ENCOUNTERING SAINT PAUL IN MALTA
by David Woodington

Last spring, I had the fortune of studying abroad in Malta, a tiny island south of Italy in the Mediterranean. While I enjoyed the trip for a wide variety of reasons, one of the more intriguing aspects of my time in Malta was the local religion. The island is predominantly Catholic, and life on the island reflects this. Beautiful cathedrals are separated by only a couple of blocks, and classes at the university were often taught by Catholic priests and monks. Within the Catholic culture of the island, one figure dominated local interest: Paul. During our time in Malta, I saw statues and churches dedicated to him, and in general he was ubiquitous. At first, I was a bit perplexed as to why the Maltese regarded Paul so highly, but I eventually found out why. In chapters 27 and 28 of the Book of Acts in the New Testament, Paul journeys toward Rome when a storm shipwrecks his vessel and lands him on Malta. The Maltese take pride in Paul’s visit to the island, and as such he is a highly influential figure on the island.

I got my first taste of Paul’s role in Malta during my first couple of weeks on the island. While visiting the Maltese capital of Valletta, my traveling companions and I encountered a festival that was already in progress. There were colorful banners strewn across the city, and several windows and porches had religious monuments and altars on them. There was even confetti on the ground in some areas. Intrigued, we tried to find the source of the excitement. Eventually, we discovered that there was a parade, and locals were carrying many plastic statues of religious figures, including several of Paul himself. After enjoying the celebration, we found out that the festival was for the Feast of St. Paul’s Shipwreck, a celebration commemorating the event mentioned in Acts 27-28. It was an exciting time and an indelible memory, particularly since we joined right in the middle of the festival by chance.

Out of the numerous churches and cathedrals on the island, several were dedicated to Paul. Two of them in particular stand out from my time in Malta. The first was a smaller local church called St. Paul’s Shipwreck Church. While wandering around the small streets of Valletta, one of my friends saw a wood sign with painted letters that had the name of the church on it. Beyond the sign, there was nothing more than a small door and a nondescript façade, but we decided to go inside. We opened the door and were simply amazed by what we saw. Inside were cases that contained ornate Eucharist vessels, clerical robes, and some papal documents. This little local church had an astounding collection of religious artifacts on display for all to see. Finding these things in a random church tucked away in a small street was quite a surprise. On the other end of the spectrum was St. Paul’s Cathedral, undoubtedly the largest and most venerated cathedral on the island. It was a huge building, and its inside was simply stunning. Murals decorated the ceiling, stones on the floor depicted elaborate religious scenes, beautiful tapestries covered the walls, and stunning statues and altars were spread throughout the building. It was an impressive sight to behold.

My favorite discovery on Malta related to Paul was St. Paul’s Grotto. An underground passage next to St. Paul’s Cathedral led to the grotto, and it was at this spot that Paul allegedly stayed during his time in Malta. A guide walked us through the passage and to the exact room where Paul is said to have dwelled. The room is essentially a cave, and there is a statue of Paul erected in it. Along with the statue, there was a plaque commemorating a visit to the site by Pope John Paul II in 1990. Furthermore, during my time in Malta Pope Benedict came to the island as well, and he specifically visited the grotto to pray in it. Regardless of whether or not Paul actually stayed in the grotto, I found the history of the spot and its respected place within Catholicism fascinating. Overall, my experience with the religious life on Malta and the importance of Paul on the island was captivating; it is one that I will not soon forget.

David Woodington has been the recipient of a Silverstein Scholarship for each of his four years as a Religious Studies major.

Photos clockwise from upper left:
1: sign for St. Paul’s Shipwreck Church
2: inside of St. Paul’s Cathedral
3: St. Paul’s Grotto (with statue of Paul and plaque commemorating Pope John Paul II’s visit)
4: statue of Paul decorated for the Festival of St. Paul’s Shipwreck
Greetings, Friends of the Religious Studies Department at the University of Alabama!

IN THIS EDITION
This edition of the newsletter contains articles that focus on the activities of our alumni, students, staff, and faculty during the 2010-11 academic year. Thanks to all who contributed to this newsletter, and in particular: to Donna Martin for newsletter design; and to Markus Harris, Christopher Johnson, Alyssa Lennox, Chesley Peed, Chris Scott, and David Woodington for their articles.

AWARDS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS
The Department is fortunate to be able to provide a number of learning and scholarship opportunities for our majors and minors. The Silverstein Scholarship is named after the late Dr. Joseph Silverstein who earned his B.A. (’30) and his M.A. (’32) from the University of Alabama. Each year, students who have excelled academically receive one of these monetary awards. The Amy Lynn Petersen Endowed Support Fund is dedicated to providing a gift of one book for each student in the Capstone seminar. This REL 490 course is required of all majors and minors and is offered each spring semester. The fund was established in memory of Amy Lynn Petersen, a Religious Studies minor who died unexpectedly in October of 2003. This year, under Dr. Ramey’s direction, each student received a copy of the book Critical Terms for Religious Studies, edited by Mark C. Taylor. The Department also features the Aaron Aronov Lecture in the Study of Religion, which entered its ninth year in 2010-2011. The aim of this annual lecture series is to introduce to the University of Alabama community a nationally recognized scholar of religion who is capable of reflecting on issues of wide relevance to scholars from across the humanities and social sciences. Our ninth annual lecturer is Aaron W. Hughes, Gordon and Gretchen Gross Professor of Jewish Studies at the State University of New York, Buffalo. Scheduled to appear in February 2012 for the tenth annual lecture is Ann Pellegrini, the Director of the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality and Associate Professor of Performance Studies and Religious Studies at New York University. More information about our scholarship recipients and our lecturers is available in this Newsletter and at the Department’s website: http://religion.ua.edu/. Those so inclined will also find on our website information about how to contribute financially to these on-going academic endeavors.

ALUMNI CONNECTIONS
In addition to the website, we invite all alumni and friends of the department to keep connected with us through two pages on Facebook: “Religious Studies Student Association” and “Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama.” For those of you who are in the area: please watch the calendar on our website for activities that may be of interest to you in the coming years.

On behalf of the Department, I offer you best wishes and kind regards,

Theodore Trost
Chair, Religious Studies Department

ADVENTURES IN ATLANTA
by Alyssa Lennox

The 2010 regional conference of the American Academy of Religion—represented within the Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion (SECSOR)—was held in Atlanta during the month of March. It made for a most pleasurable and enlightening experience. I attended the conference as a bright-eyed freshman in the hopes that I would be dazzled by the brilliance of religious studies scholars from afar. I was indeed dazzled. With panels ranging from insider identities and discourses to Mormon prairie dress, I reverted to “kid-in-a-candy-shop” mentality. I became a madwoman. One panel in particular really caught my attention. The panelists discussed why various tombs recently discovered in the Middle East could not be the tomb of the historical Jesus. After the panel, my brain was wracked with questions. Who was the historical Jesus? Is the “historical Jesus” a man, or rather an institution—a representation, so to speak, of the beliefs of a particular group of people? These are questions for which I hope to find answers as I continue my studies.

I quickly learned that the AAR conference was definitely the place to be if you were a cool cat involved with religious studies. Rushing from panel to panel was the high-light of my first year of college: not only did I come away from the conference feeling intelligent and enlightened, I also gained new perspectives, affirmed some current convictions (like my love for functionalism and for Freud and the gang), and made friends with people I never would have known otherwise. As an amateur scholar of religious studies, my informed opinion of the AAR conference is this: it was and is most excellent.

Alyssa Lennox was a recent Silverstein Fellow and worked as an assistant in Dr. Merinda Simmons’ Introduction to Religious Studies class.

ADDITIONAL NOTES: Based on the success of last year’s trip to SECSOR, a department-sponsored trip to the conference was again scheduled for March 2011. Attending this year’s conference, taking place this time around in Louisville, Kentucky, were four Religious Studies majors: Andie Alexander, Charley Irons, Colin McElvenny, and Brett Saunders. We congratulate these students and look forward to recording their impressions of the event in a future edition of the Newsletter. We also congratulate Dr. Steven Ramey, who serves as Vice President of the Southeast Region of the American Academy of Religion during the 2011 term; his term as President will begin in March 2012.

SILVERSTEIN SCHOLARS
The following students have been recognized by the faculty as Silverstein Scholars for the academic year 2010-11. Silverstein Scholars receive a financial award and their names join those of previous recipients on a plaque that is displayed prominently in the student lounge.

Andie Alexander
Jason Crouch
Hannah Ethicon
Samuel Fore
Mary Kate Hinton
Quintus Langstaff
Colin McElvenny
Susanna Payton
Chesley Peed
Jacob Porter
Michael Proaps
Christopher Scott
Ashley Smith
David Woodington

Outstanding Student Award

In addition to being honored as a Silverstein Scholar, Christopher Scott is the recipient of this year’s Outstanding Student in the Study of Religion Award.
A VISIT TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM
by Markus Harris

The Religious Studies Department is committed to expanding the intellectual capacities of its students through rich and diverse classes and also by offering field trips. I had the opportunity to participate in one of these exciting excursions last semester. On a sunny Saturday morning in November, eight of us gathered into two vehicles and made our way to Birmingham to visit the Civil Rights Museum. Now I must admit, being an African American native of Alabama and having traveled to and through Birmingham, I never once stopped to visit this place that teaches so much about the importance of the civil rights movement. As a developing scholar nearing the end of his undergraduate tenure, I felt obliged to actively engage this opportunity.

This journey to the “Old South” promised to be interesting. After we arrived in downtown Birmingham and before beginning the museum tour, we decided to visit the park that sits directly in front of the museum and across from the 16th Street Baptist Church. In the park we encountered the first rumblings of the segregation and discrimination that took place not so long ago. Reading about these events barely compares to the immense feelings that were evoked as we passed figures of ferocious dogs with menacing teeth and water cannons aimed directly at onlookers. After observing and honestly, taking a moment to digest what we had observed, we continued into the museum.

Upon entering the museum, we were greeted by one of the many great tour guide-historians who help to maintain the integrity of the museum. We were guided into a small theater where we were privileged to sit and enjoy an eight-minute film that specifically addressed Birmingham’s history and growth. After the viewing, the tour started. Wow, there were so many objects and replicas of a torn and tattered history, from Fred Shuttlesworth to Bull Connor, from both sides of the conflict. My biggest emotional response was evoked when we came to one of the buses that had been bombed during the Freedom Rides.

The significance of a trip like this is realized when participants begin to engage and act upon new ideas. During my encounter with the museum, I knew that it was my duty to carry on these legacies, not only as an African American but also as a scholar who will bring these issues before students in classrooms in the near future. Beyond this academic responsibility, there is also a civic duty to keep this legacy alive as an actively participating member of society.

Through its sponsorship of events like this one, the Religious Studies Department helps to promote growth and development resulting in, or so one might hope, responsible citizenship.

Markus Harris, an active participant in the RSSA, is a major in African American Studies and a minor in Religious Studies. The Religious Studies Student Association, with the support of a grant from the Student Government Assembly, sponsored a February 2011 field trip to the International Museum of Muslim Cultures in Jackson, Mississippi.

THE COVETED MANLY CUP 2010
by Christopher Johnson

Every April, as the academic year draws to a close, the Religious Studies Department sponsors certain Celebration & Honors Week traditions, none more August than the contest to claim possession of the symbolically complex and universally coveted “Manly Cup.” The prize is named in recognition of Basil Manly, the second president of the University of Alabama, whose most enduring legacy was to lend his name to the beautiful building in which the Religious Studies Department is housed. At this year’s Manly Cup tournament, students and faculty went head-to-head and pin-to-pin at AMF Bama Lanes Bowling Center. The competition was especially intense as several bowlers had been in training both during league games and on late nights with nothing else to do.

Twenty-five contenders from the Department came to play their part in this epic battle that went on for several hours. If the competition had been for costume creativity, the faculty would have won effortlessly with their many custom bowling shirts and floral prints. Prof. Steven Ramey and sons landed on the lanes like a tropical storm in their beach-themed button-ups. “Peaches” (Vaia Touna) and “Babs” (Prof. Merinda Simmons) teamed up to challenge the students’ bowling prowess in elaborately embroidered jerseys that surely meant to intimidate. But, ultimately, all faculty members were overwhelmed by the athleticism of those with the unfair advantage of being under thirty. The last game came down to the wire, when an unsung hero threw a strike or two and toppled the shared faculty dream of going professional.

The true miracle of the evening was that no one was injured in a game consisting of throwing heavy balls while sliding on a waxy floor in shoes with no traction. In a public display of humiliation, the spoils of war were handed over by the faculty to the victorious students at the annual Honors Day ceremony. They took the form of the priceless Manly Cup trophy, which is now proudly displayed in the student lounge. In 2011, the faculty will be ready for a rematch. They have already begun their secret training on the underground practice lanes beneath Manly Hall.
Lectures, Academic Discussions, and Other Odysseys

One characteristic of the Religious Studies Department during the last decade has been a passionate concern for on-going dialogue with scholars from outside of the Department—scholars from other departments at the University, scholars from the Southeast region of the United States, and scholars from other parts of the nation and the world. Here is a report on some of the events that have taken place already during this academic year and events that are planned for the future.

Aronov Lectures 2011: Aaron Hughes

Dr. Aaron Hughes from the University of Buffalo, State University of New York, will be the department’s ninth Aronov Lecturer, visiting campus on March 28-30, 2011. He is currently the Gordon and Gretchen Gross Professor of Jewish Studies in the Department of History at Buffalo as well as the Associate Director of the Institute of Jewish Thought and Heritage. In addition to his ongoing work on Jewish philosophy, he has developed theoretical reflections on the treatment of Islam in the academy, which will be the focus of his lecture at UA, entitled “How to Theorize with a Hammer, or, On the Destruction and Reconstruction of Islamic Studies.” In this talk, he examines both why and how the study of Islam as carried out in departments of Religious Studies has become so apologetic that it has largely ceased to function as an academic discipline, preferring instead to propagate a theological and apologetical representation of the religion. In addition to highlighting some recent egregious examples, his talk concludes by suggesting a theoretical model for reconstructing any future study.

Religion in Culture Lecture 2010: David Bains; Mark McCormick, respondent

On October 18, 2010, Dr. David Bains of Samford University delivered a Religion in Culture Lecture on the topic “National Cathedral to National Gurdwara: Erecting American Religions in Washington, D.C.”

With an impressive array of images, Dr. Bains explored the ways in which the National Cathedral, in particular, and other “national” houses of worship located in the nation’s capital seek to provide a “spiritual home for the nation.” Dr. Mark McCormick, chair of the Religious Studies Department at Stillman College, delivered an insightful response to Dr. Bains lecture with over ninety people in attendance.

Religion in Culture Lecture Series 2011-12

For the up-coming academic year, the Department is planning an impressive series of lectures. Please watch the Department’s website for specific details. People who have tentatively agreed to participate in the Religion in Culture Lecture Series during the 2011-12 academic year include:

Dr. Kurtis Schaefer, Professor of Tibetan Buddhism, University of Virginia
Dr. Aaron Simmons, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Furman University
Dr. Jennifer Shoaff, Assistant Professor Gender Studies, University of Alabama

Theta Alpha Kappa Religious Studies Luncheons

In addition to providing venues for scholars from far away, the Department also fosters scholarship from within. Theta Alpha Kappa, the Religious Studies Honors Society, has sponsored a series of lunchtime discussions this year featuring the research projects of Religious Studies students. This academic year, Theta Alpha Kappa hosted three presentations:

Chris Scott
“John Chrysostom and the Politics of Asceticism” on September 8, 2010

Jason Crouch
“The Gun Pointed At the Head of the Universe: An Examination of ‘Halo CE’ and its Religious Infrastructure” on November 16, 2010

and Daniel Turner
“Gerhard Forde on Humanity against God and God against God” on February 2, 2011

The Greece Initiative at the University of Alabama

As an outgrowth of the Department’s Study Abroad program, the Department is taking part in a collaborative effort to foster closer ties with Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, Greece. In February 2011, Professor Angeliki Ziaka, of Aristotle’s Religion Department, delivered a lecture on “The Muslim Presence in Greece.” On another occasion during her weeklong visit to campus, Dr. Ziaka held a lunchtime discussion with students and faculty of the Department on the topic of religious studies in the Greek university. Other events that constitute the “the Greece Initiative” include: a Greek film festival; a “Greece and Global Culture” symposium featuring faculty from numerous departments in the College and University; and a second visit from an Aristotle faculty member, Dr. Danae Stefanou, from the School of Music. Dr. Stefanou will speak on musical and mixed-media group improvisation in Greece; she will also present a piano and saxophone concert (with Dr. Andrew Dewar, New College) in the Moody Recital Hall during her visit to our campus.

Meanwhile, our particular relationship with Aristotle University will be deepened this May, when the Department undertakes our 3rd annual Interim trip to Greece, led by Professors McCutcheon and Simmons. Ms. Vaia Touma—who taught as an Instructor in our Department during Spring 2010 and who holds two degrees from Aristotle University—will serve as our local coordinator in Thessaloniki.
Religious Studies Student Association
by Chesley Peed

News of the Religious Studies Student Association (RSSA) spread rapidly this fall after a couple brave members dressed up in a gorilla suit for “Get On Board Day” on Woods Quad. With one swooping gesture the group was splashed across the pages of the Crimson White and the Tuscaloosa News. Despite scorching heat, our brave gorilla survived for hours, posing for pictures with anyone who happened to walk by. This method of advertising was extremely successful, as was our annual cookout on the lawn of Woods Quad, which featured rounds of croquet and ladder golf. When we are not sporting gorilla costumes or sandwich boards with clever catch phrases, the RSSA gathers at various local venues once every two-or-so weeks. Arranged mainly through the phenomenon that is Facebook, Little Italy, Sitar, Mellow Mushroom, and Mugshots are just a few of the places that have been graced by our presence. Dinners are always intriguing experiences with good food, even better company, and sparkling conversation.

In the fall of 2010, the RSSA officers and faculty advisor, Dr. Merinda Simmons, were able to obtain funding for several educational events. With a generous grant from the Student Government Association, we have been able to take a field trip to the Birmingham Civil Rights museum. An additional trip to the International Museum of Muslim Culture, located in Jackson, Mississippi, is also under discussion. Plans are in the works for more field trips, and ideas for service projects are being thrown around. Fortunately, the Department is extremely committed to making sure the members of the RSSA are well taken care of. Recently members received uniquely designed water bottles with the department logo: even more incentive to join! As the Department continues to grow, we look forward to the RSSA expanding our membership and participating in even more campus and community activities.

Chesley Peed, a senior in the Religious Studies Department, worked as a Silverstein Fellow in the Department office and is a recipient of the Silverstein Scholarship for 2010-11.

A Journey to Jordan
by Christopher Scott

In 2010, I had the opportunity to spend the summer studying Arabic in Amman, Jordan, with the Department of State’s Critical Language Scholarship Program. Although my background in Middle Eastern Studies was limited, I did not go entirely unprepared. Having studied Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) for two years in Tuscaloosa, I could stumble through basic conversations about my academic interests and complete everyday tasks. I was also prepared with a basic knowledge of Middle Eastern and Islamic culture, thanks to courses with Dr. Ramey, Dr. Jacobs, and Dr. Marouan. With this training and my Arabic dictionary in hand, I finally travelled to the region that I had been studying for two years.

After arriving in Jordan, it quickly became apparent that religion would be an unavoidable topic of conversation. While knowing a little about the frequently cited “five pillars of Islam,” various veiling practices, and Christian communities in the Middle East was certainly helpful, there are some experiences that academic training simply can’t prepare you for. I once wrote an essay for Dr. Ramey on different ideologies concerning the hijab, but this did not prevent me from being completely perplexed upon seeing women wearing the niqab (a veil that basically covers the entire face) while shopping in a clothing store as Rihanna’s “Rude Boy” played in the background. Similarly, when first learning about the ways in which Muslims observe Ramadan, I never imagined that I would find myself light-heartedly accosting a taxi driver for drinking water during the fast after delivering a rousing speech to me on why I should convert to Islam. Neither did I expect to put my knowledge of Christianity in the Middle East to use identifying saints in an Egyptian waiter’s tattoos, which he proudly displayed for the group of Americans that he assumed to be fellow Christians.

Despite the disconnect that often occurs between the academic study of a region and the actual experience of living there, my time in Jordan also included experiences that were very relevant to what I have learned in Religious Studies. The modern history of Jordan is closely tied to that of its neighbors, Palestine and Israel. As Palestinians make up a significant portion of the Jordanian population and many are separated from family members living in the West Bank, Jordan has an important role to play in the ongoing discussions concerning a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. Academic theories concerning identity, displacement, or any other catchphrase from a conference presentation cannot solve these issues in and of themselves. However, the ability to think critically about how people are classified carries real consequence in this situation. The opportunity to have interacted in a wide variety of ways with people whose lives are shaped by Jordanian policy towards Palestinians, from playing cards in a refugee camp to discussing education with graduate students, was influential in my decision to commit myself to continued study of this issue.

Since returning to Alabama, I have applied to several MA programs in Middle Eastern Studies, as well as for a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship in Jordan. Without the opportunities given to me by the faculty and staff of the Department of Religious Studies and the Department of State, I would not have realized the great potential that there is in this field for bringing about positive change outside of academia. At home or abroad, I would strongly encourage other students to seek out new experiences outside of a university setting. The perspective that you will gain will enrich understanding, both academic and otherwise.

The recipient of the Department’s Outstanding Student Award for 2011, Chris Scott will begin a graduate program in Arab Studies this fall at Georgetown University.
**Faculty Updates**

**Steven Jacobs, Associate Professor and Aronov Chair of Judaic Studies**

This academic year, Dr. Jacobs travelled to Miami to present a paper on anti-Semitism as a factor in US-Israel relations at the Scholars for Peace in the Middle East conference (January). He traveled to Chicago to deliver the Annual Shapiro Lecture at the Catholic Theological Union, entitled, “Is Jesus the Christ for All? A Judaic Perspective on Christology.” He delivered a second address at the Chicago Theological Seminary called “Do Jesus and Paul Really Matter Judaically?” He will also be attending the 2nd International Conference on Hate Studies at Gonzaga University in Spokane, where he will speak on “genocidal religion.” Finally, Dr. Jacobs will attend the Western Jewish Studies Association annual meeting in San Diego in April.

In addition to writing four articles and being named Associate Editor of the on-line *Journal for the Study of Anti-Semitism*, he is putting the finishing touches on a book manuscript, *Lemkin on Genocide*.

**Christopher Johnson, Instructor**

Last October, Dr. Johnson attended a symposium on Byzantine chant at Indiana University. In early November, he presented a paper entitled “The Aesthetics of Nonsense: Compositional and Interpretive Creativity in the Meaningless Syllables of Byzantine Chant” at the annual national meeting of the American Academy of Religion. Last fall also saw the publication of his first monograph, *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer: Contesting Contemplation, by Continuum*. As faculty moderator for the local chapter of Theta Alpha Kappa, the national honor society for Religious Studies and Theology, he has built the membership of the society, coordinated several student research presentations and discussions, and renovated the honor society website with the help of Ms. Donna Martin. As of February, he has taken on the task of serving on the national panel of judges for Theta Alpha Kappa’s Albert Clark Award for best graduate paper, which has a prize of $500 and publication in the society’s journal. He has also been active in the Religious Studies Student Association with its faculty advisor, Dr. Merinda Simmons, and has been involved in many of its events. His current research includes a project on the tradition of holy fools and the concept of liminality and an oral history of the lives and parishes of Orthodox Christians in the Southeastern US.

**Russell McCutcheon, Professor**

This year, Prof. Russell McCutcheon has worked in the Dean’s office, in the College of Arts & Sciences, as the Associate Information Officer. Administering e-Tech (the Office of Educational Technology), he has helped the College to meet its technology goals, such as in its many multimedia classrooms, computer labs, web site development, and new online courses. He continues to teach one course a semester in REL and also continues with various writing projects, most notably publishing a review essay in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* and working on a recently contracted book with Oxford University Press (co-written with his colleague William Arnal).

**Tim Murphy, Associate Professor**

During the Spring semester 2011, Dr. Tim Murphy is teaching the course “Religious Existentialism,” an examination of thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Martin Buber, and others. In the Fall, he looks forward to teaching a large-enrollment version of Introduction to Religion as well as a course on Modern Atheism. What is the religious significance of the fact that many of European civilization’s elites are openly, even militantly, atheistic? What do these writers have to say and what is the significance of this rare event in the history of religion?

Dr. Murphy spent the Spring 2010 semester on sabbatical. During that time he worked on his forthcoming book, *“By this Sign You Shall Conquer”: Elements of a Semiotic Theory of Religion*. This book applies a theory of signs to the theoretical analysis of religion as a whole. His latest book, *The Politics of Spirit: Phenomenology, Genealogy, Religion*, was released by State University of New York Press in December of 2010. This book looks at the way the field of Religious Studies has relied upon a concept of consciousness (a.k.a., “Spirit”) that is entangled with many of the ideas and images drawn from the ideological/ideational processes with which Europeans colonized the non-European world. In the politics of Spirit, “spirit” is opposed to “nature” and identified with European-ness (Christian, male, white, etc.). The question, then, is not “what is nature?” but rather “who is nature?” in that scheme.

**Steven Ramey, Associate Professor**

In Spring 2010, Steven Ramey was elected to serve as Vice President-elect of the Southeast region of the American Academy of Religions, which means that he became Vice President at the March 2011 meeting and will serve as President beginning next March. He has also chaired the committee organizing a range of events for the Alabama Greece Initiative in the Spring 2011 semester, which is an effort in the College of Arts and Sciences to explore a possible relationship with Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, Greece, the location of the department’s Greece foreign study (led by Russell McCutcheon and Merinda Simmons this year). Vaia Touna, who taught in the department during Spring 2010, was a graduate student from Aristotle University. He continues his work with other departmental events and the Asian Studies program, as well as continuing to move forward with his next major research project, which applies theoretical reflections on the category religion to the classification of individual religions within academic discourse that implicitly supports specific theological positions and thus ignores the contested nature of the definition of individual religions.

**Merinda Simmons, Assistant Professor**

This year, Dr. Simmons joined the Religious Studies faculty as a tenure-track Assistant Professor. Along with having a great time with the Religious Studies Student Association and learning just how long someone can last in a gorilla suit without passing out, she been doing a little writing...

The proposal for her book manuscript, *Mary Prince and Her Sisters: Gender, Race, Mi-
Theodore Trost, Professor and Chair

Dr Trost is teaching a series of courses focusing on the use of narrative in the construction of religious identities. He presented a paper, “The Pan Am Quipper as Site of Anxiety; or, Negotiating Identity in an Era of Corporate Decline,” at the national Popular Culture Association conference last year. This year at PCA he will present “The Call’s Theo-political Songcraft;” an examination of punk rock group The Call’s use of theological rhetoric to critique Reagan Era politics and policies. He continues to serve as the co-chair of the American Academy of Religion’s Music and Religion Consultation. With David Bains of Samford University (and recent Religion in Culture lecturer) he is co-editing volume three in the Mercersburg Theology Series, Principles of Church History: Selected Writings of Philip Schaff, from Wipf and Stock.

Alumni News

Catherine Howell (2003)

Catherine Howell, from Tuscaloosa, was graduated from the University of Alabama in 2003 with a BA in Religious Studies. A two-time recipient of the Silverstein Scholarship, she went on to pursue a Master’s Degree in Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. Her specific field of study was sexual violence against women in the context of genocide. Currently she is working in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo near the border with Rwanda. Ms. Howell is based at the Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, an institution that specializes in treatment for sexual violence. She sent the following report:

“Last Friday, I made it across the border into the Democratic Republic of Congo with no problems. The border guards in Bukavu even told me I was welcome in Bukavu. Although not completely comforting, it was still a good sign. Last Saturday, I returned to Panzi Hospital (pictured below) for the first time since July and received a big hug from Dr. Mukwege, director of the hospital, who stated he was very happy to welcome me back to Bukavu. On Monday, I was informed by Dr. Mukwege that he would like me to work as his assistant in all matters English and help coordinate the Ushindi project—a community-based program to help empower local communities against sexual violence. This project will also work with women and children to deliver medical, psychosocial, economic, and legal assistance to their villages in a timely manner; if needed, the women and children will be referred to Panzi Hospital for further treatment. Uniquely, this project will also focus on the problem of domestic violence, since civilian rape is currently on the rise.

“So far things have been calm in Bukavu, as we see the UN frequently on our walks around the city (we stay near our apartment and have locals with us). Today we are using the internet at The Orchid Hotel, which is a very nice Hotel in Bukavu that caters to many large NGOs as well as wealthy militia (hence the sign on the door stating no arms allowed in the restaurant). There do not appear to be militia in the hotel today, but many European NGOs are present. In the office, I am working closely with Asa from PMU Interlife—a Swedish NGO that funds many of Panzi Foundation DRC programs.

“The past week in Bukavu has been great: many new assignments and friends; cows in the road; lots of rain and mud; an invitation to a wedding; and I even managed to fit in a Swahili lesson! What will the next week bring? All is well!”

Geoffrey Davidson (2009)

I walked onto the campus of the University of Alabama in August 2005 as a freshman political science major with law school aspirations and a religious studies minor born of a “fired from the hip” decision on my application. Before I knew it, four years, my law school plans and Auburn’s Iron Bowl streak had disappeared into memory. Instead, a hasty minor had transformed into a cherished major and law school became seminary.

Yes, seminary. I am now in my second year at George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University. I suspect that some of you are wondering how the academic study of religion can prepare one for a leading role in practicing religion. Not to fear; I wondered the same myself at first. However, after completing a third of my work towards a Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree, I could not have asked for a better background. As Truett teaches historical rather than systematic theology, exposure at UA to a variety of documents about Christianity, both from insiders and outsiders, gives me a valuable advantage. On a more foundational level, I found Truett’s pedagogy and structure to be just a step away from what I experienced in undergraduate work. We utilize small, discussion-based classes in which you have to know why you believe what you believe (“just because” not being an acceptable answer). Most importantly, the ability to discuss reasonably and disagree calmly with others is a vital yet unfortunately rare attribute in our culture. And I’ll be honest; it is a great deal of fun to show my colleagues from religion-affiliated undergraduate institutions that a certain state school in Tuscaloosa knows how to study religion.

Of late my studies at Baylor have increasingly bent themselves towards the study of Old Testament prophecy. While these texts seem outright confusing apart from their context, they come to life in a fascinating way when read in light of (and often in opposition to) the period monarchs. The marriage between the study of these texts and the relevant historical studies is an important academic path; however, it is not my only reason for being here. Of late my studies at Baylor have increasing interest in the prophetic voices of the 21st century. What will we find if we take more seriously the Bible as living literature? What will the prophets have to say about this place, this country, the world? If I can learn anything from my training here it is the ability to reflect on the Bible in light of (and often in opposition to) the world that surrounds me. For better or worse, the Bible is a product of its time and place, yet it can also speak to our time and place. I believe that the Bible has a future and in order to understand it we must engage it as living literature. That is what I intend to set out to do. Find the living literature of the Bible and let the world see it as we see it. That is why I am here, to learn to read the Bible so that I can read it with others. Thank you.”
This has been an exciting year for the Religious Studies Student Association. After a successful “Get on Board Day” that boasted great crowds, beach balls, and clever sandwich boards (and that was just at the Religious Studies table!), we made plans for a cookout for REL students, faculty, staff, and friends. Nearly a hundred people turned out for food, lawn games, and the chance to meet other people in the department. Many thanks are due to Betty Dickey and Donna Martin for all their help and support. Off the heels of those events, the RSSA has enjoyed record numbers at dinners-out twice a month, and our membership on Facebook has doubled since the summer.

I went to the University of Wyoming and received my M. A. in the American Studies program. During that period a friend and I made our first documentary film and dissects it weekly over the entire semester. I teach an interdisciplinary course called “Documenting Justice,” which is taught over two semesters through the Telecommunication and Film Studies program. If we devoted ourselves exclusively to our relationships with food might change for the better. Because of changes in the industrial process and will be debuting the film nationally on PBS later this year. We were interested in reconnecting with local farmers. We couldn’t find any kind of grain, milk, eggs, or meat. But after a few years in the West, making films, freelancing for magazines, and working as a producer for NPR News, he moved back to his home state to tell stories about the reenactments of “Custer’s Last Stand” in southern Montana. Andrew Grace

HONORS DAY 2010 at Manly Hall, April 2010

Silverstein Scholars (from left to right): Jason Crouch, Amy Richards, Colin McElvenny, John Lyles, Quint Langstaff, Christopher Scott; the Reception Table