NEWS FROM THE ARONOV CHAIR

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REPORT FROM WASHINGTON
DR. STEVEN L. JACOBS
AARON ARONOV ENDOWED CHAIR OF JUDAIC STUDIES

From the 13th to the 17th of January, 2003, I was privileged to attend the Winter Seminar at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, for Professors Teaching Holocaust-related courses in the areas of “Theology, Ethics, and Religion.” Sixteen of us were selected from throughout the United States from both public and private institutions to participate in this five-day learning experience hosted by the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the Museum. Our Seminar Leaders were Professor Dr. John T. Pawlikowski of the Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, IL, and Professor Stephen Haynes of Rhodes College, Memphis, TN, both of whom have written extensively on the Holocaust from the academic perspectives of religious and theological studies.

On the first day, our primary topic was “The History of Anti-Judaism and Antisemitism,” led by Dr. Pawlikowski. We examined and debated how historically-evolved, foundational ideas (both religious and secular, including the New Testament text) upon which Hitler and the Nazis and their allies were able to draw in their attempt to annihilate the Jews of Europe. Discussion then centered on the present-day (reality) of these ideas and what, if anything, could be done to combat their persistence. We were also introduced rather thoroughly to the resources of the Museum which could aid us in our work as scholars, especially the library as well as the document and photo archive collections. We also learned of the work of the Committee on Church Relations and the role of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies.

On the second day, our morning session was devoted to an historical discussion “Churches and the Holocaust (both Catholic and Protestant) 1933-1945,” which included a lengthy discussion of the complicated role of Pope Pius XII during this period. In the afternoon, we participated in a discussion entitled “Pedagogical Issues Related to Student Religious Sensitivities,” which was all the more fascinating because our respective academic disciplines included religious studies, criminal justice, history, political science, philosophy, theology, sociology, and law. In addition, some of us have been teaching courses in the Holocaust for many years, whereas others were preparing to teach their first courses in this difficult material. Thus, resources from our various disciplines and experiences gained in the classroom were shared throughout the week; recommended books, articles, video materials, etc. were continuously announced.

On the third day, our discussion redirected itself to “The Holocaust and Contemporary General Ethics” and addressed the kinds of ethical dilemmas which the Holocaust presents and how these could best be addressed within the classroom context. The topics covered not only issues of life and death in a general sense, but questions of euthanasia and eugenics, war and peace, personal and collective behavior, and the like.

Because each of us was asked to supply one or more of our course syllabi, our afternoon session was a “Discussion of Course Syllabi.” The cross-discipline fertilization was a genuine plus, as each of us felt we could draw upon these materials because the study of the Holocaust itself is, by definition, cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary.

Continued on Page 3
Many things have been happening lately in the Department of Religious Studies. A number of these are due to Professor Jacobs’s successful efforts to breathe new life into our Department’s course offerings in the history of Judaism. Through the Department’s Aaron Aronov Endowment for Judaic Studies, we are able to offer undergraduate courses and sponsor a variety of public programming events (some of which are described in this issue of our newsletter) that benefit not only our students but all those who are members of the wider university community.

But, as Chair of the Department, I’d also like to take this opportunity to inform you about some of the other good things that are also taking place. For example, this Fall was an extremely productive time for all of our faculty; apart from Professor Jacobs’s publishing a book of his own as well as a co-edited collection of essays, Professor Ted Trost (a scholar of religion in the U.S.) and Professor Catherine Roach (a scholar of religion and science as well as ethics and environmental studies) have each published their first books (with Harvard University Press and the University of Indiana Press, respectively). Professor Kurtis Schaeffer, who studies the history of medieval Tibetan Buddhism, was selected as one of fifteen recipients of the Charles A. Ryskamp Fellowship—a nationally recognized award that provides him with the resources to devote himself exclusively to his research for a year. We’re pleased that Dr. Jim Apple is able to join us to teach courses in the history of religion in Asia, in Schaeffer’s absence. And our newest full-time faculty member, Professor Tim Murphy (Ph.D. from the University of California at Santa Cruz, see below), joined us last August, teaching courses on modern European and North American religious thought.

Due to the long-predicted demographic shift within the ranks of U.S. university professors (with the baby boomers’ own teachers now reaching the age of retirement), we are an example of a completely reinvented Department whose faculty members all arrived in Tuscaloosa over only the past few years (in fact, Professors Trost and Roach have served the longest, arriving in 1998). So we are busy inventing traditions of our own, one of which is this newsletter. We hope that you find it informative and that you agree with us in thinking that the publicly-funded, academic study of the history and interactions among the world’s many religions is an important component of any university education.

On August 1st, Dr. Tim Murphy, formerly of Case-Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH, joined the Department of Religious Studies as Assistant Professor of Religion. Tim has a Ph.D. from the University of California at Santa Cruz. His research and publication areas are several, including the philosophy of religion, Native American religions, the history of the study of religion, theories of religion and postmodern cultural theory. He has taught at five different universities in different parts of the U.S. where he has either been nominated for, or awarded, several teaching awards. He has over thirty publications in the U.S., U.K. and Europe. His first book, Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion, which came out last Fall, is published by SUNY Press.

Please visit our web site for additional information on Religious Studies and our upcoming events at www.as.ua.edu/rel
VOICES OF OUR STUDENTS

“The minor in Judaic Studies combines historical knowledge with contemporary understanding of what it means to be a Jew in today’s world. It is, most definitely an interesting course of study!”

—Chris Anders
Religious Studies Major
Judaic Studies Minor

“The classes I have taken in Judaic Studies have been very interesting. The issues that were discussed were extremely thought-provoking and I would recommend these classes to other people. I enjoyed my classes so much I wish I could take more.”

—Greta Pesses
Education Major

“Judaic Studies at the University of Alabama is a program that engages students in thought-provoking discussions and lectures that cover a wide range of topics from the religious to the political aspects of Jewish life both historically and contemporarily.”

—Jeff Brown
Anthropology Major

“When you enter a Judaic Studies class, you go in thinking you already know about a topic, especially if you’ve been raised in a religious environment. But the truth is there is so much you will never learn in a [church] setting. If someone is interested in taking an objective, scholarly look at Judaism, this program is the place to go!”

—Lauren Spraberry
Psychology Major

“The Judaic Studies courses I have taken have enabled me to examine the world more objectively. They have helped me better understand the numerous conflicts throughout time that have occurred in the name of religion and to better understand the religious conflicts that plague our society today.”

—Stephen Hudson
History Major

Report from Washington, Cont’d—

Our next day began with “Debates (!) on the Actions of Religious Figures During the Holocaust,” focusing primarily on the German Lutheran clergyperson Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who participated with others in the plot to assassinate Hitler toward the end of the war and paid the ultimate price. In this context, some of his writings were examined as well as the continuing controversy about whether or not to accord him status as a “Righteous Gentile” by Yad Vashem in Israel.

Later that same day, we were addressed by Belgian Holocaust survivor Flora Singer whose life in hiding was the result of the clandestine work of Roman Catholic Father Bruno Reyners. Her story was truly unusual as was her informing us of her relationship with Anne Frank. In the evening, we attended the lecture of Professor Steven Zipperstein of Stanford University, CA, who is a Senior Scholar in Residence at the Museum, entitled “Historical Reflections on Contemporary Antisemitism.” In light of our work during the week, his presentation was a fitting conclusion to a strenuous and intense intellectual journey.

On Friday, our final morning session was devoted to an “Open Discussion on Seminar Issues,” and was an attempt to address any topics that we, as a group, felt did not receive a full hearing during the week. Significantly, we returned to our original discussion of those foundational ideas which led to the Holocaust: textual, political, social, etc.

Throughout the week of the Seminar, we were also addressed by various members of the staff of the Museum, not only the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, but scholars, both doctoral and professorial, doing research at the Museum. Coming from all over the world (e.g., Israel, Italy, the Ukraine, England, France, etc.), they reminded all of us how very much more there is still to be done in this important and significant work.

Lastly, a word about the participants: All of us, as noted, were from a variety of disciplines and institutional settings: thus, our orientation to this material was somewhat different. (For instance, one of our colleagues was a Jesuit priest from Rwanda studying for his doctorate in Social Ethics at Boston University, who shared insights with us all during the week based upon his own experiences as well as that of his family in that horrendous genocide.

Another, a Seventh Day Adventist Professor of History and Theology at Andrews University, MI, originally from Serbia also enlarged our conversations based on his own experiences.) The commitment to the material, however, created an instant bond among the scholars present. Because we, as a group, very much want to continue our conversations and network with each other, drawing upon our strengths, the Museum is now committed to exploring setting up communications for us over the Internet.

Because I am teaching this semester, courses in both the Holocaust and Genocide, this week at the Museum was particularly valuable. I am finding I am already reflecting differently on the material I am presenting to my students and re-thinking many of the assumptions with which I began this work. The generosity of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, and the Aronov Endowment, have, therefore, had an impact on our students here in Tuscaloosa.

The Aronov Lecture

Professor Martin Jaffee’s Fall 2002 public lecture inaugurated what the Department hopes to be an annual event: the “Aronov Lecture.” Distinguished from the various speakers whom we fund through our Aronov Endowment so that they can guest lecture on our campus throughout the year, the newly instituted “Aronov Lecture” will be delivered by a nationally recognized scholar capable of stepping back from the many area specialties that comprise our field, thereby exploring the wider relevance of the academic study of religion to the mission of the public university. With this general theme in mind, Prof. Jaffee’s lecture could not have been a more appropriate start for what promises to be an important contribution to the life of the Department and the University. In fact, Prof. Jaffee’s lecture has already had an impact beyond its initial delivery; as a group, the faculty of the Department of Religious Studies are currently writing replies to his lecture. Along with the text of Jaffee’s original talk, the papers will be submitted later this year to the field’s leading academic journal, hopefully for publication in the near future. We hope that you’ll look for announcements of our next Aronov Lecturer. Regarding the Fall 2002 inaugural lecture, the Department is indebted to Dr. Robert and Geri Stone, of Tuscaloosa, for helping us to host Prof. Jaffee.
Highlights of the Aronov Chair

This has been a busy and productive year for Prof. Jacobs, the highlights of which are as follows:

BOOKS


ARTICLES


BOOK REVIEWS


CONFERENCES AND PRESENTATIONS

- 1 November 2001: “Reading the New Testament Jewishly,” College of Continuing Education at The University of Alabama
- 20 January 2002: “Reading the New Testament Jewishly,” First Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa, AL
- 28 February–2 March 2002: “KLM 84338: The Writings of Orthodox Rabbi and Shoah Survivor Isaac C. Avigdor” at the Fifth Bi-Annual Holocaust Studies Conference, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN.
- 2–5 March 2002: “Interfaith Dialogue on Biblical Texts” at the 32nd Annual Scholars’ Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches, Kean University, Union, NJ.

The Aronov Speaker Series

On March 10, 2003, Professor Lawrence Powell, Tulane University, and Ms. Anne Levy, both of New Orleans, LA, were on campus for a joint presentation. Ms. Levy is the subject of Dr. Powell’s recent book Troubled Memory: Anne Levy, the Holocaust and David Duke’s Louisiana (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Ms. Levy, a Holocaust survivor, refused to tolerate David Duke’s ongoing campaign of anti-Semitism and chose to speak out. She and Dr. Powell shared this dramatic story with us.

Our Department’s minor in Judaic Studies could not continue to grow without the ongoing support of members of the local community, both state-wide and nationally. We, therefore, gratefully acknowledge the following persons for their recent financial support of the Aronov Endowment.

Ms. Ruth Jacobs-Arrill
Scottsdale, AZ
Mr. Raymond Cohen
Pike Road, AL
Dr. Robert Kreisberg
Fairhope, AL
Dr. & Mrs. Art Siegel
Opelika, AL

Additional thanks to Anna Singer, Tuscaloosa, AL, for donating a complete set of the issues of Tikkun: A Bimonthly Critique of Politics, Culture, and Society and to Mr. and Mrs. Kenn Sokol of Mobile, AL, for donating a large collection of books and videotapes dealing specifically with the Holocaust.

VERY SPECIAL THANKS TO VERY SPECIAL PEOPLE!

Religious Studies is a part of the university curriculum that usually does not receive much focus or support. Some professors are hoping that students will change their outlook on a religious studies major.

—Kathleen Penton, campus life editor
Religious Studies Pedagogy and the Skeptical Mission of the Public University,” he imagined that he would be speaking with the governor of Alabama instead of approximately 50 students.

“What I wanted the governor and the president of the university to hear is how crucial religious studies is to the humanities in general,” he said. He argued that critical studies of religion sweep into their subject matter the entire history and structure of human cultures.

“Religion offers an angle of vision upon the world that discloses something we ignore to our own impoverishment,” Jaffee added.

Jaffee used himself as an example in relating that the study of religion is crucial in teaching people how to think in critical ways about the nature of their value systems and most comprehensive social and political commitments.

“I think the academic study of religion is crucial to being an informed citizen,” he said in a follow-up interview. “And state universities have a big stake in producing informed citizens.”

Jaffee acknowledged that getting through the red tape to obtain increased funding is a complex process, and it is different in each state. But essentially, the burden of proof lies within the framework of the university itself, where every subject taught thinks of itself as the most crucial.

“Department chairs have to convince deans of liberal arts that religious studies is crucial,” he said. “Then the deans have to convince the provost, then the provost or some other lobbying agency has to influence the legislature.”

In Alabama, the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, which maintains the statutory responsibility for the overall statewide planning and coordination of higher education in the state, sets a minimum bar for all units in higher education, based on the number of graduates produced each year. The university’s religious studies department is one of many on campus aiming to surpass the ACHE minimum, thereby ensuring the long-term health of the study of religion at UA.

“Recruiting majors is a very important issue for us,” department chair Russell McCutcheon said. Unlike a major such as journalism, which is linked to a career such as reporter or editor by the credentials earned at the university, the academic study of religion is not linked to a specific profession, other than being a professor of religious studies, making it difficult to recruit students. As to whether increased funding would lead to increased student enrollment, McCutcheon said he is not sure. He acknowledged that more funding would pay for more professors and allow the department to offer a greater variety of classes and classes with smaller enrollment. He added that all of those perks would be wonderful, but he is still not sure more funding would help the department debunk the popular assumption of most students that someone goes to the university to get trained for a major-specific profession. “[W]e would be naïve to think that we can go to school simply to pursue the disinterested study of deep ideas, since, sooner or later, we’ll have to feed and clothe ourselves in some manner,” McCutcheon said. But forgoing basic human needs after graduation is not what religious studies programs are asking students to do. He noted that similar to other studies in the humanities, the study of religion provides the “self-motivated student” with a set of skills that they can market almost anywhere.

Operating under the assumption that a religious studies department in a publicly funded university is eligible for the same funding as other fields in the humanities, McCutcheon said that funding is determined by many criteria.

“Does the program bring in majors? Does the program serve the needs of other units by offering such things as general education or core curriculum courses? Does the unit bring in external funding? In other words, as in any other institution, one does not invest resources for no good reason,” McCutcheon said.

In fact, the majority of the university’s religious studies majors do not enter the university with this subject as their intended major. Instead, they come to the department after they have been at the university for a year or more and have become disillusioned with a more common major, such as business. The story generally follows a pattern of happenstance involving one of the core courses of religious studies taken to satisfy a humanities requirement and students finding themselves curious and intellectually stimulated.

The challenge is spinning a creative reason why the academic study of religion is something other than the confessional study of the phenomenon of religion.

The other avenue for pursuing funding that both Jaffee and McCutcheon allude to is donations in the form of endowments for the teaching of certain subjects. The university has already received financial backing for one part of its religious studies department with the Aaron Aronov Endowment for Judaic Studies.

Depending on the type of funding received, Jaffee outlined three options for its allocation. The first would be to establish new faculty positions independent of the state budget. This is what a “chair” usually is. Second would be to hire temporary replacement faculty so that tenure-track faculty can take time off to write and perform extended research. The final option would be to provide scholarships to students to encourage interest in the field.

Jaffee said that his impression of the university’s religious studies department was that it had “good resources in Jewish studies” but needed help in other areas.

“We are moving on all of these fronts, just slowly and wisely choosing where to put our energy,” McCutcheon said.

Jaffee’s lecture was presented as a part of the Aronov Lecture Series, an annual event sponsored by the department of religious studies and the Aaron Aronov Endowment for Judaic Studies. The series presents issues in the study of religion of broad relevance to the university community. More information can be obtained at the department’s website, www.as.ua.edu/rel/ or at (205)348-5271.

This story was written by Kathleen Penton, kat709@yahoo.com, and was edited by Elizabeth Mummert, email address is: mumme002@bama.edu.

Kathleen Penton is a major in both journalism and religious studies. Her article originally appeared in Dateline Alabama (www.dateline-alabama.com), and is reprinted here with permission.

Recently published book

Samuel Totten, Professor at University of Arkansas and Steven L. Jacobs, Professor at University of Alabama.
A Very Special Offer

The Department of Religious Studies is pleased to make available, free of charge, two of Dr. Jacobs’s books as well as a recent (2002) article entitled “Genesis of the Concept of Genocide According to Its Author from the Original Sources” (*Human Rights Review*, 3[2]:98-103). The two books are *Shirot Bialik: A New and Annotated Translation of Chaim Nachman Bialik’s Epic Poems* and *The Meaning of Persons and Things Jewish: Contemporary Interpretations & Explorations*. Please select which book you prefer on the form below and return the form to the address below:

Aaron Aronov Endowed Chair of Judaic Studies/Department of Religious Studies/The University of Alabama/Box 870264/Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0264.

YES, PLEASE SEND THE FOLLOWING:

___ “Genesis of the Concept of Genocide According to Its Author from the Original Sources” (article)

___ *Shirot Bialik: A New and Annotated Translation of Chaim Nachman Bialik’s Epic Poems* (book), OR

___ *The Meaning of Persons and Things Jewish: Contemporary Interpretations & Explorations* (book)

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