

RELIGION MATTERS

Department of Religion

Rice University

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Welcome Dr. Elias Bongmba

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

Religion has its rites to mark the endings and new beginnings of our lives, ceremonies that shift and transform us from birth, to puberty, to adulthood, to the end of life. We have all witnessed baptisms that welcome new people into our communities, and marriages that open up new futures for those we love.

This year we are witnessing the transition of leadership in the Department of Religion, a transition that requires some kind of baptism of Professor Bongmba, perhaps not with water, but certainly with words.

This year has been the last year of my six-year chairmanship of the Department, a time of opportunity, learning and leadership that will remain dear to me for years to come. I am so grateful to all of you for your support and your trust in me as we endeavored to build

smartly on our strengths in ways that have energized and challenged us to expand our reach, diversity, and impact both intellectually and programmatically. Again, thank you sincerely!

As my chairmanship ends, it is with great pleasure that I welcome our new chair, Professor Elias Bongmba. Professor Bongmba is well known to us as an expert in African religion. He came to Rice in 1995 and has taught courses on African traditional Religions and African Christianity for more than two decades.

Professor Bongmba received a Ph.D. in the Philosophy of Religion from the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology where he studied under Professor Jere Surber of the University of Denver. He wrote his dissertation on African witchcraft.

Bongmba's books have addressed witchcraft, HIV/AIDS and politics. His book *The Dialectics of Transformation in Africa* won the Franz Fanon Prize (2007). Currently, he is writing a substantial critique of Christianity and homosexuality in Africa. Bongmba also has edited



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major works on African religions, African Christianity and African theology. Last year, in fact, Bongmba's interdisciplinary research and moral critique was recognized with the award of the Doctor of theology *honoris causa* from the Faculty of Theology of Lund University in Sweden.

Professor Bongmba was born in Ntumbaw Village in the northwest region of Cameroon. He grew up in a family that did not have resources to send him to secondary school, yet this did not stop him. He pursued training as a Baptist minister and taught school in Nigeria. One of his current projects on postcolonial Cameroon and land dispute represents his own re-engagement with his homeland and intervention in his village. This project is part of the Contending Modernity Project hosted by the University of Notre Dame. Professor Bongmba has become an instrumental force in the Cameroon community in the United States. He led the efforts to create and manage the Wimbun Cultural and Development Association, which focuses on rural developments in Cameroon, and founded and leads the Cameroon American Community of Houston.

Bongmba is currently the President of the African Association for the Study of Religion, a member of the International Association of the History of Religions. The Association has organized four biennial Conferences in Africa during his tenure as President. He has delivered several invited, plenary lectures, and keynote address in the United States, Africa, and Europe. Bongmba has been active in the African Studies Association and has served on the editorial board of African Studies Review. He is also a very active member in the American Academy of Religion.

Here at home, Professor Bongmba was instrumental in the transfer of the work of the Council of the Society for the Study of Religion to our department, and became the managing editor of its two journals, *Religious Studies Review*, and the *Bulletin of the Study of Religion* for the past fourteen years. Professor Anthony Pinn is stepping into this position as Professor Bongmba vacates it. At Rice, Professor Bongmba is affiliated with the Center for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality, and the Program on Poverty, Justice and Human Capabilities. He led the department initiative to create a graduate track in Global Christianity and is actively involved with the African American Studies forum in the department convened by Professor Pinn.

Although Professor Bongmba is not a musician, he loves African Christian music. He is a life fan of Rumba music from Africa because that music has accompanied him all his life and given him much joy. He also is fascinated with fountain pens, but I will let him tell you about that.

We are so very fortunate to have Professor Bongmba as our new chair. His extensive administrative experience, intellectual achievements, and kindness speak volumes for our future. I am looking forward to his leadership as we shift into our next new beginning. In the name of the Father, Mother, Child, and Spirit (did I miss anyone?).

Celebrating Professor April DeConick, Chair of the Department of Religion

**By Elias Kifon Bongmba, Harry and Hazel Chavanne Chair in Christian theology
Incoming Chair of Department of Religion**

Six years ago, Professor DeConick took over the leadership of our department and served as Chair with great distinction and compassion. DeConick began her leadership when the Department was experiencing growth in all areas of our commitment to the intellectual traditions of the School of Humanities and Rice University. She brought a collaborative leadership style and worked closely with the faculty, the undergraduate majors, and graduate students to build the scholarly profile of the department and

it became a vibrant academic community with diverse research interests. She fostered the academic study of religion in a manner that promoted the intellectual values of Rice University and our peer institutions around the world. As professor DeConick steps down as chair, we take this moment to reflect on her stewardship and scholarship, which has helped define us as a department and enabled us to make significant contributions to the study of religion.

First, DeConick did not believe that it was enough to keep things the way they were and merely lead a department that was doing well and was respected by our colleagues around the world.

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Second, she worked with the faculty to rethink our identity, and the result was that the department was renamed the Department of Religion. The name change reflected what we do, the critical study of religion, which grounded on historical studies, has emphasized interdisciplinary approaches to the study of religion. This multi-disciplinary approach to the study of religion has shaped not only the training of our undergraduate majors but extended the theoretical and methodological tools for our graduate program to prepare scholars of religion who will do research and teach in a multi-religion context.

Third, DeConick has championed innovative scholarly offerings in the department that has received wide acclaim in the field. She led the way for the creation of the Gnosticism, Esotericism, and Mysticism (GEM) Certificate; a program which has attracted applicants from all over the world. As she ends her service as Chair, ten students have received the coveted GEM Certificate. DeConick worked with the faculty to add a new area of concentration in the doctoral program, Global Christianity, with course offerings at the graduate and undergraduate level in a field that is growing internationally but which, for our purposes, allows us to do justice to the Christian tradition, as an area of investigation and research that encompasses geographical, linguistic, and cultural, differences. Working with Professors Pinn, Kripal, and Clements, DeConick has promoted our graduate program and in doing so, we have made our program stand out as we are preparing students to teach religion in an increasingly pluralistic world.

Fourth, DeConick worked patiently to add two important components of our departmental offerings. She led the way to create the Master of Arts program, and recently successfully created a minor in Religion.

Fifth, DeConick has maintained and strengthened our international connections in different ways. She has strengthened our ties with the University of Groningen, supported student research overseas, encouraged faculty engagements around the world, and expanded the Rockwell Lectures to include international conferences and has supported six major Rockwell Conferences with two more scheduled for the near future.

Sixth, DeConick developed funding process and application for graduate students to teach courses as part of their graduate training,

presided over two faculty promotions to tenure, one to associate professor and the other to full professorship, established and published annual newsletters for the last five years, and established the annual department award dinners. She has served on several committees at the University, the Society for Biblical Literature and in the wider academic community.

DeConick carried her fair share of teaching, training, and supervising graduate students.

Her scholarly output during these years has been impressive. In addition to writing her single-authored monographs, DeConick worked with Professor Kripal and Professor Pinn to edit the ten volume Macmillan Handbooks on Religion, which have become essential reference volumes for the field. She founded *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies* and put together a department team of graduate student editors as well as an international team of editors to serve on the editorial board. She has recorded a lovely CD that is an excellent showcase to her musical talents.

Professor DeConick has been a caring Chair, who has worked patiently and in an untiring manner with our majors, graduate students, and all the members of the faculty. We extend our thanks to her for her leadership and pledge to move forward with the work and mission of the department and maintain the excellent reputation we have built. We will do this by strengthening our undergraduate, graduate programs and also provide all the support our faculty and staff will need. We thank Professor DeConick for her commitment and service to the Department and congratulate her for the amazing achievements she has registered as Chair of our Department.



DEPARTMENT & FACULTY *News*

Current Faculty, Department of Religion

Elias Kifon Bongmba

Harry and Hazel Chavanne Chair in Christian Theology and Chair of the Department of Religion (University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology, 1995): African and African diaspora religions, African Christianity/Theology hermeneutics and theology, contemporary theology and ethics

Marcia Brennan

Carolyn and Fred McManis Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religion & Art History (Brown University, 1997): modern and contemporary art history and museum studies, gender theory, mysticism and comparative religion, medical humanities

David Cook

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

Niki Clements

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

April D. DeConick

Isla Carroll & Percy E. Turner Professor of New Testament & Early Christianity; Professor of Religion (University of Michigan, 1994): New Testament, Christian origins, early Christianities, apocryphal literature, history of Christian thought, sexuality and Christianity, early Christian mysticism, Nag Hammadi literature, classic gnostic studies, coptic language

Claire Fanger

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

Matthias Henze

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

Anne C. Klein

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

Jeffrey J. Kripal

J. Newton Chair in Philosophy & Religious Thought; Associate Dean

of Humanities Faculty & Graduate Programs (University of Chicago, 1993): history of religions, colonial and western Hinduism, comparative erotics and ethics of mysticism, western esotericism

Brian Ogren

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

William B. Parsons

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

Anthony B. Pinn

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

John M. Stroup

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

FACULTY ACHIEVEMENTS

Congratulations to **Professor Matthias Henze** who has accepted an appointment as the editor-in-chief of the Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha, starting in January. <http://journals.sagepub.com/home/jsp> This is an excellent journal with a top notch academic reputation. It focuses on early Jewish literature not found in the Hebrew Bible

We also congratulate Dr. Henze for receiving the Rice University Faculty Award for Excellence in Research, Teaching, and Service this year! This award is based on nominations and is given to a faculty member who fulfills the Rice academic ideal for exhibiting exemplary achievement in all aspects of faculty responsibilities: research, teaching, and service.



Homewood, who has served as Coordinator of RSR, last year will be leaving us to take up a position at DePauw University in Indiana. Before serving as Coordinator, Homewood served as a graduate assistant for the journal throughout his graduate career and provided very much needed editorial assistance to Maya Reine, the longtime Coordinator who now serves as the Assistant Director of the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning (CERCL).

RELIGIOUS STUDIES REVIEW



Elias Kifon Bongmba, Managing Editor

I am delighted to make three announcements about *Religious Studies Review*, RSR. First, Professor Anthony B. Pinn has accepted to serve as Managing Editor of *Religious Studies Review*. Professor Pinn, who has been very active preparing for the transition and working on new ways of strengthening the duties from July 1, 2019. We are delighted that he has accepted to serve the journal and the department in this capacity.

Second, Dr. Nathanael

During the time he has served as Coordinator, Nathanael has participated in discussions on the revamping of the journal, worked with the Executive Editor and Short Review Editor as well as editors around the world to ensure timely publication of the journal. He organized the editorial board meeting at the American Academy of Religion in Denver, Colorado. We wish Nathanael and his family well as he begins a new academic life at DePauw University.

Third, I want to thank the Department for the opportunity they gave me to serve as Managing Editor of *Religious Studies Review* for the last fourteen years. When the Department decided to acquire the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion (CSSR), and its two journals, *The Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* and *Religious Studies Review*, I was asked to serve as managing editor for both journals and supervise

CSSR offices from here in the Department. Dr. MaryAnn Clark, who earned her doctorate from our Department, served as our first Coordinator. She and the rest of the graduate student assistants put in countless hours to revive the journal and restore it to its fame and the only journal dedicated to a review of books in religion. When Dr. Clark moved to Arizona, Maya Reine took over as Coordinator and continued the work of transforming and strengthening the journal. During that transition, it was necessary to scale it down for various reasons, including the fact that before coming to Rice, CSSR was in debt. We paid off that debt, transferred *The Bulletin* to the publisher Wipf and Stock, and reorganized and continued to publish CSSR's flagship journal, *Religious Studies Review*. We added several new fields of study, switched to perfect binding, but continue to recruit editors and reviewers from around the world to write reviews. During Maya's term, we worked with Mark McWilliams, the Executive Editor, and Jeremy Biles, the short review editor to redesign the journal and expand the number and length of major review essays. Also, we introduced thematic issues, launched major review essays on significant publications in the religion such as *The Oxford Handbooks*, and the *Norton Anthologies*, and the *MacMillan Handbooks on Religion*.

Permit me to highlight some simple lessons I have learned during my tenure as Managing Editor. First, religions are alive, and without

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them, many of us would be out of our jobs. Second, I have learned that people still write good books on religion, and while the center of discourse has not shifted very much, at RSR, we have worked hard to introduce scholars to books on religion written from the majority world. Third, I have learned that studies of sacred texts of all religious traditions remain popular and the scholars, who study these disciplines, still dazzle us with the many linguistic skills and esoteric texts from around the world. Fourth, I have learned that there is a rich body of scholarship that has built on earlier studies of liberation and given us new perspectives on feminism, race theory, and justice for LGBTQ and persons living with disability. Fifth, I have learned that Saint Paul remains the most controversial theologian of all times, even as he remains one of the most quoted of all the apostles. Finally,

I have learned that theologians never really die, but one who continues to rule, and scholars do not seem to have enough of him, is the North African Bishop Saint Augustine. My unscientific guess is that over the years we have received more books on Saint Augustine than any individual. The books that have passed through our office in Houston on Augustine makes one want to paraphrase the Saint and theological giant by saying, that our hearts are restless if we do not read or write on Augustine. Augustine died a long time ago, but the literature clearly says, long live Augustine.

Thank you for a fantastic opportunity to serve the department and the scholarly community as Managing Editor of *Religious Studies Review*.

FACULTY ACHIEVEMENTS



It is with great pride that we celebrate the promotion and tenure of **Brian Ogren**, a true milestone in his career. We are so lucky to have him as part of our intellectual community at Rice.

Dr. Ogren specializes in Jewish thought and is particularly interested in philosophy and

kabbalah during the early modern period. He was raised in California and was educated in Jerusalem, where he lived for thirteen years. He has also spent extensive periods of time researching in Europe. Dr. Ogren's concentration has been upon the flow and reception of ideas amongst diverse intellectual communities, and he has explored uses of

intellectual discourse as a means of asserting authority and of forming identity. He is particularly interested in textual exploration, including manuscript study, hermeneutics and historical and canonical exegesis. In other words, he is interested in the unexplored historical record of thought and in ways of eliciting meaning from texts and contexts through variant forms of interpretation.

Dr. Ogren's first monograph, entitled *Renaissance and Rebirth* (Brill 2009), treats notions of reincarnation in Italian Renaissance Jewish and Christian humanist thought. His second monograph is entitled *The Beginning of the World in Renaissance Jewish Thought* (Brill 2016) and discusses notions of creation in Italian Jewish philosophy and kabbalah between 1492 and 1535. In addition to these and to several articles on kabbalah and philosophy, he has published and edited volume on time and eternity in Jewish mysticism. Currently, Dr. Ogren is working on a project dealing with Jewish thought in early America. Dr. Ogren's work continually examines issues of center and periphery, as well as continuity and change, in regard to Jewish philosophical and mystical traditions.

FACULTY ACHIEVEMENTS

Congratulations to
Professor Jeffrey Kripal
for being named Associate
Dean of Faculty and
Graduate Studies in the
School of Humanities.

MAGIC, RITUAL, & WITCHCRAFT

Claire Fanger, Associate Professor

As *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* enters the summer of its third triannual year, we are at work on a special volume guest edited by Esther Eidinow and Richard Gordon, *Narrating Witchcraft: Agency, Discourse, and Power*. In this volume, contributors from range of disciplines explore the ways in which such narratives are employed to express relationships of power, from antiquity to modernity. The first issue, *Ancient Cultures*, is now in press, featuring articles by Svenja Nagel, Greta van Buylaere, Esther Eidinow and Quinton Deeley.



My editorship of this journal has now spanned almost a decade. When I started as general editor in 2010, the labor was divided between myself and my collaborator Richard Kieckhefer of Northwestern University.

Over time, increased commitments elsewhere forced him to step down to an associate editorial position, and since 2016 I have been the sole executive and managing editor, acting to develop the journal's networking, broaden its content, and increase its page count. I am proud to have published some groundbreaking special issues and important articles. However at this point the workload is unsustainable for a single person, even with the very supportive attitude of the Religion Department at Rice and my team of high powered and willing graduate editorial assistants.

In the interests of dividing the labor at the top between more people, I will be moving aside to open space for a team of two new collaborators to share the executive editorial labor. For at least the next two years I will continue as managing editor, retaining supervision over the aspects of the process that are working well here with my team of editorial assistants. The transition to the new leadership will take place over the course of 2020. Details of the new editorial collaboration are not yet finalized, though negotiations are in process, and I hope the arrangements will be settled by autumn. By the end of 2020, executive and managerial work will be divided between three people, making it easier to sustain the vision and expand the profile of this increasingly important and dynamic journal.

One of the most rewarding aspects of running the journal has been my productive and creative relation with the students who have helped me to do it, and indeed without their willing collaboration it would hardly have been possible at all. I have noticed how the journal work over time has strengthened their editing skills, and the developing keenness of those skills by now has not only saved me time but spared many errors I might have made without them. I asked my team of Rice graduate student editorial assistants, Ben Mayo, Jade Hagan and Sam Stoeltje, as well as up and coming assistant Arina Zaytseva, to contribute brief reports on their experience, appended below. As always, I welcome discussion of any ideas readers of this newsletter may have either for individual articles or special issues as we move forward. The author guide and other up to date information about the journal can be found at the Penn Press website <http://magic.pennpress.org/home/>.



REPORTS FROM RICE GRADUATE STUDENT BOOK REVIEW EDITORS

Jade Hagan, Department of English

"When I began working at *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* in February 2016, I could not have foreseen the many ways it would benefit me professionally, both during my time as a graduate student and employee of the journal and on into the future as I pursue an academic career. Working at the journal not only trained

me in the protocols of copyediting, *The Chicago Manual of Style* (more helpful than expected for completing my dissertation bibliography!), and submitting articles to academic journals, but also put me in direct contact with scholars in a variety of disciplines and fields. Such connections and editorial experience—not to mention the knowledge of the field and the ability to engage

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widely and broadly in a variety of scholarly discourses that comes with the territory—can be invaluable on the job market, where the competitive edge they offer can make all the difference. I'll certainly continue to look to MRW for field-defining research and informative book reviews as I move into my new role as a post-doctoral fellow and begin to revise my dissertation into my first book project."



Benjamin Mayo, Department of Religion

"My years working at *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* have been a deeply enriching experience. While the publishing world often remains dauntingly opaque to graduate students, my time working at the journal has provided me more than just a peek behind the veil—it directly involved me in the entire publication process, from working with the authors, to organizing issues, to finalizing the proofs to sending off to the press. The work provided a great avenue to pursue my interest in Western Esotericism, keeping me abreast of the most recent scholarship in the field, and has been a fantastic way of personally introducing me to the authors in my own area of research as well as the major publishers in my sub-field. I have had a fantastic time

working with Jade, Sam, and Arina. Dr. Claire Fanger has done a brilliant job of leading the charge for the journal, always somehow managing to do more than the rest of us combined. Working at the journal has been a great experience professionalizing my scholarship, and providing me with countless hours of indispensable mentorship from Dr. Fanger."



Sam Stoeltje, Department of English

"I started as a Book Review Editor for *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* in my first year at Rice. I could never have anticipated what a joy and a privilege it would be to work for the journal. Naturally, I gained the experience and know-how that comes with a role on the staff of any academic journal, learning how an issue is assembled from the ground up, how articles are selected, and so forth. It was at least as beneficial, though, to interact with this particular community of scholars and to become fluent in a set of especially stimulating topics, more often than not relevant to my own research. *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* is a priceless resource for scholars, and my time there has been nothing less than magical."



Arina Zaytseva, Department of Religion

"Working on *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* has given me the opportunity to collaborate with professors and fellow students in the production of a scholarly publication. I have learned about the workflow from book requests and book reviews all the way to final publication. Although I am a new addition to the team, I have felt welcomed by Dr. Fanger and the other editors. The journal serves as a great connecting point for scholars from different disciplines and countries. For me this project is especially exciting because my own research is connected to the theme of premodern witchcraft, and the history of witchcraft confessions and accusations forms a significant part of the journal's content. In the process of formatting and proofreading the essays and reviews for the journal, I have acquired new information while learning the craft of academic journal editing. Dr. Fanger does an amazing job managing the journal; she spends a significant amount of her time overseeing and helping out the graduate students in charge of editing work and reviews. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to MR&W, and hope to go on helping with it in the future."

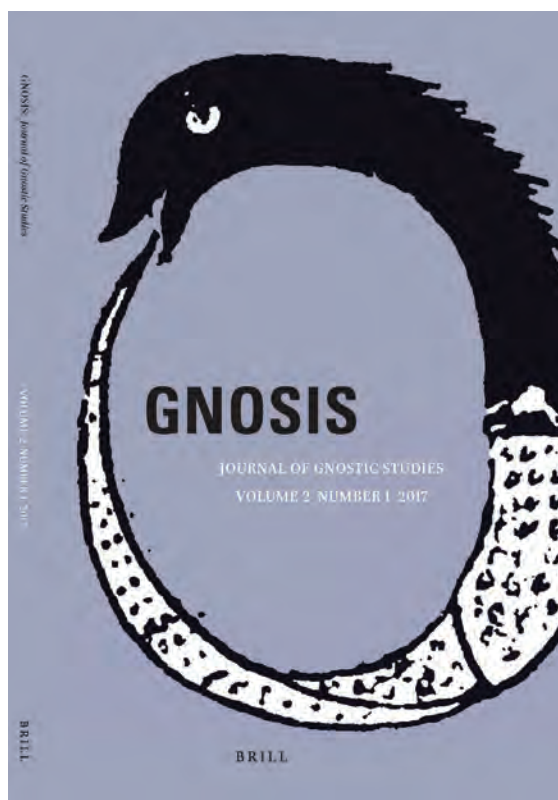
The Department of Religion at Rice University appreciates the generous contributions from our alumni & community partners.

FACULTY ACHIEVEMENTS

Congratulations to **Professor Werner Kelber** (Emeritus) who will be receiving the Walter J. Ong Award for Career Achievement in Scholarship for his exemplary scholarship and innovations in his works such as *The Oral and Written Gospel and Jesus in Memory*. The committee which gives the awards cited Kelber's work as seminal and ground breaking bridging information studies, media, studies, globalization, and new media.

Link with more information:
<https://www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org/index.php/8-news/announcements/>

REPORT ON GNOSIS: JOURNAL OF GNOSTIC STUDIES



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

This year the journal focused on collecting and publishing two issues (4.1 and 4.2) of selected papers delivered at the Gnostic America Conference held at Rice last year (March 2018). A third issue (5.1) containing the final papers will be published early next year (January 2020). The first issue is called *Gnostic Afterlives in American Culture and Religion, Part 1: Theorizing the Gnostic in Modernity*. It contains papers by April D. DeConick (The Sociology of Gnostic Spirituality), Gregory Shaw (Can We Recover Gnosis Today?), and Arthur Versluis (What is Gnosis: An Explanation). The second issue, Part 2: *(Neo-)Gnostic Movements in America*, features papers by Hugh Urban (The Knowing of Knowing: Neo-Gnosticism from the O.T.O. to Scientology), Catherine Gutierrez (Know Place: Heaven's Gate and American Gnosticism), Simon Joseph (American Gnosis: Jesus Mysticism in a Course in Miracles), and Mitch Horowitz, (The

New Age and Gnosticism: Terms of Commonality). The third issue, Part 3: *The Gnostic in Popular American Culture*, contains papers by Catherine L. Albanese (The Gnostic in Us All: Thinking from the Macrobiotics of Michio Kushi), Eric Wargo (The Space Jockey and the Future of Enjoyment: Alienated Sentience in the World of H.R. Giger), Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta (A Metaphysical Rebel? Camus's Analysis of Gnosticism and Its Influence on Literature and Cinema), Matthew Dillon (The Afterlives of the Archons: Gnostic Literalism and Embodied Paranoia in 21st CE Conspiracy Theory), Erik Davis (The Electric Chrism Acid Test: The Problem of Psychedelic Gnosis), and Jeffrey J. Kripal (Reflections of an American Gnostic). I am grateful to our lead copy editors Naamleela Free Jones, C.J. Schmidt, and Vic Nardo and their teams Thomas Millary, Kyle Smith, Oihane Iglesias Telleria, Stanislov Panin for their dedication to the journal and their attention to detail in all they do.

The Department of Religion thanks Dr. DeConick for her time and service as chair over the past six years and welcomes Dr. Bongmba as our new chair. We look forward to seeing the department continue to flourish under his leadership.



OGREN TO EXPLORE JEWISH THOUGHT IN EARLY AMERICA THANKS TO HUMANITIES GRANT



Brian Ogren is the Anna Smith Fine Associate Professor of Judaic Studies

Precious few Jewish people lived in early Colonial America. Historians surmise that Jews in North America during that time accounted for less than a tenth of a percent of the entire population. Yet by Rice professor Brian Ogren's estimation, Jewish ideas and beliefs — including the esoteric strand of Judaism known as Kabbalah — significantly influenced Puritan and other Protestant non-Jewish thinkers of the era.

This profound impact was something Ogren, the Anna Smith Fine Assistant Professor of Judaic Studies, stumbled upon while doing research within his broader field of study, Jewish thought in the early modern period in Europe. In particular, he researches the history of Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah as modes of thought that seek a more personal relationship with and understanding of God through the reading and interpretation of sacred texts.

Ogren has found a strong connection, in this regard, between Jewish interpretation and various aspects of Colonial American thought.

Article written by Katherine Shilcutt and reprinted from Rice News with permission June 20, 2019

Cotton Mather, infamous for his role in the Salem witch trials, was a well-known Puritan minister and one of the most influential North American theologians of his time. Mather's biblical commentary written between 1693 and 1728, "Biblia Americana," has been compared to "an eclectic Jewish midrash." It employed Jewish thought "in a very sophisticated manner," Ogren said, including a vast array of Jewish philosophical and mystical sources.

Then there was the seventh president of Yale University. Ezra Stiles, who served in that role from 1788 to 1795, "became fascinated by Jewish thought, in particular Jewish mysticism" over time, Ogren said. Stiles — who was Yale's first professor of Semitics — incorporated this interest into scholarly life at the university, requiring Hebrew classes and referencing it often in speeches. (His first commencement address was ostensibly delivered in Hebrew.) Stiles also maintained close relationships with various rabbis from Europe and the Near East, as the U.S. wouldn't even have its first ordained rabbi until 1840.

Once Ogren noticed these connections between early modern Jewish ideas and the nascent philosophies of new Americans, there was no looking back.

"You start peeling back the layers and finding all kinds of things," he said.

Soon, Ogren will have even more layers to peel back: He begins a year of research at the Center for Jewish History in New York this summer. While there, Ogren will be a National Endowment for the Humanities

Senior Scholar, in which role he will lead a cohort of graduate research fellows while simultaneously working on his own book.

Thanks to this competitive and prestigious grant, as well as generous research support from Rice's very own Jewish Studies Program, Ogren will spend the next 12 months in the archives of the largest repository of Jewish history in the United States. He's already got his eye on a few items within the stacks.

"They have an original copy of the very first rabbinic sermon given in the New World, in Rhode Island, by a rabbi visiting from Hebron," Ogren said.

Dating to May 28, 1773, the sermon was delivered in Spanish — a reflection of the active Sephardic tradition of the time. The CJH's archived copy is one of the rare existing printed versions, which was transcribed and published in English; according to Ogren, this fact itself may very well be reflective of its intended reach to English-speaking Protestants.

Then there's an original copy of Judah Monis's Hebrew grammar lessons, written out by hand by one of his students at Harvard University, where Monis taught between 1722 and 1760. The first full-time Hebrew instructor in North America, Monis was also the first Jew to receive a degree in the American Colonies.

Ostensibly the descendent of conversos himself, Monis converted to Congregational Christianity prior to teaching at Harvard. It was a controversial move in many circles, with his contemporaries referring to Monis

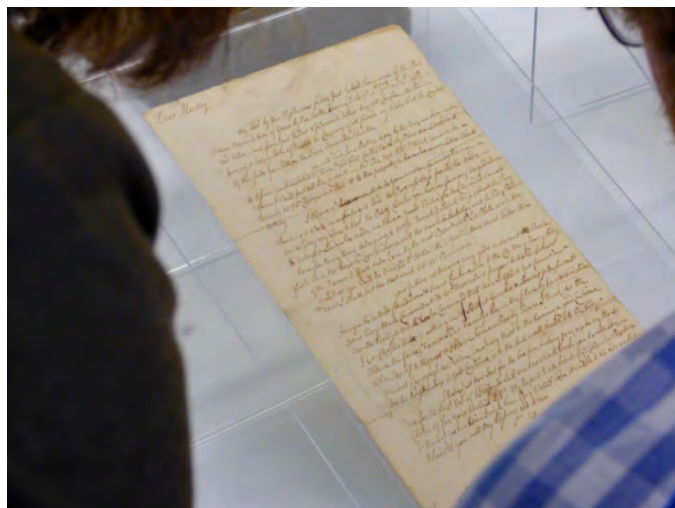
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Ogren will soon begin a year of research at the Center for Jewish History in New York as a National Endowment for the Humanities Senior Scholar



"I'm very excited about this whole experience for the sole reason of being able to plumb the archives," Ogren said.



Handwritten materials from the Colonial period in America are among the treasures within the CJH Archives

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alternately as "the converted rabbi" or "the Christianized Jew."

"Here we have a figure with a complex, mingled identity. He's Jewish in background, and in the eyes of his Protestant students and colleagues, but no longer really Jewish in the eyes of the Jewish community," Ogren said of the scholar, who was born and educated in Italy and, later, Amsterdam. "He's gone through all kinds of Jewish learning on the European continent and comes to the New World and brings this with him."

As a part of this ongoing project, Ogren will be visiting Amsterdam this summer before arriving in New York. In the Netherlands, he'll give a talk at an international conference and explore the archives of Monis's old stomping-grounds.

At the same time figures like Monis were bringing information and ideas from Jewish mystical circles in Europe to the New World, Puritan leaders like Increase Mather — Cotton Mather's father and president of Harvard for 20 years — were using incidents of Jewish conversion to push their own agendas: converting all the Jews to Christianity, for instance. Others employed kabbalistic ideas to argue that the culmination of Jewish mystical thought was actually Jesus Christ in the form of a bridge between God and man.

As these new Americans became more and more aware of Jewish thought, Ogren said, they began utilizing it to show what was, in their minds at least, "the ultimate truth in Christianity." At the same time, he said, "they were trying to forge a whole new identity, in some way, with these ideas and principles."

Or, as Edward O'Reilly recently wrote for the New-York Historical Society, "New England Puritans styled themselves as New World Israelites, envisioning parallels between their own story carving a Christian civilization out of the wilderness and the experience of Old Testament Jews."

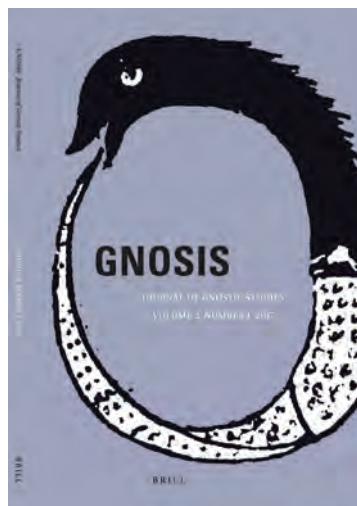
Ogren hopes to find even more examples of this emerging school of thought, especially as influenced by Jewish philosophy and kabbalah, during his year at the CJH.

"If nothing else, I'm very excited about this whole experience for the sole reason of being able to plumb the archives," he said. "And who knows what I'll find there?"

Ogren's last yearlong research trip — to Villa I Tatti, Harvard's Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence, Italy — netted enough material for a book. With any luck, he'll be able to find enough material in the CJH archives during this trip for another monograph.

"That's the goal," he said. "At least to be far enough along that I should be able to turn this whole project into a book."

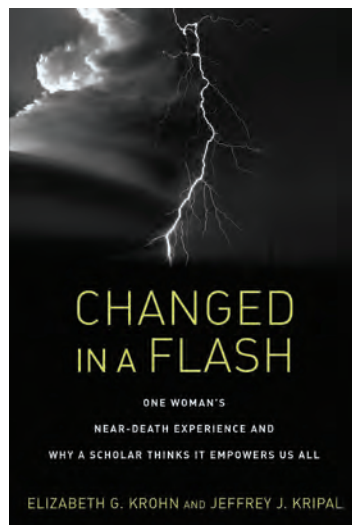
FACULTY ARTICLES & BOOKS



GNOSIS III ARTICLE

We are pleased to share that the article **Dr. April D. DeConick** wrote as a follow up to our Gnostic Countercultures Conference (2015) has been published in *Gnosis* 3 (2018) 135-176: "Deviant Christians: Romanization and Esoterization as Social Strategies for Survival Among Early Christians." The abstract reads: This paper explores the relationship between deviance and esotericism, particularly as this relationship relates to the emergence of new religious movements and the processes of social accommodation and resistance. Applying sociological models for the study of deviance, I show how emergent Catholics use a variety of accommodation strategies to better fit into Roman religious expectations, constructing a public face to their worship along with ancestral ties. As they do this, the emergent Catholics dissociate themselves from other Christians, like groups with gnostic orientations, whom they have marked as different from themselves and a liability for the survival of Christianity. They begin to argue that these "other" Christians are the deviant ones, not themselves. Their willingness to Romanize certain aspects of their religion reduces the tense relationship between their new religion and the surrounding society, increasing their ability to attract and maintain new

recruits. To make matters more complicated, gnostic groups largely resist accommodation to Roman religious expectations, a strategy that powers their countercultural critique of the hegemony of Rome. They esoterize their groups by privatizing and converting their deviance into secret social capital. The choice to maintain their deviance by limiting access to their internal social networks affects their ability to recruit, grow, and sustain their communities in the long term. The social politics of deviance goes a long way to explain the rise of Catholicism and its domination over other forms of Christianity.



CHANGED IN A FLASH: ONE WOMAN'S NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCE AND WHY A SCHOLAR THINKS IT EMPOWERS US ALL

Professor Jeff Kripal just published the book that he co-authored with Elizabeth Krohn, *Changed in a Flash: One Woman's Near Death Experience and Why a Scholar Thinks It Empowers Us All* (Berkley: North Atlantic Books). This book is a collaboration between Krohn and Kripal that recounts Krohn's

extraordinary experience surviving a lightning strike. The book offers an explanation of its after effects and helps us to think about the implications that this all may have on our understanding of humanity, death, and the afterlife.



BEING SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURES(S)
Edited by
William B. Parsons

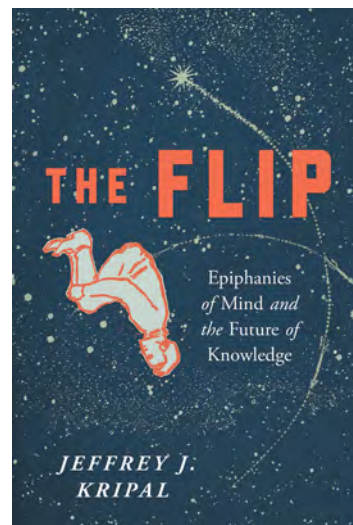


BEING SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE(S)

An amazing opening to our year, **Professor William Parsons** has just published a book that he edited from the Rockwell Conference on the Spiritual But Not Religious a couple of years ago. The book is called *Being Spiritual But Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)* and is published in the Routledge Studies in Religion series. Many of you attended that conference and so the contributions will be familiar from Fuller, Schmidt, Hedstrom, Bostic, Wilcox, Kelly, and Mercadante, and several of our own including Parsons, Kripal, Ecklund, Jain, Ceriello, and Pevateaux. Congratulations to Professor Parsons on a pioneering collection about people who paradoxically are disillusioned with traditional institutional religion, but who also feel that these same traditions contain deep wisdom about the human condition.



We are pleased to share with you that **Professor Anthony B. Pinn** has published a volume that he co-edited with Jaun M. Floyd-Thomas called *Religion in the Age of Obama* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic). This is the first book to focus on the significance of religion during Obama's years in the White House. Topics include how Obama has employed religious rhetoric in response to both international and domestic events, his attempt to inhabit a kind of Blackness that comforts and reassures rather than challenges White America, the limits of Christian hospitality within U.S. immigration policy and the racialization of Islam in the U.S. national imagination.



HUMANISM AND THE CHALLENGE OF DIFFERENCE

Professor Anthony B. Pinn has published a new edited volume of papers, *Humanism and the Challenge of Difference* (Palgrave Macmillan). The volume comes out of the Institute for Humanist Studies symposium held at Rice three years ago. The book works to understand humanism's and humanists' relationship to difference and the struggle for social justice. The main question of the volume is to address what the implication of diversity and a changing world is for humanism. Papers by ten acclaimed scholars are included.

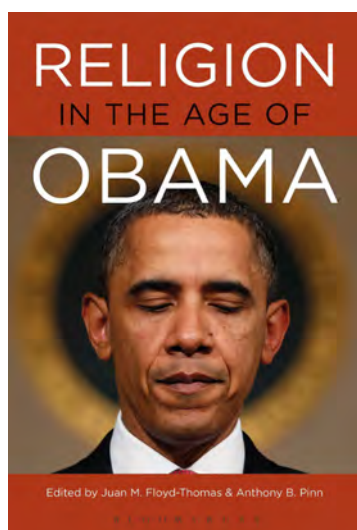


MODERN MYSTIC: THE ART OF HYMAN BLOOM

Congratulations to **Professor Marcia Brennan** who just gave me a gorgeous book that she has published (with Henry Adams) called *Modern Mystic: The Art of Hyman Bloom* (New York: Artbook). The book presents in full color the paintings and drawings of Hyman Bloom who was an artist and a mystic in the tradition of William Blake, Albert Pinkham Ryder, and Odilon Redon. He strove to capture the moment "when the mood is as intense as it can be made" (Bloom). His work touches on the body, its immanence and transcendence, abstraction, and spiritual mysticism. He has been called the first Abstract Expressionist. Kudos to Marcia for a pioneering publication.

THE FLIP: EPIPHANIES OF MIND AND THE FUTURE OF KNOWLEDGE

A big congratulations to **Professor Jeff Kripal** for his book *The Flip: Epiphanies of Mind and the Future of Knowledge* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press). The book engages both the humanities and sciences, recounting the extreme experiences of rationalists alongside explorations of consciousness by philosophers, neuroscientists, and mystics. Jeff argues for the fundamentality of consciousness to the cosmos, and offers a way to situate human beings within this. Ultimately he says, "Our deepest questions about ourselves (as parts) and the cosmos (the whole) will never be answered without an engagement with both forms of knowledge. And such ultimate questions will probably require forms of knowledge that we have not yet even imagined" (199).



RELIGION IN THE AGE OF OBAMA



CONFERENCES AND *Events*

"KABBALAH IN AMERICA" CONFERENCE

Oct. 2018



KABBALAH IN AMERICA

Rice University **October 28-30, 2018**

SUNDAY, October 28	MONDAY, October 29	TUESDAY, October 30
5:00-6:00pm Opening Keynote Boaz Huss, Ben Gurion University The Qabbalah of the Hebrews and the Ancient Wisdom Religion of Asia: Isaac Myer and the Kabbalah in America 6:00-7:00PM Textual Transmission in the American Context Brian Ogren, Rice University Zoharic Reception and Trinitarian Thought in Early America Ronit Meroz, Tel Aviv University The Many Faces of Sefer Yetzirah in the Past and in America	9:30-10:30 Colonial Beginnings Michael Hoberman, Fitchburg State University "They have with faithfulness and care transmitted the Oracles of God unto us Gentiles": Jewish scholarship in the Puritan imagination Laura Leibman, Reed College The Traveling Kabbalah: The "Lost" Carigal Manuscript in Early America 10:45-12:15 Theosophical Society and its Influences Julie Chajes, Tel Aviv University Seth Pancoast and Kabbalah Vadim Patzu, Missouri State University Kabbalah in the Ozarks: Thomas Moore Johnson, <i>The Platonist</i> , and the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor Marcia Brennan, Rice University Hyman Bloom's Mystical Brides 1:00-2:30 Nineteenth Century Developments Jonathan Sarna, Brandeis University A Jewish Kabbalistic text from 19th century America: Isidor Kalisch's Sefer Yetzirah Peter Lanchidi, Ben Gurion University The Masonic Career of A Kabbalistic Lithograph – Max Wolff, <i>The Origin of</i> <i>the Rites and Worship of the Hebrews</i> , New York, 1859 Eliyahu Stern, Yale University Pragmatic Kabbalah: Mordecai Kaplan, Joseph L. Sossnitz and the Mystical Origins of Jewish Peoplehood 2:45-3:45 Plenary Address: Shaul Magid, Indiana University A Book Bound on Both Ends: The Inverted Sabbateanism and Jewish Monasticism of Dovid Din 4:00-5:00 Hasidism, Neo-Hasidism, and Ashlagian Kabbalah Ariel Mayse, Stanford University Liberty for All: American Neo-Hasidism and Halakhah Ron Margolin, Tel Aviv University Identity or Spirituality: What is behind Buberian Neo Hasidism and Ashlagian Kabbalah in America?	9:30-11:00 Psychology and Charisma Pinchas Giller, American Jewish University Shlomo Carlebach and the Counterculture Alan Brill, Seton Hall University Aryeh Kaplan's Quest for the Lost Jewish Traditions of Science, Psychology and Prophecy Clemence Boulouque, Columbia University The Oversoul and its Kabbalistic Overtones: Schelling, Emerson and the Pre-Freudian Unconscious in America 11:15-12:15 Bodily Experience and the Paranormal Jeff Kripal, Rice University Changed in a Flash: Kabbalistic Motifs in a Modern Jewish Near-Death Experience Marla Segol, University at Buffalo Kabbalah and Sex Magic in Contemporary Self-Help 1:00-2:30 American Denominationalism Dana Evan Kaplan, Springhill Avenue Temple American Reform Judaism's Increasing Acceptance of Kabbalah : The Contribution of Rabbi Herbert Weiner's <i>9 1/2 Mystics</i> Danny Horwitz, Congregation Beth Yeshurun American Conservative Judaism and Kabbalah Jody Myers, Cal State Northridge Kabbalah as a Tool of Orthodox Outreach 2:45-3:45 Scholars and Poets Moshe Idel, Hebrew University of Jerusalem Solomon Schechter, Abraham Y. Heschel, Alexander Altmann Yaakov Ariel, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Religious Fluidity, Connecting with Ancestral Heritage and Kabbalah: Allen Ginsberg and Gershom Scholem's Teachings

Location:
Kyle Morrow Room,
Fondren Library
Free and open to the public



Many thanks to our generous sponsors:
Rice University Creative Ventures :: Rice HRC :: Department of
Religion, Rockwell Fund :: Program in Jewish Studies

Brian Ogren, Associate Professor

From October 28 to October 30, 2018, a group of twenty four internationally recognized scholars convened at Rice for a ground-breaking conference on "Kabbalah in America." Kabbalah is an esoteric tradition based in Jewish methods of interpretation and praxis, and it has occupied the American mind since the early days of the republic.

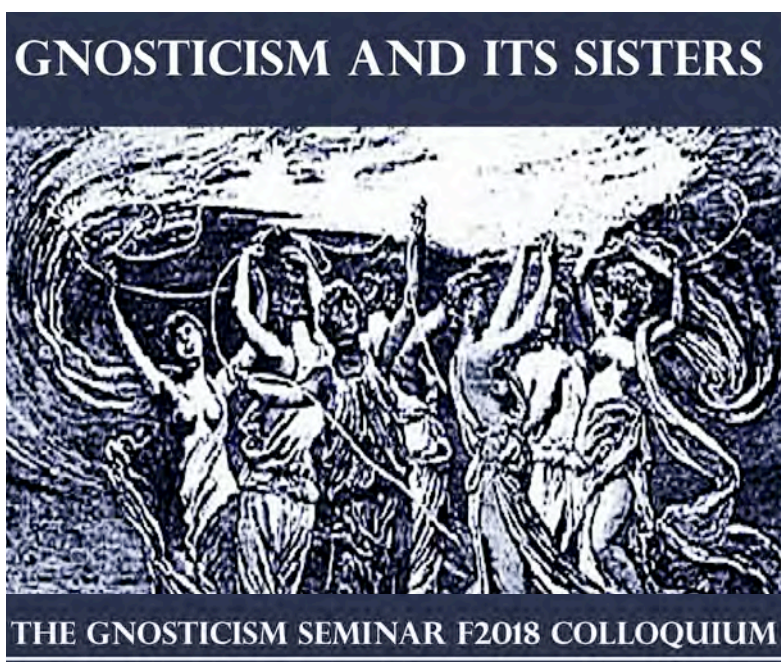
Individuals such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams wrote about it, and it has influenced American occult groups and secret societies, such as the Theosophical Society and the American Freemasons. It is central to American developments in an orthodox form of Judaism known as Hasidism, and it is at the core of the more recent Jewish Renewal movement. It has also given rise to a pop craze, as manifested

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by the likes of Madonna and Ariana Grande. As Professor Boaz Huss of Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Israel stated in his opening keynote address to the conference, from the twentieth century onwards, America became “one of the two most important centers of Kabbalah in the world, in which innovative and influential forms of modern Kabbalah and Hasidism developed.” Notwithstanding, prior to the conference at Rice this past October, no serious academic attention had been given to the important phenomenon of Kabbalah in America. Conference panels spanned the historical stretch from colonial America to contemporary expressions, and included a diverse array of scholars from history, art history, religion, sociology, literature and gender studies. The areas covered were diverse and eclectic, from the American New Age to traditional Jewish Denominationalism. The goal was to approach the topic from as many angles as possible, and the theme of “Kabbalah in America” acted not only as a geographical, but also as a cultural linchpin. For example, speakers from disparate

areas of study considered questions such as whether there are distinctly “American” manifestations of Kabbalah, and if so, how they might express themselves. Further questions explored were whether Kabbalah has undergone any changes in the American context, or has changed the American religions with which it has come into contact. What emerged from both the formal talks and the discussions surrounding them was a complex picture, related to American ideas of identity and religiosity. For the conference, Kabbalah in America acted as an important prism through which to examine some of the forces of modernity as marked by notions such as religious liberty and tolerance. Proceedings from the conference will appear in expanded and revised form in an unprecedented edited volume, which is sure to set the tone and the agenda for all future discussions of Kabbalah in America. The conference itself, and the volume that will result from it, were made possible by the generous support of the Creative Ventures Funds of Rice, the Humanities Research Center, the Rockwell Fund of the Department of Religion, and the Jewish Studies Program.



GNOSTICISM AND ITS SISTERS

Oct. 2018

Stefan Sanchez, Graduate Student

The Gnosticism and its Sisters conference offered up an exciting series of presentations exploring the themes of syncretism, rebellion, and re-interpretation in religious movements both ancient and contemporary. What was truly impressive about this lineup of presentations was that, in sitting through a conference on Gnosticism, one was taken far outside of the expected geographic range, indeed exploring the core themes of the concept as they expand not only eastward and westward throughout history, but northward and southward as well. It was truly awe-inspiring, as an audience member to follow this group of scholars as they began to pluck on conceptual strings that begin far in the past, and proceeded to show, without doubt, just how far-reaching the influence of Gnosticism, broadly conceived, and its sister movements in the ancient world have been throughout the course of history. Further, the

range of topics which sprang forth from the conference's subject matter made for a program that would have some attraction for a large number of scholars and onlookers: from the influence of Iamblichus on contemporary conceptions of science and supernature, to the veneration of Mani in China, to the striking range of forms the 'gnostic impulse' takes on in the Americas in everything from Pentecostalism to Mexican shamanism, the conference cast a wide and compelling net. Reading April DeConick's work, one learns that we have to talk about a lot more than “just” Gnosticism to understand its place in history, and Gnosticism and Its Sisters showed exactly why it is that this conversation is so expansive, complicated, and important: the course of history as we know it would not be anything close to recognizable to us without Gnosticism's ripples, nay, gigantic splash, in the cultural history of the ancient world. I would seriously suggest attending any conference organized by April DeConick and her students, as it is sure to be an illuminating experience.



DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

ANNUAL AWARDS

DINNER MAY 3, 2019

Welcome: April DeConick, Chair
Ph.D. 2018: Nathanael Homewood
Ph.D. 2019: Jessica B. Davenport and Rebecca Harris
GEM Certificate: Timothy Grieve-Carlson, Naamleela Free Jones, Victor Nardo, Gregory Perron, and Christopher Senn
Department Service Award: April DeConick
Alumni Flame 2019 -Outstanding Graduate: Nathan Carlin

Congratulations to everyone on their outstanding accomplishments





Conceptions of the Present in Jewish Antiquity

Sponsored by the Rockwell Foundation and the Department of Religion at Rice University
October 21-22, 2018

Sunday, October 21, Humanities Building, rm. 215

5:00 pm Welcome event & Re-cap Meeting

Monday, October 22, ACC 306

9–9:50 am Mette Bundvad, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
9:50–10:40 am Jonathan Kaplan, University of Texas at Austin
10:40–11:10 am Coffee Break
11:10 am–12 pm Katie Maguire, University of Toronto, Canada
2:00–2:50 pm Rebecca Harris, Rice University
2:50–3:40 pm Grant Macaskill, University of Aberdeen, U.K.
3:40–4:10 pm Coffee Break
4:10–5:00 pm Judith Newman, University of Toronto, Canada

Free & Open to the Public

CONCEPTIONS OF THE PRESENT IN JEWISH ANTIQUITY

Oct. 2018

Matthias Henze, Director of Program in Jewish Studies

In June 2016, my colleague Dr. Judith Newman and I co-hosted a conference on Time and Temporality at the University of Toronto, Canada. The common theme of the twelve conference papers was the question of how Time is constructed in early Jewish and Christian texts. Part two of our ongoing workshop on Time took place on the Rice campus. On October 21–22, 2018, Rice hosted the international conference "Conceptions of the Present in Jewish Antiquity," generously supported by the Rockwell Foundation and the Religion Department. The six presenters came from the US, Canada, Scotland, and Denmark. Instead of trying to cover as many dimensions of ancient temporalities as possible, as we did at the Toronto meeting, the Rice conference focused on different forms of constructing the present. And instead of following the traditional format of paper presentations at the conference, all papers were pre-circulated, so that we were able to spend all of our time together discussing the papers.

I am most grateful to the Rockwell Foundation for making this form of international collaboration possible. Unfortunately, these kinds of conferences that function more like workshops, for which a group of international specialists comes together to explore a topic of

interdisciplinary interest, are still the exception. All participants agreed how privileged we are at Rice to be able to support such forms of innovative research. Dr. Newman and I are now in the early stage of putting the papers together for a publication.

EMERGING RELIGIONS CONFERENCE III

Apr. 2019

CJ Schmidt, PhD Candidate in New Testament & Early Christian Studies

The Mellon Graduate Research Seminar in Emerging Religions held their third public research symposium at the Kyle Morrow Room in Fondren library on 18 April 2019. For the past two years, Professor April DeConick has led a Mellon graduate seminar on emerging religions, exploring sociological methods of studying new religious movements (NRMs). During the second year of this seminar, Professor DeConick and PhD students Learned Foote, Timothy Grieve-Carlson, and CJ Schmidt together sought to learn accomplished scholars whose accessible writing style allows their work to reach beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries—even beyond the ivory tower. In the Fall semester, we were joined by Rice PhD student Victor Nardo, and in the Spring by both Rice PhD student Naamleela Free Jones and visiting PhD student Emily Lafèche, of the University of Ottawa.

The seminar culminated with the Emerging Religions Conference III, which featured twenty-minute presentations of students' respective

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research projects. Presentations covered a range of topics from the use of Christian scriptures in emerging religions to new religious phenomena.

Professor James A. Tabor of the University of North Carolina–Charlotte delivered the Keynote Address. His talk, “From Qumran to Waco: Dead Messiahs Who Don’t Return,” focused on the apocalyptic messianic views of the Branch Davidian community and of their leader David Koresh, who tragically came to international attention in the Spring of 1993. Professor Tabor was directly involved in assisting FBI negotiators during the Waco crisis, and has studied the apocalyptic teachings of David Koresh in the light of ancient apocalyptic traditions from the late Second Temple period and early Christianity. He highlighted some of the major thematic parallels between the apocalyptic belief system of the Branch Davidians and that of the Qumran community, as reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls, isolating some of the main elements in a common process of interpreting texts that he described as the “dynamics of biblical apocalypticism.”

Fifth-year PhD candidate CJ Schmidt presented his work on Clement of Alexandria’s treatise *The Instructor* and how this early Church father theorized the health of both the fleshly body and soul through bodily discipline. He drew upon the work of Michel Foucault to raise historical questions regarding discipline, punishment, and technologies of the self in Clement’s formulation of Christian self-identity. Visiting PhD student Emily Laflèche shared her dissertation research in “A New Christian Identity in the Gospel of Philip,” drawing on inscriptional evidence for discussions of gender and sexuality in Valentinian Christian writings such as the Gospel of Philip (NHC II,3).

Naamleela Free Jones, a second-year PhD student delivered a paper entitled “The New Testament in New Religious Movements,” in which she demonstrated the creative use, interpretation, and re-imagining of Christian scriptures in new contexts. She highlighted the gnostic interpretations of Christian scriptures by her father, the twentieth-century spiritual teacher Adi Da Samraj. Adi Da read the Christian scriptures as a moral, devotional, and mystical text, and coupled the Genesis story with the life and teachings of Jesus as revelations of the esoteric anatomy of the enlightenment of the body, the latter of which were informed by Indian yogic and tantric traditions.

Third-year PhD student Learned Foote shared his research on the seventeenth-century Presbyterian minister and Scottish folklorist Robert Kirk. Foote’s presentation drew upon his own archival research and personal examination of Kirk’s handwritten manuscript *The Secret Commonwealth*, in which Kirk describes elves, fauns, fairies, and a ritual involving a “Seer” or “Wizard.” Foote argued that Kirk’s Wizard was—in part—an autobiographical reference that both conceals and

Andrew W. Mellon Graduate Research Seminar 2019
EMERGING RELIGIONS CONFERENCE III

KEYNOTE ADDRESS
James D. Tabor
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
From Qumran to Waco: Dead Messiahs Who Don't Return

THURSDAY, APRIL 18, 1-5 PM Kyle Morrow Room
Fendren Library, Rice University

1-2 KEYNOTE ADDRESS
James A. Tabor
From Qumran to Waco: Dead Messiahs Who Don't Return

2-3:10 Christian Scriptures and Emergent Religions
Charles Schmidt *Clement of Alexandria and the Care of the Self*
Emily Laflèche *A New Christian Identity in the Gospel of Philip*
Naamleela Free Jones *The New Testament in New Religious Movements*

3:10-4 New Religious Phenomena
Learned Foote *Robert Kirk and the Wizard*
Timothy Grieve-Carlson *Finding Bigfoot: Anthropology and Monsters*

4-5 Coda
April D. DeConick
The Fight for God in Emergent Christianity

PUBLIC WELCOME Sponsored by the Humanities Research Center, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

reveals his identity via esoteric language.

Timothy Grieve-Carlson, third-year PhD student, critiqued the increasingly popular approach known as Monster Theory in his “Finding Bigfoot: Anthropology and Monsters.” Drawing on first-person accounts of encountering the humanoid monster commonly known as Bigfoot, Grieve-Carlson asks, “How is Monster Theory—or any theory—supposed to account for the monsters that answer us when we call to them in the woods at night? Grieve-Carlson argued that Monster Theory has severe limitations when faced with questions of the undeniable experiential dimensions of humans’ accounts of their encounters with the monsters that populate the margins of our world.

Professor April DeConick concluded the event by sharing her latest research into the history of the transcendent God in ancient Mediterranean religion. She argued that it was within the contested

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theological territory over the identity of the biblical God that early Catholics began forging strong links between the biblical God and the transcendent God of the philosophers. This strategy supported early Catholic Christianity as a new religious movement in the Roman world.

This event was made possible by the Humanities Research Center and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

ROCKWELL CONFERENCE

Apr. 2019

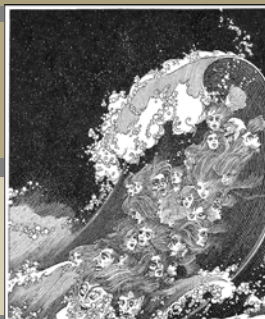
The Department of Religion presents a 2019 Rockwell Lecture

TOTAL RECALL: THE 'PANORAMIC LIFE REVIEW' NEAR DEATH AS SEEN IN WESTERN ESOTERICISM OF THE 19TH CENTURY



Dr. Jens Schlieter
Professor, University of Bern

Thursday, April 11, 2019
5:00 pm
117 Humanities Bldg.



Jens Schlieter, Professor

On April 11 and 12, Prof. Jens Schlieter of the University of Bern visited the Department and delivered two lectures. On April 11, he delivered a lecture on his new book, *What Is It Like to Be Dead?* (Oxford, 2019), a profoundly original study of the modern near-death literatures that locates these kinds of modern visionary journeys on a large historical and comparative canvas. In the lecture, Prof. Schlieter outlined a history of the “panoramic life review,” demonstrating some of its historical roots in occult and esoteric literature of the nineteenth century. On April 12, he spoke to our GEM Forum on the subject of “experience” as “experiment” in contemporary Buddhist communities, demonstrating how these two categories share common Greek and Latin roots and are in deep conversation in the general history of religions. Between lectures, Prof. Schlieter met with graduate students over meals and engaged the faculty around his important work.

Jeff Kripal, Professor

We also stopped for this photo, taken by Matthew Southey. I think “RICE” is misspelled, but the collegiality seemed more important than the spelling.



FACULTY ACHIEVEMENTS

Congratulations to
Professor Anthony Pinn
on his appointment at
The University of South
Africa as “Professor
Extraordinary” in the
Department of Biblical
and Ancient Studies. This
appointment is awarded
to researchers who enjoy
international recognition by
his peers, and has a proven
(scholarly) publication track
record.

The position is held for a
three-year appointment,
renewable indefinitely. He
begins this summer.

We are so proud of you.



WILD WILD SCRIPTURES

Apr. 2019

Naamleela Free Jones, Graduate Student

On April 17, 2019, the Department of Religion hosted a graduate student conference titled “Wild, Wild Scriptures.” The conference featured presentations by eight Rice graduate students, one Rice undergraduate, and one visiting graduate student, under the auspices of Professor DeConick’s New Testament and Christian Origins seminar.

The focus of Professor DeConick’s Spring seminar was the early years of Christian history and literature, specifically the first three generations. DeConick’s approach intentionally integrated the diversity of early Christian pluralism into the story of Christian origins. In this historical context, we engaged with early Christian scripture both inside and outside the New Testament. We examined the canonical Gospels along with several Gnostic texts, interrogating their early reception history along with the categories of orthodoxy and heresy. DeConick’s seminar was unique in that we looked to understand and theorize early Christianity as a new religious movement. Scholars have created the category of new religious movement to imply an innovative movement that is not yet an established religion. To examine Christianity through this lens allowed us to wrestle with the questions that diverse regional communities engaged with in early generations, prior to Nicaea. It also allowed us to extend our research in to the contemporary world, examining how religious movements throughout history have continued to produce their own readings of New Testament scripture.

Several students began by presenting their research under the heading “Old World Scriptures.” Dauda Umaru Adamu presented on the Gospel of Matthew in light of contemporary theories of trauma and survival. Katherine Webber, our undergraduate colleague, conducted a feminist analysis of Genesis and the role of women in early Christian movements. Finally, Emily Ann Laflèche, a visiting graduate student from the University of Toronto, presented her research on “children of the bridal chamber” in both the New Testament and early Gnostic sources.

The second group of students presented under on “The Pentecostal

Spring 2019 Conference hosted by RELI 416/616 New Testament and Christian Origins
Anderson Hall 117, Rice University
Wednesday, April 17, 8 am – 12 pm

WILD WILD SCRIPTURES

8 – 9:15 am Old World Scriptures

Dauda Umaru Adamu *The Gospel of Matthew, Trauma, and Survival*
Katherine Webber *Blaming Eve, Blaming Women*
Emily Ann Laflèche *Children of the Bridal Chamber and the New Testament*
 Discussion

9:15-10:15 am The Pentecostal New Testament

Azizou Atte-oudeyi *Paul in Sub Saharan Africa*
Kyle Smith *Scripture Gone Wild in American Pentecostalism*
 Discussion and Break

10:15-12:00 am Jesus in New Religious Movements

Christopher Senn *Jesus as a Yogi: Paramahansa Yogananda’s Spirituality*
Naamleela Free Jones *Yogic Gnosticism in the Work of Adi Da Samraj*
Kyungsoo Lee *New Christianity in Korea*
Thomas Millary *Acid Apocalypse: Christ, Drugs, and the End of the World*
 Discussion

Sponsored by the Department of Religion, Rice University

New Testament.” Azizou Atte-oudeyi gave a historical description of the influence of Paul on contemporary Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa. Kyle Smith further traced the influence of New Testament scripture in the development of American Pentecostalism.

In the final group, four students presented on “Jesus in New Religious Movements” by examining how the New Testament continues to influence new religious movements in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Christopher Senn gave us insight in to Paramahansa Yogananda’s perspective on Jesus as a yogi, in light of Eastern spirituality. Naamleela Free Jones presented on Adi Da Samraj’s work on Jesus and the New Testament in light of gnostic spirituality and the yogic physiology of enlightenment. Kyungsoo Lee conducted a genealogical study of new Christian religious

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movements in Korea in the twentieth century. Thomas Millary concluded the conference with a presentation on Christ in the context of drug culture and apocalypticism.

The conference was an excellent reflection of the diversity of interests and research in Professor DeConick's seminar. The students carried on lively presentations and discussions of how early Christian scripture has informed a wide variety of texts and movements throughout history.

Save the Date

The Department of Religion is excited to announce next year's Rockwell conference at Rice University: "Opening the Archives of the Impossible: Writing the History of Religion and Science After the Normal." The conference will be held on October 29 - November 1, 2020.

The conference will be built around a new archival collection organized by Prof. Jeffrey Kripal of the Religion Department, "The Archives of the Impossible." This new collection, held at the Woodson Center in Fondren Library at Rice, is dedicated to collecting and preserving materials relating to the history of the paranormal in American history, including materials related to UFOs and parapsychology.

The conference will gather an international group of scholars and experts in fields related to the Archives of the Paranormal collection, serving as both an announcement and the inaugural event of the archive.

Gnostic America Conference

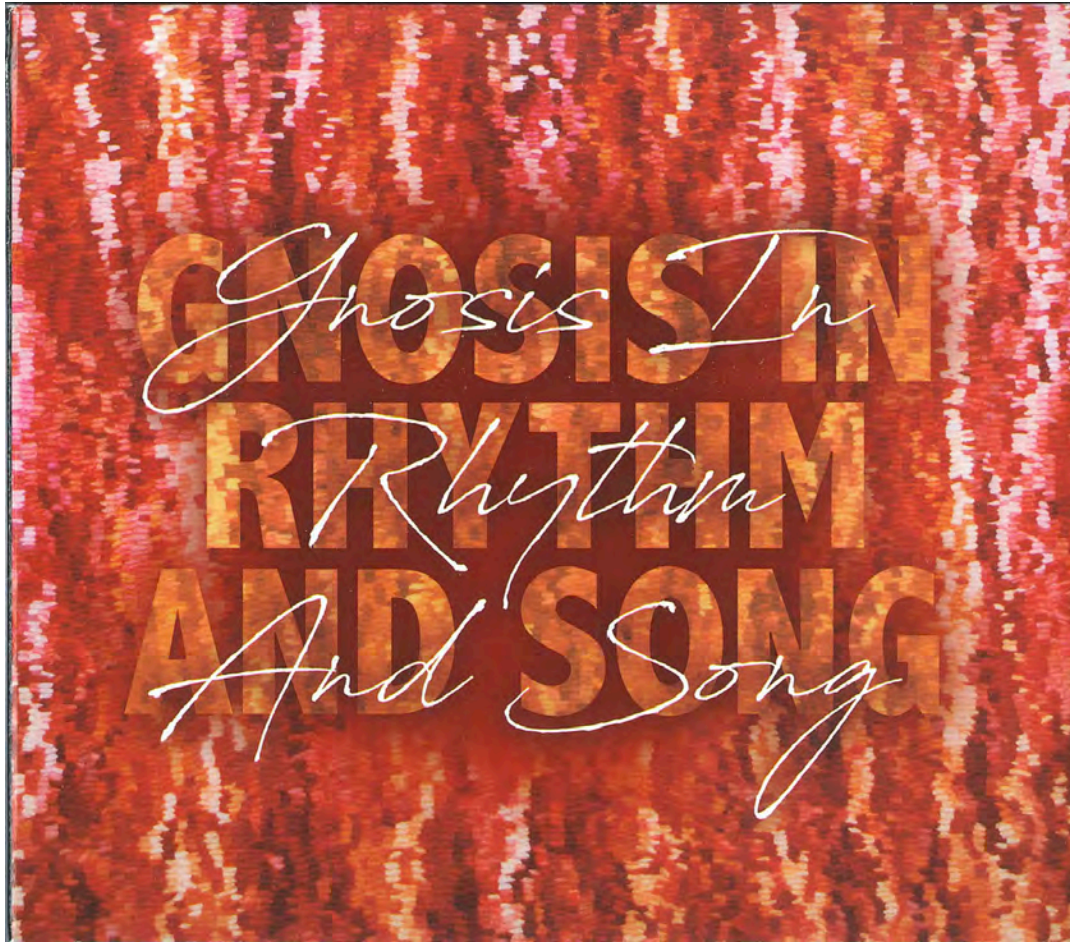


Special Gift: Gnosis in Rhythm and Song

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

I am very pleased to be able to include in this copy of the department newsletter a special gift. The CD *Gnosis in Rhythm and Song* which originally was composed and performed during the Gnostic America Conference (March 2018) by Sonja Bruzauskas (Vocals), Craig Hauschildt (Percussion),

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and April D. DeConick (Lyrics and Commentary). In June 2018, we recorded the work at Wire Road Studios with Brad Sayles (Engineer). The cover art is a hooked wool rug on linen foundation (18 inches by 46 inches) by April D. DeConick titled *Baptism By Fire* (2010). This musical project was made possible with a Creative Ventures Grant from Rice University.

Gnosis in Song and Rhythm is inspired by the curiosity to experience the hymns and prayers that ancient Gnostics have left in their texts. What would it be like to hear the hymns and prayers of the ancient Gnostics performed

musically as they were intended? While we have many Gnostic texts from the fourth-century Nag Hammadi collection and can read them, this is not the same thing as experiencing them musically as they were meant to be sung or chanted. We wanted to bring these ancient hymn and prayers back to life and feel their emotional impact.

We originally put together a performance of these Gnostic inspired liturgies for the Codex Judas Congress (2008). In that performance staged in the Rothko Chapel, Sonja Bruzauskas and Becky Baxter put the lyrics to harp renditions of traditional Christian hymns. Then in 2018, the musicians Sonja Bruzauskas and Craig Hausschildt reduced the music to the two most basic sounds, voice and heartbeat simulated by percussion and rhythm. This rendition was performed at the Rice University Memorial Chapel for the Gnostic American Conference.

This performance is meant to reveal how rhythm and pitch, and song and dance enable us to communicate on a level that exceeds language. Modern speaking utilizes only a very small subset of the vocal range that is available to us. And thanks to texting, tweeting, and other manifestations of technological advances, speaking is no longer necessary to communicate at all. Does vocal engagement still have any use or meaning for us? After all, do we even use our full vocal range anymore? What about when we scream, laugh, cry, and celebrate, when we have vocal reactions to primal emotions? Like these primal vocal reactions, singing and rhythm connects us to our emotional selves, enabling us to communicate on a level that exceeds language.

For *Gnosis in Song and Rhythm*, the musicians decided to view the ancient texts through this lens. They thought to enhance our understanding of these hymns and prayers constructed from the Gnostic texts by allowing the listener to absorb the words on the emotional level. To do so, in this recording, they combine modal scales, old and new rhythmic styles, as well as chant. The instrumentation is carefully chosen to emphasize either emotion or life force, in some cases a combination of both. These decisions informed the use of percussion instruments that either have distinguished pitches or those that create pure rhythm. The musicians hope that their performance will enable the experience of these hymns and prayers on a deeper level, perhaps even an unconscious one.

Enjoy!

Sponsored by the Creative Ventures Fund, Rice University, and the GEM Collective from the Department of Religion

UNDERGRADUATE *News*

The Undergraduate Religion Major in 2018-2019



“What we have learned here, within the hedges, can solve the world’s problems. That doesn’t mean each of us has to, but what it means is that in many ways, we have a responsibility to help out our global community.”

Prof. Niki Clements, Director of Undergraduate Studies 2018-2019

In her 2019 commencement speech as Student Association President, Ariana Engles, a 2020 Religion graduate, exhorts her classmates: “What we have learned here, within the hedges, can solve the world’s problems. That doesn’t mean each of us has to, but what it means is that in many ways, we have a responsibility to help out our global community.” Inspired by her mother and the Mexican and Central American immigrant communities of Austin, Texas, Ariana has committed to building communities that are diverse and inclusive both at Rice and beyond. And she describes her shifting academic focus in pursuit of critically engaging different perspectives: “After changing my major 8 times, I chose religion. I did this because I was interested in studying everything Rice had to offer, and religion is the most interdisciplinary major we have.”

As the national crisis with immigrant detention, child separation, and deportation reaches a fevered pitch, the question of what education does to recognize and challenge these conditions becomes urgent. Refusing the paralysis of pessimism, Ariana instead chooses to affirm both reflection and action as part of her Rice education: “This degree is, in so many ways, a hope for a better future tomorrow.” Students like Ariana have been part of the public push for such change today, evident in Rice’s shifting policies to better include DACA and undocumented students in admissions processes and to offer financial support for all compelling students to join the university.

This big picture thinking that Ariana engages while honing particular, technical knowledge—this dual-perspective on theory and practice—is what students in the study of religion can cultivate. Through Spring 2019 courses like Marcia Brennan’s *Medicine and the Museum*, John Stroup’s *Religion and Law*, David Cook’s *Pilgrimage and Crusade*, Brian Ogren’s *The Bible in Popular Culture*, Anne Klein’s *Tibetan Language & Culture*, Rahnuma Shehabuddin’s *Gender and Islam*, Niki Clements’ *Religion and the Art of Happiness*, and the ever popular *Jerusalem* of Matthias Henze and Melissa Weininger, students gain exposure to the critical skills for the study of religion across religious traditions. By engaging interdisciplinary methodologies and theories, undergraduate students come to better understand and interpret historical, social, cultural, political, legal, economic, and even biological phenomena. Majors in the department use their training to creatively pursue research projects that exemplify the Rice motto of “unconventional wisdom.”

Incorporating historical, theoretical, and ethnographic methods, Chloe Wilson performed exquisite research in

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her year-long thesis on “the modes of agency and power in the context of ritual adoption and innovation in the Jewish ritual of mikveh immersion.” Abigail Schulman engaged fascinating comparative analysis in semiotics and reader-response criticism with Jewish interpretive strategies, analyzing how “Kabbalistic thought, especially, uses concepts of infinite divinity to support diversity in interpretation.” Sharon Cho rigorously engages religious experiences at the intersection of imperialism and orientalism through nineteenth-century pilgrimage narratives, coming to investigate “divergences in religious attitudes toward the forms of Christianity found in the Holy Land as well as political attitudes to the differences in their religious and political identities.” Isaac Carroo, who won the Best Oral Presentation in Humanities for the Rice Undergraduate Research Symposium, foregrounded the imperative of ecological and humanistic research for

understanding “the role of religious experience as a catalyst for positive social and environmental interactions through mystical experiences, group rituals, and cultural practices.”

From monthly community teas for the RELI community at Brochstein to the presentation of Senior Theses, the department of Religion is constituted by undergraduates, graduate students, and professors committed to forging communal discourse on issues that matter academically, politically, and existentially. Coming to recognize the plurality and diversity of religious traditions in their genesis and development, students come to see and value marginalized, repressed, dehumanized, and censored voices and experiences. With critical recognition and charitable engagement, RELI students challenge themselves, their peers, and their professors to heed Ariana’s call: to see that a humanistic education can help address today’s problems and, with that possibility, comes our responsibility to meet it.

Congratulations Graduating Class of 2019



Isaac Carroo (pictured here with Dr. Niki Clements) after traveling to London, Thailand, Bali, and Taipei this summer, will start working at Deloitte Consulting Strategy and Operations in Houston on September 30, exploring the business sustainability sphere through projects in a wide range of industries.



Sharon Cho is moving to Dallas to work for Bain & Company, a management consulting firm, as an Associate Consultant. After her two year commitment, she might pursue an MBA and continue a career in business.



Nikolas Liebster has joined the Peace Corps and will serve for two years in the education sector in Tanzania, teaching physics on a secondary school level in a rural area. As Tanzania is a country of huge religious diversity, he feels very fortunate to have such a wide base of knowledge of world religions to help guide his encounters with Tanzanians.



Abigail Schulman is pursuing a Master in Public Health (Epidemiology track) at UT School of Public Health.



Chloe Wilson will be working as Field Director for the Raj for Houston City Council campaign.



Congratulations to all of our graduating seniors and best of luck as they continue onwards with their careers!

Announcement of Minor in Religion

Under the direction of April DeConick as Chair, our department constructed an undergraduate Minor in Religion. Granted approval by Faculty Senate in 2019, students will be able “to master a core body of basic knowledge about the study of religion,” anchored in the methodologies and descriptive information about world religions. With at least six courses (including RELI 101 and two courses in religious traditions), students will be able to hone their critical skills, understand historical, social, and multi-cultural dimensions of religion, engage psychological, philosophical, and cognitive dimensions of religion, examine religious plurality, and gain foreign language skills.

RURS Presentations



Chloe Wilson, “Innovating Within the Tradition: Feminist Reconstructions of Agency in the Jewish Mikveh” (Advisor: Dr. Niki Kasumi Clements)



Isaac Carroo, “The Role of Religious Experience in Prosocial and Pro-Environmental Behavior” (Advisor: Dr. Niki Kasumi Clements)
Winner of RURS Best Oral Presentation in Humanities

Senior Thesis Presentations



The following seniors pursued a one-semester thesis in Dr. William Parson's Mysticism seminar and Dr. April DeConick's Early Christian Origins seminar: **Savion Lee, Nikolas Liebster, Daniel Russell, and Katherine Weber**

Aparicio Prize

In 1985, Professor Francis R. Aparicio bequeathed a fund to the Department of Religion (and then Chair Niels C. Nielsen) to honor her late husband. Each year, the fund has been used to award what has come to be known as the Aparicio Prize to a deserving member of the undergraduate class. The prize, voted on by the entire Department of Religion, celebrates the most outstanding paper on religion (with preference going to those written in the psychology of religion). This year, the award was bestowed on **Emily Rychener**.

Saba Prize

The Saba Prize is the most prestigious award bestowed by the Department of Religion. It is given as a result of departmental consideration majority vote, carries with it a substantial financial gift, and designates that graduating senior and religious studies major who has demonstrated the highest form of academic excellence over a four-year period. This year, the award was bestowed on **Isaac Carroo**.

Distinction in Research and Creative Works

Distinction in Research and Creative Works is a university award for select undergraduates, granted at commencement, which appears on the transcript and diploma. Students must apply to be considered for the award with a letter from a faculty member (or Center director) to the student's major department. A student whose research or other creative project is in a field outside of his/her major should submit an application to the academic department or program most closely associated with the subject matter of their project. Eligibility for the award extends widely to include a variety of research, design, and other creative projects, as well as persistent dedication to research. Projects completed in part or entirely at other institutions or with community partners will be eligible for consideration. This year, the award was bestowed on:

Isaac Carroo, "The Role of Religious Experience in Prosocial and Pro-Environmental Behavior"
(Advisor: Dr. Niki Kasumi Clements)

Sharon Cho, "Comparative Reading of Nineteenth-Century French Catholic and American Protestant Pilgrimage Narratives: Religious Experiences, Imperialism, and Orientalism"
(Advisor: Dr. Matthias Henze)

Abigail Shulman, "Conflicting Truths in Jewish Thought: A Comparison of Subjectivity in Jewish Exegesis and Modern Literary Theory" (Advisor: Dr. Brian Ogren)

Chloe Wilson, "Innovating Within the Tradition: Feminist Reconstructions of Agency in the Jewish Mikveh" (Advisor: Dr. Niki Kasumi Clements)

RELI Tea



Department of Religion

Tuesday Teas with RELI

Join the Department of Religion every second Tuesday of the month from 4:00 - 5:00 pm at Brochstein Pavilion.

Come meet department faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate majors for conversation, coffee, and tea.

RELI TEA at Brochstein
4:00 - 5:00 PM
2nd Tuesday of the month



The Students' Thoughts

"I have deeply enjoyed my time in the Rice religion department. The eclectic group of professors and students are constantly pushing the boundaries of what the study of religion means and have entirely reframed my understanding of myself as an actor in the world. These lessons will be of fundamental importance in the next stage of my life."

- Nikolas Liebster



"I love the RELI Department and the opportunity to learn about a variety of religions from a variety of perspectives. The flexibility to explore is so important to me as I weave through the many interests I have within the field of religious studies. It's also awesome to have professors who love the subject and are incredibly knowledgeable in their field!"

- Lidia Ochoa



"Dr. Cook's Arabic classes made my Rice experience. Writing about Richard the Lionheart in Dr. Cook's Crusades and Pilgrimage class."



Most important to another student was "Mentorship with professors, independent research project, quality of classes"



Current Undergraduate Students

Chabrielle Allen
Religion
Hanszen College

Catherine Choi
Religion and English
Hanszen College

Ariana C. Engles
Religion and Kinesiology
Lovett College

Stefanie King
Religion and
Biochemistry & Cell
Biology
Martel College

Savion Lee
Religion
McMurtry College

Theresa Leibig
Religion
Jones College

Augustin Liebster
Religion and Computer
Science
McMurtry College

Nikolas Liebster
Religion and Physics
Hanszen College

Michael McDowell
Religion, Sociology, and
Social Policy Analysis
Wiess College

Emery Mintz
Religion
Martel College

Mariana Nájera
Religion, Anthropology,
and Ancient
Mediterranean
Civilizations
McMurtry College

Lidia Ochoa
Religion and Visual &
Dramatic Arts
Mathematics Minor
Duncan College

Pavan Pinnamaneni
Religion and Computer
Science
Sid Richardson College

Sunee Kate Quirante
Religion and
Anthropology
African Studies Minor
Lovett College

Logan Rance
Religion and
Biochemistry & Cell
Biology
Jones College

Rebecca Topper
Religion and English
Jewish Studies Minor
McMurtry College

Katherine Webber
Religion and Study
of Women, Gender, &
Sexuality
Jewish Studies Minor
Martel College

Elizabeth Weeks
Religion and
Biochemistry & Cell
Biology
Martel College

INTRODUCING MASTER OF ARTS CLASS OF 2019

ANTOINETTE VON DEM HAGEN

religion & culture

SHANI STERLING

african american religion

BRANDON WILSON

new testament and early christian studies

JONATHAN DELAVAN

contemplative studies

CONNOR STORCK

history of religions in america

We are looking forward to this second year for our new thesis MA degree program. We established the MA program because we were constantly receiving phone calls and emails requesting a MA degree in Religion at Rice. So the faculty got together and designed an MA that will provide students with a broad but tailored understanding of the academic study of Religion. Students may be looking for a degree that will provide them with the necessary background and credentials for admittance into competitive divinity and doctoral programs in the study of Religion. Others might wish to develop the skills necessary for other vocational or professional options that do not require a Ph.D. Other students may just have a personal or professional interest in Religion. Students accepted into the MA program have the added bonus that they are eligible to participate in the GEM Certificate program. We welcome the second class of MA students: Jonathan Delavan, Connor Storck, Shani Sterling, Antoinette "Toni" von dem Hagen, and Brandon Wilson.

Professor Claire Fanger is serving as the Director of MA Studies.

CONTINUING STUDENTS

BENJAMIN MATTHEWS

tibetan buddhism

STEFAN SANCHEZ

religion & psychology

M.A. IN RELIGION AT RICE UNIVERSITY

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

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

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

For inquiries regarding the application process, please contact:
humagradadmissions@rice.edu.

For academic inquiries regarding the program, please contact:
Claire Fanger, M.A. Director: cfanger@rice.edu

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:
RELI.RICE.EDU/GRADUATE/MA-RELIGION
APPLY AT:
RELIGRADAPPS.RICE.EDU/**

GRADUATE STUDIES

ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL YEAR

William B. Parsons, Director of Doctoral Studies

Graduate studies in Religion at Rice continues to flourish being marked by, in addition to our PhD program, the inauguration of our two-year Master of Arts. For the upcoming AY 2019-2020, five new students were admitted into the program in PhD studies and five into the M.A.

Introducing Doctoral Class of 2019

Brett Carollo

GEM; History of Religions in America; New Testament and Early Christian Studies, Religion and Culture

Nicholas Collins

GEM, History of Religions in America, Religion and Culture

Sabariah Mohamed Hussin

Islamic Studies; Religion and Culture

Hwankyu Kim

New Testament and Early Christian Studies

Hassan Henderson-Lott

African American Religion

The milestones and awards of our current students are multiple and listed below. Congratulations to all!



August 2018

Nathaneal Homewood

May 2019

Jessica Davenport

Rebecca Harris

Passed Comprehensive Exams

Fall 2018

Gregory Perron
C.J. Schmidt
Tommy Symmes

Spring 2019

Cindy Dawson
Abdulbasit Kassim
Justin Kelley
Waleed Rikab
Victor Nardo

Passed Language Examinations

Konner Childers	Oihane Iglesias-Telleria
DeAnna Daniels	Waleed Rikab
Learned Foote	Christopher Senn
Naamleela Free Jones	Kyle Smith
Timothy Grieve Carlson	Azizou Atte-Oudeyi

Achieved PhD Candidacy and Candidacy MA Degrees

Gregory Perron

CJ Schmidt

Tommy Symmes

CONGRATULATIONS CLASS OF 2018-2019!



Rebecca Harris

Advisor: Matthias Henze



Jessica Davenport

Advisor: Anthony Pinn



Nathaneal Homewood

Advisors: Elias Bongmba & Jeffrey Kripal

Graduate Areas of Concentration

African American
Religion

African Religions

Bible & Beyond

Buddhist Thought

Contemplative Studies

Global Christianity

History of Religions in
America

Jewish Thought &
Philosophy

Modern Christianity
in Taught & Popular
Culture

New Testament & Early
Christian Studies

Psychology & Religion

GRADUATE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

It is with great pride that we share with you the news that **Rebecca Harris**, who works on Qumran with Professor Henze, has just accepted a position at Messiah College as an Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies in the Department of Biblical and Religious Studies. Messiah College is located in Mechanicsburg, PA.

Congratulations to **Nathanael Homewood** who just accepted a position as a Postdoctoral Scholar and Assistant Professor of Christianity in the Religious Studies Department at DePauw University. We send you our best wishes and many thanks for stepping in to assist with RSR this last year. We are very proud that you will be heading into a new phase of your life as a scholar at DePauw.

Congratulations to **Azizou Atte-Oudeyi** who has been selected to attend the 2019 National Humanities Center Summer Residency training in North Carolina from July 15-26. Azizou will represent Rice University School of Humanities. He will be part of a team trained in the use of geospatial technology to create inquiry-based maps. Each team and each individual participant will create and share an instructional resource that is ready for their own teaching in the fall. Since 2015, the Center has extended these offerings to PhD graduate students as support for career diversification and preparation. For additional information, following is the link to the NHC website: <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/education-programs/2019-summer-residency-phd/>

Congratulations to **Abdulbasit Kassim** who just received a Wagoner Foreign Study Scholarship to conduct field archival research in Banjul (Gambia), Kaolack, Touba, and Dakar (Senegal), Accra (Ghana) and Abidjan (Ivory Coast). The research is toward his dissertation (Old Reformers: New Dissidents: The Intellectual History of Islamic Reform, Dissidence and Rebellion in Central Sudanic Africa). He combines multidisciplinary approaches including intellectual history, textual anthropology, ethnography, and the close reading of published and unpublished Arabic manuscripts. He explores how the canonical ideas associated with Islamic reform have undergone significant mutation in the ways their interpretations and meanings are constructed and negotiated across the spectrums of the Sufi-inspired jihads in the 18th

and 19th century to the hybrid mode of political Islamism and Salafi-jihadi soteriology that emerged in Central Sudanic Africa in the 20th and 21st century.

Congratulations to **Waleed Rikab** who has just received the Marilyn Marrs Gillet International Travel Fellowship to conduct archival research in Berlin and Istanbul into 18th century manuscripts coming from Egypt and Syria. Waleed will be examining the literary production of religious scholars, members of the military, and middle class merchants and traders, in order to understand the formation of prevalent ethical distinctions in Syrian and Egyptian societies, at the intersection of religion, politics and society.

Congratulations to **CJ Schmidt** who has just accepted a position as Lecturer in Religious Studies in the Department of Comparative Cultural Studies at University of Houston, starting this Fall. He will teach Intro to Religious Studies, Paul the Apostle, and Intro to New Testament during 2019–20 academic year.

Congratulations to **Justine Bakker** who has been named a Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellow for 2019 by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (\$25K for the 2019/2020 academic year –this is a big one). The Newcombe Fellowship is the nation's largest and most prestigious award for Ph.D. candidates in the humanities and social sciences addressing questions of ethical and religious values, providing support for the final year of their dissertation work. Justine's dissertation, titled *"The Vibrations Are Different Here": Parahuman Stories in Black Religion*, looks at Afro-diasporic literature, poetry, and visual art in an effort to rethink the relationship between and categories of "the human" and "religion." For more information, we refer you to their website directly: woodrow.org/news. We are proud beyond measure!

Congratulations to **Abdulbasit Kassim** for his recent appointment as Visiting Pre-Doctoral Fellow at Northwestern University for July and August. This is a real honor and opportunity! Kassim will be conducting research at the Program of African Studies and the Institute of Islamic Thought in Africa. Our best to you Kassim!

Current PhD Students

Dauda Adamu
African Religions

Azizou Atte-Oudeyi
African Religions

Justine Bakker
African American Religion;
Gnosticism, Esotericism, and
Mysticism (GEM)

Brett Carollo
Gnosticism, Esotericism, and
Mysticism (GEM), History
of Religions in America,
New Testament and Early
Christian Studies, Religion &
Culture

Shardé Chapman
African American Religion

Konner Childers
Continental Philosophy of
Religion

Nicholas Collins
Gnosticism, Esotericism, and
Mysticism (GEM), History of
Religions in America, Religion
& Culture

Simon Cox
Gnosticism, Esotericism, and
Mysticism (GEM)

DeAnna Daniels
African American Religion

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

Mark DeYoung
African American Religion

Learned Foote
Tibetan Buddhism; Gnosticism,
Esotericism, and Mysticism

Jason Ford
Bible & Beyond

Renée Ford
Buddhist Thought; GEM

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

Timothy Grieve-Carlson
History of Religion in America;
GEM

Hassan Henderson-Lott
African American Religion

Oihane Iglesias Telleria
Gnosticism; Latin American
Literature

Bradley Johnson
African Religions

Abdulbasit Kassim
Islamic Studies, African
Studies

Justin Kelley
Buddhist Thought

Hwankyu Kim
New Testament and Early
Christian Studies

Kyungsoo Lee
Religion & Psychology

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

Thomas Millary
History of Religions in
America

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

Stanislav Panin
Modern and Contemporary
Western Esotericism

Anne O. Parker
Contemplative Studies,
Buddhist Thought

Gregory Perron
Gnosticism, Esotericism,
Mysticism (GEM); Religion &
Psychology

Waleed Rikab
Islamic Studies; Sunni Islam

Mark Schmanko
Politics, Culture, and Religion
in America

C.J. Schmidt
New Testament and Early
Christian Studies

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

Kyle Smith
History of Religions in
America

Matthew Southey
Buddhism; Science

Tommy Symmes
Religion & Psychology;
Anthropology

Arina Zaytseva
Global Christianity



GEM CERTIFICATE



Naamleela Free Jones, Graduate Student

The GEM certificate was the principal program that initially drew me to Rice. Having grown up in a new religious movement with a deeply esoteric core, I was struck by the fact that Rice is the only program in the United States to offer an emphasis on such heterodox voices and alternative religious currents. By engaging in the GEM courses and interacting with the group of professors who specialize in these traditions, I was able to develop a stronger reflexive understanding of my own lineage and upbringing as well as pursue my academic research interests.

The GEM courses provided me with theories and methods that I now apply to the study of new religious movements and Asian religions in America in the twentieth century. They allowed me to explore the historical emergence of both yogic traditions and gnostic spirituality in contemporary culture, and to exercise a

comparative approach to the esoteric dimensions of myth and symbol. They imbued me with a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of orthodoxy and heresy that have existed in both ancient and modern times, defining many of our identities in often unexamined ways.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have been part of a truly welcoming, thought-provoking, and open-minded group of scholars. GEM provides a family and community for those of us who come from all manner of religious backgrounds, empowering us to find our voices and learn how to use them in the greater world of religious dialogue. To inspect our own presumptions and beliefs while engaging in critical discussions of culture, consciousness, sexuality, and religious experience, has been an opportunity I will always remember.

GEM Certificate Recipients of 2019

Timothy Grieve-
Carlson

Naamleela Free
Jones

Victor
Nardo

Gregory
Perron

Christopher
Senn

GRADUATE *Conferences*



Society for Biblical Research Annual Meeting | Denver, CO | November 2018

Rebecca Harris, Graduate Student

The award I received from the Dean's Conference, Research, and Professional Advancement Fund allowed me to travel to Denver for the Society for Biblical Research (SBL) annual meeting. Earlier in the year, I had been selected to present a paper at this conference. My paper, "Constructing Time and Space: the Last Days as a Liminal Time-Space in the Qumran Sectarian Manuscripts," was very well received. Following the presentation, a number of audience members posed questions, indicating the material had stimulated some interest for their own research.

This trip proved to be incredibly beneficial to me as it allowed me to present my work in a public forum, receive valuable feedback, and connect with others whose work intersects with my own. I was also able to maximize my time at the conference by scheduling other important meetings, including a meeting with an editor and a job interview. I am hopeful that the connections I made this past weekend will lead to new opportunities and relationships that will help propel me forward in my professional career.

Fifth International Seminar of Young Tibetologists | St. Petersburg, Russia | October 2018

Renée L. Ford, Graduate Student

The Dean's Conference, Research, and Professional Advancement Fund supported my attendance to the fifth International Seminar of Young Tibetologists in St. Petersburg, Russia. This is one of two international conferences that are devoted to Tibetan studies, and the only conference that only focuses on young scholars' work. My primary objective at this conference was to present my summer research for my dissertation titled, "Devotion in the Heart Essence, Vast Expanse Tradition." Presenting my material offered me a chance to synthesize my field-work and receive feedback from other scholars, which will inform my dissertation writing.

I was also asked to join a small working group called, "The Buddhist Digital Resource Center UX." This small group of six people consists of scholars who closely work with this particular website (tbr.org) and provide feedback and issues. The goal of this group is to inform the web developers and executive board of BDRC so that the website improves. Joining this board advances my experience in working with fellow scholars and a prominent Tibetan studies resource. My attendance to this seminar offered me the rare opportunity to be asked to join this group.

Dean's Fund Research | Cape Town, South Africa | September 2018

Bradley Johnson, Graduate Student

In early September, 2018, I traveled to Cape Town, South Africa, in order to conduct research on religious dimensions of the city's recent water crisis. A generous grant from the Dean's Fund helped to cover a major portion of my roundtrip airfare, one of the most expensive parts of my fieldwork. While in Cape Town for nearly four months, I managed to interview 43 people on about Cape Town's water and ecological issues, and what kinds of implications these topics

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held for their understanding of Christian faith. I spoke to academics, government officials, clerical leaders, and ordinary church members about their theological and moral approaches to the water crisis and similar environmental problems. This on-the-ground research forms an irreplaceable core for my dissertation, and again, I am grateful to those behind the Dean's Fund for making this trip more manageable.



Annual Academy of Religion Conference | Denver, CO | November 2018

Mark DeYoung, Graduate Student

In November of 2018 I had the wonderful opportunity to both present a conference paper and preside over a panel at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in Denver, Colorado. In a session on fictional religions in film and literature for the Religion and Popular Culture Unit, I presented a paper entitled "Butler's Parables: Religion in/as Fiction." My paper argued that Octavia Butler's construction of the fictional religion Earthseed in her Parables series novels offers a salient theory of religion in literary form. Using Butler's contrast between Earthseed and Christianity within the series, I demonstrated how her narrative is suggestive of a rich theory of the nature, function, and possible future of religions. That is, religion can be theorized as a feedback loop in which the particular ways we narrativize our modes of being in the world become constitutive of those very modes of being—religion can

neither be escaped nor perfected, only improvised, rethought, and experimented with. Finally, I suggested that Butler's ambivalent stance toward religion is pragmatically helpful; she suggests that the future holds open a wide range of possibility for human beings, yet cautions that for every alternative possibility, problems will remain.

In addition, I was fortunate to preside over a fascinating panel exploring the implications of the groundbreaking work of Jamaican scholar Sylvia Wynter for the study of religion. The panel featured brilliant papers by current and former Rice colleagues Justine Bakker and Dr. David Kline, as well as a response by esteemed scholar Dr. An Yountae of California State University, Northridge.

It was a tremendous privilege to take part in this conference as both presenter and presider and I am grateful to the Department of Religion and the School of Humanities here at Rice for making this experience possible.

Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion | Denver, CO | November 2018

Timothy Grieve-Carlson, Graduate Student

Thanks to a generous grant from the Dean's fund for graduate student research, this past November I was able to present my paper "A Hidden Predator: Ecology and Esotericism in the Work of Whitley Strieber" at the Western Esotericism section of the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Denver, Colorado. My paper explored themes from ecology and animal studies in Whitley Strieber's 1987 book *Communion: A True Story* and similar themes in Strieber's early horror novels. This award enabled me to travel for my first presentation at the major annual conference in my discipline, where I was able to share original research with a community of scholars working in similar areas. I was also able to make professional connections with other individuals working in the field. Finally, I received important feedback and encouragement on my paper as I revise my work for eventual publication.

Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion | Denver, CO | November 2018

Simon Cox, Graduate Student

Using the Dean's Fund I attended the 2018 American Academy of Religions meeting in Denver, Colorado from November 23rd-26th. While there I attended

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a number of panels in the sections of Daoist Studies, Yoga Studies, and Religion and Philosophy in Late Antiquity. The Yoga studies section in particular had two panels relevant to my dissertation: one on Chakra systems and another on comparative Chinese and Indian Yogic systems. Most pertinent to my career, I also networked with a number of professors in my field, securing a grant to attend a conference on theories of incarnation at the Esalen Institute in April 2019.

Annual Academy of Religion Conference | Denver, CO | November 2018

Justine Bakker, Graduate Student

In November 2018, I received funding from the Dean's Travel Fund and the HGSA to attend the annual American Academy of Religion conference. This year held in Denver, Colorado, AAR was fun, productive and stimulating—an occasion to see old friends and former colleagues, a possibility to encounter new, exciting research, and a chance to receive feedback on my work.

This year, I co-organized a panel on “Sylvia Wynter and Religion” with Dr. David Kline former Rice grad student who now teaches at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. In recent years, the thought of Jamaican philosopher and post-colonial theorist Sylvia Wynter—a key theorist for my dissertation—has received enthusiastic attention by scholars in black studies, post-colonial studies and critical race theory. Her vast oeuvre has yet to be taken up substantially by scholars in religion, however; to that end, David and I proposed a panel that would introduce her work.

My paper, entitled “Productive Tension: Religion in the Writings of Sylvia Wynter,” explored the different (and occasionally seemingly contradictory) usages and definitions of religion in Wynter's later work. I engaged several questions: What, precisely, is religion for Wynter—a term that is at once central to her systematic and structural analysis of modernity and colonization of the human species and yet remains elusive and slippery? Why do some of her writings seem to have confidence in the transformative power of religion while other articles—both earlier and later—seem to suggest that we need to move beyond religion altogether? Moreover, how could Wynter suggest at once that we should move beyond religion, while her new definition of the human must, simultaneously, also be grounded in the continued existence of religion? My paper interrogated this tension between Wynter's different positions on religion, arguing that two different definitions are operative that, both, deserve careful consideration.

Receiving helpful feedback from respondent Dr. An Yountae (California State University) and productive questions from members of the audience, presenting at AAR has certainly helped me to further my dissertation research and writing. I thank the Dean's Fund at HGSA for providing funding to attend this year's annual meeting.



Association for the Study of Nationalities World Convention | New York | May 2019

Stanislav Panin, Graduate Student

On May 2-4, 2019, I attended an annual convention of the Association for the Study on Nationalities that took place at the Harriman Institute of Columbia University. The Association for the Study of Nationalities is an association that focuses on issues of ethnicity and nationalism with an emphasis on Eastern Europe, Russia, and Ukraine. For me this event presented an opportunity to reach outside of religious studies and communicate with scholars from other disciplines, such as history, law, and political science, who concentrate on the same period in Soviet and Russian history. My presentation was titled "Jewish Conspiracy Narratives in Russian Publications on the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution" and focused on the role of ideas about an occult Judeo-Masonic conspiracy in certain interpretations of the conflict in Ukraine that appeared in Russian publications between 2014 and 2019. This topic provides an example of how the study of esotericism can be applied to understand current political developments and therefore is not limited to a theoretical historical enterprise. The presentation was a part of a session "Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Ukrainian-Russian Conflict" organized in collaboration with Ukrainian and American colleagues.

**Africa Annual Conference | Austin, TX | March 2019****Dauda Umaru Adamu, Graduate Student**

I was at University of Texas at Austin to attend the African Annual Conference and came back to Houston on Sunday. My paper was presented on the 30th with the title "African Metaphysics and Ontology". Very interesting about this day is the fact that my presentation was done right before my advisor, Prof. Elias K. Bongmba, and to his joy and commendation, a lot of scholars lavished commendations on the paper and my style of presentation. For those who could not take note of the tag on me, and came to find out about my institutional affiliation, I was glad to say "Rice University". Attending this conference is important to my academic pursuits just as fuel is to vehicle. I was

able to build more confidence and network with various scholars in diverse field. Just as other scholars assisted me with useful suggestions on how to improve on my paper, the conference provided me the opportunity too to help others improve on theirs with my suggestions. The papers presented at the different sessions I attended broaden my horizon of knowledge, especially with regard to my prospective dissertation. Finally, I thank the department and the dean for the fund and the opportunity it provided me to go and improve myself. Thank you very much.



Institute for Ecstatic Naturalism.

Congress on Ecstatic Naturalism | Madison, NJ | April 2019**Thomas Millary, Graduate Student**

In April, the Ninth International Congress on Ecstatic Naturalism was held at Drew University. Ecstatic naturalism is a philosophy developed by Robert Corrington, professor of philosophical theology at Drew. Corrington's work combines the ideas of the American philosophical tradition (transcendentalism and pragmatism) with insights from phenomenology, Jungian psychoanalysis, theosophy, Hinduism, and Taoism, among other influences. The annual Congress brings together scholars influenced by Corrington to examine a particular topic related to this philosophical system.

The topic for this year was "Race, Class, and Gender in Ecstatic Naturalism." I presented a paper entitled "Inexhaustibly Complex: Pursuing Justice in an Unpredictable World," in which I discussed political philosopher Gerald Gaus' arguments against ideal theorizing in politics. The Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize (awarded each year to best paper by a young scholar), which I received last year for a paper on the topic of panpsychism, was awarded to Sarah O'Brien for her paper "Ecstatic Naturalism and Eco-Phenomenology," which explored the relevance of ecstatic naturalist metaphysics for eco-feminist concerns. Plenary speaker Desmond Coleman's address "On Being Sunk," discussed the theme of blackness through discussion of Hegel, Jordan Peele's film "Get Out," and ecstatic naturalism. Another highlight of the conference was a dialogue between Corrington and psychotherapist/philosopher Adam Crabtree on the topic of teleology in nature.

graduate student INSTRUCTORS



REL 158: Introduction to Theologies of Liberation

Mark DeYoung, Graduate Student

In the Spring of 2019 I had the privilege of teaching REL 158, "Introduction to Theologies of Liberation" for the department. This was my students' first experience with a religious studies course and it was a pleasure engaging with them and the course materials throughout the semester.

Through a series of interactive lectures, seminar style discussions, writing assignments, and discussions of current events, we focused on the development of liberation theologies in North America in the wake of James Cone's seminal development of Black Liberation Theology in the late 1960s. From there, we explored subsequent theological movements such as Feminist, Womanist, Mujerista, Native American, Disability, Queer, and Queer Womanist theologies of liberation.

The students gained a sense of the unique challenges, political struggles, and theological hopes particular to each of these oppressed communities in North America, as well as a sense of the ways in which power, privilege, and oppression intersect both within and across axes of oppression such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, ability and sexuality.

I was thoroughly impressed by the level of engagement displayed by my students who, despite having limited familiarity with liberation theology or religious studies in general, were always willing to explore new perspectives and ideas and to think critically about the ways in which these perspectives might help to shed light on the ongoing struggles of oppressed communities in our midst today.

I am grateful to the department for allowing me this opportunity to teach and engage with Rice students. It has been a tremendous benefit to have gained this valuable teaching experience and the pedagogical skills I was able to develop and hone over the course of the semester will serve me well throughout my teaching career.

REL 219: The Supernatural and Religion

Benjamin J. Mayo, Graduate Student

This semester I had the honor of designing and teaching The Supernatural and Religion to 17 undergraduates (and one auditor) for Rice's own Religion department. Throughout the course we delved into many of the world's most common supernatural beliefs and experiences, and how they understood and lived from both inside the bounds of religious traditions and those that stand firmly outside of them, as well as those experiences

and belief systems that challenge the dichotomy between the secular and the sacred. We explored hauntings, divine healings, demon possession, and other supernatural encounters, reports, and experiences through a broad range of theorists such as Gloria E. Anzaldúa, David Hume, and Mark Fisher, learning different ways humanity has tried to make sense of supernatural through various religions, cultures, and philosophies. Each student chose their own supernatural phenomena or theory to do a semester long research

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paper on and then presented their own fantastic findings to the rest of the class at our week long mini conference the end of semester. Designing and teaching this course has been one the most educational and rewarding experiences of my own life and the tremendous outpour of student interest inside the classroom and far beyond it wildly exceeded my greatest hopes and has been incredibly inspirational for my own scholarly journey forward. I can't give enough thanks to my incredible students, and to all of the faculty and staff of the Religion Department who made this possible.

RELI 231: American Metaphysical Religion: The History and Meaning of the "Spiritual but not Religious"

Mark Schmanko, Graduate Student

American Metaphysical Religion explored the development of religious pluralism and mystical, gnostic and esoteric currents in American history—in light of what reputed historian of religions Leigh Eric Schmidt (2005) calls “American Spirituality.” We kicked off the semester by studying this tradition of American Spirituality in the second half of the nineteenth-century, giving attention to Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson, iconoclastic mystic poets like Walt Whitman and esoteric elements in the life and thought of William James, his friends and his colleagues, who avidly pursued inquiries very relevant to Rice’s GEM program. In the second half of the semester, we used Dr. Kripal’s text *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*. This served as an effective primer to trace and analyze the changing religious

landscape in mid-twentieth century America, as we discussed the American counterculture of the 1960s and considered how it set the stage for the emergence of the spiritual but not religious (SBNR) demographic. Kripal’s vision of Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California turned out to be a fruitful prism for expanding students’ understanding of the meaning of categories and topics pertinent to GEM and American Metaphysical Religion. In the last three weeks of the class, students initiated their independent research for final papers, doing so in ways that related to course content, while also engaging their personal interests, experiences and intellectual curiosities centered on research in the humanities. The course, I think, helped to nuance and deepen students’ understanding of religion and spirituality in the contemporary world. It provided an alternative historical perspective and a range of unconventional inquiries, which proved to be an effective supplement to the study of religion focused on more traditional comparative models of “the world’s religions” and conventional categories (such as belief, prayer, faith, and canon) associated with them.

RELI 365: PAUL & THE NEW TESTAMENT
(M/W/F 3-3:50pm)

Ever wanted to learn about earliest Christianity and its relation to ancient Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture? Here's your chance! Come explore the life, letters, and legacy of the apostle Paul in this exciting class. In addition to introducing you to New Testament and Pauline Studies, together we will explore topics such as ancient views about gender and sexuality, the body, conversion, the people of Israel, forgeries, and some of the most recent cutting-edge scholarship on "the apostle to the Gentiles."

No previous knowledge or prerequisites required.

If you have any questions about the course as you consider your schedule for Spring 2018, feel free to contact the instructor, Charles (C.J.) Schmidt, at schmidt@rice.edu.

RELI 365: Paul and the New Testament

CJ Schmidt, PhD Candidate in New Testament & Early Christian Studies

As the **T. Orman Taylor Teaching Fellow in Religious Studies**, CJ Schmidt taught the upper-level seminar “Paul and the New Testament” in the Spring of 2019. Seven students—ranging from first years to Seniors—enrolled in the course, along with two auditors. Most students were STEM majors, and for many this course was their first in Religion.

The course introduced students to the study of ancient Mediterranean history, culture, and religion, focusing on Paul’s context as a late-Second Temple Jew and religious expert whose life, letters, and legacy played a substantial role in early Christianity. In addition to being introduced to Pauline Studies, students explored a range of topics such as ancient constructions of gender, the human body, ethnicity, as well as forgeries in the name of the Apostle to the Gentiles.

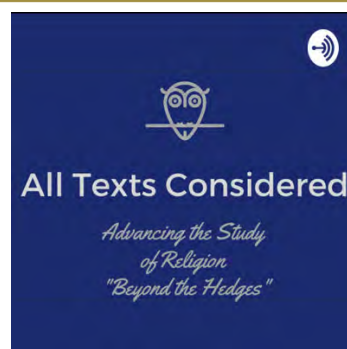
The course culminated with the creation of a student-centered podcast series on Paul. Over the course of several weeks, students were guided through the process of proposing, researching, outlining, recording, and producing individual podcast episodes based off of their own personal interests as they arose during the semester. This first

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season of the All Texts Considered Podcast, will serve as an opportunity for students' voices and independent research to reach beyond the classroom and have an impact in the real world, thus bringing the academic study of religion "beyond the hedges." Season one (The Apostle Paul) drops in Fall 2019.

I would like to thank the Department of Religion for this wonderful opportunity to put into practice the training I've received from the Center for Teaching Excellence's Graduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning.



Fall Semester RELI 378: Buddhist Art and Literature

Simon Cox, Graduate Student

Through generous funding from the **Khyentse Foundation**, Simon Cox taught "Buddhist Art and Literature" in the Fall of 2018. In this course students examined the formation and transmission of the many Buddhisms of the Silk Road from antiquity through the early medieval period. With a view toward art, literature, philosophy, and religious praxis, students became acquainted with the history of East and Central Asian Buddhism in terms of comparative religions, art history, and geopolitics focusing on the history of Buddhism on the Silk Road up to the 10th century, reading relevant primary source Buddhist literature.



Buddhist Life Stories

RELI 378: Buddhist Art & Literature

Spring Semester RELI 378: Buddhist Art and Literature

Learned Foote, Graduate Student

Thanks to the generous support of the **Khyentse Foundation**, in the spring 2019 semester I taught RELI 378: Buddhist Art and Literature. The advanced seminar had six undergraduate students, and focused in particular on biographical literature. Students began with two very different versions of the life story of Gautama Buddha, as told by 20th century British academic Karen Armstrong and 18th-century Bhutanese abbot Tenzin Chögyel. Through studying the various accounts of Gautama's life, students learned how various

Buddhist traditions from the ancient Indian to tantric Tibetan contexts describe the founding of the school. Students also read significant works of autobiographical writing from Japanese authors Lady Sarashina and Kamo no Chōmei, and reflected on how classic Buddhist themes of impermanence and liberation are reflected in these life stories. The class also spent time in a close reading of the biography of 11th century saint Milarepa and the 20th century British nun Tenzin Palmo: both participants in the Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. In essays and in class discussions, students developed comparisons between how these various works treat topics such as suffering and death, monks and lay-persons, and buddha nature. While keeping a tight focus on the biographical texts, the course offered an opportunity to discuss the larger history of the spread of Buddhism, the subtlety of its various philosophical schools, and how its practitioners deal with issues of sexuality, gender, antinomian practice, and religious authority. The course also featured an introduction to Tibetan language.

Students learned pronunciation of the alphabet, basic elements of grammar, and several vocabulary words important to Buddhist discourse. In the final weeks of the course, we read several verses from Nāgārjuna's *Dharmadhātustava*, a treatise on Buddha nature that features relatively straightforward Tibetan in four-line stanzas. In addition to their final papers reflecting on the themes they read about during the course, students also took exams that required them to give the English meaning of selected words and verses. This class is the first I have taught at Rice, and it was certainly a pleasure to explore Buddhist literature and language with these engaged students.



PhD Recipients

JESSICA DAVENPORT



Appositional Black Aesthetics: Theorizing Black Religion in the Visual Art of Carrie Mae Weems

Jessica Davenport, Ph.D 2019

My research is in the areas of black religion, black critical theory, aesthetics and art history. In April of 2019, I defended my dissertation, "Appositional Black Aesthetics: Theorizing Black Religion in the Visual Art of Carrie Mae Weems." At the heart the dissertation lies a core premise: black art and visual images provide rich source material from which to consider the nature and meaning of

black religion. To be sure, scholars of black religion have long looked to forms of cultural production in order to proffer their claims. Nevertheless, while robust attention has been given to mining literary and musical forms for religious significance, few scholars in the field of black religion have rigorously engaged visual and aesthetic methods and theories. I contribute to efforts to fill this void by examining visual artist Carrie Mae Weems's conceptual photography as a case study.

In considering Weems's intermedia photography that includes performance and text-and-image combustibles, I construct what I refer to as an "appositional black aesthetic" framework. Situated as a departure from the categorical binary of positive vs. negative images through which the archive of black representation is often defined and considered, appositional black aesthetics refers to art and images that depict black life with complexity and a type of multidimensional openness that eludes strict categorization. Moreover, it is also an approach to viewing and analyzing images that emphasizes expansive explorations into the complicated nuances, creative improvisations and alternative social logics that attend black life. In delineating appositional black aesthetics in specific pieces from Weems's oeuvre, I make the case that her work ultimately offers a reframing of black religion. That is, the artwork challenges conceptions of black religion that posit

inclusion within the category of subjectivity as its primary aim and aspiration. More specifically, Weems's renderings demonstrate ways of being and engaging with the world that exceed what black critical theorists identify as the fraught racialized classificatory paradigm of subjectivity. Rather than a quest for inclusion within subjectivity's categorical schema, I reframe black religion as a generative enactment of the flesh. This theoretical conceptualization situates black religion as a locus point of possibility for complex, open, ever-shifting ways of being that always already exceed the regulating social logics of dominant society and its prescribed ontologies.

I look forward to dedicating the next year to revising and publishing my dissertation as an academic monograph as well as to continuing my work in this area by expanding my research to other black women contemporary artists. In the meantime, my thanks go to the Department of Religion at Rice University for its support throughout my graduate studies and to my dissertation committee, Dr. Anthony Pinn, Dr. Marcia Brennan and Dr. Nicole Waligora-Davis, for the profound role they played in helping me to sharpen my ideas.



REBECCA HARRIS

Living in the Liminal: the Present as a Place of Access in Qumran Sectarian Literature

Rebecca Harris, Ph.D 2019

Today, over sixty years after their initial discovery, the Dead Sea Scrolls continue to transform

the landscape of the Biblical Studies field. My dissertation, *Living in the Liminal: the Present as a Place of Access in Qumran Sectarian Literature*, seeks to contribute to this work by showing how notions of space and time shape the beliefs and practices of members of the Qumran movement. Over a century before the emergence of the earliest Christian communities, members of this movement conceptualized the present as

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a type of liminal space in which certain individuals already participated in otherworldly realities associated with the transition to the new age.

Drawing on theories of time and space and ritual performance, I argue that in the sectarian literature a new social space emerges in which communion with the divine is considered a present reality for members of the movement. The ultimate goal of this communion is incorporation into the eternal realm—an imminent expectation, the seeds of which have already taken root in the present through the member's incorporation into the sect. Ritual action, particularly in the form of liturgical performance, then provides the locus for this communion in the present and aims to make that communion permanent by hastening the arrival of eschatological events still anticipated.

I intentionally engage theories that open up new avenues of research in Qumran studies and link my work to concerns in Hebrew Bible and early Christian studies as well. The implications of this work for the

study of the New Testament are far-reaching, especially as it relates to early Christian conceptions of the present as a liminal time-space, a type of “already but not yet” existence. In future years, I hope to expand my work with ritual and performance theories to include the interpretation of other early Jewish and Christian texts.

I am deeply grateful for the support I have received these past five years from the Department of Religion, its faculty, my committee, and most of all, my advisor, Matthias Henze, whose excellent mentorship and guidance made this degree possible. I am especially thankful for Matthias's understanding, patience, and encouragement as I endeavored to balance my studies with my responsibilities as a mother of one, and now two, small children. Though I am sad to see this part of my academic journey come to an end, I look forward to stepping into my new role this fall (2019) as Assistant Professor in the Biblical and Religious Studies Department at Messiah College in Pennsylvania.

NATHANEAL HOMEWOOD



Pneumoeroticism: An Erotic Hermeneutic of Body and Spirit in Ghanaian Pentecostalism

Nathaneal Homewood, Ph.D 2018

My dissertation, “Pneumoeroticism: An

Erotic Hermeneutic of Body and Spirit in Ghanaian Pentecostalism” emerged from nine months of fieldwork in Accra, Ghana studying the Pentecostal exorcistic ritual known as deliverance in which prophets attempt to rend demons from fleshy bodies. While in Accra I was a participant-observer in three deliverance sites: a prayer camp, a small deliverance ministry attached to a mainstream Pentecostal church, and a deliverance-centric mid-week church service at an exceedingly controversial charismatic church. I augmented this participant observation with over one hundred interviews with deliverers and deliverees alike.

Applying my training in the history of religions, I was able to challenge the assumed norms and values of Christianity through the application of some of the core convictions of the history of religions: dislodging the Western-centric nature of religious studies; emphasizing religion not as belief, but as practice and ritual below the level of consciousness; and critical analysis of idealized self-representations of Christianity. This approach was particularly useful in understanding the ubiquity of sexuality within various Pentecostal rituals.

Deliverance rituals often imbricate sexuality and spirituality through a variety of

sexualized performances. For example, there are regularly bodily manifestations of non-normative sexualities, as well as ubiquitous revelations of ‘spiritual marriages,’ which are sexual relationships between humans and spirits. From masturbating congregants, gay and lesbian spirits, to sexual experiences with spirits and spirit animals, sex is used in Ghanaian Pentecostalism to expand the definition of the body beyond its fleshy boundaries and to make spirits immanent, even intimate. In foregrounding these ubiquitous sexual experiences, which are largely ignored in the academe, I confound Pentecostalism's theologically expressed conservative and repressive sexual ideals with the Pentecostal practice of sexuality in its public, creative, and expressive particularity.

My research was financially supported by the Wagoner Foreign Study Scholarship and Rice's Center for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality. Nothing, though, approaches the depth of my gratitude toward the members of my committee without whose support none of this would have been possible. I continue to revise the dissertation for publication and explore new avenues of analysis for the material, in particular a sharp decolonial turn.

ALUMNI NEWS



CARLIN HONORED WITH ALUMNI FLAME AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING GRADUATE

Nathan Carlin, Alumni Flame Awardee

“ In *Success and Luck*, Robert Frank observes that people who make it in life not only are hardworking and talented but also are lucky. The book is full of data and anecdotes across many fields and areas. One story that Frank told on NPR is about the Mona Lisa. While the Mona Lisa was painted in the 16th century, it did not become famous until the 20th. Why? Frank suggests that it became famous, in part, because it was stolen in the early 20th century and that the theft conferred upon the painting worldwide attention, as its image was printed in newspapers across the globe. When the painting was recovered a couple of years later, the image was reprinted for the whole world to see again. Leonardo da Vinci was talented and hardworking, of course, but this little bit of luck helped him to become the world's most widely-celebrated artist.

I have had my own share of luck in life so far. To have been born white and male confers on me many privileges. To have been born in the United States of America has been an advantage for me. To have been born after penicillin is lucky.

If I have had any disadvantages, they would be related to socioeconomic class. I grew up in rural Pennsylvania, about 40 minutes north of Pittsburgh. Farm country. Or Trump country, as it is called now. I am the son of a steel worker. During college, in between semesters—summers and winters—I

worked in the mill with my father. He wanted me to know what it was like to work in the world without a college education. I learned a lot in this regard. I learned about the sacrifices he made for our family. He worked long hours for modest pay in dangerous and dirty conditions, essentially trading life expectancy for a paycheck, because his body absorbed a considerable amount of nickel and cadmium over his 30-year tenure in the mill. “So,” my father said to me, “it’s either the mill or college—you pick.” I chose education. And I pursued it with the ethic of a blue-collar worker, because I knew there was no safety net. So perhaps even being born of modest means was lucky.

I went to Westminster for college, Princeton for seminary, and Rice for graduate school. In terms of where to study, I had a key choice at a critical juncture. For seminary, I was accepted at both Princeton and Harvard, and I chose Princeton so that I could work with Donald Capps. Jeffrey Kripal, who was my professor at Westminster, influenced this decision; he is the one who told me about Capps. This was a lucky tip I received from Kripal. Capps and I wrote three books together, as well as a dozen articles. Kripal also introduced me to William Parsons, who became my dissertation advisor, and to Thomas Cole, who opened the door for me to medical education. Parsons and Cole continue to be great mentors to and supporters of me. To make it in academia, you

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need advocates—your whole life. (As an aside, the promotion process at McGovern Medical School, where I teach, requires 17 letters of recommendation.) I'm lucky to have met Kripal, Parsons, and Cole.

I'd like to share something that I learned from Capps. This is a piece of advice is directed to students, especially graduate students, who read this newsletter. The something that I would like to share is a suggestion: be generous. And, by generosity, I am not speaking about money. Rather, as you rise in rank and influence, be generous with your time, with your support.

While success in all fields probably requires some degree of healthy narcissism, academia is probably especially narcissistic, and often not in a healthy way. To reign in our narcissism, we should remember that, while we have worked very hard to get where we are, most or all of us have been lucky as well. To reign in our narcissism, we should do what we can to make the lives of others easier. Do more than your fair share. Be there for others when they need you. Pull others up.

That is what Capps did with me. Indeed, we began writing together while I was doing a master's degree. And Capps worked fast. He published over 50 books during his life. In order to keep up with him, I had to put everything else on hold and work as fast as I could so that I could contribute to an article—otherwise he would have written the whole thing. (And this was when he was in his 70s, easily his most prolific period!) Capps died in a car accident on August 26, 2015, at the age of 76. In a memorial tribute about his life, a doctoral student at Princeton Seminary had this to say: "I just loved the man and who he was. He had the most . . . kind and caring spirit. . . . [and he] gave more to me than he took." He gave more than he took. That was my experience of Capps, too. I am lucky to have known him. My wish for you—and for me—is that we strive to become persons about whom others feel as though they are lucky to have known us, because we gave more than we took. Finally, I'm deeply grateful to have received the Alumni Flame Award from the Department of Religion at Rice University. My years at Rice were magical. I wouldn't trade them for anything. I'm lucky to be an Owl.



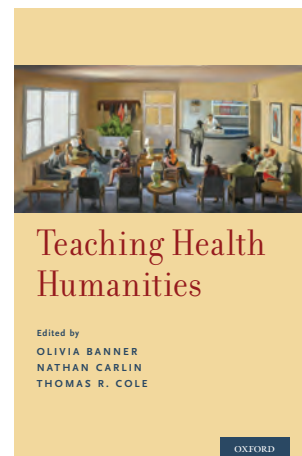
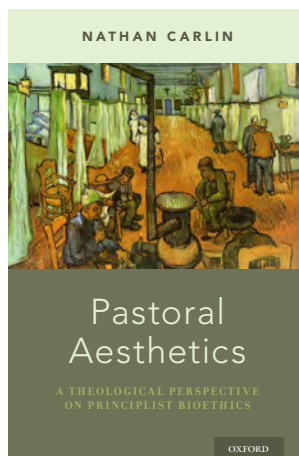
CONGRATULATIONS

Congratulations to **Grant Adamson** (PhD graduate 2014), a graduate from our department that has been a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Arizona for the past two years. He has just been promoted to Lecturer and will be teaching traditional courses for the Religious Studies department, as well as helping to launch a new religious studies minor for Arizona Online. He will be responsible for teaching Introduction to the New Testament, Christianity in the Greco-Roman World, Christian Literature and Thought, Christianity and Art, and Abrahamic Religions.

Congratulations to **Erin Prophet** (PhD graduate 2018) who has sent us the good news that she has accepted the offer from the University of Florida to be a Visiting Assistant Professor again next year. She writes about the fabulous time she had this year, and looks forward to continuing to teach for them in the coming academic year.



Congratulations to **Nathan Carlin** (PhD graduate 2009) who, during the past two years, was awarded tenure at McGovern Medical School, and also an endowed chair (title below). In the spring, he'll have two books published, both with Oxford. The book covers are on the right. His wife (Keatan King) and him also welcomed their first child, Cohen May Carlin. On the left is a picture of her at brunch.



Jason Jeffries (PhD graduate 2017) has accepted an offer for a tenure-track position at University of Denver as Assistant Professor of Religion in the Americas. He will be joining them in September, at the beginning of the Fall semester. Jason also said how grateful he is for the support that he received from various members of the faculty in the Department of Religion. He writes, "My success with University of Denver would not have been possible without it." We are honored Jason, but you made this happen!

We have the pleasure of sharing good news about **Michael (Goat) Domeracki** (PhD graduate 2016), a graduate alum in Religion. Starting May 1, he will be the Assistant Director for Outreach Programs at the Shelton Leadership Center of North Carolina State University. He will be overseeing their campus and community engagement initiatives, developing and running programs, as well as teaching classes. He is very enthused about this opportunity, as are we.

It is with great pleasure that we inform you that **Itohan Mercy** (PhD graduate 2018) has just been appointed Assistant Professor of Religion at Gonzaga University. She will start her new position in the Fall.

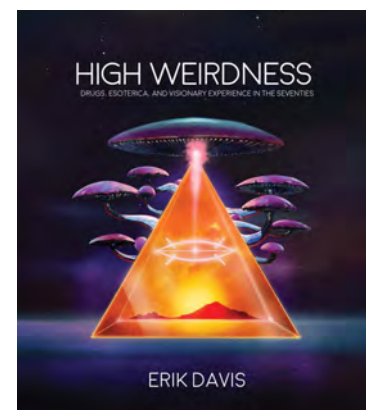
Congratulations to **Minji Lee** (PhD graduate 2018) who has just been named a Visiting Scholar in residence in the Medical Humanities at UTMB (in Galveston). Her thesis was on Hildegard von Bingen's theology and medical theory as it pertains to women's reproductive bodies. Minji says that her work in the department and exposure to feminist approaches, comparative study, and knowledge of pre-modern and modern religious phenomena helped her widen her research scope in her application to UTMB. She is interested in understanding how the sexual reproductive bodies of women are religiously framed in the medieval European medical theory and modern Korean folk medicine discourse about mugwort. In addition to her research, she will be lecturing to students who are studying medical humanities.



A hearty congratulations to **Daniel Brubaker** (PhD graduate 2014) who has published his book *Corrections in Early Quran Manuscripts: Twenty Examples*. Daniel surveyed over 10,000 pages of early Quran manuscripts and located thousands of corrections, some (but not all) related to scribal error. His book is accessible to non-specialists, covering a selection of corrections and their relationship to a modern standard edition of the Quran.

Congratulations to **Dustin Atlas** (PhD graduate 2013) who has just been appointed as Co-ordinator of Jewish Studies and Assistant Professor in Contemporary Jewish Religion and Globalized Identities at Queen's University's School of Religion. His work brings together Jewish thinkers and contemporary issues such as relationships between humans and non-humans, ecology, and postcolonial identities, showing how Judaism in the present is responding to globalized world views. Most recently he has been Assistant Professor in Religious Studies at University of Dayton where he has overseen and taught in the Jewish Studies program. He has already published a number of articles and chapters and his book manuscript, *Buber Talks: Jewish Dialogue and the Nonhuman World* is nearing completion.

Congratulations to **Erik Davis** (PhD graduate 2015) for publishing his brand new book *High Weirdness: Drugs, Esoterica, and Visionary Experience in the Seventies* (MIT Press). This is a much-expanded and rewritten version of his dissertation on Philip K. Dick. It is a study of the spiritual provocations found in the work of Philip K. Dick, but also Terence McKenna, and Robert Anton Wilson. His book charts the emergence of a new psychedelic spirituality that arose from the American counterculture of the 1970s. He examines how their writings reflect as well as shape the seismic cultural shifts that were taking place in America at that time. Erik examines both published and unpublished writings of these radical thinkers as he presents a new theory of the weird and argues that it is a viable mode for a renewed engagement with reality. Congratulations again to Erik on an outstanding intellectual achievement (and a really beautiful book -very lush illustrations!).



Alumni,

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

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

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

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