

# RELIGION MATTERS

Department of Religion

Rice University

Issue V, Fall 2018

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## Message From the Chair: What does it mean to study religion critically?

By April D. DeConick  
Isla Carroll & Percy E. Turner Professor of  
New Testament & Early Christianity;  
Chair of Department of Religion

This year, Professor Niels Nielsen died at the age of 97. Professor Nielsen founded our department in 1968 to provide students with an opportunity to study religion from critical perspectives. Professor Nielsen's vision was prescient, since he built our department at a time when theological studies was the norm and religious studies was newly emergent in university settings.

In an interview, Professor Nielsen once explained about this critical stance, "A lot of the youngsters were interested in their family traditions and came to study with me to see if there was anything to it. I took what I'd call an objective approach, one that gave priority to philosophy and history." Professor Nielsen went on to say that he understood the founding of the department to be a necessary critical response to the troubling rise of Christian fundamentalism during his time.



Prior to the 1960s, religion was studied mainly in theological circles and schools and largely for purposes of Christian apology and advocacy. While the comparative study of religion had developed as a field by the early twentieth century, non-Christian religions took the back seat to Christianity which was understood and presented as the normative religion by which all other religions were criticized, judged and assessed. While this colonial Christian approach to the study of religion has been abandoned by us today, the beginning of the "critical" study of religion did begin with the assessment and comparison of non-Christian religions to the Christian standard.

Today, the critical study of religion is not about judging religions against each other or some imposed colonial standard. The critical study of religion is about understanding the significance of religious thought, practices, authorities, and institutions within larger human landscapes, including their historical, cultural, social, economic, political, and cognitive frameworks. This reorientation of the study of religion means that the analytical tools we use to study religion are no longer dominated by theological and philosophical questions, though such questions are still relevant ones and can be asked. The diagnostic tools we use are also informed by cultural theorists, social scientists, and natural scientists.

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The Department of Religion at Rice has changed and diversified since its founding, but the critical study of religion has remained our charge, a charge that is no less significant in our era of overt nationalism, terrorism, immigration nightmares, and evangelical politics. These social realities have made it clear that the study of religion outside the religious institutions and beyond the religious authorities themselves is critical.

When we grasp religion critically, we come to see that religion and religious traditions (including our own) are human constructions in response to our personal and cultural experiences. It is an ancient idea first aired by Xenophanes who conjectured that if horses had Gods they would be depicted as horses. In his words, "The Ethiopians say that their Gods are flat-nosed and black, while the Thracians say that theirs have blue eyes and red hair. Yet if cattle or horses or lions had hands and could draw, and could sculpt like us, then the horses would draw their Gods like horses, and cattle like cattle."

Understanding the human constructiveness of religion is the first step away from religious exclusivism, misunderstanding, intolerance, and violence. It is the door that opens the way toward acknowledging the global reality of religious pluralism and inequities. It is the window that allows us to see the ever-constant changes that religions undergo and conflicts they engage. This window provides us with a panoramic view of religions as both sources of social maintenance and social change, domination and liberation. The critical vista that emerges is one where traditional religions, minority religions, and religion in the margins are cultural forces that touch every aspect of human life and society.

# DEPARTMENT & FACULTY *News*

## PROPHECY IN PRACTICE: THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF DIVINE KNOWLEDGE IN THE 12TH CENTURY

**Claire Fanger, Associate Professor**

With support from the American Council of Learned Societies, I spent this last academic year immersed in the extraordinary world of my primary sources for the book I am writing on monks and prophecy, *The Everyday Life of Divine Knowledge in the 12th Century*. This project complements my past study of medieval ritual magic with a new focus on monastic practices that encouraged visionary revelations and prophetic cognition. Since magic was a monastic preoccupation too, it should not be surprising if the aims of monastic devotion and magic overlap. One of my forthcoming articles ("Divine Dreamwork," *Magic, Ritual & Witchcraft* 13 [2018]: 1-39) shares content with my book, using a set of case studies to show

how, during the two centuries preceding 1300, monastic cultivation of visions reflects principles and practices on which ritual magic also relied.

The primary data central to my study of monastic prophecy is drawn from the visionary and theological works of two German writers from the 12th century. One is quite well known (as medieval writers go), and the other hardly known at all. The first is the nun Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a polymath who not only wrote three big theological books based on illumination from what she called the "living light" of God, but also wrote music and authored works on cosmology and medicine. The other is a figure of the generation just preceding her, the monk Rupert of Deutz (c.1080 – c. 1129). Like Hildegard, Rupert



claimed theological insight straight from God, and like Hildegard, too, his writing

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## RELIGIOUS STUDIES REVIEW


**Elias Kifon Bongmba, Managing Editor**

The Religious Studies Review Editorial Board met during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Biblical Literature in Boston, MA, Friday November 17, 2017. The meeting was chaired by Mark MacWilliams, Executive Editor with Jeremy Biles, Short Review Editor

Religious Studies and will be followed by more special issues. RSR has added new features with Adam Stewart (Interviews Editor) publishing two extended interviews, and J Sage Elwell (Digital Materials Editor) organizing our Online Resources section, which will be a regular feature from now on. Special issues, guest editors, and collaborative, interdisciplinary area-editor generated essays continue to improve not only the quantity but also the quality of journal offerings.

Maya Reine, RSR Coordinator for 11 years has accepted another position at Rice. I thank her for her years of service to RSR. Nathanael Homewood has agreed to serve as the new RSR Coordinator. Please join us in welcoming him.

We are also delighted to welcome the following editors to the Editorial Board: Matthew Dillon, Comparative Studies; Elliott Knuths, Philosophy of Religion; Ken Derry, Pedagogy; Katelynn E. Carver, Religion, Arts & Culture; and Stephen Wolfe, The Americas. Bradley Johnson continues to serve as Graduate Student Assistant. We will be recruiting new Graduate Assistants in the fall of 2018.

We thank all our editors and reviewers who continue to serve RSR. As we start a new school year, we invite readers who are interested in contributing to RSR by writing major review essays or shorter reviews, to visit our website at <http://rsr.rice.edu> or email [rsr@rice.edu](mailto:rsr@rice.edu).

and Maya Reine, Coordinator, assisting. In recent years, the journal has continued to improve the number of special issues and major reviews published. In 2017, RSR published 44 review essays, a steady increase from 16 in 2016, and 7 in 2015. The March 2018 issue (RSR 44:1) was the second special issue on the Oxford Handbook Series – Works in

## SID AND RUTH LAPIDUS FELLOWSHIP

**Brian Ogren, Assistant Professor**

“ In May of 2017 I was fortunate to receive the Sid and Ruth Lapidus Fellowship of the American Jewish Historical Society, which is located in New York and which has archives and holdings in New England. This fellowship supports research on early American Jewish history, and it has allowed me to embark on my newest project, which is exploring Jewish thought in early America. My goal is to turn my research into a book that will seek to broaden our understanding of the role that Jewish philosophy and kabbalah, as well as corresponding intellectual exchanges between Jews and Protestants, played in the shaping of American notions of religious liberty, tolerance, and the formation of individual identity.

With support from the Lapidus Fellowship,

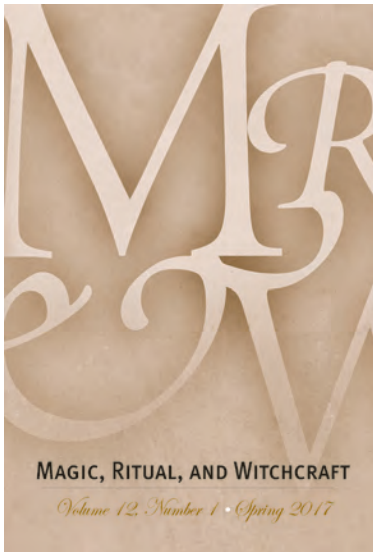
I was able to spend a month in New England, researching important manuscripts in archives and libraries. This includes a rare kabbalistic manuscript housed at Harvard, which was owned and partially penned in the eighteenth century by the first full-time Hebrew instructor at Harvard. It also includes rare manuscripts housed at the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston, and unique letters penned by Hannah Adams, cousin of John Adams and the first professional American female author. Adams is important for my project due to the fact that she was the first person in America to produce a comprehensive work on Jews and Judaism with her *History of the Jews*, published in 1812. Several of Adams' manuscripts regarding this project are housed at the New England Historic Genealogical Society, which is associated with the New England archives of the American Jewish

Historical Society.

I have presented some of my preliminary findings at the international conference of the World Union of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem last August, and at the annual conference of the Association for Jewish Studies in Washington, D.C. in December. In June I will participate in the biennial scholars' conference of the American Jewish Historical Society, which will be held in Philadelphia. There I will discuss how the texts that I have been analyzing can add a new dimension to our perception of American Jewish history. I also plan to visit the archives of the Society in New York. My hope is to contribute a new understanding of American self-fashioning, as well as constructions of American religious history; I am grateful to the Lapidus Fellowship for allowing me the means to begin this important journey.”

## DR. COOK PROMOTED TO PROFESSOR

Congratulations to **David Cook** on his promotion to Professor. David did his undergraduate degrees at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and received his Ph.D in 2001 from the University of Chicago. His areas of specialization include early Islamic history and development, Muslim apocalyptic literature and movements (classical and contemporary) and radical Islam. His first book, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, was published by Darwin Press in the series Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam. Two further books, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press) and *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press) were published during 2005, and *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007) and other books. Cook is continuing to work on classical Muslim apocalyptic literature, translating the sources, such as Nu'aym b. Hammad al-Marwazi's *Kitab al-fitan*, as well as having recently become the co-editor for Edinburgh University Press' series on Islamic Apocalyptic and Eschatology. He is also sponsoring research on Boko Haram's ideology, working with Ph.D. student Abdulbasit Kassem and Rice University Post-Graduate Fellow Michael Nwankpa on the group's texts and videos in order to translate them into English.



## MAGIC, RITUAL, AND WITCHCRAFT

### Claire Fanger, Associate Professor

As the journal *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* enters the summer of its second triannual year in 2018, we are at work on a particularly nice special issue coming out later this summer. This is the second of two issues with an anthropological focus edited by Raquel Romberg, and is entitled *Shrines and Altars that Happen, Do, and Cease*.

The issue comprises six studies of altar spaces located in diverse cultural settings in Philadelphia, Taiwan, Spain, Brazil, Puerto Rico and Korea. The studies are ordered according to the model of a life cycle, with the first and last pieces exploring respectively the beginning of the "life" of a shrine in Philadelphia, and the bringing to closure or "death" of a domestic altar in Korea. The pieces in between look at the work of "living" shrines and altars, tracing the energies that transform them into a communal habitation of non-

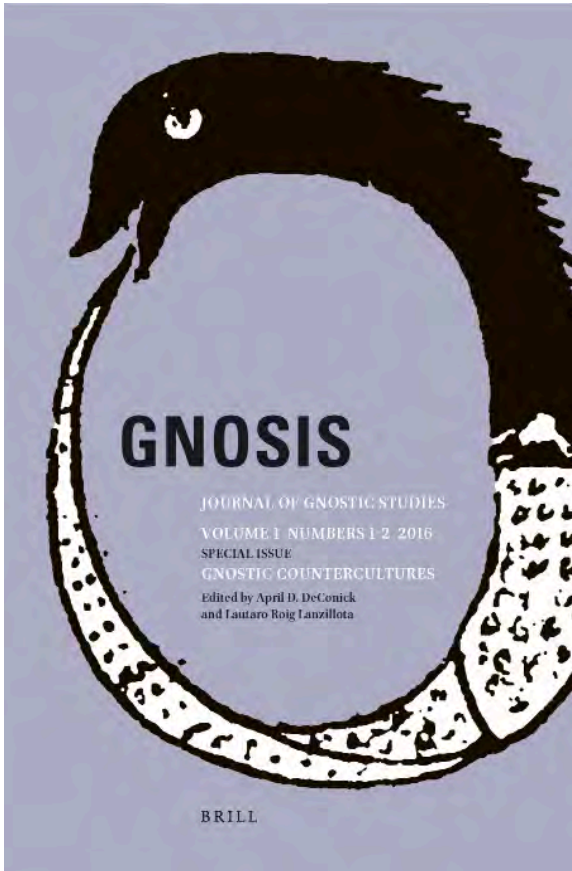
humans and humans, living and dead. As spaces that enable ritual action, shrines are central to the provision of channels for connecting visible and invisible worlds; thus by documenting details of altar space transactions in words and images, contributors witness the work of shrines as they link matter and spirit; we hope it will be as interesting to our readers as it has been to us.

Even as we complete this issue, we are engaging in preparations for the first issue of a special Volume Three linked issues based on papers delivered at a conference held at the University of Erfurt, in June 2016, to be edited by Esther Eidinow and Richard Gordon. The special volume, due for publication in 2019, will look at "witchcraft narratives" across time, space and cultures, with contributors from a range of disciplines exploring the ways in which such narratives are employed to express relationships of power. We look forward to the interaction of the collaborators and the interlacing of stories.

Because their workload has increased by 50% over the last two years, I want to acknowledge with gratitude the work of Rice graduate students, Ben Mayo, Jade Hagan and Sam Stoeltje, our current book review editors. As we moved forward into the triannual publication schedule, they have become responsible for thirty reviews per year between them. As well, they have undertaken increasing amounts of other work, including formatting and copy editing of articles, gathering and soliciting respondents for book forums, helping out with transmittal forms and many other things. Without their willing collaboration, running such a journal would hardly be possible.

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

## GNOSIS: JOURNAL OF GNOSTIC STUDIES



**April D. DeConick, Isla Carroll, & Percy E. Turner Professor of Biblical Studies;  
Department Chair**

This new journal devoted to the interdisciplinary study of gnosis continues to grow and flourish. Volumes 3.1 and 3.2 were published this year. Volume 3.1 is a special issue (edited by Guest Editor Christian H. Bull) focusing on Hermes Trismegistus. Bull explains that this issue “seeks to show some of the trajectories taken by the literature attributed to Hermes—in antiquity, ancient alchemy, Arabic pseudepigraphy, Renaissance Christianity, and Theosophy. Although the contours of the historical religious groups devoted to the teachings of Hermes, Seth, Valentinus, etc., remain blurry, it is clear that there is some literary relationship between the treatises authored and used by these people. It is to be hoped that the present issue contributes in some small way to the continued investigation of this relationship, and of the religious phenomenon of Hermetism, now commonly known as the Way of Hermes Trismegistus” (2). Article authors in this issue: Christian H. Bull (Oslo and Princeton), Anna van den Kerchove (Institut protestant de théologie), Kevin van Balde (Yale), Claudio Moreschini (Università di Pisa), and Erin Prophet (Rice).

While Volume 3.2 does not have a special theme or editor, it contains strong studies on Romanization and esoterization in early Christianity (April D. DeConick, Rice), the concept of mind in the Teachings of Silvanus (Ashwin-Siejkowski, King's College London), Borges' reading of Gnostic myths (Lautaro Roig Lanzillota, Groningen), kabbalistic motifs in visions of a contemporary Jewish woman (Jeffrey J. Kripal, Rice), philosopher priests in late antiquity (Heidi Marx-Wolf, Manitoba), and the utility of freelance religious experts as a heuristic category (Kimberly B. Stratton, Carlton).

I want to thank Erin Prophet who has been our chief copy editor for the last three years, establishing our style guide and training our graduate students to be article editors. Erin has graduated this year and so we will miss her kindness, guidance, keen intellect, and careful attention to detail. My thanks also to the copy editors Oihane Iglesias Telleria, Naamleela Free Jones, Vic Nardo, Kyle Smith, and CJ Schmidt.

## HONORARY DOCTORATE TO ELIAS BONGMBA

Congratulations to Elias Kifon Bongmba on his honorary doctor of theology degree awarded by Lund University. Bongmba is a theology, religious studies and African Studies scholar who works at Rice University in Houston Texas.

His research and teaching covers broad areas and combines theology, religious studies, philosophy and ethnology. His books include philosophical, theological and social analysis of African witchcraft, and discussions of public theology as well as the HIV-AIDS pandemic in Africa. He is currently working on a extensive introduction to the three major groups of religious tradition in Africa: traditional African religions, Islam and Christianity.

Professor Bongmba has previously visited Lund as a keynote speaker. He also participates in various research and publication projects together with several researchers at the Lund Faculty of Theology.

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Elias Kifon Bongmba was born in Cameroon where he initially studied to become a teacher and Baptist Pastor, before embarking on an academic career in the United States. He is the holder of the Harry and Hazel Chavanne Chair in Christian theology, and a professorship in religious studies.

Lund University has a special focus on Africa and global

challenges. By making Elias Kifon Bongmba honorary doctor of theology in connection with the University's 350th anniversary, the Faculty of Theology wants to show its appreciation for his way of addressing important societal issues in a boundary-crossing manner, thereby building bridges between theology and other disciplines.

## Current Faculty, Department 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

### Elias Kifon Bongmba

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 Africa Islam

### Niki Clements

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

### Claire Fanger

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

### Matthias Henze

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

### Anne C. Klein

Professor (University of Virginia, 1981): Tibetan Buddhism, comparative contemplative epistemologies, Buddhism and feminism, esoteric views of embodiment

### Jeffrey J. Kripal

J. Newton Chair in Philosophy & Religious Thought; Director of Undergraduate Studies (University of Chicago, 1993):

history of religions, colonial and western Hinduism, comparative erotics and ethics of mysticism, western esotericism

### Brian Ogren

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

### William B. Parsons

Professor (University of Chicago, 1993): comparative mysticism, psychology of religion, social scientific interpretations of religion, religion and culture, religion and gender

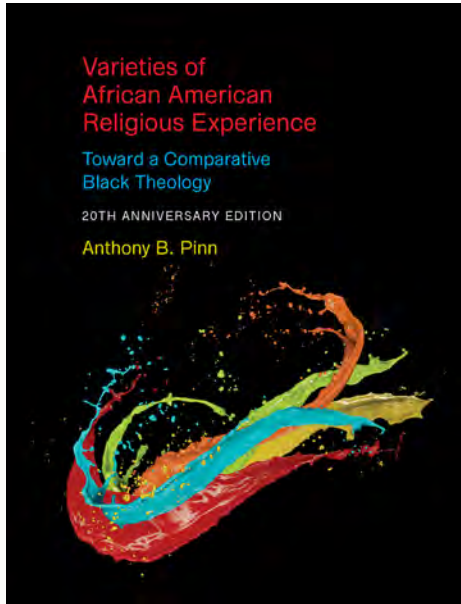
### Anthony B. Pinn

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

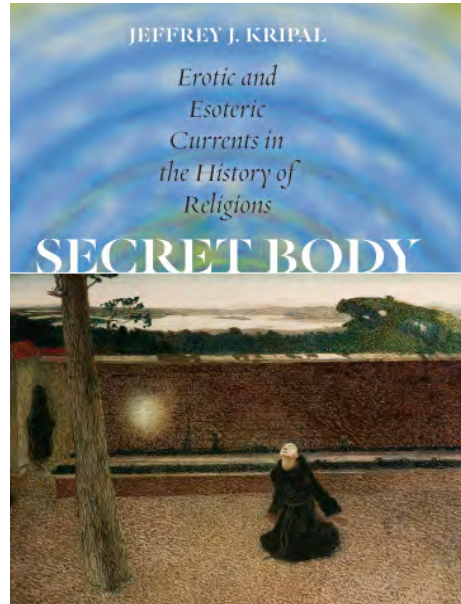
### John M. Stroup

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

# FACULTY PUBLICATIONS

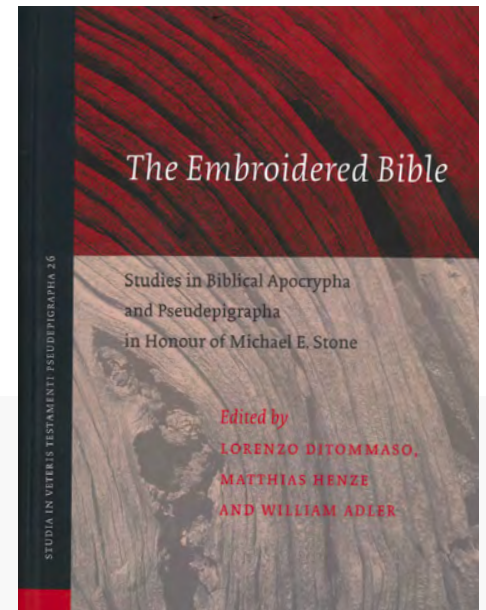


It is with great pleasure that we announce that the Twentieth Anniversary Edition (with a new preface) of Professor **Anthony B. Pinn's** book, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* has now been published by Fortress Press. "Varieties of African American Religious Experience: Toward A Comparative Black Theology clarifies and expands my initial thinking regarding the development of a theology with the capacity to appreciate and thoughtfully unpack the nature and meaning of multiple and competing faith traditions with African American communities. The volume offers a new preface and a new chapter that discusses how my thinking on major theological categories such as "God" have changed over the past twenty years."



Congratulations to **Jeffrey Kripal** on the publication of his newest book: *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions*. *Secret Body*--at once a reader, a memoir and a manifesto--crystallizes and clarifies a quarter century of thought and writing by Jeff on two major complexes in the contemporary study of religion: the relationship between erotic expressions of mystical experience and male sexual orientation from Europe to India; and the rise of the paranormal in American culture and its contested interfaces with magic, miracle and modern science. In the process, Jeff explains how his Chicago corpus came about with humor and honesty, frankly answers his censors and critics, thinks out loud in the mirror of his private correspondence with readers and, finally, lays the foundations for a future theory of religion grounded in the cosmic nature of consciousness as such.

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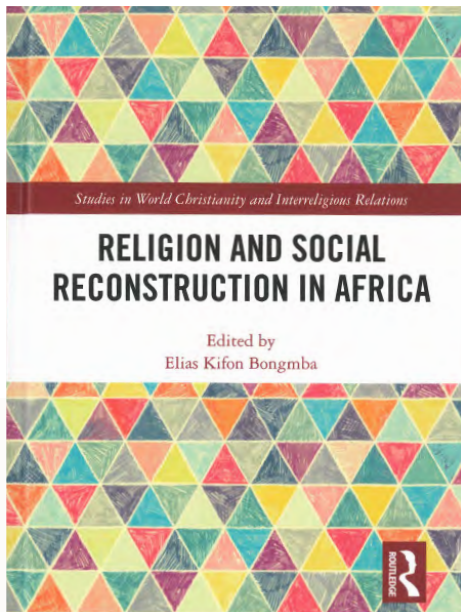


Congratulations to Professor **Matthias Henze** who has edited a 1000-page festschrift for Michael Stone, *The Embroidered Bible: Studies in Biblical Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha in Honour of Michael E. Stone*, with his two colleagues Lorenzo DiTommaso and William Adler.

Over the course of his remarkable career, Michael E. Stone, Professor Emeritus of Armenian Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, has been a giant of several academic fields, Armenian language and literature, Dead Sea Scrolls, and Early Judaism among them. When two colleague friends and I edited this Festschrift for Michael, we asked the contributors to write an article that includes some original work with a little known text.

In other words, rather than writing another "opinion piece," we asked that they work with unpublished manuscripts, produce critical text editions, or otherwise break new textual and philological ground. The result is this book. It is our hope that the number of ancient languages here represented, the fresh and original quality of the research, and the enormous historical and cultural terrain covered by these articles together do justice to the brilliance of the Festschrift's recipient.



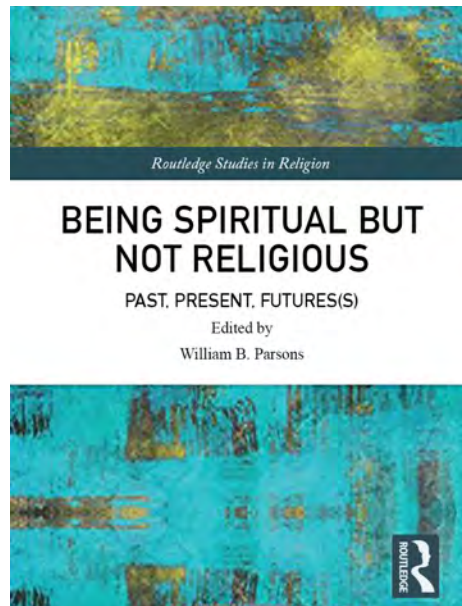


Congratulations to Professor **Elias Kifon Bongmba** on the publication of his edited book published with Routledge: *Religion and Social Reconstruction in Africa*. His book started as a project on an AAR panel.

The book explores how religion has played a major role in both the social division and unification of peoples and countries within Africa. Chapters in the book address this powerful societal force, and explores the implications of a theology of reconstruction, most notably articulated by Jesse Mugambi. This way of thinking seeks to build on liberation theology, aiming to encourage the rebuilding of African society on its own terms.

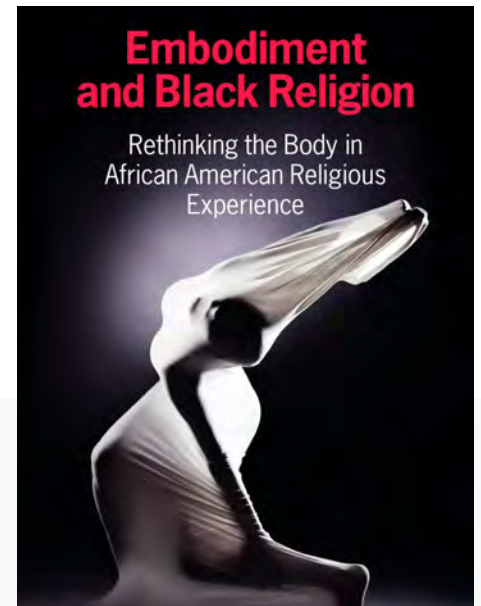
Contributions are written by an international and interdisciplinary panel examining the issues around reconstructing the religious elements of African society. Looking at issues of reconciliation, postcolonialism and indigenous spirituality, among others, they show that Mugambi's cultural and theological insight has the potential to revolutionise the way people in Africa address this issue.

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON



Professor **William B. Parsons** published an edited volume titled *Being Spiritual but Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)*. The volume issued from a Rockwell Symposium based on the ongoing graduate program in Gnosticism, Esotericism, Mysticism put on by the Department of Religion in the spring of 2016.

In a general sense the term SBNR denotes 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" indicates that one seeks to mine the religious wisdom and practices found in all of the world's religious traditions without acquiescing to religious dogma, ideologies, rituals, and hierarchies. While a spate of essays and a few books have appeared concerning the SBNRM this volume seeks a deeper exploration of what characterizes its "present" nature, its "past" cultural determinants, and its possible "future(s)." AVAILABLE ON AMAZON.



**Anthony B. Pinn** and CERCL authors Jessica Davenport, Mark DeYoung, Justine Bakker, Jason Jeffries, Biko Gray, Shardé Chapman, Cleve Tinsley, and David Kline. They have just published collectively the volume, *Embodiment and Black Religion: Rethinking the Body in African American Religious Experience*. This is CERCL's second publication.

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The book was written and published collectively and represents initial drafting of chapters by individual authors and then collective revision based on ongoing conversation about the subject. They write, "This text demonstrates a collective journey." They wanted to speak together in this book.

Thank you for providing us with a different model of scholarship that troubles "a sense of isolated ownership of ideas" and promotes "appreciation for refinement of ideas through conversation"

# CONFERENCES AND *Events*

## BEYOND HARD KNOCKS: CREATIVE BUDDHIST VOICES ON LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE SEPTEMBER 15-16, 2017

### Anne Klein, Professor

Buddhism is famous for its willingness to name and address the pain and dis-ease that is inevitably part of life. But this is only the beginning. Much of Buddhist philosophy, contemplative practice addresses itself to bringing out the potential for creative responses to life, the cultivation of qualities that are enjoyable, resourceful, and supportive of collective harmonies. It was this knack for resourcefulness that was on display in all the speakers who brought their special brand of skillful means to bear on their scholarship and refreshing discussion.

Our September 15-16, 2017 symposium "Beyond Hard Knocks: Creative Buddhist Voices on Learning from Experience" found a receptive audience at the McMurtry Auditorium in Duncan Hall. Friday evening's keynote lecture was by Buddhist Teacher and well known author Ken McLeod, who drew on the story of the legendary lady yogi, Niguma, and translated the metaphors of her tumultuous life into reflections on contemporary responses to adversity. About 90 people attended the talk and the reception that preceded it.

At Saturday's talks and panel discussions Professors Sarah Jacoby, Guy Newland and Dan Cozort gave talks linked to their own research that also connected to the scholarly work of Prof. Anne Klein. Sarah, who teaches at Northwestern, referenced the struggles and triumph of one of the foremost female Dzogchen (Great Completeness) practitioners of the 20th century, drawing from her recently published *Love and Liberation* and the inspiration she drew from Anne's *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*. Guy, a well known translator and Professor of Buddhism at U Michigan, Mt Pleasant, spoke of his own experience and reflections on loss, drawing partly from his recent *A Buddhist Grief Observed*. Dan, who teaches at Dickinson College, reviewed Anne's scholarly contributions and spoke of the humanitarian side of Buddhist philosophy, drawing in part on his work as long-time editor of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*. Rice Religion colleague, Marcia Brennan, delivered a paper written for the occasion describing Anne's surprising but important influence on her own work given their very different fields of inquiry.

We are grateful to the Chao Center for supporting this event.

Discussion between the speakers and with the audience circled around issues of philosophy, as well as life-choice issues when it comes to momentous life issues. The symposium was recorded, and will by mid-summer be available through [www.dawnmountain.org](http://www.dawnmountain.org). In the meantime direct inquiries to [ack@rice.edu](mailto:ack@rice.edu).

dawn mountain presents a special symposium






## Beyond Hard Knocks

Creative Buddhist Voices on Learning from Experience

Fri., September 15th 6:30 - 9:00pm & Sat., September 16th 9:30am - 5:00pm

at Rice University (McMurtry Auditorium, Duncan Hall)

featuring

		
Ken McLeod <i>Wake Up to Your Life</i>	Sarah Jacoby <i>Love and Liberation</i>	Guy Newland <i>A Buddhist Grief Observed</i>
		
Marcia Brennan <i>The Heart of the Hereafter</i>	Dan Cozort <i>On Buddhist Philosophy</i>	Anne Klein <i>Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse</i>

Pre-registration required  
at [dawnmountain.org](http://dawnmountain.org)

Lengchenpa's View, Kalgil Thogay Central Tibet





## DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

# ANNUAL AWARDS

## DINNER 2018

This year we honor our graduating PhD students and recognize our faculty's incredible service.

**Orman Editor Award:** Erin Prophet

**Ph.D.:** Reyhan Erdogan Basaran, Linda C. Ceriello, Itohan M. Idumwonyi, Jason O. Jeffries, David Kline, Minji Lee, Erin Prophet

**Departmental Service Award:** Anthony Pinn

**Alumni Flame 2018 -Outstanding Graduate:** Andrea Jain





## FALL LECTURES ON AFRICAN TOPICS OCTOBER 2017

### David Cook, Professor

On October 3, 2017 Tanko Abdullahi Umaru of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (Nigeria) delivered a Rockwell lecture entitled "Nigeria in the 21st century: Challenges and Opportunities."

This lecture was a revelation concerning the difficult situation of education and infrastructure in Nigeria at the current time. Tanko, who is in the Political Science Department, was hosted by Prof. Elias Bongmba and Dr. David Cook, and spoke about the deadly effects of corruption in Nigeria, and the growing problem of insecurity, even in the wake of Boko Haram's defeat.

This lecture was followed up by a colloquium sponsored by the Baker Institute for Public Policy, the Rice University Dept. of Religion, and the Boniuk Center for Tolerance on Nov. 27, 2017 at the Baker Institute. This colloquium involved a panel consisting of graduate student Abdulbasit Kassim, Dr. Michael Nwankpa, with a special guest Prof. Amidu Sanni of Lagos State University, Lagos (Nigeria) on the forthcoming Boko Haram Reader (due to appear July 1, 2018). The event was moderated by Dr. David Cook, and introduced by Prof. Allen Matusow.

Kassim presented the findings of the Boko Haram Reader, emphasizing the importance of ideology for understanding this Salafi-jihadi group, while Nwankpa, who was hosted by the Dept. of Religion and the Baker Institute as a research fellow during spring 2015, detailed the future challenges for Nigeria after the Boko Haram insurgency. Prof. Sanni critiqued the work for over-emphasizing ideology, while lauding the quality of the translations. The event lasted about 2 hours, and was attended by upwards of 85 people.



### Tanko Abdullahi Umaru

Lecturer, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria Nigeria

### Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Challenges and Opportunities

Tuesday, October 3, 2017

4 -5:30 pm

Kyle Morrow Room, Fondren Library

The lecture will discuss the most critical challenges with which Nigeria is faced in the 21st Century, the 'Challenge of National Unity' and the 'Challenge of National Security'. Since 1914 political governance has only succeeded in the management of geo-politics of Nigeria but Nigeria's national unity is more of a debate. It has not been given any concrete expression. National Unity has been enforced through the introduction of policies and mechanisms that do more havoc than good to the objective of national unity. This lecture will examine the challenges in Nigeria's varied conflicts in the Lake Chad Basin and the South-Eastern region. It will also focus on the opportunities and broad strategy for building peace and preventing violent conflict in Nigeria.

Tanko Abdullahi Umaru is a lecturer of Political Science at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. He specializes in political governance, African security, African economic growth and development and religious extremism in the Lake Chad Basin and Sahel region.



Sponsored by The Rockwell Fund & The Department of Religion at Rice University

## SEVENTH ANNUAL INSTITUTE FOR THE HUMANIST STUDIES SYMPOSIUM

Nov. 2017

### Anthony Pinn, Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities

November 3-5, 2017

For the past six years, with Anthony Pinn as director of research and Maya Reine as symposium manager, the Institute for Humanist Studies has held its annual meeting on the Rice Campus.

Based in Washington, the Institute for Humanist Studies (IHS) is a think tank committed to providing information and other resources useful in promoting humanism and humanism centered solutions

to pressing issues. IHS, consistent with the American Humanist Association and the International Humanist and Ethical Union, understands humanism to be "a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity."

To support its mission, the Institute gives careful attention to and implementation of a variety of goals including the production of publications as well as the hosting of symposia that bring together the

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best minds to address pressing issues through a humanist perspective. The first symposium was held at Columbia University. It addressed the question "What is Humanism, and Why Does it Matter?" The book resulting from that gathering was published February 2013 by Acumen. The second meeting took place at Rice University and it addressed issues of public policy related to a central question: "Does theism have an impact on public policy and, if it does, what is it and how should humanists respond to this situation?" The third symposium turned attention to the means by which humanism might address the socio-political, economic and cultural challenges facing communities in the United States and globally: "How should Humanism Relate to the Non-Humanist World?" In 2014 the fourth symposium related to the theme "Humanism and Technology" took place at Rice University. The 2015 and 2016 meetings addressed the issue of Humanism on Race,

Gender and Class." This year the theme for the November meeting was "Humanism and Education", and it was a delight to have Jeffrey Kripal and April DeConick deliver papers. IHS and the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning (CERCL) sponsored a special screening of *A Better Life: An Exploration of Joy & Meaning in a World Without God* and talk by Christopher Johnson, author/film maker, at Moody Center for the Arts.

As was the case for the proceedings from the second meeting moving forward, the proceedings containing papers by DeConick and Kripal will be published through "Studies in Humanism and Atheism", a Palgrave Macmillan book series co-edited by Anthony Pinn and Juergen Manemann (The Institute for Philosophical Research – Hannover, Germany).



Andrew W. Mellon Graduate Research Seminar

## Emerging Religions Conference

**Keynote Address**  
Susan J. Palmer, Concordia University

Wednesday, November 29, 2017, 8 am – 12 pm  
Kyle Morrow Room, Fondren Library, Rice University



8-8:30	April D. DeConick <i>Why is a Scholar of Early Christianity Interested in New Religious Movements?</i>
8:30-9	Naamleela Free Jones <i>Toward an Emergent Understanding of Charisma</i>
9-9:30	<b>Keynote Address</b> <b>Susan J. Palmer</b> <b><i>Children in New Religious Movements and State Intervention</i></b>
9:30-10	Erin Prophet <i>Conceptual Blending and "Evolution" as Therapeutic Salvation</i>
10-10:30	Timothy Grieve-Carlson <i>The Emergence of American Wilderness Mysticism</i>
10:30-11	Elena Valdez <i>Regional Spiritualities in Chicana Literature</i>
11-11:30	Jessica Bray <i>When Religion and Politics Meet in Trumpism</i>
11:30-12	Learned Foote <i>Heretic Among Heretics: Vallee Among Emergent UFO Religions</i>

Sponsored by the Humanities Research Center at Rice University in collaboration with the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

## EMERGING RELIGIONS CONFERENCE Nov. 2017

### Timothy Grieve-Carlson, Graduate Student

On November 29th, 2017, the Mellon Graduate Research Seminar in Emerging Religions held their first of two research symposiums in the Kyle Morrow Room in Fondren library. The seminar, which is co-taught by Professor April DeConick and Ph.D candidate (now graduate) Erin Prophet, is an interdisciplinary research group that focuses on new religious movements (NRMs) and includes students from the departments of Anthropology, English, and Religion at Rice.

The symposium began with Dr. DeConick's talk, "Why is a Scholar of Early Christianity interested in New Religious Movements?" Dr. DeConick's work in this area applies the insights from NRM scholarship to better understand the historical circumstances of the earliest Christians, who, in the first and second centuries, were a new religious movement themselves. DeConick argues that the sociological methods of NRM scholarship can provide new insights for historians of early Christianity.

The next presenter was Naamleela Free Jones, a second-year Ph.D student in the Department of Religion, who presented a paper entitled "Toward an Emergent Understanding of Charisma." In her paper, Jones compared Max Weber's sociological model of charismatic authority with more contemporary models used in organizational psychology. Jones noted the

advantages and weaknesses of both models, ultimately concluding with a provocative assertion that the field of aesthetics might provide a more nuanced understanding of how charisma emerges and functions.

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The seminar was pleased to host Dr. Susan Palmer of Concordia University as the keynote speaker. Dr. Palmer's paper, "Children in New Religious Movements and State Intervention," turned towards the most contentious of social issues for emergent religions: the role of children. State interventions, Dr. Palmer noted, were frequently conducted in response to reported or rumored child abuse within insular religious communities. Dr. Palmer argued that child abuse within new religious does not actually occur at any higher rate than the rest of the population, and that state authorities could benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the social dynamics of NRMs.

Erin Prophet's paper, "Conceptual Blending and 'Evolution' as Therapeutic Salvation," focused on her dissertation research. Prophet suggests that esotericists in the nineteenth century adapted a discourse of spiritual development from the biological sciences, specifically, Darwinian evolution. Evolution, then, became not only a helpful way to understand the origin of species, but to understand the nature of human spiritual development. Prophet went on to show how the idea of evolution is often portrayed in a spiritualized manner in popular culture up to the present.

Tim Grieve-Carlson's paper, "The Emergence of American Wilderness Mysticism," focused on a seventeenth-century figure named Johannes Kelpius. Grieve-Carlson argued that Kelpius' mystical writings—in particular his articulation of a "Threefold Wilderness State," or tripartite model of human religious development—

presents a stark contrast to prevailing religious attitudes towards the environment in much of the religious literature of the early Americas. The next speaker was Elena Valdez from the English Department at Rice. "Valdez's paper, "Regional Spiritualities in Chicana Literature," considered how the intersection of place and spirituality in Ire'ne Lara Silva's "Flesh to Bone" (2013) promotes a sense of political consciousness and collective purpose.

Following Valdez, Jessica Bray from the Department of Anthropology presented a paper titled "When Religion and Politics Meet in Trumpism." Bray's paper considered the little-known phenomenon of devotional practices surrounding President Donald Trump among conservative Hindu fundamentalists in India. Trumpists in India admire the American President's public stance toward Islam, and in some cases this admiration goes beyond a sense of political alignment and exhibits characteristics of religious devotion.

Learned Foote of the Religion department wrapped up the conference with his paper "Heretic Among Heretics: Vallee Among Emergent UFO Religions." In his paper, Foote considered the social and religious milieu of the French Ufologist and computer scientist Jacques Vallee. Foote utilized a close reading of Vallee's published journals to better understand his relationship with major religious figures of the American counterculture in the 1970's, including Anton LaVey and Uri Geller. Foote suggests that it was Vallee's immersion within this cultural environment that shifted his attitude towards UFOs as a phenomenon better approached with methods informed by the history of religions.



## FACULTY ACHIEVEMENTS

Congratulations to Professor **Marcia Brennan** who has just been named the Carolyn and Fred McManis Professor of Humanities. We are so happy to share this esteemed news with you.

*Very well deserved!*

Congratulations to Professor **Anthony Pinn** for receiving the Faculty Award for Excellence in Research, Teaching and Service. This award is given occasionally to a faculty member at Rice who fulfills the Rice academic ideal; exhibiting exemplary achievement in research, teaching and service. We are honored to have you as a colleague and professor in the study of religion.

*You shine and inspire us*



March 2018

## ROCKWELL SYMPOSIUM

**Anne Klein, Professor**

Our 2018 Rockwell Lectures featured two prominent scholar-scientists who are pushing against the boundaries that have often protected—or defended—against serious inquiry into first person experience. First person experience is experience as we live it, as it exists in the moment in all its unique particularity. Thus particularly subtle type of phenomenological inquiry, is central to this work.

This micro-phenomenology pays attention to the minute details of experience, discovering that even a few seconds of deeply probed, the simplest experience—hearing a sound, spelling a word, sitting under a tree—, can take an hour or more to describe well. This is astonishing information for most of us. And points to the untended richness of all human experience. Hence the speakers' joint title: *Lifting the Ban: Studying Lived Experience Through Micro-phenomenology*

During the evening, Professors Claire Petitmengin and Michel Bitbol spoke to illuminate the typically unrecognized vitality of lived experience. Both are scientists as well as theorists.

Claire Petitmengin is Professor Emerita and the Mines-Telecom Institut and Associate Member of the Archives Husserl at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris.

She describes her research as focused on the dynamics of lived experience. She explores this through the method of micro-phenomenological inquiry into the actual details of experience, a method enabling awareness and quite precise description of all types of experience, the experience of hearing a sound, spelling a word, and beyond. She conducts 5-day training seminars in Paris and elsewhere. Professor Anne Klein, who organized and introduced the evening, has taken several such seminars with her, at which Prof. Bitbol was also invited to speak her own work has been significantly influenced by their collaboration.

Two of Prof. Petitmengin's path breaking articles which you can find on her academia.edu site are "Toward the Source of Thought," "the Intuitive Experience", and she is lead author on a joint article with Prof. Bitbol, "What is it Like to Meditate".

Prof Bitbol, is researcher also of the Husserl Archives at L'Ecole Normale Supérieure. He is justly renowned for the extraordinary depth and breadth of his work. In addition to being an important interpreter of Husserl, with special emphasis on the centrality of subjectivity in his work. Bitbol is an

M.D. and continues to practice as such; he also holds a Ph.D in physics and did his *habilitation* in philosophy. Among other things, he studies the relationship between the philosophy of physics and the philosophy of mind, work done in collaboration with Francesco Varela, one of the founders, with the Dalai Lama, of the ongoing Mind and Life Dialogues. He writes and lectures in the area of quantum physics regarding which he has developed parallels between Buddhist theories of dependent arising and theories of knowledge. He has published seven books in French with another soon to appear, two translated into English, including *Beyond Panspsychism: The Radicality of Phenomenology* and *Mathematical Demonstration and Experimental Activity: A Wittgensteinian Philosophy of Physics*.

These talks were video-recorded and will be available by late summer. Inquiries to [ack@rice.edu](mailto:ack@rice.edu).



Prof. Michel Bitbol and Claire Petitmengin, our Rockwell speakers.



Eva Kreikenbaum MD (Mines-Teccom Institute) Anne Klein, Michel Bitbol, Claire Petitmengin, Renee Ford and Learned Foote, Rice Reli grad students



Michel Bitbol, Reli grad students Learned Foote, Justin Kelley, Renee Ford



Michel Bitbol, Anne Klein, Claire Petitmengin

# Gnostic America Conference



**March 28-31, 2018**

**Rice University, Fondren Library, Kyle Morrow Room**

## GNOSTICISM IN AMERICA MARCH 2018

### Erin Prophet, Graduate Student

Is American gnosticism about light and oneness with a transcendent God above all gods? Or is it about despair and a dark conspiracy by evil archons? Is it optimistic (non-dual) or pessimistic (dualist)? Rebellious or conformist? Authoritarian or individualistic? How does it differ from ancient gnosticism? During the international Gnostic America conference organized by the Rice Religion Department March 28 through 31, 2018, speakers explored the influence of gnostic themes across American life, from religion, literature, and poetry to movies and television. It became apparent that the full picture of gnosticism in America requires a multi-valent perspective. Debate in the scholarly world is ongoing about whether the category of “gnostic” existed in ancient times, and whether it can be traced to the present. But speakers showed how ancient gnosticism has taken on a variety of new lives in America, from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries.

April DeConick, Chair of the Religion Department at Rice, and one of the world’s foremost experts in ancient gnosticism, opened the conference by explaining how gnostic ideas and themes survived through textual artifacts and were transmitted to the present, even though most gnostic groups died out in antiquity. Paper topics ranged from contemporary gnostic groups such as the Ecclesia Gnostica, to gnostic influences on Carl Jung and the counterculture. Five of the papers were presented by Rice graduate students, alongside such world-renowned scholars as Catherine Albanese, former president of the American Academy of Religion, whose keynote address described the appropriation of the gnostic Gospel of Thomas in the dietary system called macrobiotics. Gregory Shaw shared his work on gnosis in antiquity and its relationship to Neoplatonism and American Transcendentalism. Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta spoke on Albert Camus’s gnosis, and how it was shaped by the scholarship of his time. And Erik Davis (Rice PhD

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2016) traced the influence of psychedelics on American gnosis.

A highlight of the conference was the performance “Gnosis in Rhythm and Song” in the Rice Memorial Chapel, a modern reflection on ancient gnostic worship. Mezzo soprano Sonja Bruzauskas and percussionist Craig Hauschildt worked from DeConick’s translations of ancient gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi and the Tchacos Codex. Bruzauskas intoned hymns, prayers, and vowel chants accompanied by Hauschildt’s antique-inflected percussion, designed to evoke ancient sacred music.

Shaw remarked what a treat it was to hear the vowel sounds sung, rather than having to imagine them from written text.

While no consensus was reached on how to characterize gnostic America, it became apparent that there is much more to explore. Papers will be collected in a special issue of the journal *Gnosis: The Journal of Gnostic Studies*, which is edited by DeConick and Roig Lanzillotta. The conference was sponsored by the Rice University Creative Ventures Fund and the GEM Collective in the Department of Religion.

## ANDREW W. MELLON GRADUATE RESEARCH SEMINAR MARCH 2018

### EMERGING RELIGIONS II



Elena V. Valdez, Department of English, Rice University



Naamleela Free Jones, Department of Religion, Rice University



Gordon J. Melton, Distinguished Professor of American Religious History at Baylor University



### Learned Foote, Graduate Student

This semester concluded the 2017-2018 Andrew W. Mellon Graduate Research seminar, which was led by April DeConick and recent Ph.D. graduate Erin Prophet. The focus of the seminar was Emerging Religions.

The seminar ended with a public panel and discussion in Fondren Library on April 18, which featured a key-note address by Gordon J. Melton, Distinguished Professor of American Religious History at Baylor University. Having recently returned from documenting religious movements in China, Dr. Melton lectured on his methods for refining the picture of American religiosity as it has been depicted in sociological research. Dr. Melton focuses in particular in identifying

congregations that may not be noticed by official censuses.

The seminar also hosted earlier in the semester Ann Taves, former president of the American Academy of Religion, a scholar at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Dr. Taves focuses particularly on understanding religious phenomena in American history in light of cognitive science, medicine, and anthropology. Dr. Taves led a discussion with the Mellon students and others from the Rice’s Department of Religion, which focused especially on experiences deemed religious, and how the collective interpretation of these experiences leads to the formation of spiritual paths, or new religious movements.

The Mellon seminar hosted two conferences

at which graduate students presented their research. Last semester’s conference featured Susan J. Palmer of McGill University. On April 18, in addition to the key-note address from Dr. Melton, the graduate students presented their work on a variety of topics they had researched over the seminar. Erin Prophet, co-teacher of the seminar who received her Ph.D. this semester, lectured on Frederic W. H. Myers and how he reworked the concept of evolution alongside a variety of other concepts to create an innovative picture of therapeutic religion. Learned Foote spoke on the Woodson Research Center’s recently-donated archive of autobiographical letters of anomalous experience written to Anne and Whitley Strieber. Jessica

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Bray's research focused on government surveillance of new religious movements, and in particular the 1985 bombing of the MOVE compound in Philadelphia. Timothy Grieve-Carlson spoke of monastic communities founded in colonial Pennsylvania, and how they were influenced by Jakob Böhme. Naamleela Free Jones spoke of religious leader Adidam and how his conception of the subtle energies of the human body developed in complex and innovative relation to traditional teachings. Elena V. Valdez spoke of Santa Fe festivals for Our Lady of Conquest, and how these festivals perpetuate colonialist ideology even as they act as a locus for sacred Hispano identity. This year's students in the Mellon Seminar on Emerging Religions came from the departments of Religion, English, and Anthropology.

## EROS, SEXUALITY AND EMBODIMENT IN ESOTERIC TRADITIONS: SEVENTH BIANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF ESOTERICISM

**ROCKWELL LECTURE**

May 25, 2018  
4 p.m.  
Kyle Morrow Room, Fondren Library

**"SACRED SEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ESOTERIC GROUPS: FROM EARLY 20TH-CENTURY ORIGINS TO MISA"**





**Massimo Introvigne**  
Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), Torino, Italy

Sacred sexuality and sexual magic are an important, if neglected, component of western esotericism. This talk presents an overview of the recent history of groups deploying sex for sacred purposes. Contemporary groups have their roots in certain subcurrents of spiritualism and Rosicrucianism, spearheaded by people like Andrew Jackson Davis and Pascal Beverly Randolph. Western knowledge of tantra and Taoist sexual alchemy also played a role. Among contemporary groups it is possible to distinguish between those emphasizing continence, i.e., sex without ejaculation, and those extolling the magical properties of semen and other fluids. In the second category, prominent is the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), led by Aleister Crowley. The OTO also influenced the practices of subsequent satanist organizations. In the first category, the gnostic movement of Samuel Aun Weor has a sizable following. Combining practices of the first and the second category are the organizations claiming the heritage of the Italian magus Giuliano Kremmerz. The largest esoteric organization promoting sacred sexuality is, however, the Movement for the Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), founded in Romania by Gregorian Bivolaru. It insists both on male continence and on the sacred use in a sexualized context of a bodily fluid, urine. Presentation of its theories by some of its students through adult movies and erotic shows made MISA both controversial and unique.

**Free and open to the public.**



**"Angelic Love: Swedenborgian Bodies in Henry James' 'The Wings of the Dove'"**

Amy Hollywood  
Harvard Divinity School

May 24, 2018 • 7 p.m.  
Kyle Morrow Room, Fondren Library

Many characters die twice in the 19th-century British and American novel, with protracted and repeated death scenes marking the profundity and inescapability of death, but also the deep sentimentality associated with the loss of a beloved other. In "The Wings of the Dove" (1902), Henry James repeats the trope of doubled death, but with a radical difference. His heroine, Milly Theale, initially stages her own death to represent an assumption, one James directly models on Swedenborgian accounts of the transformation of the human into an angel. That Milly dies again, although with an audience of one, suggests the complexity of James' relationship to this Swedenborgian scene, one he comes to through the legacy of his father's writings and an early novella by Honoré de Balzac, in which just such a Swedenborgian ascension is, more literally, inscribed.



**"Eros and the Future of the Esoteric Humanities"**

Arthur Versluis  
Michigan State University

May 26, 2018 • 4 p.m.  
Room 117, Humanities

In Platonism, the search for knowledge is understood as driven by Eros, and perhaps nowhere is this more true than in what we may term the esoteric humanities, where we are drawn by what fascinates us to explore previously unnoticed or undiscovered aspects of our familiar materials across many disciplines and fields in the humanities. In this plenary talk, I'll reflect on western esotericism as a field in a North American context, taking into account the contemporary alarming state of the humanities more broadly and the consequent implications for studying recondite subjects in a time of crisis. And I'll explore the advantages of new terms and transdisciplinary models for understanding our shared interests in a challenging era for humanities scholarship.

Claire Fanger, Associate Professor

MAY 24-27, 2018

This year the seventh biannual conference of the Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE) was hosted by the Rice Department of Religion. The ASE was founded in 2002 in a meeting at Michigan State University led by Arthur Versluis, where it adopted as its mission "to promote excellence in scholarship and teaching in the study of esotericism and mysticism." In past years, ASE conferences have been hosted at Michigan State, University of California at Davis, Colgate University, and the College of Charleston.

It was a pleasure to bring this enthusiastic group of researchers to our campus, and excellent scholarship was certainly in evidence in all

sessions I attended. The conference was launched on the evening of Thursday May 24th with an engaging plenary talk by Amy Hollywood of Harvard Divinity School. Entitled "Angelic Love: Swedenborgian Bodies in Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove*," her lecture presented the death of James'

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Department of Religion

The Rockwell Fund



Richard Kaczynski, Independent Scholar (above)  
Jeff Kripal, Rice (below)

Cathy Gutierrez, NY Public Library (above)  
Arthur Versluis, Michigan State University (below)

Christa Shusko, Independent Scholar (above)  
Anne Parker, Rice (below)

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protagonist Milly Theale as modeled on a Swedenborgian transformation of a human into an angel, an argument made partly by cross referencing James' novel with *Séraphîta*, Balzac's explicitly Swedenborgian narrative about a perfect angelic androgyne.

Friday's sessions, which included an array of cool papers on alchemy, aliens, art, music literature, and yoga, culminated in the Rockwell Lecture delivered by Massimo Introvigne of the Center for Studies on New Religions. His talk, "Sacred Sexuality in Some Contemporary Esoteric Groups: From Early 20th Century Origins to MISA," was informative and funny and I learned a lot about MISA (Movement for the Spiritual Integration into the Absolute), founded in Romania by Gregorian Bivolaru, one of largest groups promoting sacred sexuality active today.

Saturday night, after more fascinating papers on topics including gnosticism, healing, prophecies, theurgic operations, and vampires, ASE founder Arthur Versluis capped the last full day of the conference with a plenary talk on "Eros and the Future of the Esoteric Humanities" in which he talked about the possibility of using transdisciplinary models inspired by the study of esoteric thought to understand and address some of the challenges to the humanities.

Versluis' talk was a good segue to the roundtable on pedagogy that occupied the last half day on the morning of Sunday, May 27th

Dynamic presentations by Nell Champoux, Amy Hale, and Jeff Kripal, dealing with how to use esoteric topics effectively in curriculum and course design, all had directly applicable benefits for teachers of undergraduate courses in religious studies. The presentations were followed by lively discussion that resonated with themes emerging elsewhere in the conference and also gave me some good ideas for future classes.

Fifty-five people were in attendance at the conference, not counting members of the local community who took advantage of the opportunity to attend individual plenary talks and sessions which were free and open to the public. We are grateful to the Humanities Research Center and the Rockwell Fund for their support for the plenary talks. Thanks also to the Rice graduate students, including Tim Grieve-Carlson, Minji Lee, Ben Mayo, Anne Parker, and Christopher Senn who helped out in diverse ways, editing the program and abstracts, designing and printing conference badges, filling out housing forms, distributing keys and packets, coaxing recalcitrant equipment, and showing people around, all in addition to presenting compelling and professional papers themselves. Special thanks to Erin Prophet and Sravana Varma for being ready to help individual participants in need.

For more information on the ASE and its publications see [www.aseweb.org](http://www.aseweb.org).







# UNDERGRADUATE *News*

## The Undergraduate Religion Major in 2017-2018

### Prof. Jeffrey Kripal, Director of Undergraduate Studies 2017-2018

This last school year was an especially rich year for the undergraduate major, as we had eleven seniors graduate with a major in Religion. We also had numerous awards granted to our majors. **Christopher Brehm** and **Isaac Schultz** both won the Saba Prize for excellence in the study of religion. Chris wrote on the changing religious demographics of Houston; Isaac on religious memorials in contemporary Israel. **Isaac Carroo**, a junior, won the Aparacio Prize for the best paper in the psychology of religion, an analysis of Rastafarian religion. And **Jacob Blumenkranz** won Distinction in Research and Creative Writing for his essay on real estate patterns among immigrant religious communities in Houston and New York City.

We cannot possibly do justice to each of our majors. A few stories will have to suffice. Each is drawn directly from emails and conversations that I had with the student.

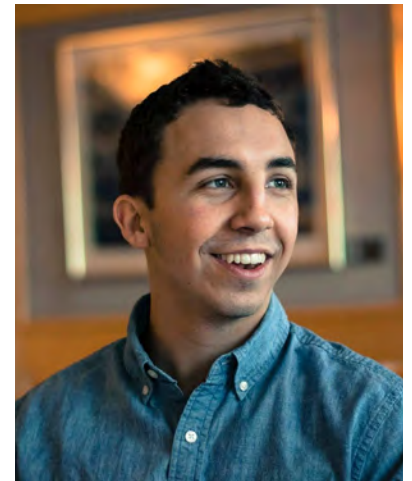
Modeling the interdisciplinary approach of the study of religion, Christopher Brehm worked closely with Prof. Stephen Klineberg in the Department of Sociology on a research paper entitled "The Shift in Religious Identity and Religiosity and its Effects on Population as Modeled by Houston." The aim of the paper was to evaluate changes in religious identity and religiosity in the Houston area and its effects on public opinion and political attitudes. To measure these changes, Chris used data from the Kinder Houston Area Survey (KHAS), an extensive survey conducted yearly in the Houston, Texas area. Overall, Houston was found to mirror many national trends in religious identity and religiosity. The main results of the analysis found that most religious groups were declining as a percentage of Houston's total population, while evangelical Protestants stagnated in percentage and Nones dramatically increased. Furthermore, religious identity was found to play an influential role in shaping beliefs, especially over the morality of homosexuality. Nones, a group sometimes characterized as lacking morality due to a lack of moral authority, seemed to be the group most open to diversity and support for government programs to eliminate inequality.

**Neomi Fletcher** will be pursuing graduate work in the study of religion

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Christopher Brehm



Isaac Schultz



Isaac Carroo

Neomi Fletcher



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this coming Fall. More specifically, she will be pursuing a Master's of Divinity at Candler School of Theology, with a concentration in society and personality. Her goal is to explore the influence social systems and cultural personalities have on shaping church practices. One reason that Neomi chose Candler is because her Race and Transformation course at Rice highlighted the importance of community involvement for churches seeking to participate in social justice. The Candler School of Theology will help her to pursue and develop these ideas and practices with its contextual education program and connections to community organizations that do not have church affiliation.

The story of another major, **Hunter Ponder**, is unique but also in many ways paradigmatic of the personal and intellectual transformations that we try to inspire and guide with the major. Here is Hunter in his own words.

"To be completely honest, the major was not what I expected. What strikes me the most is that the major can be so different for each student. Also, religion is such a personal subject that the classes one takes can contradict, alter, and in some cases influence his or her own beliefs.

I chose to take classes and write on subjects with which I was not familiar, and I think this benefited me greatly. For example, my senior thesis was on the Nation of Islam, a topic about which I had little prior knowledge. The paper was not only challenging to my beliefs but also my understanding of historical events and those who shaped them. Then there were classes such as Prof. Kripal's "Mutants and Mystics" course that really make you think and question everything you believe. The swath of classes offered makes the religion major incredibly interesting and beneficial, especially with regards to life after college. Everyone has personal beliefs. Being able to not only navigate between them when they are brought up in conversation in a mature way but also to understand the beliefs and the reasons behind them is a powerful thing. I can honestly say that in the short time I've been out of college the major has helped me tremendously."

Finally, I can personally say that it was an honor standing in as Director of Undergraduate Studies for Prof. Clements while she was on sabbatical, and that it will be very good to have her back again in the Fall, leading the undergraduate program and all of its incredible possibilities and potentials.

Hunter Ponder



## Current Undergraduate Students

**Isaac J. Carroo**  
Religion and Ecology &  
Evolutionary Biology  
Hanszen College '19

**Se Yeon Cho**  
Religion  
McMurtry College '19

**Ariana C. Engles**  
Religion and Kinesiology  
Lovett College '20

**Savion T. Lee**  
Religion  
McMurtry College '19

**Nikolas D. Liebster**  
Religion and Physics  
Hanszen College '19

**Michael T. McDowell**  
Religion, Social Policy  
Analysis and Sociology  
Wiess College '201

**Mariana Nájera**  
Religion  
McMurtry College '21

**Lidia Ochoa**  
Religion and Visual &  
Dramatic Arts  
Duncan College '21

**Pavan K. Pinnamaneni**  
Religion  
Sid Rich College '19

**Daniel W. Russell**  
Religion and History  
Will Rice College '19

**Abigail Shulman**  
Religion and Cognitive  
Sciences  
Lovett College '19

**Chloe M. Wilson**  
Religion and Political  
Science  
Lovett College '19

## Congratulations Class of 2017-18

**Calvin L. Anderson**  
Religion and Economics

**Jacob R. Blumencranz**  
Religion and Policy Studies

**Christopher K. Br hm**  
Religion and Statistics

**Elizabeth Denton**  
Religion and Visual & Dramatic Arts

**Andrew B. Dunlap**  
Religion

**Neomi Fletcher**  
Religion

**Robert L. Harris**  
Religion and Economics

**John H. Ponder**  
Religion and History

**Isaac M. Schultz**  
Religion



### 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, the award was bestowed on **Isaac Carroo**, a junior, for his paper on the psychology of religion, and analysis of Rastafarian religion.

### 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 award was bestowed jointly on **Chris Brehm**, who wrote on the changing religious demographics of Houston, and **Isaac Schultz** who wrote about religious memorials in contemporary Israel.

### Distinction in Research and Creative Writing

This year the award was bestowed on **Jacob Blumencranz** for his essay on real estate patterns among immigrant religious communities in Houston and New York City.



# INTRODUCING FIRST MASTER OF ARTS CLASS

**AMANDA HOLSTEIN**

contemplative studies

**BENJAMIN MATTHEWS**

religion & psychology

**STEFAN SANCHEZ**

religion & psychology

We are looking forward to this year in the department as the first year for our new thesis MA degree program. We established the MA program because we were constantly receiving phone calls and emails requesting a MA degree in Religion at Rice. So the faculty got together and designed an MA that will provide students with a broad but tailored understanding of the academic study of Religion. Students may be looking for a degree that will provide them with the necessary background and credentials for admittance into competitive divinity and doctoral programs in the study of Religion. Others might wish to develop the skills necessary for other vocational or professional options that do not require a Ph.D. Other students may just have a personal or professional interest in Religion. Students accepted into the MA program have the added bonus that they are eligible to participate in the GEM Certificate program. We welcome the first class of MA students: Amanda Holstein, Benjamin Matthews, and Stefan Sanchez. Professor Brian Ogren has been appointed our first Director of MA Studies.

## M.A. in Religion at Rice University

The Department of Religion at Rice University is now accepting applications for a two-year, full-time M.A. in the study of Religion. This degree will provide a broad background in the study of religious currents, including the marginal and transnational, and will provide a strong theoretical framework for the academic study of religion.

- Acquiring the necessary background and credentials for admittance in competitive divinity and doctoral programs, or
- Developing the skills necessary for other vocational or professional options that do not require a Ph.D., or
- Exploring personal and professional interests

Students accepted into the M.A. program are eligible to participate in our unique GEM (Gnosticism, Esotericism, Mysticism) Certificate Program.

For inquiries regarding the application process, please contact: [humagradadmissions@rice.edu](mailto:humagradadmissions@rice.edu). For academic inquiries regarding the program, please contact Brian Ogren, M.A. Director: [beo1@rice.edu](mailto:beo1@rice.edu)

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:  
[RELI.RICE.EDU/GRADUATE/MA-RELIGION](http://RELI.RICE.EDU/GRADUATE/MA-RELIGION)  
APPLY AT:  
[RELIGRADAPPS.RICE.EDU/](http://RELIGRADAPPS.RICE.EDU/)**

# GRADUATE STUDIES

## ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL YEAR

### Anthony B. Pinn, Director of Graduate Studies

The PhD program in Religion has grown over the years in size as well as national-international reputation. We continue to bring to Rice outstanding students, with all seven admitted students arriving for the 2018-2019 academic year. As these new students join us, others will leave with PhD in hand. I'd like to take this opportunity to congratulate the following students who completed all requirements for the PhD during the 2017-2018 academic year:



### December 2017

Jason Jeffries  
David Kline

### May 2018

Linda Ceriello  
Itohan Idumwonyi  
Minji Lee  
Erin Prophet  
Reyhan Basaran

In addition, Reyhan Basaran defended during spring semester. I'd also like to note that Simon Cox, Mark DeYoung, and Bradley Johnson passed comprehensive exams during the fall 2017 semester. CJ Schmidt and Gregory Perron sat for exams spring 2018 and passed.

Beyond making impressive progress in the program, our students received significant awards during the 2017-2018 academic year. For example, Abdulbasit Kassim won the 2017 Royal Air Morocco – ASA travel award, and also gave a TEDx talk at Rice. Renée Ford won a Wagoner Foreign Study Abroad Scholarship. Rice was also well represented by our students at a variety of conferences and professional meetings.

Finally, I'd like to congratulate all our students who moved into the 2018-2019 academic year having advanced their thinking and refined their understanding of their particular fields of study. PhD work isn't easy, and progressing from year to year is nothing to ignore. Congratulations all.

### Passed Comprehensive Exams

Fall 2017

Simon Cox  
Mark DeYoung  
Bradley Johnson

Spring 2018

CJ Schmidt  
Gregory Perron

### Passed Language Examinations

CJ Schmidt Coptic

Justin Kelley Tibetan

Tommy Symmes German



## Notable Achievements

**Abdulbasit Kassim** won the 2017 Royal Air Morocco ASA Travel Award and gave a TEDx Talk at Rice. He also authored two very significant publications on Boko Haram; "The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State" and "Boko Haram's Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism". Both Available on Amazon

**Renée Ford** won a Wagoner Foreign Study Abroad Scholarship

**Erin Prophet** published her paper on Elizabeth Clare Prophet in a book titled "Female Leaders in New Religious Movements."

## CONGRATULATIONS CLASS OF 2017-2018!



From left to right: April DeConick (Chair), Jason Jeffries, Minji Lee, Erin Prophet, Itoham Idumwonyi, Linda Ceriello, Reyhan Erdogdu Basaran, Tony Pinn (Director Graduate Studies)  
Not Pictured: David Kline



Linda Ceriello and Anne Klein



Reyhan Erdogdu Basaran, Lydia Westbrook, Minji Lee

## Graduate Areas of Concentration

African American  
Religion

African Religions

Bible & Beyond

Buddhist Thought

Contemplative Studies

Global Christianity

History of Religions in  
America

Jewish Thought &  
Philosophy

Modern Christianity  
in Taught & Popular  
Culture

New Testament & Early  
Christian Studies

Psychology & Religion



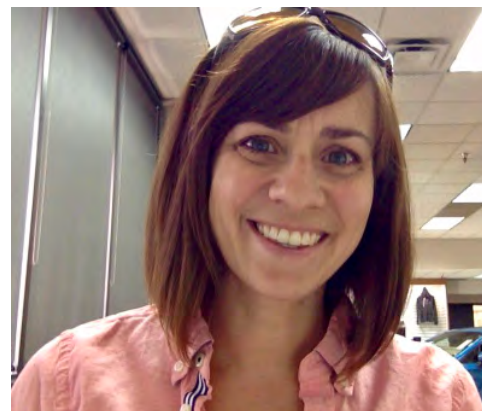
## WAGONER FOREIGN STUDIES SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT TRAVELS TO SIKKIM, INDIA THIS SUMMER

### Renée Ford, Graduate Student

As a Wagoner Foreign Studies Scholarship recipient, I am able to travel to Gangtok, Sikkim in Northern India this summer. Gangtok holds valuable Tibetan resources like the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, a Tibetan Buddhist archive and the Chorten Gonpa Monastery, which is the main seat of Dodrupchen Rinpoche and a holder of the Longchen Nyingthig tradition or Heart Essence Vast Expanse. Gangtok sits in the foothills of the Himalayan mountain range and is home to various cultural groups such as Nepalis, Lepchas, Bhutias, and Tibetans. The Tibetan Buddhist culture thrives with monasteries, educational centers, and research institutions like NIT and the Chorten Gonpa Monastery.

Namgyal Institute of Tibetology was founded in the early 1960's and is a museum, library, and a Tibetology research center. The museum holds rare collections of Tibetan Buddhist religious objects like statues, ritual objects, art such as thangkas, and ancient manuscripts. Some of these manuscripts are texts written in golden script, an 11th century palm leaf manuscript of the Saratama Prajñāpāramitā by Ratnakara Shanti, and a 12th century Chinese manuscript of the Prajñā Paramita Sūtra from South Korea.

NIT's library holds over 60,000 Tibetan works written in Tibetan, Sanskrit, and Pali. Their collection from the Nyingma (rNying ma) tradition is of great interest and import to my dissertation research. I will have a rare opportunity to research their collection of the Third Dodrupchen's entire work, which spans five volumes and other Nyingma writers like Longchenpa (Klong chen pa), Jigme Lingpa ('jigs med gling pa), and Patrul Rinpoche (dpa' sprul rin po che). Some of these works are found



on online resources but NIT provides valuable opportunities to work with native Tibetan speaking scholars.

The Chorten Gonpa Monastery is one of two Dodrupchen monasteries, the other located in Eastern Tibet in the Golog region. Chorten Gonpa is an epicenter of Tibetan Buddhism in Gangtok, as it houses 500 monastics including nuns and children. It also is an orphanage, boarding school, and a nursing home for others in the Gangtok community. These cultural contexts make the monastery an excellent location for me to carry out my dissertation research, which is "Devotion in the Heart Essence, Vast Expanse." The combination of cultural context and scholarship in Gangtok are valuable resources, as they will provide oral commentary to my textual translations on the Third Dodrupchen Jigme Tenpai Nyima's guru yoga texts, on the Important points of Guru Yoga and Instructions for Practicing Guru Yoga.

My dissertation centers on how devotion, as affect, transforms a subject for the Heart Essence, Vast Expanse tradition. Specifically, I look at how guru yoga meditation practices engage with devotion. Guru yoga meditation, for the Heart Essence, Vast Expanse, is a meditation where a practitioner engages with praxis modalities such as imagined

Continued on Page 28





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images, mantra recitation, prayer, and felt-sense of merging with the images so that she recognizes something unknown of herself. Guru yoga and other meditation practices in the Heart Essence, Vast Expanse tradition emphasize the need for devotion. My goal is to understand how devotion through guru yoga practice aides this transformative process.

The fieldwork in Gangtok provides me an opportunity to receive oral commentary on the meditational instructions. Tibetan Buddhist textual literature is never isolated from an oral tradition and is never meant to be read except in the context of scholarly oral discourse. These texts often assume oral knowledge about philosophical, ritualistic, or contextual nuances that are well known to emic students and practitioners. The oral

and written genres in Tibet are intertwined, and absolutely require each other because written texts do not contain the entire range of meaning, and were written in a way that oral commentary is required for the reader comprehend the literature.

I look forward to engaging in the Tibetan Buddhist culture as it is lived through the community of Gangtok. Scholars and the religious community offer me a multitude of experiences that will enrich my dissertation topic and understanding of Tibetan Buddhism at large. Additionally, this experience will deepen my Tibetan colloquial language that is indispensable to my academic pursuits. The Wagoner Foreign Studies Scholarship provides me with a rare opportunity to combine my academic pursuits within a cultural context.

## Current Graduate Students

**Dauda Adamu**  
African Religions

**Azizou Atteoudeyi**  
African Religions

**Justine Bakker**  
African American Religion; GEM

**Shardé Chapman**  
African American Religion

**Konner Childers**  
Bible & Beyond

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

**DeAnna Daniels**  
African American Religion

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

**Cindy Dawson**  
Early Judaism; Studies in Women,  
Gender, and Sexuality

**Mark DeYoung**  
African American Religion

**Learned Foote**  
Tibetan Buddhism; Gnosticism,  
Esotericism, and Mysticism

**Jason Ford**  
Bible & Beyond

**Renée Ford**  
Buddhist Thought; GEM

**Naamleela Free Jones**  
Gnosticism, Esotericism, and  
Mysticism (GEM)

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

**Rebecca Harris**  
Bible & Beyond

**Nathaneal Homewood**  
Global Christianity, Gender, and  
Sexuality

**Oihane Iglesias Telleria**  
Gnosticism; Latin American  
Literature

**Bradley Johnson**  
African Religions

**Abdulbasit Kassim**  
Islamic Studies, African Religions

**Justin Kelley**  
Buddhist Thought

**Kyungsoo Lee**  
Religion & Psychology

**Benjamin J. Mayo**  
Gnosticism, Esotericism, Mysticism  
(GEM); Philosophy of Religion

**Thomas Millary**  
History of Religions in America

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

**Stanislav Panin**  
History of Religions in America

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

**Gregory Perron**  
GEM; Religion & Psychology

**Waleed Rikab**  
Islamic Studies; Sunni Islam

**Mark Schmanko**  
American Religious History;  
Critical Theory

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

**Christopher Senn**  
Contemplative Studies;  
Gnosticism, Esotericism, and  
Mysticism (GEM)

**Kyle Smith**  
History of Religions in America

**Matthew Southey**  
History of Religions in America

**Arjan Sterken**  
Exchange Student

**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

**Arina Zaytseva**  
Global Christianity

# GRADUATE Conferences

## Going Viral: Religion and Health

Graduate Student Conference  
at **Boston University**

**October 14, 2017**



**Boston University Graduate Student Conference on Religion | Boston, MA | October 2017**

**Timothy Grieve-Carlson, Graduate Student**

In October of 2017, I received department funding to attend the third annual Boston University Graduate Student Conference on Religion. The theme of the conference was “Going Viral: Religion and Health.” My paper, “Animal Subjects and Religious Healing in Nineteenth Century Pennsylvania,” was selected for a panel on “Early Modern Interpretations of Sin, Sickness, and Suffering.”

My paper analyzed a Pennsylvania Dutch magico-religious healing tradition, *braucherei* or “powwow” in English, in which nonhuman animals, typically livestock like horses, cows, and pigs, were frequently the subject of healing practices. In the paper, I surveyed several groups of primary source material, including written charms, grimoires, and oral traditions. My paper considered how religious conceptions of health might change when they do not presume a human body as their primary subject. My paper also challenged a prevailing narrative in animal history, in which early American attitudes towards animals are understood as having been shaped by a Christian orthodoxy of human

dominion over the natural world in which animals were subordinate automations. Pennsylvania Dutch cosmology challenges this narrative by portraying animals as active participants in a cosmos of suffuse divinity.

Overall, the conference was a stimulating, productive, and fun conversation surrounding the intersection of religion and health.

## Re-Imagining the Christian Body Conference | Turku, Finland | November 2017

**Nathanael J. Homewood, Graduate Student**

In November of 2017 I had the good fortune of attending the Re-Imagining the Christian Body conference at the University of Turku, Finland. The theme of this particular conference was timely and important, focusing on the ways in which the human body has been imagined and re-imagined throughout Christian history up to and including the present. Papers ranged from antiquity to the present and explored how the human body interacts with other bodies and with the divine, how the body is privileged or renounced, and ultimately asking what is the human body.

My particular paper argued that Pentecostals define the body primarily through ritual practice instead of theology or cognition. Within their rituals – including but not limited to deliverance, glossolalia, healing, prophecy – the body is defined and redefined repeatedly through the dual process of exploring the boundaries and stretching the limits of the human body. In particular, through deliverance Pentecostals come to know their own bodies in a multiplicity of ways from feeling the body’s

physicality and kinesthetic motion through disinhibition, to temporarily losing control and/or autonomy of that body in ecstasy, and to regaining control of the body. Importantly, the body is always defined in relation to spirit(s). As such, any epistemology of the body must also take into account the transcendent and the manner in which Pentecostals utilize spirit(s) to define their bodies. The paper, based on eight months of fieldwork in Accra in 2015-2016, utilized the ritual of deliverance to explore Pentecostal epistemologies of the body and spirit, ultimately concluding that in many ways, to deliver is to know.

I consider it a great privilege to have been involved in this conference and deeply appreciate the support of the Department of Religion and Humanities Research Center that made the travel possible.



**Turun yliopisto  
University of Turku**





**African Studies Association Conference|  
Chicago, Illinois| November 2017 | Boko  
Haram | September 2017**

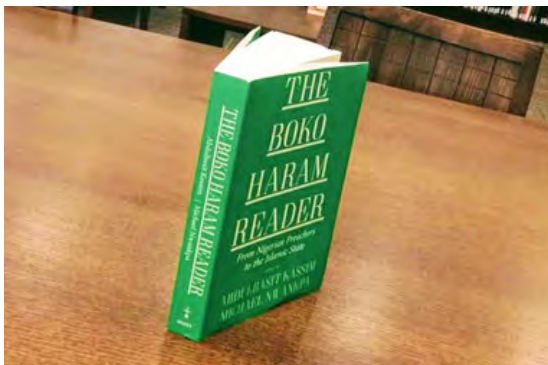
**Abdulbasit Kassim, Graduate Student**

In the Fall of 2017, I presented my paper titled “Constructing Institutional Legitimacy: The Salafi-Jihadis’ Appropriation of Sufi Jihad in the Sahel-Sahara,” at the Annual African Studies Association (ASA) Conference at Chicago, Illinois. Based on a study of the Arabic literature of Muhammad Abd al-Kārim al-Maghīlī (d. 1504) and ‘Uthmān Ibn Fūdī (d. 1817) as well as a study of the primary source materials of Boko Haram in Nigeria and Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin in the Sahel, the paper examines how the core ideological concepts that animated the historical jihads of the 19th century in the Sahel-Sahara—including ideas about takfir, Dār al-Islām, Dār al-Kufr, hijrah and al-walā’ wa-l-barā’—were appropriated into the ideological manuals of contemporary Salafi-Jihadi movements in an attempt to establish institutional legitimacy for their belief-system in the Sahel-Sahara religious marketplace. The paper has been nominated for the Best Graduate Student Paper and the final award announcement will be made at the next ASA conference at Atlanta in December 2018.

I was also awarded the Royal Air Morocco/ASA student award. My participation at the conference was made possible through the generous travel fund from the Department of Religion, Rice University.

In the same Fall 2017, I also presented my paper titled “Redeeming the Ideology of Slavery in Northern Nigeria: Boko Haram and the Quest for the ‘Servile Estate’ at the Annual Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA) conference at Washington, DC. Although the institution of slavery in Northern Nigeria was officially abolished following the enactment of Slavery Ordinance No. 19 on September 24, 1936 and the elimination of the clause that maintained the status of slavery for those individuals born before April 1, 1901, my paper examines Boko Haram’s quest to revive the institution and ideology of slavery in Northern Nigeria with the kidnapping of the 276 Chibok schoolgirls on April 14, 2014. I received a travel grant from ASMEA and Rice University Humanities Research Center to present my paper at the conference.

In the Spring of 2018, my first book (co-edited with Michael Nwankpa with an Introduction by Professor David Cook) “The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State” was published by Hurst Publishers and Oxford University Press. Using unprecedented collection of primary source materials - much of it published for the first time - including essential texts, books, rare internal documents, videos, audios, communique and nashids (martial hymns), translated into English from Hausa, Arabic, and Kanuri, tracing the origin, history, and evolution of Boko Haram, the 546 pages book tells the story of Boko Haram through the frame of reference of the key ideologues that contributed to the ideational capital of the group.



**Society for Pentecostal Studies | Cleveland, Tennessee | March 2018**

**Kyle Smith, Graduate Student**

At Society for Pentecostal Studies, I presented a paper that linked institutional stability to epistemological methodology. I argued that Pentecostalism adheres to a radically different epistemology that is in tension with the reigning methods of creating truth claims in Western Christianity. Consequently, as Pentecostalism continues to grow demographically both internationally and domestically, Christian institutions (churches, universities, seminaries, etc.) will begin to

experience fragility as the methods for forming consensus are no longer universally accepted. One of the scholars whose work I utilized extensively attended the presentation and spoke to me afterwards.

I also served as a critic for Daniel Castelo’s new book *Pentecostalism as a Christian Mystical Tradition*. In his book, Castelo argues that, “Encountering God...serves as the epistemological grounding for Pentecostal theological methodology.”\* I was able to talk to Castelo after the presentation and meet several other scholars working in similar fields.

\* Castelo, Daniel, *Pentecostalism as a Christian Mystic Tradition*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017.) Page 81.”



### Annual Conference of the Society for Science, Literature and the Arts | Tempe, Arizona | November 2017

#### Justine Bakker, Graduate Student

The department's research travel funding helped me to attend two back-to-back conferences in November 2017. In Tempe, Arizona, I participated in the annual conference of the Society for Science, Literature and the Arts (SLSA), which was hosted by Arizona State University. In keeping with this year's theme—Out of Time—I presented a paper on alternative modes of temporality in visual artist Ellen Gallagher's Watery Ecstatic series. I argued that Gallagher, in repeatedly using the same figure in different oceanic settings, exposes the interplay between what I called captive time and fugitive time—or, time as a mere continuous repetition of the forces of antiblack white supremacy and time as breaking out of this cycle of violence towards an as-of-yet-imagined future. As I was one of the few religious studies scholars present, the SLSA provided a great occasion to engage scholars and scholarship in a wide range of different fields. After a few wonderful days in the desert, I flew to Boston to attend the annual American Academy of Religion meeting. Part of one of the mysticism panels—"Mutable Flesh: Mysticism, Bodies, and Boundaries"—my paper engaged, once again, the Watery Ecstatic series, but now to think through the ways in which visual art offers a site to interrogate the nature of mysticism. As I engage Gallagher for one of the chapters of my dissertation, both conference provided me the opportunity to present and receive feedback on dissertation material.



### Sixth Annual Ways of Knowing Conference | Boston, Massachusetts | October 2017

#### Waleed Rikab, Graduate Student

On October 27th, 2017, I attended the 6th annual Ways of Knowing Conference at the Harvard Divinity School in Boston, Massachusetts. My attendance was made possible by funding from the Department of Religion and the Humanities Research Center.

I took part in the "Bodily Ways of Knowing" module and gave a presentation titled "Reason and its Discontents – Inquiry Into the Place of Reason in the Writings of al-Ghazali and Qadi Abd al-Jabbar", which focused on the Islamic theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's model of embodied knowledge vs Mu'tazili models of impersonal and abstracted knowledge.

The conference was a good opportunity to present my work and receive instructive feedback, and to get to know fellow graduate students working on a wide array of projects.

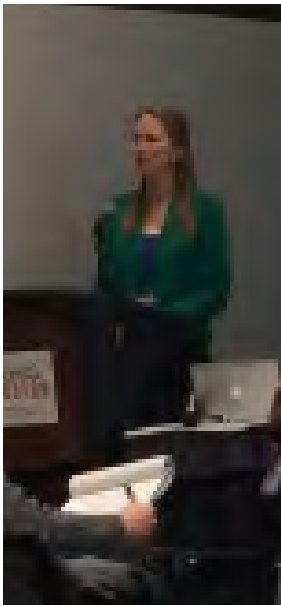
### American Academy of Religion Conference | Boston, Massachusetts | November 2017

#### Bradley Johnson, Graduate Student

Thanks in part to funding from the Department of Religion, I was able to travel to Boston for the 2017 American Academy of Religion conference, where I presented a paper titled "The Invention of Hells: Black Mirror and Punishment as Spectacle." Using two episodes from the second season of the British television show *Black Mirror* (which has now found a home on Netflix), I argued that our society's desire for purely retributivist punishment signifies our social, political, and psychological need for the damnation of the Other. Futuristic technology is combined with recognizable social institutions to torture convicted criminals in both episodes, in ways that are bereft of any reforming purpose and are visibly open to the public. Drawing on Foucault's "punishment as spectacle" and demonstrating how the show partially reverses the disciplinary trajectory he

proposes, I use Lisa Guenther's writings on "solitary confinement as social death" to posit that *Black Mirror* allows us to envision "solitary confinement as public spectacle" along with a demented means of enjoying the punishment inflicted on Others. I conclude by noting that a future techno-utopia will not save us from our hellish desires to enact retribution against those we consider less-than; it may only intensify the tools we use to do so. I participated on the Religion and Science Fiction panel, where I entered into conversation with other nerdy scholars discussing superheroes, dystopian futures, anime, and similar topics. Our diversity of media, approaches, and foci allowed a wonderfully fruitful discussion among ourselves and with members of the audience. This marked my first presentation at an AAR conference, and it was an honor to take part.





### American Academy of Religion Conference | Boston, Massachusetts | November 2017

#### Cynthia Dawson, Graduate Student

In November 2017, Cindy Dawson presented her paper, "Hiding Sophia: Preservation of the Female Body's Value in Gnostic Mythology" as a part of the SBL/AAR session, "Ritual Creativity: Old and New, Inside and Out" at SBL/AAR's annual meeting in Boston, MA. This joint session partnered SBL's Mysticism, Esotericism, and Gnosticism in Antiquity with AAR's Western Esotericism.

Dawson's paper explores the construction and function of the female body in four gnostic texts: Pistis Sophia, On the Origin of the World, Hypostasis of the Archons, and Apocryphon of John. In these texts' accounts of the mythological origin of the cosmos, the exposed bodies of Sophia and her daughters are consistently depicted as objects of excessive, often gratuitous sexual violence.

Yet in the midst of this violence appears another, equally consistent motif: the gnostic writers protected their female characters through a variety of narratorial techniques, such as transforming the female body into a tree or a strenuous insistence on the violence's ultimate failure. Dawson's paper accounts for this curious pairing of violence and protection by evaluating the female body as a cultural artifact embedded with the values of the patriarchal culture which constructed it, a culture which valued the female body as a reliable, untainted conduit of progeny.

This paper was originally written during Dawson's enrollment in two seminars in Spring 2017: April DeConick's RELI 581: Gnosticism, and Susan Lurie's SWGS 501: Feminist Debates. Dawson would like to thank her professors and the participants in these seminars for their feedback on her paper. She would also like to thank the Religion Department and the Center for Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality for their generous financial support to cover travel expenses.

### Esotericism and Gender at the American Academy of Religion | Boston, Massachusetts | November 2017

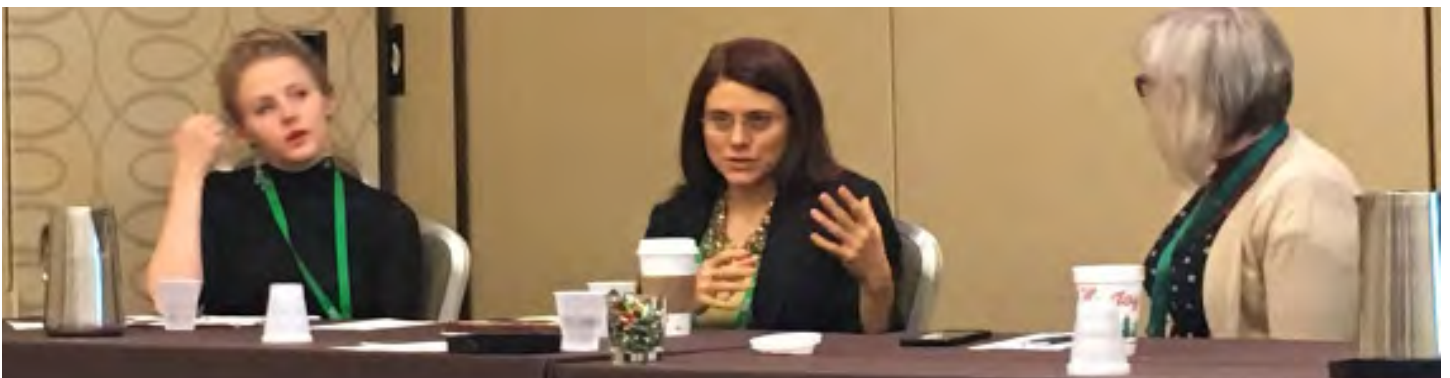
#### Erin Prophet, Graduate Student

Controversial topics abound in the study of Western esotericism and gender, particularly as ideas about gender change from one century to the next. My dissertation studies esoteric appropriations of evolution, particularly "root race theory," a controversial system of salvation developed by the Russian mystic Helena Blavatsky during the nineteenth century. In November 2017, I presented my research at the American Academy of Religion annual conference in Boston, during a panel entitled "Differently Gendered Esotericisms: Modern Esoteric Negotiations of Gender Polarity."

In my talk, I explained why and how Blavatsky's system came to depict the human as moving from a hermaphroditic to a gendered state, and what were the implications for theological discourse. My paper was entitled "Syncretism in the Gendered and Nongendered Reproduction of Blavatsky's Root Races: From Hermaphrodites to Hairy Red Giants." I explored the syncretism at work in Blavatsky's theories about

the transformation of humans over the grand span of evolutionary time, including that human souls inhabited the bodies of giant ape-like creatures who, she claimed, were the evolutionary forebears of modern primates!

Also on the panel was Manon Hedenborg White of Uppsala University, who spoke about gender polarity in contemporary Thelema, a system of belief and practice that was initiated by Aleister Crowley. Our discussion, moderated by Amy Hale, explored how women have negotiated gendered discourse in esoteric systems between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. My travel was supported by the Department of Religion as well as the Andrew W. Mellon Seminar on Emerging Religions through the Humanities Research Center.



## graduate student INSTRUCTORS



### RELI 378: Buddhist Art and Literature

**Simon Cox, Graduate Student**

Through generous funding from the Khyentse Foundation, Simon Cox taught “Buddhist Art and Literature” in the Fall of 2017. In this course students examined the formation and transmission of the many Buddhisms of the Silk Road from antiquity through the early medieval period. With a view toward art, literature, philosophy, and

religious praxis, students became acquainted with the history of East and Central Asian Buddhism in terms of comparative religions, art history, and geopolitics focusing on the history of Buddhism on the Silk Road up to the 10th century, reading relevant primary source Buddhist literature. Additionally students learned the fundamentals of the classical Tibetan language.

### RELI 322: Introduction to Buddhism

**Simon Cox and Justin Kelley, Graduate Students**

Through generous funding from the Khyentse Foundation, Simon Cox and Justin Kelley had the privilege of teaching “Introduction to Buddhism” this past Spring semester. With a maximum capacity of twenty students, all from a variety of backgrounds and with diverse interests, the course focused on important written, artistic, and lived expressions of Buddhism as found throughout Asia and beyond. This broad assortment of topics allowed each student to focus in on a particular section of the syllabus and dig deeper into it for their group-presentations and papers, which ranged in topic from gender in Buddhist iconography to the relatability of neural

networks and traditional Buddhist presentations of consciousness.

From the outset, students engaged in conversation about the materials in small-group activities and classroom discussions. This dual-focus allowed for both learning about historical Buddhist lineages/traditions/individuals, as well as engaging with them in conversation, drawing out how they are applicable in a contemporary setting. The final two weeks of the course were dedicated to student-led group presentations and an exploration of north American Buddhism. Ultimately, the course provided both a deeper understanding of Buddhism as a historical and lived tradition, as well as methodological tools for investigating cultural-religious phenomena in general.

### RELI 304: Jesus and the Gospels

**Rebecca Harris, Graduate Student**  
**T. Orman Taylor Teaching Fellow**

This semester I had the opportunity to teach Jesus and the Gospels to Rice undergraduate students. Seventeen students enrolled, ranging from freshman through seniors. For a few of these students, this class was their first introduction to the Religion department.

In the course, we explored various depictions of Jesus in the New Testament Gospels as well as in non-canonical sources, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Mary,

and Toledot Jeshu. We also discussed historical-critical issues such as the formation of the canon, manuscript traditions, and early heterodoxy. The students impressed me with their level of engagement. They came to class having read the assignments and prepared to discuss the complexities of the texts and issues. While many students were familiar with the New Testament Gospels, for most this class was their first introduction to other gospel literature and gnostic ideas, and they engaged these texts with great interest and openness.

I am so grateful the department provided me with this opportunity to teach. The skills I developed through designing a course and being fully responsible for its implementation will serve me well as I move forward in my career.





From left to right: Summar McGhee, Dheyrl Batts, Avery Johnson, Jordan Murley, Aaron Cephas, Ako Adams, Jordan Myers, Austin Trammell, Cam Montgomery, D' Angelo Ellis, Anthony Ekpe  
 Pictured with Rice alumna: Rhys Caraway and Chavonte Wright

## RELI 270: Introduction to Black Christian Churches

**Cleve V. Tinsley IV, Graduate Student**

In the spring of 2018, I taught "Introduction to the Black Church," a sociohistorical and interpretive survey course, which traced the development of black churches as separatist movements and traditions of African American spirituality from the late 19th century to contemporary times. The objective of the course was to help students understand how black Christian churches have shaped and initiated much of what has taken place within the black community as it relates to struggles for self-definition and social advocacy. As the first institutions in the United States developed and controlled by black Americans, these churches, then, were (and still are) major resources those interested in understanding

religious expression and socio-political activism in black America.

Throughout the course I used a combination of lectures, videos, and group-based case studies in order to connect the thought and worship practices of the major "Black Church" denominations to a broader movement of black spirituality in African American culture. Near the end of the semester, we also gave some attention to African Americans within predominately white denominations.

There were four course outcomes. First I wanted students to become acquainted with the social and historical contexts that gave rise to black Christian expressions of faith in the United States. Secondly, I wanted them to come to know and understand the major denominations that comprise the "Black Church" tradition and what distinguishes them from one another and how they (a group also referred to as Black Protestants) are distinct protest traditions within a larger Christian Protestant tradition. Thirdly, I wanted students understand the unique significance of worship and ritual in black Christian expressions. And, finally, we concluded the final weeks of the course connecting the Black Church tradition to modern movements of religious expression by exploring some of the contemporary challenges facing black Christian churches in US contexts today.

The experience was one of the best I've had at my time here at Rice, and I particularly enjoyed seeing students begin to understand black Christian expressions in the larger context of black freedom struggle and African American core desires for liberated self-expression and social belonging.

## RELI 271: Medieval Popular Christianity

**Minji Lee, Ph.D 2018**

In Spring 2018, I taught "Medieval Popular Christianity" class with seventeen undergraduates. It was a kind of celebrating my final semester at Rice. I enjoyed a lot and I learned a lot from my students.

As an international student, I could not dismiss any possibility of language barrier before I started teaching. However, my TA experience for the same class taught by Dr. Fanger and her advices helped me in various ways. Moreover, I was able to use my experience of Christianity in South Korea to compare and to contrast with medieval Christianity. Once I showed a part of

the Korean movie "Exorcist" where two priests practice exorcism on a young girl. From this movie, we had time to find medieval components from this ritual.

Also, I have to appreciate my students that they encouraged me in my thesis and career. We exchanged comments and grades in numerous emails and papers, and most of the time, they gave me supports and appreciations. In the last class, some of them gave me hug which made me nearly cry. We even had a wrap-up party at Valhalla although since many of them were under 21 so we had coffee and muffins together, sharing our future plans. I received a thank you card from one of my students and he said "Your class has been one of my favorite classes that I have taken at Rice." I would not forget my experience teaching at Rice.

# PhD Recipients

## JASON JEFFRIES



### **Underneath the Surface: African American Religion and Tattoo Culture**

**Jason Jeffries, Ph.D 2017**

My research is organized around qualitative and quantitative issues related to human embodiment, African American religion and spirituality, and African American institutions and contemporary popular culture. My work considers non-traditional ways that the black

body contributes to the creation of non-institutional religious practices, including secular or new forms of black religion and spirituality, and through ongoing attention to the longstanding “academic” preoccupation with black bodies.

Trained in the multidisciplinary methods offered by religious studies, I make use of social scientific approaches to religion. I seek to understand how the body works to create and contribute to both social constructions of religion/the sacred, including non-institutional forms outside of institutionalized religion. In my dissertation, *Underneath the Surface: African American Religion and Tattoo Culture*, I explore whether there is a relationship between tattooing and religion within the African American community. I argue that tattooing should be included as source material for the study of black religion, because it is an embodied, cultural product that often captures black experience, black cultural memory, black ethics, black history, black social analysis and identity. Throughout the dissertation, I used interdisciplinary methods to analyze the subjects, black religion and tattooing culture. One of the important interventions the project makes uses sociology and systems theory to sketch the ways in which power relationships work to confine black bodies, such that the body becomes a space of meaning making. Tattooing serves as a way in

which black bodies regain subjectivity. I also discuss, in the dissertation, the psychological effects of living under webs of oppression, and suggest that body modification, especially tattooing, can be considered a method by which those who suffer under the psychological strain can restore a healthy sense of self.

These arguments emerge by way of ethnography conducted in St. Louis, Houston, and New Orleans over 2015-2017, that included African American tattoos artists and African American tattooed persons of various ages and religious backgrounds, ranging from Catholic to atheist. I questioned both tattoo artists and people who have tattoos about their opinions on the relationship between tattooing and religion. Through the reading of tattoos and understanding tattoo narratives, we may better understand a person's morals, ethics, and values. We also can better understand how they utilize their tattoos to express what is meaningful in their lives, and to forge part of a broader, multifaceted social identity. Additionally, the project concludes with consideration of Tupac Shakur's “Exodus” tattoo as a case study to examine how tattoos may be utilized as source materials for religious studies. Tupac's tattoos are a way in which Tupac practiced and expressed meaning in the context of oppression, a way for him to create meaning in life through celebration of the black body.

## DAVID KLINE

### **The Apparatus of Christian Identity: Religious (Auto) Immunity, Political Theology, and the Making of the Racial World**

**David Kline, Ph.D 2017**

My research is in the areas of religion and race in the Americas, critical and cultural theory, and political theory and theology. My dissertation, which was passed with distinction in August 2017, “*The Apparatus of Christian Identity: Religious (Auto) Immunity, Political Theology, and the Making of the Racial World*,” undertook a critical and deconstructive analysis of western Christian discourses of race and

offered a pragmatic religious/theological framework for resisting white supremacy in the contemporary United States. As a contribution to various scholarly fields including religious studies, American studies, whiteness studies, and critical race theory, I theorized white American Christian racism and violence as reactionary responses to the perpetual inescapability of social, political, and cultural transformation. In response to this cycle of violence, I engaged various strands of black studies, critical and cultural theory, and sociology to construct a pragmatic framework of a religiously based anti-racism centered on theories of blackness as affirmations of the temporal and transient nature of human community. For the past year, I have been a lecturer in Religion, Race, and Ethnicity in the Americas in the religious studies department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.





## ITOHAN IDUMWONYI



### **An Ethnographic Study of Gender Dynamics in Benin Religion and a Pentecostal Congregation in Benin City, Nigeria.**

**Itohan Mercy Idumwonyi, Ph.D 2018**

My research, publications, and teaching on religion lies at the intersection of Religion in Africa, Global and African Christianities, Pentecostalism, Religion in African Diaspora, Religious and Cultural Identity Construction

in Homeland and Diaspora Religion, African Indigenous Religion and Traditions, Ethnographic, Women and Gender Studies.

My dissertation, *An Ethnographic Study of Gender Dynamics in Benin Religion and a Pentecostal Congregation in Benin City, Nigeria* surveys what it has meant to be a woman in male-dominated and male-founded religious traditions historically, and what identity construction might mean for women moving forward. I analyze critical elements of African Traditional Religions as the common legacy that Nigerian Pentecostal Tradition (NPT) subtly engages and thus inform their theory and practices of inclusion. It explores how cultural beliefs drawn from Benin (African) Traditional Religion impacts gender dynamics in Nigerian Pentecostal congregations exemplified in the foremost Church of God Mission International in Benin City, Nigeria. Drawing on the drama that followed the consecration of the first Pentecostal female Bishop in a mega Pentecostal congregation in Nigeria, I argue that Pentecostal tradition is yet to pragmatically embrace gender inclusion and the sole consecration of the female bishop – Margaret Idahosa – should not be mistaken for gender egalitarianism and inclusion.

Lastly, I stayed on the theme of gender exclusion and the resistance of the masculine hegemony by women in this faith tradition. On the broadest level, my dissertation and research draws from and contributes to the discussion on cultural beliefs, social status, and gender inclusivity –

more specifically, the ways that male religious leaders (in Benin religion and Pentecostal tradition) embody, address, and employ cultural beliefs and social status to diffuse gender inclusivity in religious traditions, particularly in Indigenous and Pentecostal traditions. Not only do I show the role of religion and cultural beliefs in shaping gender dynamics, I also show how women pragmatically resist the religious, cultural, and gender borders in ways to 'become' and build an inclusive faith community.

My research was supported by fellowships from the American Association of University Women (AAUW), the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE), and the Rice University, Center for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality (CSWGS) and I am grateful to these institutions.

I successfully defended my dissertation on April 4th, 2018. This accomplishment concluded my time at Rice University, where I was thankful to have been given expert mentorship. I am grateful for all the support that the Department of Religion at Rice University offered me in the course of my graduate studies. My foremost gratitude goes to my stellar dissertation committee, without whom I would not have seen the light of day: Elias Kifon Bongmba (Religion), Jeffrey Kripal (Religion), and Elaine Howard Ecklund (Sociology). I look forward to revising and transforming my research into a full-length monograph over the next year and bringing it to publishers sometime in late 2019.

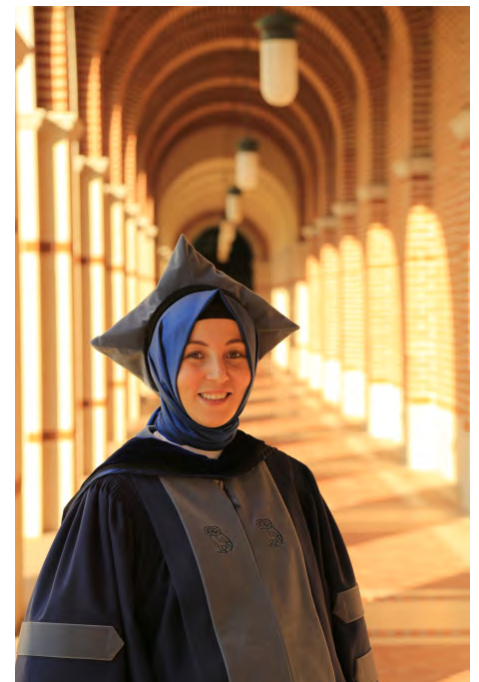
## REYHAN ERDOĞDU BASARAN

### **Why Label Alevi Islam as Shi'ite?: A Comparative Inquiry into Alevi Identity Outside of the Sunni-Shi'ite Framework**

**Reyhan Erdoğan Basaran, Ph.D 2018**

As a PhD holder in Religion at Rice University, I focus on Sunni-Shiite polemics, sectarianism, and minority religious groups including the Alevis of Turkey and the Nusayris/Alawis of Syria. I also study Bektashism, Salafism, Ahmadism, and Wahhabism. In my research, I use historical-critical methods. I also apply theoretical insights from women's and gender studies. In my dissertation, which I successfully defended on Tuesday, April 17th, 2018, I addressed the question of what Alevism really is in terms of sectarian discourses.

The Alevis represent the most significant minority religious group in Turkey and the Alevi question represents a unique ethnic and religious challenge for the Turkish state. Although the number of academic studies on Alevism have dramatically increased in the last three decades, the question of whether Alevism is a branch of Shi'ism has not been thoroughly explored. The majority of recent works on Alevism have automatically and straightly classified Alevism as Shi'ite due to the shared religious elements like the veneration of Ali and honoring ahl al-bayt, blaming Yazid for the murder



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of Husayn, grieving for the martyrs of Karbala, etc. They did not, however, interrogate those Shi'ite currents as to how they are applied and perceived in Shi'ism and Alevism. By using a comparative study of religion methodology, this research seeks to provide an elaborative analysis on the distinguishing features of the Alevi belief system, in relation to the Alid cause. While analyzing the contemporary approaches and archival of the official and historical records on Alevi belief, the particular focus of this dissertation is to understand, decode, and theorize the status of Alevism in conjunction with and separate from Sunnism and Shi'ism. In doing so, this dissertation argues that most of the existing scholarship fails to conceive of the Alevi differences outside of the Sunni-Shi'ite framework. The unique contribution of my research to the body of knowledge is that I challenge the very concept of Shi'ism through unpacking the

following questions about the nature and determinants of a sect. Were the categories of a sect determined and by whom? Are these categories too clear? And what are those categories to define a group as a sect? Why cannot Alevism exist as free of Sunni/Shi'ite binaries?

I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to my advisor, Prof. David Cook for his endless support, encouragement, and patience. My sincere gratitude also goes to the other two-committee members, Prof. Jeffrey Kripal and Prof. Lora Wildenthal. I am also deeply thankful to all of the professors in the Department of Religion at Rice University, particularly to Prof. April D. DeConick, who as chair of the Department of Religion has become to me a leading role model. I plan to return to Turkey to work in one of the prestigious universities in Ankara as an Assistant Professor in Religion.



## LINDA CERIELLO

and portrayals in contemporary popular culture of these religious phenomena. In essence, I attempt to first show how each of these topic areas inflect and influence one another (historically, ideologically, culturally), and second, I roll out my notion of a "secondhand mysticism" that may result from their confluence.

Portrayals of lay spiritual experiences in popular culture are more prevalent now than ever. Contemporary individuals encounter the mystical and non-ordinary in many such decontextualized, secular formats. I analyze the cultural work of the mystical to trouble the well-trodden perennialism-constructivism binary and consider new frameworks for viewing the central debates within mysticism studies. I also argue that such textual encounters exceed the boundaries of what it means to consume culture, as when audiences and fans become participatory producers of culture in ways unique to the age of social media.

The major theoretical apparatus that I employed--metamodern theory--is a quite new one; I believe mine to be the first dissertation in the field of religious studies to utilize such a perspective. I make a case that theorization of metamodernism (as an epistemic turn and a more substantive conceptualization of post-postmodernism) may have much to contribute

to our field.

The dissertation project was skillfully shepherded by my advisor, Dr. Jeffrey Kripal, whose work factors into my own in numerous ways. I utilize his notions of scholar-mystics, and of "gnostic scholarship" as evincing a potentially binary-busting third thing. My other departmental committee member was Dr. Bill Parsons, with whom I have been working closely on the SBNR material. My essay for the volume Dr. Parsons is currently editing on the topic (Being Spiritual but Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)) is in fact a condensed version of one of my dissertation chapters. Dr. Deborah Harter from the European Studies and Classics department was my outside reader. As a participant in Dr. Harter's 2012-13 Mellon seminar, "Frames of the Beautiful, the Criminal and the Mad: The Art and Science of Excess" I had a chance to hone my ideas on mystical experience as excess into the interdisciplinary perspective that shaped the dissertation.

I am currently at work on a book chapter for a textbook on the paranormal in popular culture. Going forward, I will be working on the monograph version of my dissertation. I also hope to submerge myself again in South Asian study and Sanskrit, and to finally get caught up on *The Walking Dead*.

### **Metamodern Mysticism: Narrative Encounters in Contemporary Western Secular Spiritualities**

Linda Ceriello, Ph.D 2018

I defended my dissertation, entitled "Metamodern Mysticism: Narrative Encounters in Contemporary Western Secular Spiritualities," on April 4. The project brought together my research in mystical experience, spiritual-but-not-religious (SBNR), the influences of Asian religious philosophies on SBNR and other secular-spiritual movements,

## ERIN PROPHET

### **Evolution Esotericized: Conceptual Blending and the Emergence of Secular, Therapeutic Salvation**

Erin Prophet, Ph.D 2018

In the summer of 2016 when I began my research on esoteric responses to theories of natural selection in the immediate post-Darwin period, I was not sure what I would find. By the time I defended my dissertation

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two years later, I had come to realize that twentieth-century narratives about evolution as a form of self-improvement and new “secular” theologies of self-improvement were heavily influenced by ideas that emerged in the nineteenth century at the intersection of spiritualism, the Theosophical Society, psychical research, and nineteenth-century evolutionary biology.

My research had taken me to the Wren Library, Trinity College, University of Cambridge, where I examined the papers of Frederic W.H. Myers, a key figure in the development of the narrative, who was both a psychical researcher and pioneer in early psychology. I showed how Myers adapted spiritualist and Theosophical ideas as he developed a system of evolution as a form of self-improvement and partially

secularized therapeutic salvation. I also traced key inflection points in the concept of the evolutionarily “advanced” human (possessed of psychic talents), which would be hugely impactful in both twentieth-century spirituality and science fiction.

In addition to applying historical methods, I also incorporated insights from the cognitive science of religion, particularly conceptual metaphor theory, which is becoming more widely used as a tool for understanding historical transformations of religious discourse. I intend to publish my work in an academic monograph as I continue to pursue a career in the academic study of religion. My thanks to the Department of Religion, the Andrew W. Mellon Fund, and the Humanities Research Center at Rice University for supporting my research.



**Bodies of Medieval Women as Dangerous, Liminal, and Holy: Medical and Religious Representations of Female Bodies in Hildegard of Bingen's *Causae et curae* and *Scivias***

**Minji Lee, Ph.D 2018**

My dissertation explores aspects of a long-term interest of mine in the history of attitudes to the woman's body. Here, I look at how the womb and women's reproductive bodies were described, depicted, and used in relation to women's roles, nature, and authority during the late Middle Ages in Europe. I aim to discover how women's reproductive bodies were represented in medieval medical and religious writings not only in men's but also women's views. Especially, I use Hildegard of Bingen's works in order to

## MINJI LEE

emphasize the positive and even salvational roles embedded in women's sexual bodies in medieval Christianity. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was a German nun who not only professionalized in theology and medicine but also claimed herself as a true messenger of God. I argue that she presented the professional and elaborated views toward women both in medical and religious writings. Despite being the weaker sex, Hildegard was educated enough to bring her unique views of the world, human beings, and women.

Here, my aim is not to represent her as a proto-feminist or her views as liberating women. Hildegard of Bingen still heavily depends on her contemporary stereotypical gender roles, such as the popular image of females as the weaker and inferior sex, when she explains the creation and bodily conditions of human beings. However, it is noteworthy that she was not a woman who exactly fits the medieval gender stereotypes. Above all, Hildegard of Bingen was not a weak woman. Despite ecclesial limitations and difficulties imposed on her femaleness, she was someone given to raising her voice in theological and political matters, as seen by her many correspondences with the clerical authorities and political authorities who sought

her opinions. Her influence was more significant than was common among medieval women, though there are a few other cases found among saintly women who spoke from the authority of visions and mystical experience.

In Part I, I focus on common understandings of women's reproductive bodies expressed in medical and theological writings. This lays the background for my interest in Part II, which looks at woman's reproductive body in the writing of Hildegard of Bingen who was literate and professionalized both in medicine and theology. In her *Causae et curae*, she emphasized the positive depiction of menstruation as proper purgation and women's big contribution to pregnancy and childbirth. In the *Scivias*, Hildegard represented Ecclesia as having childbirth to the souls in her vision, which signifies her positive evaluation of women's sexual bodies and reproductive procedures. This thesis is important since it shows how women used the cultural depictions of women and developed the symbols and representations of women so that they achieved more profound authority with their gender. It is a part of women's history that women did not necessarily deny their gender but promoted their femaleness in theory and life.

## ALUMNI NEWS

JAIN HONORED WITH ALUMNI FLAME AWARD  
FOR OUTSTANDING GRADUATE

**Andrea Jain, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, editor of the *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, and author of *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture***

“The door to Jeff’s office stands wide open. I walk in to find his seat empty. I stand there for a few frozen seconds, just long enough to glare at the emptiness and for agitation to arise. We had scheduled a meeting at this time to discuss my progress with the dissertation. What could possibly be more important? I head out through the copy room in search of him. Time slows as I open the door out into the hall. Ah, there Jeff is. He stands in the hallway, casual as always. In his right hand, he holds a large red apple a few inches from his mouth. His left arm dangles comfortably across his body, his left hand resting in the fold of his other arm. He has a half-chewed bite in his mouth. “What are you doing?” I ask in an entirely inappropriate tone. Who am I, after all, to hold Jeff—my professor, my mentor—accountable in this way? I carry on without tact, “You’re supposed to be working.” He replies emphatically, but also with friendly laughter: “I am.”

I wake up.

I dreamt this some time during the latter half of my time at Rice. It was undoubtedly around the time I read *The Serpent’s Gift*. I remember the dream more vividly than many of the moments I spent sitting (in the flesh, that is) in Jeff’s actual office. It was

formative, as they say.

Jeff. Bill. April. Elias. Ann. Nate. Derek. Julie. So many others . . . The people here formed me and witnessed me take form—admittedly, a tangled mess—and they have cared for me despite it. They are the reason I consider the “contributions” for which I am receiving the Alumni Flame Award to be a part of my life’s work, not merely the stuff of a job, career, or profession. With the daily assaults of messages that the purpose of life is an economic one—that every human and human activity can be reduced to a market value—my thoughts turn to them, a reminder that our collective intellectual efforts are worth so much more than our productivity.

The academic study of religion gifts us skills, not in the sense of techniques for performing certain jobs aimed toward turning a profit, but in the sense of freeing us, liberating us, to analyze, interpret, and judge patterns, purposes, possibilities, impossibilities, and meanings that are relevant to everyone. The relationships I formed here free me to recognize my blind spots and step outside my inherited assumptions about human purpose and value. Our intellectual efforts, even—especially—our transgressive ones, awaken us even if that enlightenment is terrifying.

Every day, I hear them whispering in my ear the words of Aldous Huxley: “Orthodoxy is the diehard of the world of thought. It learns not, neither can it forget.” In times when I feel tired, and I want to stop thinking and fall heavy into the easy arms of

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convention, I hear them. Don't fall. Don't fall. Don't fall. Refuse. Stand up. Transgress. Think.

They sustain me more than they know or could ever know.  
For the gift of them, and for the award, I am forever indebted.



Andrea R. Jain, Ph.D. received her doctorate degree in religious studies from Rice University in 2010. Her areas of research include religion in late capitalist society; South Asian religions; the history of modern yoga; the intersections of gender, sexuality, and religion; and methods and theories in the study of religion. She is a regular contributor to Religion Dispatches and co-chair of the Yoga in Theory and Practice Group of the American Academy of Religion.



Dr. Daniel A. Brubaker and Dr. Andrew Bannister with Dr. Christian Sahner (center) in front of the Khalili Research Center after a presentation of Qur'an Gateway to Oxford students and faculty

### Daniel Brubaker, '14 Ph.D

On November 20, 2017, Rice Religion Department alumnus Dr. Daniel Brubaker (Ph.D. 2014), colleague Dr. Andy Bannister, and team unveiled their digital concordance of the Qur'an, called Qur'an Gateway, at the Annual Meeting of the International Qur'anic Studies Association (IQSA), in a special panel called "Towards a Sophisticated Digital Concordance of the Qur'an: A Presentation of the Qur'an Gateway Project."

The panel and the evening reception following marked a milestone for the Qur'an Gateway project as the first public introduction of this research tool that Brubaker and Bannister have been working on now, with the help of Roy Michael McCoy (Ph.D. candidate, Oxford) and a few others for nearly three years. It was a soft launch, and Qur'an Gateway is in beta with a projected hard launch, at which time it will become subscription-based in order to keep the project sustainable, in 2018.

Since IQSA Qur'an Gateway has been highlighted at several additional academic venues. Dan introduced it to a group of Islamic Studies colleagues at a March conference in Otzenhausen, German, and Dan and Andy were invited to the Oriental Institute at Oxford to present to graduate students and faculty in April 2018. Qur'an Gateway has been received positively everywhere we have shown it in scholarly fora.

After the IQSA presentation, Emran El Badawi remarked to the

## QUR'AN GATEWAY PROJECT

team that one of the things that most impressed him about Qur'an Gateway is that, while critical and academic, it is completely non-sectarian. This indeed has been a goal of the team, and for this reason and to ensure the highest possible level of academic integrity, Dan and Andy have formed a Council of Reference for the project that includes the following academics in the field:

Mehdi Azaiez

François Déroche

Alba Fedeli

Thomas Milo

Peter Riddell

Keith E. Small

Emran El-Badawi

Fred Donner

Asma Hilali

Gabriel Said Reynolds

Nicolai Sinai

Qur'an Gateway now exists to give scholars, students and others working in the area of Islam's core text an in class tool to aid them in scholarly study. We seek to provide wide access to the best research on the Qur'an and surrounding literature. We are committed to excellence and the highest standards of academic rigor, product quality, and quality of service to our subscribers. Organizationally and individually, our team strives for

- Integrity of data
- A culture of collaboration that promotes the good work of others
- Kindness and collegiality
- Humility and service

The Qur'an Gateway research website is the principle result of the above aims and goals. We intend for it to become the best digital tool for critical study of the Qur'anic text and its history.

With Qur'an Gateway ([qurangateway.org](http://qurangateway.org)), users can:

- Navigate to any part of the Qur'an in a variety of ways
- Browse the entire text of the Qur'an in side-by-side format with Arabic, transcription, and English
- Choose from several translations

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- Hover over any Arabic word to reveal a full parsing, then drill down further to see more details
- Search the text of the Qur'an in English, Arabic, or Arabic transcription by word, root, or lemma
- Easily access research works like Penrice and Lane at a click
- Search for word associations
- Search for formulae of 3, 4, 5, and 6 words throughout the Qur'an
- See and search manuscript corrections, in

most cases with photographs and detailed descriptions

- Conduct an advanced search based upon other criteria of your choosing
- Browse charts and graphs, and generate your own
- Mark entries as "Favorites"

This is a partial list. We invite you to come check out Qur'an Gateway at [qurangateway.org](http://qurangateway.org). When you do, please click "Register Interest" and enter your contact details so we can get back to you with an access code. If you have colleagues who may find Qur'an Gateway

useful, please pass the word to them as well.

We are proud of this tool and hope that it will serve as a platform that will be of help to many of you and to many others in the years to come. Although it is already quite robust thanks to Dr. Bannister's work with Oral Formulaic theory as well as the coding of the website, with Dr. Brubaker's content and research on manuscripts, what has been done in Qur'an Gateway is only a beginning. The team will be happy for the help of the scholarly community to test this tool, give quality feedback, and bring any errors to our attention.

## Testimonials

"A powerful and sophisticated digital concordance whose advanced search functionalities [...] tie in with debates that are [...] at the forefront of Qur'anic Studies." – *Nicolai Sinai*

"Qur'an Gateway is an incredibly powerful tool, both enhancing as well as replacing earlier digital Qur'an projects. QG's depth and breadth of examination are simply unprecedented. The user interface is relatively simple, and help guides and videos are abundant. QG offers an incredible variety of 'search' functions, and empowers the researcher by cataloguing [...] scribal changes in a growing list of manuscripts (also accessible) as well as 'formulaic density.' QG opens up new questions, and significant challenges exist as compiling exhaustive Qur'an manuscript data is nearly impossible [...] Thanks to QG, these and other critical questions [...] can be debated more robustly than before." – *Emran El-Badawi*

"...I'm astounded [...] Quite apart from putting Qur'anic studies on a par with biblical studies, I'm not even sure anything as nice and usable as this exists for the Bible!" – *Rachel Dryden, PhD Candidate, University of Cambridge*

## CONGRATULATIONS



Congratulations to **Ata Anzali** ('13 Ph. D), a graduate of our program and professor at Middlebury College, on the publication of his book *Mysticism in Iran: The Safavid Roots of a Modern Concept*. Available on Amazon.

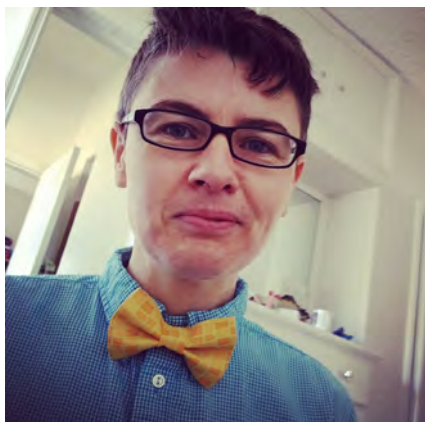
This is a special publication because this book developed out of Ata's dissertation, and it is his first book! In the book he brings into the conversation a large number of manuscripts from Iranian archives and offers us a rich study of the religious landscape of Safavid Iran and the marginalization of Sufism and the emergence of 'irfan as an alternative to Shi'i model of spirituality.

Congratulations to **Jason Jeffries** ('17 Ph.D) as he has just accepted the new position at Amherst College as a Post Doctoral Fellow and Visiting Assistant Professor. He starts at this post on July 1st.

Congratulations to **Mike Heyes** ('15 Ph.D) whose edited volume from the "Holy Monsters, Sacred Grotesques: Monstrosity and Religion in Europe and the United States" conference has been published by Lexington Books with contributions by Linda Ceriello and Minji Lee.



Congratulations to Professor **Andrea Jain** ('10 Ph.D) of Indiana University as she has been appointed the new General Editor of JAAR by AAR! Andrea will be in charge of the articles side of JAAR: accepting and rejecting manuscript submissions, soliciting peer reviewers, editing accepted articles, corresponding with authors, guiding JAAR articles through production and into advance access and ultimately into print, and choosing whether and when to publish special topics forums and other materials. The former Editor, Cynthia Eller, will be staying on with JAAR as General Editor, overseeing the broad, long-term interests of the journal and especially its intersections and interactions with the rest of the AAR's publications suite, including Reading Religion. She will also serve as JAAR's book review editor.



Congratulations to our alumn **Ann Gleig** ('11 Ph.D) for her achievement in getting promoted to the position of Associate Professor of Religion and Cultural Studies at the University of Central Florida.

Congratulations to **Erin Prophet** ('18 Ph.D) who has accepted a position at the University of Florida Department of Religion as Lecturer for the 2018-2019 academic year in the areas of Religion and Nature and Religion and Medicine.



Congratulations to **Grant Adamson** ('14 Ph.D) who will be transitioning from Visiting Assistant Professor to Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies and Classics in the College of Humanities at the University of Arizona in August. He'll be teaching at both the Main Campus, which offers undergraduate major and minor degree programs in religious studies, and for Arizona Online, which is launching a new Religious Studies minor this fall.



Congratulations to our alum **Daniel Brubaker** ('14 Ph.D) for the creation of a new internet resource called the Qur'an Gateway. Nothing like it has ever been created before. It is a research tool for scholars and laypeople working with the Qur'an text. Daniel has given us a few access codes. If you would like access, please stop by the department office. Here is a link to the website: <https://info.qurangateway.org/>

Thank you Daniel for your creativity and foresight to develop this kind of digital tool. It will be a big benefit to researchers.

## Alumni,

Please send information about your current activities to **reli@rice.edu** to be included in future newsletters!



### Niels C. Nielsen Jr., 1921-2018

On March 27, Dr. Niels C. Nielsen, Jr., Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Religious Thought, died at age 97. A Memorial Service was conducted on April 25 at St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Houston.

Dr. Nielsen was the founder of the Department of Religious Studies (so named at the time).

He was holder of the J. Newton Rayzor Chair in Philosophy and Religious Thought and honorary associate of Will Rice College. Having obtained a BA from Pepperdine University, and a BD and PhD from Yale University, he served on the Rice faculty from 1951 through 1991.

While at Rice, he was President of the Southwestern Philosophical Society, and regional representative of the American Council of Learned Societies Committee on History of Religion. He held membership in the American Philosophical Association, the American Academy of Religion, and the American Society for the Study of Religion.

In 1982-83 Dr. Nielsen was appointed visiting professor in the humanities at the Colorado School of Mines, Golden, CO. In 1965 he was awarded a Fulbright grant to conduct research in Madras, India. He often talked about his year in India that left a deep impression on his thinking. It deepened his interest in the history of religions and contributed to his aspiration to create a department of religion.

Three years later, in 1968, he founded the Department of Religious Studies. It is noteworthy that his death coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Department.

In the 1960s, a department of religion was a novelty for a private research University in the United States. The academic study of religion in this country was traditionally confined to seminaries, Divinity Schools and institutions with religious affiliation. In Europe to this day, religious studies tend to be theologically oriented, and they are for the most part located in theological facilities. Today departments of religion have become an integral part of many schools of humanities in the United States. But in the 1960s there were next to no models available for a Rice department of religion. It is against this historical background that Dr. Nielsen's founding of the religion department has to be understood and appreciated as a genuine innovation.

Dr. Nielsen's publications demonstrate keen interest in the interface of religious, cultural and religious affairs. Among his ten books are *The Crisis of Human Rights* (1978), *Revolutions in Eastern Europe: the religious roots* (1991), *Fundamentalism, mythos, and world religions* (1993), *Religions of the World*, co-ed. and contributor (1993, 3rd ed.), *God in the Obama era: Presidents' religion and ethics from George Washington to Barack Obama* (2009).

**Werner Kelber, Isla Caroll and Percy Turner Professor Emeritus**  
**Department Chair 1989-1995**





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## BECOME A DEPARTMENT PARTNER

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

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

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

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

### **BECOME AN UNDERGRADUATE PARTNER \$100**

Please consider supporting the future of the study of religion at Rice as we seek to provide undergraduate students with new academic and experiential learning opportunities, including research internships in the Houston community and abroad.

### **BECOME A GRADUATE PARTNER \$200**

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

### **BECOME A FACULTY PARTNER \$500**

We ask too for help in supporting the research of our faculty, especially their travel to archives and conferences, and their increasing need for subventions for publications and exhibitions.

### **BECOME A SCHOLAR PARTNER \$1000**

With financial support, we would be able to bring to campus more guest scholars and to organize more conferences on Rice's beautiful campus, so that we can share knowledge more directly with the Houston community.

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