explored world religions from the Mid-East and Asia – Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism – and the ways in which they have adapted, or been adapted by, American culture. We studied new religious movements that grew from the American soil such as the Church of Latter-Day Saints, the Branch Davidians, Spiritualism, and the New Age. And we explored how both transnational and new religions impacted indigenous American populations.

Student interest peaked when we began to ask critical questions about American religions: what do all these religions – whether from the west or east, ancient or new – have in common? What is American about religion in America? What do we even mean by religion? To help interrogate such questions I introduced a range of theoretical concepts that students applied in midterms, writing exercises, and their final papers. The concept of modernization helped distinguish the contemporary situation from ancient Jerusalem or feudal China. In the American situation, all religions have to navigate scientific discourses, the presence of other religions, and the separation of church and state. Democracy, pluralism, and the advent of a scientific worldview transformed historical religions and allow new religions to arise. The sociological concept of transgression analyzes how religious communities function and why so many new ones arise. Inspired by the ideal of personal liberty and protected by religious freedom laws, groups transgress the norms of their native religion. Where in the past such groups might be labeled blasphemers (and suffer accordingly), in America they simply split off and move down the street. Last, we assessed different models of religion at work. Functional and substantive definitions help us grapple with what most people understand by religion: organized groups of individuals with shared beliefs and practices. Yet such definitions struggle to encompass contemporary forms of religiosity, such as the New Age or “spiritual but not religious.” Our class found that psychological models of religion did a better job of grasping these new phenomena.

In sum, the students walked away with far more than an introduction to the variety of religions in America. They absorbed and practiced critical methods of interpreting religious phenomena that they can apply in years to come.

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*If you are an alumna or alumnus of the Department of Religion at Rice University, we would love to hear from you! Please send information about your current activities to [reli@rice.edu](mailto:reli@rice.edu) to be included in future newsletters.*

## 2015 - 2016 Doctoral Graduates

### Michael S. Domeracki “The Domestication of Paul: Christian Responses to the Rise of Paul in the Second Century”

**Michael S. Domeracki, PhD**

The purpose of my dissertation was to account for the prominence of Paul in Late Antique Catholicism. As an apostle and authority, Paul did not emerge as the dominant figure among Catholics until the end of the second and beginning of the third century, and even at that it was done within the context of the authority of the other twelve disciples. I suggest that Paul's popularity and authority arose first within alternative forms of Christianity, and specifically among Charismatic groups, mystics like the Valentinians, and the biblically-focused Marcionites who were frustrated with the emerging doctrinal and ecclesial authority of the Catholic Church. These three movements identified with Paul as a singular authority and rejected, or at the very least, diminished, the authority derived from the other twelve disciples. These alternative churches were growing in influence during the second century and rooted their authority in Paul. As these churches grew, their influence threatened the primacy of the dominant Catholic Church and forced it to vie with these Pauline forms of Christianity for church control. The popularity of Paul was then first witnessed in these

discursive movements, and not, among the Catholics.

Through use of social memory, ritual, and identity theories, I explored the growth of discursive Pauline Christianities in the second century and detailed the orthodox reactions. Ultimately, I argued, the response to these transgressive movements was seen in two ways. The more Torah-focused Christians rejected the authority of Paul completely and depicted him as the arch-heretic. The Catholics, however, responded differently and maintained that Paul represented the same teaching as the twelve, simultaneously arguing that Paul did not have a private teaching and that their own teachings were definitively Pauline. In the process of incorporating Paul, the Catholics domesticated his image and removed the charismatic, mystical, and scriptural memories of the discursive churches from their image of Paul. It was in reaction to these transgressive communities that the domesticated Paul became the dominant apostle, even if one among many, for the Catholics. In other words, the rise of Paul among the discursive communities forced the Catholics to respond, and so doing, fractured it into two movements:



one rejecting Paul entirely and one venerating him. The rise of Paul among the Catholics was done in response to his popularity among alternative Christian communities, and in order to incorporate him, the Catholics had to domesticate his image as one who was accessible, community-driven, and one who taught the same message as the other disciples.

### Darrius Hills “Toward a Theory of Reciprocity: Constructing a Hermeneutic of Relationality for Black Theological Discourse”



**Darrius Hills, PhD**

I defended my dissertation in May 2016. My dissertation is “Toward a Theory of Reciprocity: Constructing a Hermeneutic of Relationality for Black Theological Discourse”. In the dissertation, I bring together womanist religious thought, the philosophical ethics of Martin Buber, and womanist literature to formulate new ways of conceiving human relationality--notably in contemporary expressions of black theology and black religious studies. My degree will be conferred in December 2016.

Shortly thereafter in June, I was offered and accepted a tenure-track teaching position. Starting Fall 2016, I will be Assistant Professor of Black Church Studies at Morgan State University in Baltimore, MD.

On a personal note, I also wanted to say that I am deeply indebted to the students and faculty of the Religious Studies Department. Many thanks for all the support!

## Aundrea Matthews on “Quilting Faith”



**Aundrea Matthews, PhD**

For decades, scholars of religion have paid critical attention to gathering and evaluating black cultural productions to understand African American experiences, the formation of religious beliefs and black institutions; the interconnections between cultural continuity and aesthetic considerations. This critical examination offers a sociocultural framework for understanding the complexities and varieties of black religion and experiences of the religious within African American communities in the United States. Lacking in this discourse is the analysis and understanding of the religiosity of African American quilts, the quilters who make them, and the quilt-making process as source material for the study of African American religion. In this light, my research fills the gap within the discourse and proves that African American quilts, as objects of material culture, are just as important to understanding African American religion and experiences of the religious as heralded black cultural productions such as music, dance, folktales, literature and the like.

My dissertation - *Quilting Faith: African American Quilts as Source Material for the Study of African American Religion* argues that some African American quilts create visual testimonies (statements made with images, signs, and symbols) out of scraps of mundane materials that illuminate links between black religion and everyday life. This dissertation adopts and thinks with Anthony B. Pinn's

definition of black religion as the quest for complex subjectivity, a desire or feeling for life meaning to show the nuance and complex ways African American quilts communicate the struggle against dehumanization. Through a multi-disciplinary approach that draws on sociology, art criticism/art history, and religious studies, this dissertation reveals that African American quilters in Houston, Texas create quilts that communicate visual testimonies that inform us about the memories, experiences, and/or beliefs that gave their life meaning; brought a transformation of consciousness, a sense of inner peace, and a particular focus on what ultimately matters in the struggle for a fuller life.

I chose contemporary African American quilters in Houston, because little is known about African American quilting tradition in Texas, and even less is known about the continuity of the tradition among contemporary African American quilters. Ethnographic research was conducted on African American quilters in Houston, Texas that belonged to the Jubilee Quilt Circle, and began quilting between 1960-1990. Drawing from the collected data, the investigation reveals that (a) the quilt, the quilter, and the quilting process (the 3 Q's) must be studied as three parts of a whole, (b) the scraps of materials, quilt pattern and designs, and weaving communicate visual testimonies about daily experiences that inspire African Americans to rework and re-imagine the past, reflect on who they are, what they know and what they wish to become, and (3) the creative act of salvaging and transforming scraps of mundane materials into quilts serves as a viable outlet to communicate lived experiences, beliefs, and visions of life that illuminate the links between black religion and everyday life.

Results from these analyses reveal that African American quilts, the quilters who make them, and the quilting process are source material for the study of black religion. Ultimately, my dissertation points to the need for continued research on African American quilting to: (1) gain an understanding of the inextricable interconnectedness between the quest for complex subjectivity, creativity, and material culture in the faith formation of African Americans, (2) crucially examine how African American women construct their world and make meaning out of life using needles, thread, and scraps of mundane materials, and (3) encourage scholars to collect, interpret, and

display the visual testimonies of contemporary African American quilts in order to broaden our understanding of black religion and experiences of the religious in the 21st century.

One of the highlights of my journey as a graduate student was being recognized by President Leebron at graduation for my contributions to the Rice community. The experience, knowledge, relationships, and leadership skills I gained as a graduate student in the Department of religion allows me to pursue a number of different career choices. In today's multicultural, global economy, I plan to seek a career path that will allow me to combine my research interests in art and religion with my leadership/administrative skills, in order to develop and implement innovative programs, curriculum, and/or partnerships that foster mutually beneficial university-community enterprises. Currently, I am working on a Memorialization project to donate and erect a Buffalo Soldiers Monument at the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York in 2017, and I just created and implemented the 1st Annual Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math (STEAM) youth summer camp for the Village of Highland Falls, New York.



## Alumni News

### Chaoul Honored by Alumni Flame Award as Outstanding Graduate

**M. Alejandro Chaoul, PhD (Rice, 2006)**  
**Assistant Professor, Department of Palliative**  
**Care & Rehabilitation Medicine, Division of**  
**Cancer Medicine,**  
**The University of Texas MD Anderson**  
**Cancer Center**

I am very grateful to April DeConick and the Religious studies faculty for selecting me for this award. My dissertation focused on Tibetan ancient yogic practices and applications in contemporary medical settings.

In 1998, as I was in the middle of the Religious studies PhD program and as my first child, Matías, was about to come to this world, my dad, who lives in Argentina, asked me to accompany him to MD Anderson for a second opinion on his recent diagnosis of prostate cancer.

This led me to start as a volunteer at MD Anderson's Place of Wellness facilitating Tibetan Meditation, thanks to the support of my teacher and former Rockefeller Fellow at Rice, Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche. And as I continued there, Lorenzo Cohen, a behavioral researcher, suggested I propose a Tibetan mind-body protocol for cancer patients. This had a tremendous impact on my dissertation. I discussed and decided with Anne (Klein) that the topic of my dissertation was going to be Trul khor, the Tibetan yoga from the Bon tradition, and Lorenzo's suggestion added an interesting twist. The coming of the new century and millennium, was an appropriate and auspicious time to build on the synergy of the dialogue of spirituality and science.

Edith (Wyschogrod) told me something that always stayed with me: "it will be tougher to get a job in religious studies but you will be touching more people in a deeper way." Bill (Parsons) and Jeff (Kripal) were very supportive in expanding my research and work into the healthcare field, and I was able to include our first study of Tibetan Yoga for people with lymphoma that had been published in Cancer journal, as an appendix in my dissertation.

As Edith predicted, my work continued at the medical center, and we received a large grant to fund the continuation of the Tibetan Yoga study, and since then have been able to participate in more mind-body research projects, continued the meditation class all these 16 years, and started a meditation clinic for cancer patients 4 years ago. This work is very rewarding, and I feel grateful that these people let me participate in their journey; and I greatly appreciate the theoretical and practical education that I received in our Reli program as well as from my Tibetan teachers.

I also direct the education programs of integrative medicine, including outreach through the Friends of Integrative Medicine, and I believe that there can be possibilities of collaboration between Religious Studies at Rice and Integrative Medicine at MD Anderson. It is good I can put this in writing and tell the current reli students that we welcome this possibility!!!



This could for example be in the way of reli students that are interested in some intersection with integrative medicine coming to MD Anderson or having a mentor from the Medical Center; or in shared speakers or programs; or other ways that I can't think of now, but better minds can come up with. This can be a way of keeping the flame alive!!! Once again, I am honored to be the recipient of this Outstanding Alumni award, Thug je che! (Thanks in Tibetan)

PS: my dad is still well, although I can't say that it was because he has been meditating ☺

### Parker Eudy '14 Awarded Fulbright ETA; Pursuing Law Degree



**Parker Eudy, Religion major, Rice**  
**University 2014**

In March 2016, I was awarded a Fulbright to teach English at a university in Manisa, Turkey in fall 2016. I had taught middle school in Houston for two years, and I was excited by the opportunity to teach abroad in a totally new culture. In late July, however, my plans shifted dramatically when the military coup in Turkey resulted in thousands of teachers, professors, and government employees losing their jobs. The Fulbright program in Turkey

was also suspended for the entire academic year. Devastated by the turmoil in Turkey, I started making alternate plans for the upcoming academic year. I had applied to law school at the same time that I applied for the Fulbright as a backup plan. After some patience and dozens of calls and emails, I was fortunate enough to reinstate my acceptance at the University of Chicago Law School in time for orientation. I am now half way through with my first term and am interested in pursuing a career in human rights law.

## Claire Fanger Promoted to Associate Professor



The Department of Religion congratulates Claire Fanger on her promotion to Associate Professor with tenure. Professor Fanger came to Rice in 2009 after graduating from the University of Toronto in Medieval Studies and teaching at the University of Western Ontario and the University of Waterloo. Her research focuses on the understandings and practices of Latin Christianity in the later Middle Ages. She works particularly on texts and manuscripts of magic in a Christian context, especially what she describes as “angel magic.” Her interests largely revolve around questions about how some forms of knowledge are determined to be illegitimate or false, while other forms of knowledge are determined true. She is one of the world’s experts on monastic esotericism, magical practices, and prophecy in the medieval context. She is the managing editor of the academic journal *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* and co-editor of the academic book series, *Magic in History* (Penn State University Press).



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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.