

RELIGION MATTERS

Get Smart About Religion

Message From the Chair

April DeConick

Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity Studies



The motto of Rice University is strikingly bold. "Unconventional Wisdom." It is a motto that we love to own because it describes the kind of intellectual community that we create and foster in the Department of Religion. To study here means to challenge the status quo, to investigate what is not obvious, to reimagine what was, is and can be when it comes to religion. To study here means to enter an intellectual community where critical thought, disciplined training, and innovation intersect with religion.

We are a bold international faculty with specialties that range across many fields and approaches. We are marvelously interdisciplinary and pluralistic, studying everything from the rich diversity of early Judaism and Christianity to superhero comics and the paranormal, from medieval and renaissance mysticism and magic to African witchcraft, from the origins of Islam to modern apocalypticism and cultural pessimism, from Buddhist models of the mind to Freudian psychology, from modern art and spirituality to hip hop, from the ancient New Age to the modern-day expansion of gnosticism.

Why study religion? Why do it differently from the churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and theological schools? Religion is a powerful force with many facets and layers. It is part of a bigger historical, social, cultural and political network that links us to the way we perceive our world and our place, as human beings, within it. Many people grow up in a particular religious tradition, which comes to define their view of themselves and their relationship to others and the world. The classes we offer, the conferences we sponsor, the books we write aim to create a space for stepping back and viewing religion from other angles and perspectives, for asking questions that may be considered "way-out" or even "banned" by the religions themselves. We seek answers that help us face and overcome religious intolerance by informing us about other views, challenging our religious stereotypes, and addressing fears that sometimes lead to hostility and violence.

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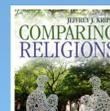
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Department of Religion

We are proud to announce that our department has a new name. We are no longer the Department of Religious Studies, but the Department of Religion. We feel that our subject is much too important to consign it to an adjective. Our studies are not "religious;" rather, we study "religion."

Honoring a Trailblazer

When Leonora Montgomery earned her doctorate in religious studies from Rice University in 1984, the one thing that may have seemed unusual was her age, 62. Little did she know at the time that she was a trailblazer in her own right. The Indiana-born mother of four had become the first woman to graduate from the Department of Religion's Ph.D. program.

The department honored Montgomery May 2 at its first recognition dinner with an Alumnae/Alumni Flame award. The honor coincides with the School of Humanities Center for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality's "The Women of Rice: Our Legacy and Labor" project, a campuswide initiative launched this year to document and archive the contributions women have made and continue to make at Rice.

"I look at what she (Montgomery) has done as a woman in our world, and I am truly inspired," said April DeConick, the Isla Carroll Turner and Percy Turner Professor of Religion and department chair.

For Montgomery, a key source of her inspiration has been education. "In my family, education is the coin of the realm," Montgomery said during an interview at Rice's Cohen House, where two of her four children had their wedding receptions. Her father, Oswald Ryan, earned his undergraduate degree at Harvard University and attended Harvard Law School. Montgomery herself received an undergraduate degree from Wellesley College. While at Wellesley, she met her future husband, Jeff, then a student at Harvard's business school. They married during World War II and, after the war ended, started a family in Jeff's home state, Texas.

When Montgomery enrolled at Rice in 1974 at age 51, her road to the university had been paved with a commitment to her children and social service causes. Her husband's career in the oil and gas industry had taken the family across Texas — from Midland to Fort Worth, then Dallas and finally Houston.

"My career was parenting," Montgomery said of her first years in Texas. "I thought I was a pioneer woman. I had never been west of the Mississippi. I thought it was exciting."

In Houston, Montgomery became involved in social service causes and served on various boards, including as president of the Daycare Association and chair of the Drug Abuse Council. During Houston schools' racial integration in the 1960 and '70s, Montgomery became active as a staunch "white ally," helping to elect liberal members to the Houston Independent School District board. "It was easy to be influential as a volunteer in Houston if you did your homework, if you read the reports and the materials you should read."

At the same time, Montgomery pursued her intellectual curiosity through involvement in a "great books" discussion group she and her husband led and taking continuing education courses at the Women's Institute of Houston. At the institute, she became acquainted with Rice through a course taught by Rice Philosophy Professor Radoslav Tsanoff, who would become influential in her decision to eventually attend Rice. "I took every course Dr. Tsanoff taught," Montgomery said.

She said the impetus for enrolling at Rice was based on an urge to understand the source of the social problems she was witnessing while engaged in the Houston community. "I was where I needed to be," she said. "I was studying because I was looking for answers to questions, not because I had a professional goal." She studied under Niels Nielsen, the founding chairman of the Department of Religion and professors Werner Kelber and James Sellers.

Her doctoral thesis would become influenced by two pivotal developments in her personal life at that time: Her husband suffered a heart attack that would affect his health for the next 10 years, and she began caring for her father, who suffered from memory loss. Both her husband and father died just days apart from one another in December 1982.

The title of Montgomery's dissertation was "Homecoming: The Ethical Imperatives Which Emerge From a Theological Perspective on Disintegration at the End of Life." At the time,

literature on the ethical dimensions of old age was slim, she said. Today, the topic of the ethics of old age could not be of bigger importance to society.

"What if God is saying, 'I've given you a whole lifetime to learn the skills that you're going to need. Now we're ready for the big challenge?'" Montgomery said. "The big challenge is, What can you do under conditions of limitation? There are always powers left that remain and with those powers, it depends on what you do."

Montgomery said social change can happen through a new awareness of old age. "If you began to deal with people knowing the very end of their lives is the 'big deal' — that's when you either make or break the worth of your whole life — think of how things would shift," she said. "You would do everything you could to see that that person had everything going for them that they possibly could, and you would know you were going to be there someday. So how are you going to live your life now?"

A year after earning her doctorate, Montgomery was ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister. She served five English-speaking churches in Brussels, Amsterdam, Paris, Wiesbaden and Heidelberg, Germany. In Houston, she served three local churches. She retired from the Bay Area Unitarian Universalist Church in 1996.

Montgomery has served on the board of Meadville Lombard Theological School, the Roman Catholic Ecumenical Commission and the Wellesley College Unitarian Universalist Chaplaincy Advisory Board. She was awarded an honorary doctorate from Meadville Lombard in 2012 for her dedication and service to the Unitarian Universalist faith.

For Montgomery's honorary doctorate, Meadville Lombard's citation letter read, "As an agent of change, Rev. Montgomery focused her keen insights on the social and civic problems of the day. What is remarkable, however, was that she was not content to simply notice that our social world was dysfunctional, but chose to do something to correct the problem."

Article by Jeff Falk: <https://news.rice.edu/2014/05/12/honoring-a-trailblazer>



New Faculty Members

Niki Clements



Dr. Clements joins the faculty as the Watt J. and Lilly G. Jackson Assistant Professor of Religion, specializing in Catholic History and Thought. She will be teaching and researching Christianity in Late Antiquity, and modern philosophy of religion and religious ethics. Dr. Clements focuses on questions of ethical formation and conceptions of the human person, analyzing how Christian traditions--notably Catholicism--historically define the person with attention to embodiment, affectivity, rationality, and inter-relationality. Originally from northern California, she moves to Houston after graduate work in the northeast, including a Master of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a PhD in Religion and Critical Thought from Brown University.

Elizabeth Barre



Dr. Barre, Assistant Director for the Center for Teaching Excellence, joins the faculty as an adjunct assistant professor. She will teach courses on Christianity, Islam, and laws and ethics. Dr. Barre spent two years as an Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Marymount Manhattan College, one year as an ACM-Mellon Post-Doctoral Fellow in Islamic Studies at Lake Forest College, and one year as Spruill Fellow in Law and Religion at Emory University's Center for the Study of Law and Religion.

New Graduate Students

Simon Cox: Gnosticism, Esotericism, and Mysticism

Mark DeYoung: African American Religion

Rebecca Harris: Bible & Beyond

Bradley Johnson: African Religions

Charles (C.J.) Schmidt: Bible & Beyond

Current Graduate Students and Areas of Study

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

African Religions: Nathanael Homewood, Itohan Idumwonyi, Rachel Vlachos

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

Bible & Beyond: Jason Ford, Michael Domeracki

Buddhist Thought: Renée Ford, Anne Parker, Elizabeth Wallett, Claire Villarreal

Islamic Studies: Reyhan Erdogdu Basaran

Medieval Christianity: Michael Heyes, Minji Lee

Modern Christianity in Thought & Popular Culture: Ross Tieken

Religion & Psychology: Elliot Berger, Mark Schmanko

Religion in South Asia/Asian Religions in America: Sravana Varma

GEM (Gnosticism, Esotericism, Mysticism) Certificate: Justine Bakker, Michael Domeracki, Renée Ford, Michael Heyes, Benjamin Mayo, Erin Prophet, Mark Schmanko, Claire Villarreal

New Program Coordinator

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



I have had the privilege of working for the Program in Jewish Studies since the beginning of 2014. Since I am housed in the Religion office, I also work directly with the Department of Religion, and have been taking full advantage of Sylvia Louie's wisdom! Although I have not been with the university for very long, it's easy to see that Rice is a unique university. The Department of Religion and Program in Jewish Studies in particular stand out in the opportunities they provide, and it is clear from my interactions with both faculty and students that we can expect to see many great achievements.

I am thrilled to be a part of this department and its exciting future!

Department and Program Updates

African American Religion at Rice

Anthony Pinn, Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities: The formal study of African American religion began at Rice roughly 10 years ago. Beginning with one graduate student, the program has grown to 12 in the program, and six graduates teaching at a range of institutions, including Wake Forest University, the University of Rochester, and Louisiana State University. Within a short period of time, students studying African American religion have come to represent one-third of the total graduate student population.

While current students and graduates have a range of interest, they share a common intellectual foundation. Research and teaching related to African American religion at Rice takes seriously the need for multi-disciplinary training, taking advantage of theoretical and methodological innovations in a variety of disciplines. In so doing, the study of African American religion at Rice involves synergy, a creative tension, between the standard areas of religious studies (e.g., theology, philosophy, and religious history) other humanistic disciplines, and the social sciences. Taking advantage of this rich religious context, the study of African American religion at Rice takes seriously developments in the United States, but also pushes for analysis that moves beyond such boundaries to understanding African American religiosity in the United States in relationship to hemispheric developments.



Furthermore, the study of African American religion at Rice seeks to ground theory and method in lived experience, recognizing that African American religion involves a quest for complex subjectivity that takes various forms and uses various signs and symbols. The approach to African American religion at Rice involves rigorous study of the field so as to develop expertise promoting a synergy between various disciplinary tools applied to African American religion with an emphasis on the dynamics of African American religious thought and the contours of African American religious life.

Students involved in the study of African American religion give conference presentations, publish, and participate in international research projects such as the "Religion and Embodiment" symposium co-sponsored by the African American religious studies concentration and the University of Kent. In addition, one of our recent projects is a co-authored volume (involving nine

students and graduates) on religion and hip-hop culture. It will be published in Fall 2014. The excellent work done by students in the concentration has also garnered numerous external fellowships, such as the Ford Foundation Fellowship.

In addition to graduate level work, the study of African American religion at Rice also includes one of the most popular courses on campus - "Religion and Hip Hop Culture" - co-taught by Anthony Pinn and Bernard "Bun B" Freeman.

Program in Jewish Studies

Matthias Henze, Isla Carroll & Percy E. Turner Professor of Biblical Studies: The Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University recently celebrated its five-year anniversary. Since its launch in 2009, the program has achieved many noteworthy accomplishments. We have seen a dramatic increase in the number of courses offered in Jewish Studies (an average of eight to ten each semester), with an enrollment of about 150 students. We created two new faculty positions: the Anna Smith Fine Senior Lecturer in Jewish Studies and the Postdoctoral Fellowship in Jewish Studies. Students of the program have formed the Jewish Studies Student Association to increase communication and involvement on campus. We have given out 10 Desirée and Max Blankfeld stipends for students to travel abroad over the summer to engage in a special project, as well as four Morris and Shirley Rapoport awards in Jewish Studies. We have established a partnership with the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and with the help of local congregations and institutions, we have created a robust outreach program to offer a variety of classes open to all who wish to learn about Judaism.



The future of the Program in Jewish Studies holds great potential. We will continue to grow the program and further expand its course offerings. For example, Drs. Henze and Weininger will offer a course on Jerusalem in the spring of 2015 and take students on a trip to Jerusalem as part of the class. We will also expand our collaboration with the Jewish communities. In addition to our connections in Houston and San Antonio, we will host our first reception in Dallas this fall. We will continue to work with our friends and partners at other universities, particularly with the Jewish Theological Seminary and the University of Houston.

Medieval Early Modern Studies Program and Religion at Rice

Claire Fanger, Assistant Professor of Religion: The Rice Medieval and Early Modern Studies Program is an organic outgrowth of the Medieval Studies Program founded by Rice Professor emerita Jane Chance in 1987. This program continues to offer undergraduate students the opportunity to study many aspects of medieval and early modern civilizations in Europe, the Middle



East and Mediterranean basin, as well as in Asia, from the 4th to the 16th centuries. Over the past few years, the Department of Religion has become increasingly active in offering participation and support for the program and its activities, with several professors including David Cook (Islam), Claire Fanger (Christianity), Brian Ogren (Judaism) and John Stroup (Reformation) contributing to the diversity of cross-disciplinary course offerings. The Department of Religion has also worked with Medieval and Early Modern Studies on several events over the past few years, contributing both administrative support and funding to successful graduate and undergraduate conferences, and also to the extracurricular Medieval Film Series in 2011 and 2012. Additionally, since 2011, Claire Fanger has been hosting an ongoing reading group for anyone interested in medieval Latin. This small group welcomes Latin students at all levels of proficiency who have an interest in seeing first hand how knowledge was transmitted in medieval Europe. It is hoped that coming years will allow the parameters of the group to expand into manuscript studies, thus fostering exploration of other aspects of medieval textual and material culture. We are proud of this increased involvement with the Medieval and Early Modern Studies program, which actively encourages students to extend their interests and skills across an array of disciplines, even as it opens out more possibilities for collaborations between faculty.



certificate program at Rice in the area of *Gnosticism, Esotericism and Mysticism*, what we fondly call GEM. The requirements include courses in theory and historical coverage from the ancient to modern times. It also includes participation in the new GEM Research Forum, a collective of Rice scholars and students who meet monthly to discuss ongoing research in the field. We hope to be able to build up this program and create an endowed lecture series to support its future activities.

The GEM Certificate provides students with a theoretical orientation, which they then can apply to their chosen concentrations (i.e., American Religion, Psychology and Religion, Medieval Studies, Jewish Studies, Biblical Studies, Buddhist Studies, African Religion, African American Religions, etc). Traditionally the study of religion has privileged the authoritative voices of the religious experts and the scriptural texts that uphold orthodox faith traditions. This traditional approach ignores, marginalizes, and even sometimes literally demonizes religious expressions that are against the grain or cannot be fit into the normative worldview. These same expressions have also been identified by orthodox faith traditions as "heresy." For too long, scholars have been reluctant to consider this "other" material central or vital to academic discussions of religion, while these alternative religious expressions have been pejoratively labeled as the stuff of charlatans, the mentally ill, or ignorant folk.

It is our opinion that such an approach has failed to consider fully the process of the construction of orthodoxy and heresy out of a plurality of competing religious voices. This failure creates and sustains political narratives of religion that serve to protect orthodoxies from criticism and promote their biases as historically sound. It disregards religious voices that are vibrant historical witnesses to the shaping of religious landscapes.

GEM is a new approach to the study of religion that does not privilege the public orthodox framings but takes seriously the heterodox and esoteric currents that have been actively repressed, censored, or marginalized in a variety of sociological, psychological, philosophical, and political ways. GEM takes into account the plurality of religious voices and expressions, including the neglected currents, in order to reconceive religion. This approach also engages the psychology and the phenomenology of religious experience, rather than relying exclusively on the authorial framings taught by the faith traditions and transmitted in their scriptural texts, interpretations and rituals.

While we recognize that the comparative categories of gnosticism, esotericism and mysticism are modern constructs, each provides us with different nuances that can assist in asking the sort of dialectical questions that

New GEM Graduate Certificate

April DeConick, Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor and Department Chair: We are pleased to announce that this year we created a new graduate

will result in a more honest assessment and thick description of religion and the religious traditions we study. The first five years of this program have been a wonderful success. With the help of friends and donors, we will continue to grow the Program in Jewish Studies and further enhance Jewish life at Rice.

Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning

Anthony Pinn, Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities: The Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning (CERCL) is part of Rice's Kinder Institute for Urban Research. CERCL is a curricular and research initiative that uses innovative research, engaged pedagogy and other approaches to promote and advance creative models and practices of leadership benefiting new generations of leaders. Founding Director Anthony B. Pinn is



Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities, Professor of Religion and Director of Graduate Studies for Rice's Department of Religion. *CERCL's Leadership Lecture Series* explores dimensions of leadership in line with the mission of the Center. Three of CERCL's 2013-14 lectures were generously co-sponsored by the Rockwell Fund, Inc. through the Department of Religion.

Dr. Michael Haspel, Professor at Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, visited Rice to deliver his lecture "I Have a Dream...! Martin Luther King's Reception as Theologian and Civil Rights Leader in Germany" in September 2013. He explored the reception of King in West Germany where he is seen mainly as political activist compared to his image in East Germany as the theologian and church leader.

In November 2013, Dr. Ahmed Samatar, James Wallace Professor, International Studies, Founding Dean, Institute for Global Citizenship at Macalester College and candidate in Somalia's 2012 presidential elections delivered his lecture titled "To Make a Difference: Leadership in the Time of Globalization." He discussed why leadership is imperative in any community, explored and defined the concept of leadership in the age of globalization and concluded with brief reflections on varied (e.g. academic and civic) personal experiences with leadership.

Finally, James Cone, Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary and preeminent constructive and political theologian visited Rice in April 2014. Dr. Cone's talk "Black Blood Crying Out and the Birth of Black Theology" provided a riveting memoir of the intellectual and personal contexts out of which his work has

emerged, and he argued that America has yet to reckon with the black blood spilled in and through social institutions like slavery, Jim and Jane Crow segregation, and lynching.

For more information on CERCL visit <http://cercl.rice.edu>.

Religion and Palliative Medicine

Marcia Brennan, Professor of Religion and Art History:

Since early 2009, it has been my privilege to serve not only as a professor of religion and art history at Rice, but also as an Artist in Residence in Palliative Medicine at the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center. In the clinical context, I work as a creative writer with people at the very end of life.



In technical terms, the work unfolds at the intersection of the medical humanities, aesthetics, thanatology, and psychosocial oncology. My experiences have resulted in two books, including a scholarly volume entitled *Words Beyond Words: Finding Language at the End of Life* (forthcoming from Intellect Books, U.K. and the University of Chicago Press), and the popular book *The Heart of the Hereafter: Love Stories from the End of Life* (published by John Hunt Books, U.K., Summer 2014). Let me share a story with you.

The elderly man in the bed looked so thin and frail. He lay all hunched up under a layer of extra blankets, and he wore a little black knit cap to keep his head warm. As I approached the bed, I noticed a bright silver sparkle in his dark brown eyes. In a soft voice, I introduced myself and asked if we could spend a few minutes together. He then sat up in bed and began talking in a Cajun accent so thick and animated that it took me a moment to realize what he was saying. His lively strings of sentences would go off with little pops and bangs like a row of lit firecrackers, which were then punctuated by brief intervals of silence while he caught his breath before the next round. As we spoke, an extremely tender and moving story emerged, one that was all the more poignant because it was conveyed with such heartfelt expression. As I have said, once you cross the threshold of a patient's door, you can never, ever tell what lies on the other side.

As we visited I learned that, only a few years prior, this man had lost everything he owned in a devastating natural disaster. When he lost his home and his land, he also lost his ability to raise animals. For about an hour, this frail elderly man told a story of heartbreaking loss. Yet he also told a story of the deep love he experienced while inhabiting a living sanctuary. Just as his narrative links wild and domestic animals to liminal indoor and

outdoor spaces, these transitional zones appear as poignant metaphors of hope and the continuity between life and the afterlife.

The Canopy of Birds

*My love was birds –
Pigeons, doves, finches, parakeets, and canaries.
Oh, I loved the canaries.
In the storm, we lost everything.
Before the hurricane wiped everything out,
I had little rooms built
That went inside and outside the house,
Where I used to keep birds.
I would raise and sell canaries.
I did pretty good at it, too,
But I really did it for the love of it.*

*I always did love the birds.
I just had a knack for raising them,
And I loved all of them.
Now I've lost my land and my ability
To have my animals with me.*

*When I die,
I want to be reunited with my birds in heaven.
I want to look up
And see the birds flying
Like a canopy over my head.
The bird is the closest thing you can get
To an angel.*



For this man, birds represented his passion, his love, and his spirit. Reflecting these themes, Lyn Smallwood's illustration evokes multiple temporal and spatial associations through an ascending view of numerous birds in flight overhead. While the nuanced pastel drawing creates an overall impression

of atmospheric softness, the ethereal forms of the birds emerge through fine details rendered in complementary soft pencil drawing. The diminutive forms of gray pigeons and white doves appear to be haloed against amorphous white clouds in an open blue sky that evokes the firmament. The foreground birds seem to be very close, and at the bottom of the drawing a large white dove with outstretched wings meets the viewer's gaze directly. The scene is thus naturalistically recognizable, just as the imagery suggests a sense of imaginative multiplicity. That is, the birds appear as they would in life, even as they are pictured in the afterlife.

From a different perspective, *The Canopy of Birds* showcases the monumentality of little things. Throughout end of life narratives, birds appear as symbols of the beauty of life itself, just as they are often imagined as hovering in a transitional zone that spans multiple locations at once. Just as familiar distinctions dissolve between the incidental and the monumental, the ordinary and the sacred, there often arises a deep sense of interwovenness between these domains, and between human beings and the world that they inhabit. The artworks make such liminal states and transformational perspectives visible, while they bring to light an array of subjects that lie just above and just below various thresholds of recognition. At the end of life, these numinous transitional zones can emerge almost anywhere, in both familiar and unfamiliar places.

Cognitive Science Meets Religion at Rice

Mark Schmanko, Ph.D. Student: In the 2013 Fall semester at Rice University, Dr. April DeConick led a cognitive science and religion seminar called *The Bible and the Brain*. This course was a wide-ranging, critical exploration of the new field of Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR), covering all kinds of fascinating topics, from near death experiences and evolutionary understandings of the brain, to the role of meditation and technology in terms of the future of religion.



As a graduate student in the seminar, I researched and analyzed a variety of materials that are not only relevant to religious studies or even the Humanities as a whole, but open up deeper questions about the human condition, the natural world, and the intersections of science, culture, and religion. Why do humans believe in immortality? Does anything or anyone actually exist beyond the material and physical cosmos as we know it in the modern world? Is it possible to reliably study such other-worldly spiritual or religious claims? When and how did religious thought and ritual first arise in human consciousness and culture, and why? These are basic questions that evoke curiosity in both cognitive scientists and scholars of religion alike. Yet both scientist and religion scholar have different assumptions and methods for investigating such questions. The purpose of the Bible and the Brain Seminar was to review the latest literature and research in the field of CSR related to these topics and find areas that overlapped with our respective interests. One thing I've learned over the course of this year is that we need a "both-and" orientation to science and religion, one that embraces the

insights and approaches from different disciplines in a collaborative spirit. I believe this interdisciplinary trend is inevitable and necessary for our most important research efforts, and in this regard, the Department of Religion at Rice is truly on the cutting edge.

The Bible and the Brain Seminar culminated with a wonderful symposium held in the amazing science building, Duncan Hall. Dr. Edward Slingerland, Canada Research Chair in Chinese Thought and Embodied Cognition at University of British Columbia, was our keynote speaker. Dr. Slingerland brought the symposium to a striking close with his presentation about building bridges between the humanities and the sciences. He also informed us about some exciting initiatives that he is leading, such as the Centre for Human Evolution, Cognition and Culture (HECC) and the Cultural Evolution of Religion Research Consortium (CERRC), both revealing great work integrating cognitive science in the study of religion.



Research in cognitive science and religion over the course of the 2013-2014 school year at Rice has proven to be full of potential and promise. We hope that this is just the beginning of new and innovative space here at Rice and beyond, a space where scholars of religion and scientists can begin to cooperate and work together in mutually insightful and even groundbreaking ways. As scientists ask hard and important questions about the purpose and dangers of religion, scholars of religion turn to the insights and methods of the sciences, all in ways that are building interdisciplinary bridges and looking toward the future.

Renée Ford, Ph.D. Student: As a first-year Ph.D. student at Rice, I am learning that cognitive science explains how the brain functions within religious experience. This realization allows me to support my work in



Tibetan Buddhism with Anne Klein. My greatest interest in pursuing Tibetan Buddhism is learning how the tradition presents the functions of the mind. Even though many texts were written hundreds of years ago, they are still relevant today because they offer how the mind operates. However, it

is difficult to communicate the wisdom within these texts to a Western culture. Foreign terms that express universal ideas may take some people by surprise that may not allow them to fully understand how some ideas can be separated from religion. For example, many

Buddhist texts define the mind to be clear and aware and teach methods that lead a Buddhist to recognize this state of mind. As I pursue Buddhist studies and engage in meditation techniques, I find that my experience in meditation resembles this definition of mind. Sometimes, it is difficult to explain that Buddhist texts and meditation practices are describing a function of the mind, which could be experienced by any mind. However, cognitive science offers a method to explain that the brain actually experiences these clear and aware states.

The past semester, I studied Gnosticism and cognitive science with Dr. April DeConick. Dr. DeConick applies cognitive science in her research of Gnosticism to demonstrate that Gnostic practitioners are similar to modern religious traditions in that the practitioners, ancient and modern, are attempting to create a particular religious experience. Cognitive science is used to make the connection between these two groups because the field demonstrates how particular experiences, including religious, are induced and can be measured. This approach to religious studies is modern and applicable to areas outside religious studies and groups because it puts the study of religion into an empirical arena. The Department of Religion can no longer be criticized as studying traditions that are relevant only to the tradition itself but enters into a scientific realm that forces academia and science to understand that religion is a reflection on how our minds operate.

During the course, I explored how the use of vocalization is used within Gnostic texts to induce a religious experience. This religious experience is described as being non-dual or a sense of spaciousness and a feeling of no separation between the individual and her surroundings. Cognitive science plays a crucial role in setting up my argument because it allows me to prove that any mind holds the potential to induce this experience. Changes in the brain are measured through fMRI and PET scans so that the scientists do not rely on the accounts told by the person, which often create difficulties when interpreting studies. Now, the experiences that are recalled in religious traditions are measured by science.

My long-term research goals include incorporating cognitive science with Buddhist studies and meditation practices that discuss the process of revealing a mind that is experienced as clear and aware or as "bliss, clarity, and non-conceptuality." So far, cognitive science supports descriptions found in Buddhism are simply describing a process of the mind.

Religious Studies Review

Elias Bongmba, Harry and Hazel Chavanne Chair in Christian Theology: *Religious Studies Review* (RSR) is a



publication of the Department of Religion. RSR is the only review journal that specializes in publishing review essays and shorter reviews on recent publications in religious studies from around the world. Previously published by the Council of the Society for the Study of Religion, (CSSR), RSR moved to Rice in 2005 when the

Department of Religion became the home for CSSR and its other publication, *Bulletin of the Council of the Society of the Study of Religion*. When CSSR folded its operation in 2010 the Department acquired RSR and continues its tradition of excellence.

RSR is led by an international editorial board made up of the Executive Editor and Review Essay Editor, David Gray, and Book Note (Shorter Review) Editor Jeremy Biles. Both of them work with a long list of scholars from around the world who serve as area editors covering different fields in religion. The area editors work with several scholars who serve as networkers and reviewers. Here in the Department of Religion, Elias Bongmba serves as managing editor, Maya Reine is the coordinator, and religion graduate students, Rachel Schneider, Itohan Odunwomyi, Nathanael Homewood, Mark Schmanko, Linda Ceriello, and Matthew Dillon serve as editorial assistants. Faculty members and graduate students of the department have played key roles in making RSR one of the main places to look for the latest in religious publishing. Former graduate students who worked for the journal continue in new roles as area editors, and networkers. Our publisher is Wiley Blackwell <http://rsr.rice.edu>

The Department of Religion and the editors of RSR constantly work to ensure that the journal remains true to its mission of bringing the best reviews in religion and that the reviews that are published reflect critical and diverse perspectives in the discipline. For example, our current issue is an excellent example of such broad perspective and makes a case for why RSR continues to be a sought after journal. This issue carried review essays on paranormal beliefs, religious pluralism, prosography of the Middle Byzantine era, religious resurgence and international relations, sacred texts and sacred interpretations, and many shorter reviews or booknotes. These reviews provide the scholars of religion a perspective on current trends and research that makes RSR an important resource for scholars and professors looking for texts to assign for class and

discussion. Our current plans include expanding our web presence and restructuring the editorial process by creating an online work space that would allow editors, authors, and publishers to communicate and interact easily. We are currently discussing design and looking at the most cost effective way of achieving these goals.

Sylvia Louie

Sylvia Louie, Senior Department Coordinator:

Welcome to a new academic year in the Department of Religion. We are excited about our name change and the addition of Katrina Hubbard. Together we comprise the “answer team;” and if we don’t know the answers, we know where to find them.



Over the decades that I have sat in this chair, I have seen many department changes most notably the increase in faculty (from 3 to 13); graduate students (from a mere handful to almost 40); vast number of courses offered; and mountains upon mountains of paperwork. What remains constant is the quality of the people whom we call family and work with everyday. They make it a joy to come to work.

Maya Reine

Maya Reine, Religious Studies Review Coordinator:



I look forward to another successful year with the *Religious Studies Review*. I started at Rice as Coordinator for the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion (CSSR) in 2007 and continued as RSR Coordinator when Religion acquired the Journal in 2010. Over the years I have worked - with a steady stream of Religion faculty and graduate students as Area Editors, Networkers, Editorial Assistants, and reviewers. Each year we build a team that has helped to grow the journal to what it is today. Please feel free to come visit our office at the end of the hall and see what we do.

Foundation and Grant Reports

Khyentse Foundation Grant for Buddhist Studies

Anne Klein, Professor of Religion: Anne Klein has just received her second grant from the Khyentse Foundation to further the teaching at Rice of courses on Buddhist thought, language, culture, and literature. The first award for \$15,000 made possible three graduate-student taught courses, with the last one taught Spring 2014. The second award begins Fall 2014, and will fund courses over the next four years. In further support of this project, the T.T. and W.F. Chao Center for Asian Studies will also fund a course during this period.

To meet this very exciting opportunity, we have developed a curriculum that will benefit both graduate and undergraduate students. Graduate students will be able to use these courses, toward the newly instituted Certificate in Gnosticism, Esotericism, and Mysticism (GEM). The GEM faculty (of which I am one) approved these courses as part of the Certificate program. Several of the classes will also count toward the Contemplative Studies track within GEM



Students who teach these courses gain valuable teaching experience in their chosen field as well as

monetary support for their studies in the last years of their dissertation work. The scope and content of the courses can vary, depending on the teacher, as we set in motion the rich and flexible sequence we have just instituted.

Beginning level courses focus on the basics of Buddhist thought and culture through reading classic works in translation as well as relevant Western sources. Rudiments of Tibetan grammar are also introduced as well as the Tibetan alphabet. We show films about Buddhist/Tibetan culture or by Tibetan Film-makers (*Himalaya, Kundun, The Cup, Summer, Fall, Winter Spring*, (Korean/Zen), *Blindsight Digital Dharma* are among our favorites shown in the last few years.

Intermediate level courses build on this by introducing Indian and Tibetan materials on ontology and epistemology, and the structure of certain meditation practices. Readings in English supplement our reading some of this material in Tibetan. In this way students meet three distinct genres of literature, syllogistic debate, philosophical treatises, and contemplative

poetry. This continues in the advanced level courses, with focus on Middle Way Philosophy as well as more esoteric elements, and includes Indian or Chinese materials by way of comparison.

Supplementing the grant with funds from our Visiting Asian Scholar Fund, we expect an annual visit from a highly trained scholar from the Tibetan or other tradition to meet with the class for intensive analysis of a particular portion of our text. Students who take the courses benefit, the graduate program at Rice is strengthened in new ways and, by catching smart and enthusiastic students young, the future study of Buddhist and Asian thought, culture, language and literature is enhanced. Several undergraduates who took such courses in the past have gone on to graduate studies in the field, one has started a translation bureau in India, others are making connections between Western science and Tibetan literature or contemporary communities who wish to study science. The fact that we now have a four-year period of courses assured makes it more likely that ambitious students will take advantage of a series of sequenced courses. Finally, a cohort of students studying Asian Buddhism makes Asian cultural conversations and the emerging field of contemplative studies, as well as our unique GEM program much more visible at Rice.

T. Orman Taylor Teaching Fellow Report

Grant Adamson, Ph.D. Graduate: Fall 2013, as the T.



Orman Taylor Teaching Fellow I had the opportunity to teach RELI 365: "Paul and the New Testament." There were 18 students in the class. Only a few were religion majors. Most took the class as a free elective. I designed the class to be a mix of lecture and discussion, with an

emphasis on discussion. As I explained the first day, I believe that the give and take of discussion between us is an essential part of learning. I was keen to foster a critical exchange of ideas, and to enable the students to think critically about the New Testament and religion even after the class was over. So, I lectured some and we discussed a lot.

In order to ground our discussion in an informed reading of the New Testament and scholarship on it, I had the students bring their books to class and write brief responses to discussion prompts throughout the reading. The required textbooks were *The New Oxford*

Annotated Bible edited by Michael Coogan, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (with companion website) by Bart Ehrman, and *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* by Alan Segal.

RELI 365 is one of the department's regular course offerings. It is intended to examine the growth of Christianity from its origins as a Jewish group to a religion in the mid-second century that distinguished itself from Judaism. It includes discussion of Acts, Paul's letters, Johannine corpus, Gospel of Thomas, Pastorals, Catholic letters, Hebrews, and Revelation. Given the focus on Paul, a topic that we discussed repeatedly and in detail was conversion, both from one religion to another as well as between groups within a single religious tradition. Was Paul a convert or not? Coming from various backgrounds, the students applied their developing critical skills to this question and many others dealing with Christian origins. Teaching the class was a great experience for me. It made me a better teacher and strengthened my resume. Thanks to all who made it happen.

Student Exchange with the University of Groningen

Benjamin Mayo, Ph.D. Student: This year, Rice's Department of Religion kicked off its partnership with its new Dutch sister program at the University of Groningen in style. The fall semester of this year inaugurated the beginning of Rice's Gnosticism, Esotericism, and Mysticism program and Groningen's Concealed Knowledge, Gnosticism,



Esotericism, and Mysticism program foreign exchange program for graduate students. Rice sent me as their first student to Groningen to take classes and conduct research with top faculty at the University of Groningen, paving the way for future collaborations as well as student and faculty exchanges between the two universities.



Study of Modern Christianity

John Stroup, Harry and Hazel Chavanne Professor of Religion: 2014 Rice graduate and religion major Matthew Vale travels to South Bend, IN for funded graduate study in Catholic theology with Professors Cyril O'Regan and John Betz, with a first concentration in the work of the Jesuit Erich Przywara. Older friends of this department may recall that department founder Niels C. Nielsen, Jr. completed a 1951 Yale dissertation on Przywara and the analogy of being under the direction of fabled theologian Robert Lowry Calhoun. Awarded a distinction was the senior honors thesis of 2014 graduate Nina Elizondo Garza, which, by means of an analysis based in Max Weber, contributes to new and comparative understanding of political religion focused around contemporary charismatic political leaders, specifically Kim Jong-Il and Hugo Chavez.

Conferences and Rockwell Symposiums

Rockwell Symposium: Eternity, Epoch, and Soul: Jewish Mystical Notions of Time

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



On November 4, 2013, a group of sixteen international scholars of Jewish mysticism and related currents convened on the campus of Rice University for a two-day symposium entitled: “Eternity, Epoch, and Soul: Jewish Mystical Notions of Time.” This was part of the annual Rockwell Symposium series held by the Department of

Religion. It included eleven specialists from across the United States and from as far as Israel and Italy, and five researchers from our own department at Rice. The symposium included both world-renowned senior experts and some of our top graduate students, and all participants presented original research on notions of time and eternity in Jewish mysticism.

The event was kicked off with an inspiring public lecture at Congregation Beth Israel by Professor Jonathan Garb of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who spoke on the eighteenth century pietistic movement known as Hassidism. The goal of this talk, which was co-sponsored by Rice’s Program in Jewish Studies, was to bridge the gap between the ivory tower and the public and to bring awareness of the international happenings in the Department of Religion at Rice out into the wider community.

Even though the symposium itself had an extremely high academic focus, it was in fact well attended by members of the wider Houston community, who greatly appreciated our open doors. Some of these came from the public lecture while others learned about the symposium online, and it was heartening to be able to offer a high caliber scholarly forum that was at once appreciated by the wider public. One community attendee expressed that he felt “welcome and at home among the participants in the conference,” and mentioned that for him, the experience was “intellectually stimulating and inspiring.”

Professor Elliot Wolfson of New York University gave a captivating opening plenary address on linear circularity and kabbalistic temporality, which set a high theoretical and textual tone for the symposium.

This was followed by four periodized sessions spanning from antiquity to early modernity. The second day

consisted of three sessions on modernity and a riveting closing plenary talk by Professor Moshe Idel of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, entitled: “Higher than Time.”

Several of the international participants noted that the symposium was one of the most important of its kind to have occurred in several decades. This has to do not only with the international array of scholars and their high level of scholarship, but also with the timelessly important subject of time, which until now, has been under-studied in relation to the subject of Jewish mysticism. Our department has proudly helped to fill in the gap with this symposium, whose proceedings are presently being edited for publication as a book that will certainly contribute to making this temporally momentary, yet timely Rockwell Symposium on time more long-lasting and more widely known.

Rockwell Symposium: Holy Monsters, Sacred Grotesques

Erin Prophet, Ph.D. Student:



How did Medieval Christian maps assist in transforming Jews into monsters? What is the significance of vampires in popular culture today? Are serial killers and cult leaders monstrous? At “Holy Monsters, Sacred Grotesques,” a Rockwell-sponsored graduate conference held at Rice in the fall of 2013, these topics and more were discussed by faculty, graduate and

undergraduate students from a variety of humanities departments in dialogue with several of the top scholars in the rapidly evolving field of monster studies.

The notion of monster studies comes out of John Block Friedman’s 1981 *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, which suggests that monsters reveal culture. It drew interest not only from medievalists and historians, but also from art historians, classicists, linguists, and scholars of religion and literature, as well as in the fields of feminist, cultural and media studies. In 1996, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen published “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” in the edited volume *Monster Theory*, giving definition to the field.

The idea that our monsters demonstrate something about us can clearly be taken in a variety of directions. Michael Heyes, a Ph.D. candidate in the Gnosticism, Esotericism and Mysticism (GEM) program offered by the Department of Religion, explains how monsters lend themselves to interdisciplinarity: “There is no monster

that you can say is one-hundred percent literary, or artistic, or religious. You naturally get something that is multidisciplinary that engages people and they are almost forced to talk to one another in order to grasp it." It was evident at the conference during meals and breaks that the boundaries between disciplines were thinning, leading to a number of variations on the theme: "I never thought of it that way before."

Friedman was one of three keynote speakers, and explored a fifteenth-century middle French wonders text describing varieties of classical monsters. Asa Mittman, who edited the 2012 *Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, presented "Christian Maps, Jewish Monsters," in which he explored how maps assisted in defining Jews as the apocalyptic figures *Gog* and *Magog*. Jeffrey Weinstock, whose work covers modern vampires and supernatural fiction, explored H. P. Lovecraft's endowing of objects with agency.

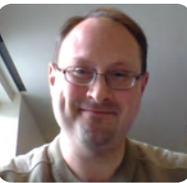
The conference grew out of discussions held by the GEM graduate student group in the fall of 2012. It was organized by four GEM students, Linda Ceriello, Erin



Prophet, Minji Lee and Michael Heyes, in conjunction with Jamie Yeo (English) and Layla Seale (art history), with generous support from the Rockwell Fund, the Rice Department of Religion, and the Humanities Research Center



(HRC). The HRC's Lauren Kleinschmidt also provided logistical support. Ceriello studies comparative mystical experience and reviewed examples from pop culture that show spiritual transformation arising out of the monstrous figure's instability; Lee studies female medieval saints, and presented her research on the depiction of women's bodies as monstrous; Prophet studies apocalypticism and new religious movements, and presented an



application of monster theory to cult leaders and their followers. Heyes is writing his dissertation on Saint Margaret, and makes use of monster theory in multiple ways, also involving virginity studies and performance studies.

A pre-conference event encouraged undergraduate participation by viewing monster studies through the lens of the 2012 film "The Cabin in the Woods," which features a menagerie of historical monsters in a

dystopian contemporary setting. Heyes explained the basics of monster theory and Ceriello gave a brief review of the sacred-monstrous in film and video.

"Planning and executing the conference gave us valuable academic experience that took us beyond our solitary work," said Ceriello. "It also helped us to build relationships outside our field that will inform our future research."

Gnostic Spirit Conference

Benjamin Mayo, Ph.D. Student: In the spring semester Rice and Groningen joined forces for the Gnostic Spirit conference that Rice's Department of Religion hosted this year.

Gnostic Spirit conference was a resounding success, featuring not only a multitude of presentations by Rice's own graduate students and professors on their current research pertaining to Gnosticism, but also featured the Rockwell Fund keynote lecture by Professor Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta from the University of Groningen. Professor Lanzillotta worked closely on Gnostic material with Rice's foreign exchange student while he was at the University of Groningen and both presented material from that time period at the conference.

Gnostic Spirit conference featured a number of radical multidisciplinary methodologies, approaches to, and interpretations of Gnosticism. Subjects ranged from ground breaking new interpretations of the cosmologies and anthropologies of historical ancient Gnostic groups, to explorations of religious systems created by contemporary gnostic artists and thinkers, to Neo-Gnostic UFO sightings, to understandings of Gnostic rituals and practices as a form ancient psychotherapy, and everything in-between. The conference presented a platform for students and faculty of both Rice and the University of Groningen to not only present their research on Gnosticism to the public and their peers, but provided a chance for these scholars to truly embrace the Gnostic Spirit themselves, to step outside the beaten path, to really follow Rice's motto and dare to pursue research outside the bounds of conventional wisdom.

Recent Travel Reports

Marilyn Marrs Gillet Fellow Travels to Amsterdam

Matt Dillon, Ph.D. Candidate: In May of 2013 I was granted the Marilyn Marrs Gillet Fellowship in order to conduct library research in Europe. With the \$4000 distributed through the Humanities Research Center I was able to fund a visit to Amsterdam, Holland for over two weeks, study in top-notch research libraries and network with some of the most eminent professors in my discipline.



During the days I worked from The Ritman Library, an independent library of primary and secondary materials in the study of Gnosticism and Esotericism that is famous for being the best stocked specialist library for these subject in the world. While primarily recognized for their original pre-Enlightenment resources, specialists in the 19th and 20th century can find assembled collections at the Ritman including the periodical *La Voie*, the published proceedings of the original French Gnostic Church *L'Eglise Gnostique*, as well as a full run of the *Theosophical Revue*, the original publishing voice of the Theosophical Society in Britain and India. Neither of these journals are available in full in the United States. Through research into these periodicals I was able to write an informed pre-history of modern Gnosticism for my dissertation, as well as a paper on the impact of 19th century occultism on contemporary Gnostic Churches. The latter, entitled "Unearthed Rituals, Recollected Theologies: Mnemohistory and the Role of Scholarship in Contemporary 'Gnosticism(s)'" will be delivered at the New Antiquities Workshop this June in Berlin, Germany and will be included in the forthcoming edited volume from Brill under the same title.

The second purpose of my trip to Amsterdam was to discuss my dissertation with Professor Wouter Hanegraaff, the most accomplished scholar of New Age religions and modern Esotericism in the world, whom I am enormously fortunate to have as a reader on my dissertation. In a series of conversations with Professor Hanegraaff and other professors and candidates at the University of Amsterdam I developed and refined the primary



theoretical positions of my dissertation. Without the benefits of the research and conversations conducted abroad at the inception of my project it is unlikely that my dissertation would have been advanced enough for me to have recently received the Lodieska Stockbridge Vaughn Fellowship, the only full fellowship available through Rice University to humanities students completing their dissertations.

One Voice in Egypt

David Cook, Associate Professor of Islam: Traveling in Egypt without any tourists is an interesting experience. On the one hand, Egypt has been a consistent draw for tourists since the time of Herotodus. On the other, during the past three years reportage about the country has been filled with a consistent flow of protests, counter-protests (all too often accompanied by sexual violence), and suicide attacks during the course of which the economy has collapsed. My trip through Egypt was brief, between April 26 and May 7, but strategically placed as it immediately preceded the most important non-election that Egypt has had in the past 50 years: the coronation of Marshal Abd al-Fattah Sisi (who actually won the election with about 94% of the vote). The basic problem was the question of which was more important to Egyptians: freedom from authoritarian rule (of Mubarak and his predecessors) or security from the violence of radical Islamists and protestors. Although one of the bank signs in the Cairo Airport states baldly that "Egyptians have spoken with one voice" and have chosen democracy, this was by no means clear on the ground. From guides in the Valley of the Kings (Mansur, a guide: "I wish that there were more candidates, but we need security") to boatmen in Aswan (Abdullah: "I hated Mubarak, but I will vote for Sisi") to the Salafis (from a radical bookseller in Cairo: "We should support any government as opposed to chaos") to Coptic Christians (Hanna, a taxi driver in Cairo: "Sisi is our savior! I love him!!") one was struck by the "one voice" that Egyptians, at least those close to the tourist industry, were actually speaking. On the morning that I left for Khartoum, I spoke to the night manager of the tourist pensione Roma in the heart of Cairo, and asked him about his attitudes. Giving him two options, on one hand freedom, and on the other hand security, without even a moment's hesitation he chose security. He told me "I cannot eat freedom."



Transformation in South Africa

Rachel Schneider Vlachos, Ph.D. Candidate: Since October of last year, I have been conducting fieldwork research for my dissertation on the role of religion and spirituality in social transformation in contemporary South Africa. ‘Transformation’ has a very unique meaning in South Africa, referring to a process by which the effects and legacies of apartheid and colonialism are dismantled through targeted social interventions and collective consent. Talk about a tall order. In any event, my research has focused particularly on how privileged white South Africans are engaging with ‘transformation,’ and the role of religion and spirituality in this process, particularly when it comes to answering the question of what it means to be racialized as white and live ethically in South Africa today.



This question is particularly relevant given vast social inequalities. Twenty years after apartheid, white South Africans continue to enjoy extraordinary wealth compared with the majority of black South Africans.

It has been an exciting year – full of interviews and adventures navigating the city of Johannesburg. Daily, I criss-cross through the cacophony of different neighbourhoods. Zones of extreme affluence and zones of crushing poverty define this post-colonial metropolis. Johannesburg is a city of immigrants. Over the last twenty years, migrants from all over Africa have flocked to the city seeking stability and income. Perhaps one of the most interesting sites of research has been a Quaker community in the heart of the city. A relatively small meeting of approximately 30 people, the racial integration of this group intrigued me: a relatively equal mix of white South Africans, black South Africans, and black immigrants and refugees from other parts of Africa. I was curious what allowed this community to sustain itself, what attracted its diverse members, and to observe moments where race and class divides undermined stated values of equality and inclusion. On a more general level, my research has only confirmed the contradictory role that religion plays in this country – for example, being used to shield white citizens from the emotional demands of transformation while also providing resources and practices to aid transformation.

While there are many more facets to my fieldwork, unfortunately, I do not have the space to explore them here. Certainly, no reflection would be complete without noting two crucial political events. In December, Nelson Mandela died, and I spent hours attending memorial gatherings, including the infamous memorial at the soccer stadium where Pres. Obama shook Raul Castro’s

hand. And in May, I witnessed the fifth national election, which saw the African National Congress win its fifth election handily. I blogged about both of these events and their relationship to religion at The Immanent Frame.

Finally, an unexpected benefit of my fieldwork has been the opportunity to develop relationships with those who understand intimately the stakes and urgency of my work. To this end, I am grateful for the very warm welcome I received at the Centre for Diversity Studies at Wits University in Johannesburg as well as the numerous academics I have met who are involved in the fields of religion and theology in and around Johannesburg. Even more importantly, I am grateful for all my informants. I’m humbled by how they have entered into a dialogical engagement with me and recognize that they will co-constitute the very fabric of my dissertation. It has been exhilarating, and also messy, to learn the joys and tensions of such a process. I must confess that I enter the process of writing my dissertation with nervous anticipation as I critically engage with and hold their reflections, experiences, histories, identities, hopes, fears, and dreams. South African continues to be a place where individuals and communities struggle *daily* to imagine a better world and flesh out the contours of this world. To bear witness to this struggle, as a scholar of religion, has been an immeasurable gift. I am thankful to our department for helping prepare me to receive this gift without sacrificing the rigors of scholarly critique and interrogation.

Student Achievements

A 90-Second Thesis

Aundrea Matthews, Ph.D. Candidate: Aundrea Matthews won a new competition at Rice: presenting your thesis to an audience in 90 seconds or less. Her thesis is entitled, "Telling Stories Without Words." Here is her award-winning description:



What is your story? Everybody has a story to tell. When you tell your story people reflect on their lives, people

reimagine the past, and people find purpose and meaning in their lives. Right now, if you could tell your story how would you do it? Now try to imagine telling your story without words. Of all the creative ways you considered, did you think to tell your story through the use of quilts?

Quilts are a narrative part of our American lives. They are in our everyday spaces, including our homes, churches, schools, hospitals and businesses. Quilts hold in fabric stories of family history, religious beliefs, particulars within acts or events, hopes and dreams, as well as, ideas and visions both real and imagined. As a student of religion, I was intrigued by the stories quilts provide. Through an interdisciplinary approach utilizing art history, religion, and sociology, I assert that quilters craft a visual language out of fabric to communicate stories of lived experiences that are significant to our understanding of religion. My research reveals that quilts are just as important to understanding religion as music, drama, film, poetry, art and literature. It will allow religion scholars to gain deeper insight into the role of quilts in the expression of religion, and think of the art of storytelling in new contexts, with new possibilities.

Distinctive Undergraduate Researchers

Bill Parsons, Professor of Religion: Writing a senior thesis in your major is not always a simple matter. First you have to qualify by maintaining a high grade point average through your first three years. Then you have to convince a faculty member of the academic worth of the project you wish to research. Then you have to write it! That takes a good year to do. Usually a summer is spent preparing the ground. Then a semester of nothing but research. And then finally a semester of writing, revising, writing, and revising again. Yet every student who goes through this process ends up saying it was one of the best – if not "the best" – academic experiences of their undergraduate careers. Students claim it clarifies personal and career objectives. Many use it to catapult

themselves to graduate school. Others simply bask in the radiance of a job well done.

There can be additional perks. Every now and then a student will write a thesis that is so well researched and written that it breaks new ground. Rice's designation for such a highly crafted work is simply this: "Distinction in Creative Works." If a department is lucky, they may have a student every now and then who meets the bar necessary for the awarding of that title. This year, however, the Department of Religion had not one, not two, but *three* students who were bestowed with that honor!

Courtney Applewhite, seizing upon a generational turn in what it means to express your desire to be religious, researched the now famous notion of being "spiritual but not religious." In three linked chapters, and using multiple methodologies, she first described the parameters of this movement, carefully noting how the SBNRers seek to mine the wisdom of religious traditions without interference from its often-debilitating institutional accouterments. She then traced the cultural sources – both distal and near – which helped bring the SBNRM to cultural ascendancy (20% nation-wide and over 70% for those 18-29). Finally she unpacked the numerous debates and responses that the proponents of this movement have engendered in both academia and the general lay population.



Parker Eudy, on the other hand, focused his research on the 15th century poet Kabir. He expertly analyzed the various hagiographies of Kabir in the context of the relevant Indian religious landscape, and then utilized this analysis to bring richness and complexity to his multi-faceted literary productions. Finally he "re-imagined" Kabir's inner world – his mysticism, his psychology, his profound insights into sexuality and gender – through the use of contemporary psychosocial methodologies.



Finally, Nina Elizondo Garza explored how it is that two major charismatic political figures – Hugo Chavez and Kim Jong-II – used "political" religions to gain political power. Utilizing a wide range of original sources (including an extensive literature in Spanish), Nina expertly illustrated how these leaders appropriated sacred narratives to legitimate and maintain their power. They fostered a "narcissistic nationalism" -- one that centered on the leader's charisma.



2013 – 2014 Ph.D. Graduates

Grant Adamson: “Christ Incarnate: How Ancient Minds Conceived the Son of God”



I did four things in my dissertation. First I looked at the historical origins of the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence and the idea of his virgin birth in the first century of the Common Era. Second I looked at how these two separate ideas were then combined into the new idea of Jesus’ pre-existence and incarnation through virgin birth, as opposed to incarnation through birth, incarnation by possession at baptism, or no incarnation at all. Third I applied a theory known as blending theory from the field of cognitive linguistics in order to explain the novelty of the early Catholic doctrine of Incarnation through virgin birth. And fourth I applied another cognitive theory, the theory of minimal counterintuitiveness, to suggest why the doctrine was culturally successful.

I expect that my project will contribute to the big picture of the development of belief about Jesus. I plan to take one of my smaller arguments about the historical origin of the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth in the Gospel of Matthew and revise it for publication as a journal article. Once I have done that, I plan to revise the whole manuscript for publication as a book.

Thanks to my committee, April DeConick, Matthias Henze, and Hilary Mackie.

Dustin Atlas: “Out of the In-Between: Moses Mendelssohn & Martin Buber’s German Jewish Philosophy of Encounter, Singularity, & Aesthetics”



My dissertation traces out a trajectory in Germanic Jewish thought, beginning with the work of Moses Mendelssohn and ending with Martin Buber; this trajectory maps two concepts: the in-between [*zwischen*] and singularity [*die Singularität*]. These ideas are developed in light of their philosophical context, and brought into dialogue with contemporary thought. Singularity is a kind of absolute uniqueness. In more technical terms: singularities are individuals that cannot be seen as a particular instantiations of either a general or universal concept. This makes it hard to think about them, because most thinking works by placing things in categories, and unique things cannot be put into categories. Further complications result from this: it is difficult to see how

unique things can relate to or affect each other. This is where Buber’s in-between comes to the rescue: it is the relational space that allows for singularities to contact each other. In the in-between, I am no longer talking *about* something singular (and putting it into a category) but talking *to* something singular, which needs no categories. In this sense, the in-between is the chief conceptual support for the idea of singularity.

This dissertation takes the modest goal of formalizing and clarifying these concepts, preparing the ideas of the in-between and singularity so they can be used to study religion. I suggest these concepts are useful because they let us take a middle path between theology and reductive analysis, viewing religious claims in a manner both sympathetic and critical.

Daniel A. Brubaker: “Intentional Changes in Qur’an Manuscripts”

Several years ago, I began noticing scholarship on Qur’an manuscripts. I found it interesting and exciting. Having decided to research early development of the written Qur’an, I began looking at pictures of the earliest handwritten Qur’ans and then



went on a 6-week trip around Europe and the Middle East to continue this research, viewing many of these in person, page by page. One aspect that intrigued me was that they all had places where a scribe – and sometimes not the original scribe – had inserted something, or erased something leaving a gap, or erased something and written something else, and so forth. As I looked closer, I noticed there were in fact hundreds of such instances. Remarkably, while other scholars had studied specific changes, no one had examined the phenomenon of changes in early Qur’ans on a global scale. And so my dissertation topic became “Intentional Changes in Qur’an Manuscripts.” As it progressed, I made a second trip, this time including the Russian Federation in order to see one of my subject manuscripts that resides there. By now I have now looked at many of the earliest textual witnesses to Islamic origins at the British Library, Cambridge University, Oxford University, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the Beit al-Qur’an in Bahrain, through glass in museums in Cairo and Istanbul, and at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts in St. Petersburg.

This subject is current and full of meaning for historians of the Qur’an and of Islamic origins, particularly in developing a clearer picture of how and over what time period the Qur’an was drawn into strict conformity with

a standard. I am now continuing this research while also preparing my dissertation for publication; I will likely follow that with a version accessible to a lay readership.

Jonathan Chism: “The Saints Go Marching’: The Church of God in Christ and the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis, Tennessee, 1954-1968”



Because black Pentecostals, saints, placed a strong emphasis on spiritual matters, many scholars assumed saints were divorced from the Civil Rights Movement. Scholars concentrated on exploring Black Baptists and Methodists’ contributions to the Movement. Primarily guided by historical and sociological methods, the dissertation examines Church of God in Christ (COGIC)—the largest and oldest black Pentecostal denomination—members’ involvements in the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis, Tennessee from 1954 to 1968. I chose to focus on Memphis because the most renowned Civil Rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., delivered his last sermon in Memphis at Mason Temple, the international COGIC’s headquarters. The dissertation argues that Memphis COGIC members were not divorced from the Movement but endeavored to combat racial inequality through a diversity of means, including through politics, nonviolent direct action, and spiritual quest. Holiness-Pentecostal theology informed the activism of Memphis COGIC leaders such as Bishop J.O. Patterson Sr. who adamantly insisted that spiritual beliefs and practices are indispensable to the black freedom struggle. The dissertation recovers Memphis saints’ engagements in the Civil Rights struggle and troubles the assumption that members of COGIC are strictly otherworldly, simply acquiesced to the status quo, and did not strive to resist racial injustice in meaningful ways. In the future, I aspire to turn the dissertation into a published book. I desire to present my research to academic and non-academic audiences interested in examining the nexus between theology, spirituality, and past and present social justice movements.

Chad Pevateaux: “What Mystics May Come: Forming More Perfect Unions from Pragmatism to Posthumanism”

After the American Civil War, William James and others constructed the modern category of mysticism in part to provide a common core around which divided peoples might rally in the hope of forming a more perfect union. My dissertation moves discussions of the



mystical forward by developing resources for perpetually forming ever more perfect unions through transforming dynamics of oppression such as gender, race, class, species, and other issues of embodied difference. Understood anew, embodied finitude may provide resources for promoting justice by uniting around a different kind of common core—a common core of no common core. Supplementing previous scholarship, my project goes beyond merely the linguistic and logical to analyze the embodied and emplaced. Through creative collisions of apparently disparate thinkers who draw on mystery as a resource rather than a threat, each chapter compares what I call mystical and mundane modes of undoing, such as Jamesian pragmatic participation in a pluralistic universe and Derridean deconstruction (Chapter 1); Eastern and Western embodiments of cosmic vibrations from ancient gnosis, through Christian mystical theology, to Allen Ginsberg’s poetry (Chapter 2); the yearning for more life meaning in African American religiosity represented by Howard Thurman, Langston Hughes, and Sojourner Truth (Chapter 3); and democratic theorizing from feminists to posthumanists (Chapter 4). My research thus rethinks agency in relation to passivity and in collaboration with an emergent cosmos to help us be more just in our inter-relationships with others—whether other humans, other nonhuman animals, ecosystems, religions, or whatever may come.

Franklin Trammell: “(Re)growing the Tree: Early Christian Mysticism, Angelomorphic Identity, and the Shepherd of Hermas”



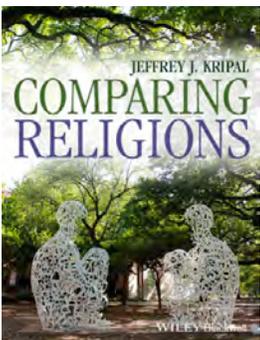
My doctoral dissertation argues that the late first/early second century Christian apocalypse from Rome, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, transmits a tradition which is best understood within the context of early Jewish and Christian mysticism. This tradition involves the ritual of baptism and revelatory instructions which allow the Christians of Hermas’ community to take on a new angelomorphic Self which is understood to mirror the union of the masculine and feminine elements that make up the divine glory. My study was based largely upon a comparison of the traditions preserved in the *Shepherd of Hermas* with the Q source, an early speech gospel commissioned by James, brother of Jesus, along with traditions within the *Letter of James*. Importantly, Hermas’ tradition can be shown to be directly traceable to the Jerusalem Church as its precedent is found in these two sources. The tradition of *Hermas* therefore represents an old mystical form of Christianity originating out of Jerusalem. In continuing my work on this for publication as a book, my current research is on Jewish Christian baptismal mysticism and

angelomorphic identity in other sources traceable to the primitive community of Jerusalem. My findings have been quite interesting and will shed substantial new light on facets of the early Jerusalem tradition that have been largely neglected. I will be presenting a conference paper on this topic in the Esotericism, Mysticism, and Gnosticism section at the national meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego this coming November.

Rice Textbooks for a New Generation

Jeffrey Kripal, J. Newton Rayzor Professor of Religion:

Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms



I still remember the day that I received an e-mail from Rebecca Harkin at Wiley-Blackwell, in the spring of 2008, asking me to consider proposing a textbook on the subject of comparing world religions. I responded that I could not see myself writing another world religions textbook, as I was mostly bored with the genre and, worst yet, morally

frustrated with the ways that it keeps each religious system safely tucked away in a virtual historicist and cultural “silo.” The big questions, the tough questions, seldom get asked, I observed. Rebecca artfully responded that she was not asking me to write another world religions textbook; she was asking me to propose something different. Rebecca caught my attention, and then about five years of my teaching and writing life. The book finally appeared this last spring as *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms*.

The subtitle is the key to the thing. It is a conscious *double-entendre*, alluding at once to the technical terms that are necessary to critically study religion, and to the existential sense of “coming to terms” with the comparative method itself, which neither our fields nor our public cultures have even begun to do. There are, after all, very real familial, ethnic, moral, political, gendered, and religious costs of doing comparison fairly and rigorously. Put most simply: to treat other religions fairly, seriously, and critically is to implicitly or explicitly question the exclusiveness and absoluteness of one’s own worldview, whatever that worldview is.

It is much more complicated than that, of course. Hence the textbook. The text “backgrounds” the religions themselves (there are no chapters on Judaism or Christianity or any other religion) and “foregrounds” the methods and themes of comparison itself around:

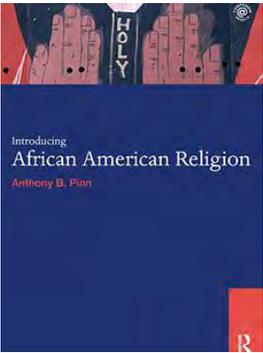
the themes of myth and ritual; religion, science, and nature; sexuality and gender; charisma, religious institution, saint, and miracle; the religious imagination and the paranormal; and death and the end of the world. The goal is to teach comparison by doing it, and then—and this is the really important part—to help the student-reader deal with the promises and perils of the comparative method in three final chapters, which provide a series of strategies for “putting the pieces back together again.” The book aims to confuse in its middle chapters, but it also aims, in its last chapters, to provide some humble form of closure or conclusion. The authority to conclude and close, however, lies entirely with the student-reader. The text provides the strategies, but not the answers.

I wrote the book with the help of three of my former or present graduate students here at Rice: Ata Anzali, Andrea R. Jain, and Erin Prophet. Ata is a historian of religions teaching at Middlebury College and working on Sufi traditions in the Islamic world, particularly in Iran. Andrea is a scholar of Indian religions teaching at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis who shares a dual Jain and Protestant parentage and is presently finishing her first book on the constructions of yoga in contemporary consumer culture. My third co-writer, Erin Prophet, is presently studying with me here at Rice as an expert on new religious movements in the U.S., partly out deep and abiding intellectual interests, partly because she grew up in one. Obviously, comparison is much more than an abstract intellectual exercise for this team. It is who we are.

Anthony Pinn, Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Religion:

Introducing African American Religion

Whereas many texts understand African American religion to mean the Black Church Tradition, and on some occasions this is expanded to Islam, this volume holds in tension the various traditions and orientations that mark the religious landscape of African American communities. In this way, students are exposed to a greater sense of the depth and complexity of what it means to be African American and religious in the



context of the United States. This textbook offers an understanding of African American religion that involves a complex response to cultural developments missing from most texts. For example, the impact of hip hop culture on religion is significant (and hip hop is a major force in the thinking of the target audience); yet, this receives little attention in the existing literature.

And so, rather than simply providing the history of institutional representations of African American religion, this textbook presents the underlying nature of African American religion in a way that is easily understood. By so doing, it explores the way in which African American religion functions in the life worlds of African Americans, cutting across various traditions and time frames. The objective guiding this approach is the presentation of African American religion as composed of various faith communities – competing faith claims – all involved in the forging of life meaning.

The main themes structuring the book include: (1) the creative fusion of various traditions and practices as the bedrock of African American religion; (2) the story of struggle against dehumanization and the creative development of new self understandings, related to issues of race, gender, class; (3) the growth and alteration of African American religion in light of pressing socio-cultural and political issues and developments; (4) the impact on the nature and ‘look’ of African American religion of the growing number of vocal African American atheism.

The first section explores the origins and content (e.g., institutional developments, major theological concerns, typical practices) of African American religion – giving primary attention to some of the more visible traditions. It consists of five chapters that move from the initial arrival of enslaved Africans, to late twentieth century developments. The second section provides examples of the process outlined in chapter five. In so doing, it presents various examples of African American religion at work. In this way, readers are exposed to the thinking and practices (including theology and ethics) shaping what we mean by African American religion. The third and final section gives attention to key issues and concerns that have developed during the late 20th century and early 21 century.

Current Faculty

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

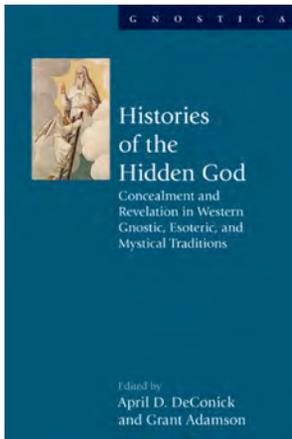
Brian Ogren (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008): early modern Jewish thought, philosophy and kabbalah during the Italian Renaissance

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

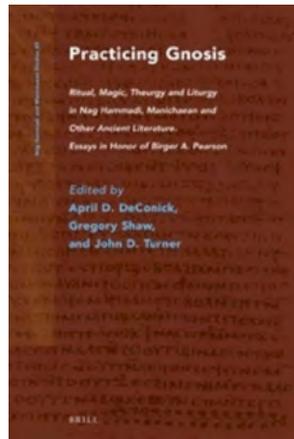
Anthony B. Pinn (Harvard University, 1994): African American religious thought, liberation theologies, African American humanism, religion and popular culture

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

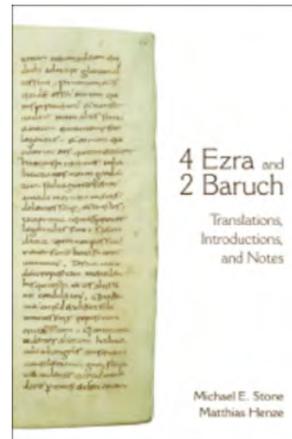
Published Books by Our Faculty in 2013 – 2014



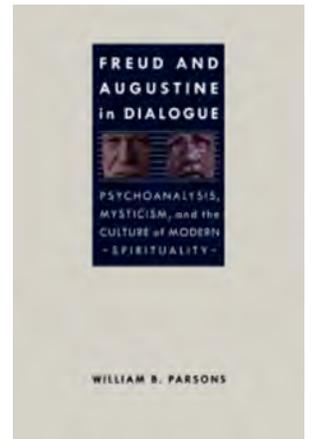
April DeConick and Grant Adamson:
Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Gnostic, Esoteric, and Mystical Traditions



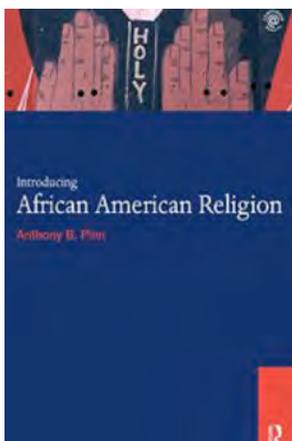
April DeConick:
Practicing Gnosis: Ritual, Magic, Theurgy and Liturgy in Nag Hammadi, Manichaean and Other Ancient Literature



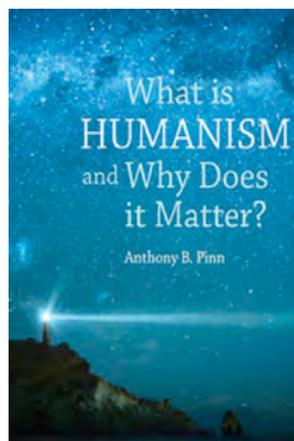
Matthias Henze:
4 Ezra and 2 Baruch: Translations, Introductions, and Notes



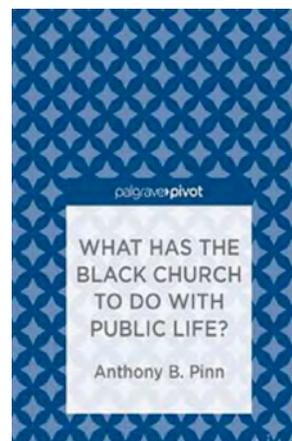
William Parsons:
Freud and Augustine in Dialogue: Psychoanalysis, Mysticism, and the Culture of Modern Spirituality



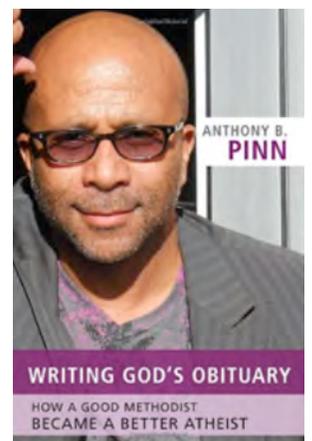
Anthony Pinn:
Introducing African American Religion



Anthony Pinn:
What is Humanism, and Why Does it Matter?



Anthony Pinn:
What Has the Black Church to do with Public Life?



Anthony Pinn:
Writing God's Obituary: How a Good Methodist Became a Better Atheist



Supporting the Department of Religion at Rice

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.

Paying it forward

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.

How can you help?

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

Contact Info

To make a contribution, please visit reli.rice.edu

For more information about supporting the Department of Religion at Rice University, please contact Jeanette Zey, senior director of development, at 713-348-4669 or at jzey@rice.edu.

What are our immediate needs?

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



GET SMART ABOUT RELIGION

RELIGION MATTERS

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