



DEPARTMENT of
RELIGIOUS
STUDIES

Studying Religion in Culture

THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA
ARTS & SCIENCES

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Studying
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RELIGIOUS STUDIES NEWSLETTER

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Studying Religion in Culture: A Tale of Prepositions and Conjunctions



Although it may seem to some to be a rather minor thing, and therefore something easily overlooked or ignored, the motto of the University of Alabama's Department of Religious Studies—"Studying Religion in Culture"—italicizes the preposition "in." We do this to draw attention to the fact that the more common version of this popular phrase—"Religion and Culture"—employs the conjunction "and," and along with it, a series of assumptions that we hope our students will learn to recognize.

Associated with the work of such scholars as the German sociologist of religion, **Max Weber** (1864-1920), and the theologian, **Paul Tillich** (1886-1965), the phrase "religion and culture" is today used by scholars to name a field that studies the intersection of these two otherwise distinct domains. That is to say, the areas known as religion, on the one hand, and culture, on the other, are assumed to be separate domains that may or may not interact. The field known as "religion and culture" therefore names the intellectual pursuit of studying their periodic interactions.

Basic to this way of approaching the field is the assumption that the area of human practice known as religion is somehow set apart from those historical and social influences that commonly go by the name of culture (which includes such things as language, art, types of social organization, and social custom). Upon further examining this assumption, it often becomes evident that an even more basic assumption is operating, concerning the belief that the area we identify as religion (sometimes called "organized religion") is in fact the public, and therefore observable, expression

of what is believed to be a feeling, faith, or sentiment that defies adequate expression. The term "religion," then, is thought by many to name the public manifestations (in texts, rituals, symbols, institutions, etc.) of an otherwise inner, personal experience—hence the often-heard phrase, "I'm not religious, I'm spiritual." Because one cannot get inside other people's heads—or so the argument goes—this view assumes that scholars of religion are left with studying these secondary, public expressions, comparing them across cultures in search of the similarities and differences that may help us to make inferences about that unobservable thing which inspires them all. "Religion and Culture," then, names the field which takes as its data the shape adopted by what is presumably the inner essence of religion—a shape taken when it is not just experienced but also expressed publicly in such historical settings as art, architecture, writing, behavior, etc. As many have said, we study the branches, which are visible, in order to understand the roots, which are hidden.

Contrary to this approach, to study religion in culture means one does not begin with the assumption that the two domains periodically bump into each other, for the good or ill of either. Instead, the preposition "in" signifies that the area of human behavior we have come to know as "religion" is but one element within human cultural systems—systems which are themselves historical products that, because they are public, can be studied. An assumption basic to this approach is that the objects of study for any scholar are historical creations that had a beginning and that change over time. Whether these changes are random or regular, and therefore governed by other factors—such as gender, economics, politics, cognition, or even geography and environmental features—is one of the areas that such scholars explore. To study religion in

culture therefore means that ones object of study is a product of human belief, behavior and social systems.

Although it may strike some as a little too subtle, the preposition in "Studying Religion in Culture" signals this important information. Whatever else religion may or may not be, in a publicly-funded university it is at least assumed to be a fascinating element within wider human cultural systems. ■

Russell T. McCutcheon
Department Chair

THIS JUST IN...

In March 2006 the Department hired Dr. **Steven Ramey** as its new Asian religions specialist—he comes on board in August 2006. Learn more about Steven at <http://www.as.ua.edu/re/faculty/appointments2006.html>

Scholarships

At its April 2006 **Honors Day** luncheon, the Department recognized the accomplishments of its best students, awarding prizes from its **Silverstein Endowment**. This year, two groups of Silverstein Fellows were recognized, receiving either our \$1,000 or \$500 award. The 2006-7 Silverstein Fellows:

Jennifer Alfano
Stephanie Brennan
Timothy Davis
Laura Dotter
Joe Kimbrough
Barclay Owens
Brian Robbins
Matthew Satcher
Tseleq Yusef

Daniel Cenci
Zachary Day
Timothy Homan
Sarah Luken
Karissa Rinas
Samantha Sastre
Sam Shabel
Stephen Sutherland

Amy Petersen Memorial Book Fund

In 2003 a new fund was established in the memory of an REL minor (and **New College** major), **Amy Petersen**, who died quite unexpectedly in October of 2003. The Amy Petersen Memorial Book Fund is dedicated to providing a book for each student in our Senior Seminar, a course required of all majors and minors and offered each Spring semester. It is the Department's hope that, through this kind gift, Amy's memory will live on through her family's interest in the work we do.

If you are interested in contributing to this fund, or to any of the endowments that help to make our work possible, then we encourage you to contact the Department's main office at 205-348-5271.

2005-2006 Silverstein Fellows



At the April 2005 Honors Day lunch, the 2005-6 Silverstein Fellows were awarded \$1,000 each. Pictured above are those recipients who were able to attend our reception. They were, left to right, Josh McDonough, Brian Robbins, Matthew Satcher, Kristin Bradbury, Marianne Stanton, Samantha Sastre, and Brandon Andrews.

ATTENTION GRADUATES

We'd like to know what you're doing. We have devoted a page on our website to news about graduates and we'd like to see this page grow. So please visit our website, <http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/alumni.html>, and send us some news, even a photo or two that we can use.



Annually, the Department hires some of its students to help out in the main office. Since the Fall of 2001, we have been able to hire nearly twenty different students, some of whom have assisted professors with their ongoing projects while others pitch in to help with day-to-day life in the Department. This year we've benefited from the energy of four students, seen here peeking out from behind a rather skinny tree (clockwise from bottom left): **Sarah Luken**, **Jennifer Goodman**, **Samantha Sastre** and **Melanie Williams**.



An American in Edmonton

John W. Parrish

I was sitting at Tim Horton's this morning, having a cup of coffee and reading a book, when I began to think about how it's funny where life takes you. I grew up in Ft. Payne, Alabama—a small town by its own admission, snuggled in the valleys of the Appalachian foothills. Now, I am close to finishing my first year of a Master's degree program in Religious Studies at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. How did someone from Alabama end up in Edmonton?

Well, although I have learned to be suspicious of such "myths of origin," I can think of no better way to begin than by sharing the story, anecdotal though it may be, of how I became interested in the field of "Christian origins." I had transferred to the University of Alabama in my third year of college, and had already developed an interest in studying early Christian history, so I decided to major in Religious Studies. I recall that "fateful day" in the Fall of 2002, when I walked into the office of my advisor, Russell McCutcheon, and informed him of my interest in studying early Christian history, using the New Testament as an "artifact" to aid in the description of the communities behind the texts. Upon learning of my interests, Dr. McCutcheon handed me a Xerox copy of Burton Mack's article "On Redefining Christian Origins," suggesting that I read it and see if I might be interested in that type of work. Well, I was interested, and still am, and I'm now in Edmonton pursuing that interest.

I decided to attend graduate school in Canada for a number of reasons. For one thing, it costs less money to go to school in Canada, even paying international tuition rates. There was also the appeal of spending time in another country, with all the experiences and opportunities that come with it. Plus, I was awarded funding. I am working as a research assistant for Dr. Willi Braun, who I met in Spring 2003 when he gave a lecture at the University of Alabama. Meeting Dr. Braun and learning about his academic interests also influenced my decision.

Looking back on my time at the Department at Alabama, I feel grateful. We were a small Department, but that was part of its charm. I made friends with students and professors alike. I ate pizza and drank Jones soda with them at Movie Nights, and laughed with them while imbibing beverages at Happy Hour. We were a community, and a great one at that. The fact that many of my fellow students were also my best friends actually helped prepare me for graduate school, as we often had conversations that integrated "Religious Studies stuff" with "real world stuff." I recall a conversation with my friend Mike Winder, in which we pondered what Jonathan Z. Smith might have to say regarding the various mythic elements found in Star Wars, as one of the more amusing examples.

In that increment of time between August and May which we refer to as the "academic year," life happens. In our Department, it was a good life. On paper, the Department of Religious Studies is just a

curriculum and a list of courses. In reality, it is a community. As with all communities, people come and go. Professors take new jobs, and students graduate. The motion of life carries us along with it. But whether it takes you to a Canadian grad school or somewhere else, if you started at the University of Alabama's Department of Religious Studies, you had a damn good start. ■

Sabbatical Greetings From Ottawa

Theodore Trost



Greetings from Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, where Catherine Roach, our sons Benjamin and Nathaniel, and I are enjoying our sabbatical. For the boys this has been a time for learning new things, especially French and a lot about snow. For Catherine and I, it has been a time to pursue long-term writing and research projects and to reflect upon (and to anticipate future) teaching.

In a culture driven by the Puritan work ethic, the "sabbatical year" is not particularly well known. No small irony is attached to this fact, since the concept is actually a biblical one. It comes directly from the Hebrew Scriptures or what the Puritans themselves would have called the *Old Testament*. It is related to the requirement, featured fourth among the Ten Commandments (and inscribed accordingly on former-Alabama-Judge Roy Moore's famous monument), to cease from work on the sabbath day.

The *sabbath year* (or seventh year) is also called the "Year of Remission"—a period of prescribed rest during which the land is meant to lie fallow and all agricultural labor ceases. In addition to its symbolic significance, the sabbath year is filled with environmental as well as psychological import. Were it observed with any regularity in ancient times (and this is a matter disputed by biblical scholars, archeologists, and historians) it would have been a period during which the land renewed itself and people attended to activities other than those specifically associated with the production of crops: bridge-building, for example, or making music. Perhaps in the emerging political culture of the United States—at least as we get reports about it here in Canada—there will be a return to (or reinvention of) the kind of regulation a literal rendering of the "year of remission" represents. This would not be a bad thing, in my opinion; though it might undermine the commercial foundations of contemporary culture.

In academia, the sabbatical year comes after a six or seven year period of teaching. According to the University of Alabama's faculty guidelines, a sabbatical leave provides professors with an opportunity for growth through various kinds of activities, including research that leads to publication or improved teaching. My goal for this year is oriented toward both of these.

Specifically, I received a grant from the Louisville Institute to research and write about a

nationwide television advertising campaign initiated recently by the United Church of Christ—one of the United States' seven or so "mainline" Protestant denominations; the one, in fact, that traces its origins back to the first white settlers in New England through the Congregationalist (originally Puritan) branch of its mixed heritage. During this period in our nation's history when much of the rhetoric is about fortifying borders (banning women and homosexuals from the ordained ministry in many churches is one of the religious manifestations of this which, in turn, is not unrelated to the effort to seal the Mexican and Canadian borders—perhaps even with walls—from unwanted outsiders), the United Church of Christ's ads declare: "Jesus didn't keep people out; neither do we." My purpose is not to advocate or to condemn the ads but rather to offer a semiotic analysis of the overall campaign (to explore how rhetoric, images, and ideology combine to engage in a pertinent cultural debate) and to determine if, and—if so—how the campaign succeeds. So far I have traveled to the UCC's headquarters in Cleveland to interview some of the people behind the advertising campaign and I have presented a report on my preliminary research to the Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies Research Group at Ottawa University.

As for teaching, I have profited from my relationship with Carleton University as Visiting Professor in the College of the Humanities. I continue to be fascinated with the ways in which the religious history of a nation is told. For example, a key component in the narrative of American religious history is a strong anti-Roman Catholic theme that erupts in riots during the 1840s, plays an important role in several presidential campaigns including Kennedy's in 1960, and remains relevant in relation to the curious (from a historical perspective) coalition of forces that represent "Christian" interests in American politics today. The foundational narratives of Canadian religious history differ significantly from the American story, particularly with regard to the role played by Roman Catholics in the discovery and development of the nation. As a consequence of my work and studies in Canada, I intend to incorporate aspects of the Canadian story into the courses I teach on "American" religious history in the future.

All-in-all, this has been a marvelous opportunity to gain new perspective, to read carefully and conscientiously, and to plan for the future. I am exceedingly grateful to my colleagues and to the University for this experience. And I am looking forward to returning—reinvigorated—to teaching and advising in the coming fall semester. ■

The Department thanks all those who contributed to the newsletter, especially Donna Martin, who does our layout and who, along with our senior staff member, Betty Dickey, took a number of the photographs. The Department would not run well without such valued staff contributions.

An Interview with Dr. Rob Stephens

With another new faculty member of the 2005-6 academic year, we invited Melanie Williams, an REL/Anthropology major (pictured bottom left), to introduce readers to Dr. Rob Stephens. The College of Arts & Sciences provided the Department with funds to hire Rob for the year, to help the Department while Profs. Trost and Roach were on sabbatical.



Melanie: How did you end up at the University of Alabama?

Rob: I came here as a sabbatical replacement who could teach in the area of Asian religions (namely the seminar on Tibetan Buddhism this semester and a course on Hinduism in the spring). Someone was also wanted with some background in methods and theories in religious studies so that she or he could cover some sections of the Intro to Religious Studies course. I seemed to fit the department's needs and was delighted to come here with my wife, Stacy, and son, (who turns ten years old this month), Connor Joseph.

Melanie: How did you become interested in Religious Studies?

Rob: Like many first-generation college students, I was immediately overwhelmed after setting foot on a college campus by all of the choices that were available for courses, majors, minors, extracurricular activities, etc. I was delighted to be able to take courses, for instance, in the social scientific and historical study of religion. I had no idea that such courses were even offered! As a high school senior I won my graduating class's "Distinguished in Social Studies" award (please try not to be overly impressed), so I knew that I wanted to do something in the humanities or social sciences. In fact, my first major in college was high school social studies education. After a less-than-inviting experience during my student teaching practicum, I decided that any future teaching excursions for my part would have to involve students beyond the high school level; in short, students who wanted to be in class. That choice was confirmed when the high school teacher to whom I was assigned as a student teacher told me that he was remarkably unimpressed with his profession. On the first day that I showed up for my assignment working with high school students, he emphatically warned me that: "If there's absolutely anything else that you can do in life besides high school teaching, you should go and do that instead."

I took his advice and decided that teaching about religion in college would be a better vocational fit for me than teaching high school social studies.

Melanie: How did you form the research topic for your dissertation?

Rob: I began formulating my dissertation topic during a "Religion and Law in Modern India" seminar that I participated in as a graduate student at the University of Iowa. The seminar was led by my Ph.D. adviser Professor Emeritus Robert D. Baird (I always include the middle initial because there's another Robert Baird who also writes in Religious Studies circles) who has published widely on the topic of religion, law, and the secular state in modern India. I thought that by focusing my work more specifically on the problem of religious conversion, I could include other areas in my study that I was also interested in exploring, such as definitions of "religion" and "religious conversion." Additionally I wanted to ask certain questions regarding who gets to decide what counts as "religion" and "religious conversion" (legally, politically, socially, etc.) and how they do so, and what are some of the ramifications of conversion in the Indian secular state (legally, politically, socially, etc.). I am currently in the process of revising the dissertation for publication.

Melanie: What is your favorite book and why?

Rob: Currently, mind you, (...remember Heraclitus: "You can't step in the same river twice" or put another way, "You can't have the same favorite book forever"...and it may change after the very next book that I read) my favorite book is John Updike's "Rabbit Angstrom" novels. These are really four separate novels but since I have an "Everyman's Library" copy on my shelf in which all four are bound together as one, I can (or I choose) to count them as one giant novel: *Rabbit Run* (1960); *Rabbit Redux* (1971); *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981); *Rabbit at Rest* (1990). I really enjoy the way Updike uses the English language, develops his characters, and explores recent U.S. and world history; all while telling (to my thinking) very compelling stories.

Melanie: Who would play you in a Lifetime made-for-TV biopic? Would it be a musical?

Rob: I've been told that (on good days, in the right sunlight, and from a great distance) I can resemble either Kyle MacLachlan or Johnny Depp. I suppose that one of them would have to play me in my made-for-TV life story docudrama. And, since I played in a rock-n-roll band in college (our amps went to eleven), yes, it would have to be a musical. ■

The photo of Melanie and Rob was taken in our student lounge, Manly 200, recently remodeled to create a pleasant and relaxing academic atmosphere for conversation and friendly debate.

Interested in learning more about the academic study of religion? Then visit www.as.ua.edu/rel/studyingreligion.html—a site made last summer with the help of two of our graduates, Kim Davis and Christine Scott.

African Diaspora Conference

The conference, which took place in April 2005, at the University's Bryant Conference Center, focused on the place of African cultures within the academic study of religion—including, but not limited to, indigenous African religions, African Christianities, African forms of Islam, religions of African-Americans, Afro-Caribbean religions, and Afro-Brazilian religions. The conference highlighted the work of up-and-coming national and international scholars studying the history, spread, and influence of African cultures.

The conference, organized and hosted by the Department of Religious Studies, was funded by thirteen different units on our campus, receiving significant support from Provost Judy Bonner's office as well as Arts & Sciences Dean Robert Olin. Learn more about this very successful event at <http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/africanconference.html>.



Pictured above, left to right: Dr. Wilson J. Moses, Dr. Ted Trost and Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr. Dr. Glaude, a keynote speaker at the Conference, is professor of Religious Studies at Princeton University. He is also the recipient of the 2002 Modern Language Association William Sanders Scarborough Prize for his book, *Exodus!*, which investigates how the story of the exodus in the Hebrew Bible has been interpreted and used to forge a common identity among African Americans. Dr. Wilson J. Moses, also a keynote speaker, is Ferree Professor in American History at Pennsylvania State University and senior fellow of the Institute for the Arts and Humanities. Dr. Ted Trost is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama and was Chair of the Conference.



Maha Marouan, Professor of Religious Studies, University of Alabama, was a participant in the African Diaspora Conference, (pictured above with Prof. Jim Hall) and (far right) Merinda Simmons, Department of English, University of Alabama, also a participant. Simmons will be giving a lecture in the Department April 26, 2006 entitled "Slain in the Spirit: Sexuality and Afro-Caribbean Religious Expression in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," sponsored by the Religious Studies Student Association.

Judaic Studies/ Jewish Studies: Whither?

Steven L. Jacobs



The academic study of Judaism is its own interdisciplinary field of study and largely a function of who is doing the teaching and when and whether or not it is a department in and of its own right or one or more individual faculty housed in another department. Whether referred

to as "Judaic Studies," as we do here at The University of Alabama where it is located in the Department of Religious Studies, or "Jewish Studies" as in other institutions of higher learning, it attempts to encompass the vastness of the Jewish experience in both its historical and contemporary journeys as well as its various manifestations: Biblically, philosophically, theologically, sociologically, anthropologically, politically, linguistically, and, of course, historically, and attempts to draw upon the tools of each of these disciplines to better understand the people we call "Jews" and their behavioral manifestations subsumed under the label "Judaism." As a field of study, it is of relatively recent origin, coinciding, in the main, with the rise of so-called "ethnic studies" in the late 1960s, though the study of both the Hebrew Bible and the Hebrew language have been permanent fixtures of higher education in the U.S. since Professor Judah Monis (1683-1764) first taught Hebrew language at Harvard University (1722-1760), though somewhat ironically, having converted to Christianity in order to do so.

With the proliferation of positions throughout the United States and Canada (and departments where warranted), the research, publication, study, and teaching about Jews and Judaism have come into their own, including both Master's-level study and Doctoral-level study. Indeed, today, the Association for Jewish Studies, now headquartered at the Center for Jewish History in New York City, remains the professional organization for faculty of all disciplines engaged in these pursuits, and boasts its own academically well-respected journal, the *AJS Review*, published twice-annually. Other journals important to the scholarly study of Judaism include *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* (Purdue University, Indiana); *The American Jewish Archives Journal* (Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Ohio); *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* (Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, England); *Modern Judaism* (Oxford University Press, New York); *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life & Thought* (American Jewish Congress, New York); *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* (Indiana University, Indiana); and *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* (Indiana University Press, Indiana). One might even prove so bold as to declare that Judaic/Jewish Studies has arrived and been fully embraced by higher education, and, with the

present and still-growing inclusion of "Israel Studies" pioneered by Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, the future for this field has never looked brighter.

Departmentally, as the holder of the Department's **Aaron Aronov Endowed Chair of Judaic Studies**, I regularly teach the following courses, not only in our Minor in Judaic Studies: REL100 (Introduction to the Study of Religion), REL110 (Introduction to the Hebrew Bible), REL223 (The Holocaust in Historical Perspective), REL224 (Introduction to the Judaic Experience), REL238 (Philosophies of Judaism), REL332 (Figures in Contemporary Jewish Thought), REL347 (Jewish-Christian Relations), and REL490 (Capstone Seminar: Religion and Genocide).■

Prof. Jacobs holds the Aronov Endowed Chair in Judaic Studies, which was created in 1988 by the unanimous resolution of the UA Board of Trustees, and named for the late Mr. Aaron Aronov of Montgomery, AL. Monies for its endowment were raised both by Jewish persons and others not only here in Alabama but throughout the South, as well as the University itself. It remains the only such position in all of Alabama and Mississippi with only two similar positions in Louisiana and four in Tennessee. And like these other positions, we, too, provide our students with the opportunity for a Minor in Judaic Studies within our Department.

An Interview with Prof. Maha Marouan

We invited a recent graduate of our program, **Kim Davis** (pictured below right) to introduce one of our faculty members, **Maha Marouan**, to readers of the Newsletter. The Department is extremely pleased that Prof. Marouan, who just defended her Ph.D. dissertation in the U.K., has been hired as an Assistant Professor, beginning in August of 2006.



Kim: What was your dissertation topic?

Maha: To state it simply, I look at the construction of religion and history in the contemporary work of African American writers. My work experiments with counter histories, religions, and racial discourses, in order to challenge traditional constructions of identity and create space for a black consciousness.

Kim: What is the difference between school in the U.S. and UK?

Maha: I would firstly say that the jargon is really different. To give just an example, in the UK, "dissertation" would be associated with the Masters

degree whereas "thesis" would be connected to the Ph.D. So yes, the terminology is one rather glaring difference. The semester and term calendars are also quite different. But these are the more surface level differences. I would say that university in the UK tends to be more research based with a heavier concentration on essay work for students.

Kim: What is the strangest thing you find in Tuscaloosa?

Maha: Now, that's certainly an interesting question, considering that Tuscaloosa is quite unique in its own way. The first thing that comes to my mind is of course Southern food, fried green tomatoes, grits, fried okra and of course I could go on....

Kim: What is one of the biggest things about England that you miss?

Maha: I would have to say that there's more than just one, so permit the indulgence! I think at the top of the list would have to be its closeness to other European countries. It takes only a couple of hours to get to Spain, France, or to Italy - which is nice, especially for someone like me who enjoys traveling. I also miss the English countryside and then in no particular order, pub lunches, tea and scones. It seems like food does make me quite happy!

Kim: What is the one thing you are looking forward to doing here?

Maha: It would have to be accustoming my ear to the southern accent. It would make life much easier for my department secretary, **Betty Dickey**. On a more serious note, the U.S. is a huge country and very varied in terms of culture, architecture, and landscape etc., and so I can certainly say that I would absolutely love to do some cross-country driving in the near future.■

The photo, of Maha and Kim, was taken in the Religious Studies Library, recently updated to include new video equipment for our video library as well as a variety of reference books and reading materials.



*During the Department's Honors Day luncheon, held in early April of each year, we present awards, among which is our Outstanding Student in the Academic Study of Religion award. Pictured above is the 2004-5 recipient, **Marianne Stanton**, with her parents. Marianne, who was also a student worker in the Department, is currently back in Texas. Visit our Scholarships page, off of the Students Desk page, to learn more about some of our annual student awards.*

New Classroom



Professor **Steven Jacobs** holding his REL347 class (Jewish-Christian Relations) in Manly Room 210, our new seminar room. This room was recently updated and remodeled this past summer, including new multi-media equipment and furniture. Our thanks to **Dean Olin**, of The College of Arts & Sciences, for providing us with this new space.

Goodbye, Kurtis



Prof. **Kurtis Schaeffer**, who taught in the Department from 2000-2005, with wife **Heather** and children, **Ruby** and **Max**. Kurtis was professor of Asian religions for our Department and recently left to take a position at the University of Virginia in Charlotte, VA.

Student Publication



Matthew Satcher, a senior double majoring in religious studies and philosophy, will have his philosophy honors thesis published in the April 2006 issue of *Dialogue*, a scholarly journal for undergraduate and graduate students in philosophy. His essay, entitled "Proper Function Theory, Religious Exclusivism and the Challenge of Religious Diversity," is a rebuttal to Alvin Plantinga's "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," a topic Matthew first tackled in his final project for **Catherine Roach's** REL 344 "God and Moral Reasoning" class. An earlier draft of his thesis won the Alabama Philosophical Society's 2004 Student Essay Competition. Matthew presented the paper at their conference in Mobile in October 2004, a trip funded by the Religious Studies department. Matthew will graduate in May and begin medical school at the University of Alabama School of Medicine in the fall. To read his essay, go to: <http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/stdesksatcher.html>.■

Newlyweds!



"You guys really seem to be doing an excellent job of reinventing yourselves and it is a very appealing reinvention. What I have found from my experience with the religious studies program is that it offers something that transcends the typical classroom. You have a variety of classes that offer students the opportunity to learn about other cultures and ways of thinking or doing things that give them the chance to examine their own views. But what I have most found beneficial are those classes that take it a step further and really address the often overlooked framework that plays such a huge factor in binding a group together."

- **Jason Wright** (pictured with his wife, REL grad **Michele Trawick**), REL graduate December 2002, currently working and pursuing his MA in Psychology

2006-2007

The Fifth Annual Aronov Lecture

to be delivered by
Prof. Tomoko Masuzawa
University of Michigan

Title and date/time to be announced

The first thing that struck me was the sheer size of the whole thing. There were always meetings or lectures taking place, and everywhere you looked you could see scholars of Religious Studies chatting it up in the hallways. It was a great comfort to realize that there were hundreds of people who were interested in the same area of study as me. The atmosphere was very inviting and, after a short time, I was able to walk up to strangers and introduce myself so that a conversation could begin.

Going to the AAR was an opportunity to see the different people who contribute to the field. It was an opportunity to sample some of the new research that scholars are doing and also a window into the "hot topics" that are currently lighting up the field. I enjoyed being able to meet scholars with whom I might potentially be interested in doing my Ph.D. work. Talking with scholars was a way for me to see what they were interested in and how they went about their research, etc., as well as a way for them to meet me and hear about some of the things which interest me.



Christine Scott with **Slavoj Zizek**, during a break, at a Syracuse University Conference, just after she got him to autograph her new copy of his book, *On Belief*.

On a more personal level, the AAR's annual meeting was a time when I was able to catch up with old friends. I was able to connect with several of the professors that I had during my undergraduate work at the University of Alabama. It was nice to see how life in Tuscaloosa was treating everyone and also an opportunity to meet my professors as friends and associates instead of as teachers. I was also able to meet up with a few graduate students that I met on a University of Alabama sponsored trip to a conference at the University of Syracuse.

All in all, the national AAR conference gave me a glimpse into the professional life that I would like to lead. It was a time and a place to meet with others within the field and discuss issues important to us all. After attending the conference I realized just how important my time in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama had been. My time at Alabama was essential in preparing me for the academic side of graduate work, as well as the social and professional aspects of the field.■

*Readers may be interested to know that, at the 2005 meeting of the AAR, Christine was appointed as the editorial assistant to **Jeff Ruff** (of Marshall University), editor of the international quarterly journal, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, published in the Netherlands. Congratulations, Christine!*

Religion *in* Culture Lectures

Each year, the Department sponsors the Religion *in* Culture Lecture series which consists of various speakers on a variety of topics of relevance to our students and classes. These lectures are now held at **Gorgas Library's Henry Jacobs Reading Area**.



Prof. **Tim Murphy** giving a lecture entitled "Voodoo and Zombies: The Real Story" sponsored by the **Religious Studies Student Association**. The talk addressed the tremendous discrepancy between popular American conceptions about "voodoo" and "zombies" and the religious reality of "Vodou," the Afro-Caribbean religion practiced by most Haitians.



Prof. **Vernon J. Knight**, Department of Anthropology, giving a lecture entitled "Archaeology of Religion: The Mississippian Cosmos," concerning the people who once lived at Moundville, AL.



Hank Lazer at the reception following his lecture entitled "Religious vs. Religion: Innovative Poetry and Spiritual Experience." Pictured left is **John McGaugh** of the University Supply Store who handles the book displays at many of our lectures.



Religion in Culture Discussion Luncheons are held following some lectures. The guest lecturer, department professors, and students participate in this event. The students sign up for this event and are required to read a paper, written by the guest lecturer, to be prepared for the discussion session. In this photo left to right, Prof. Darlene Juschka, Prof. Bill Arnal, Prof. Maha Marouan, Prof. Steve Jacobs, and Ethan Livingston, Women's Studies grad student. Prof. **Darlene Juschka** delivered a lecture entitled "Sexing the Gods: Gender, Sex, Sexuality, and Systems of Belief." This lecture was co-sponsored by the **Department of Women's Studies**. Prof. **Bill Arnal** delivered a lecture entitled "Heresy as an Analytic Category: The Case of the Apostle Paul." For more information on our student discussion luncheons, please visit our website and photo gallery.

For more information on these lectures, please see our website <http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/events.html>.

Student Trips



In April, 2005, the Department sponsored three students to attend **Syracuse University's** "St Paul Among the Philosophers" conference—the first in a series of biennial conferences on post-modernism, religion, and culture. Sponsored by Syracuse's Department of Religion, the conference attracted a large, national audience and featured not only U.S. scholars of antiquity/Christian origins but also noted European intellectuals such as Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou. The three students are—**Kim Davis**, REL/Philosophy double major **Christine Scott** and **Melanie Williams**.



In March, 2005, the Department sponsored a two-day trip to the **Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit** at Mobile's Gulf Coast Explorem for students in REL 346. Prior to the trip, the class studied the **Qumran** site—home of this well-known archeological find. Prof. **Gabriele Fassbeck** (center) along with (from left to right): **Ryan Garner**, **Justin Dearborn**, **Jennifer Goodman**, and **Britni Jones**. Prof. Fassbeck held the position of Visiting Assistant Professor, funded through the Department's **Aronov Endowment** between 2003 and 2005.

Aronov Lecture Series

The **Fourth Annual Aronov Lecture**, entitled "Jesus and Judaism Why the Connection Still Matters," was given by Prof. **Amy-Jill Levine** of Vanderbilt University in September, 2005. The lecture was followed by a reception. Prof. Levine also participated in a Religion *in* Culture luncheon discussion with REL majors, which was held in our new seminar room, Manly 210.

The Department's Aronov lecture series and Religion *in* Culture lecture series are open to the public and are free of charge. The lunchtime discussion series, however, is limited to majors and minors in the Department of Religious Studies.

Some of these events are funded by generous grants from the College of Arts & Sciences' Anonymous Lecture Fund for the Humanities, and others are funded by the Department.

Please consider joining us at an upcoming event. For more information, call our main office at 205-348-5271 or join our Friends of the Department Mailing List to receive flyers on our upcoming events.



Prof. **Amy-Jill Levine**, Aronov Lecturer and Professor at Vanderbilt University and Prof. **Jay Geller**, Graduate Department of Religion, Vanderbilt University, at the student luncheon discussion. Prof. Geller was also a guest lecturer for one of Prof. Jacobs' classes.



Prof. **Amy-Jill Levine** and Religious Studies students and faculty at the Aronov Lecture Reception in Smith Hall.



Samantha Sastre, President of the Religious Studies Student Association, at the luncheon discussion featuring Prof. **Amy-Jill Levine** in our new seminar room, Manly 210. Also in the photo are Prof. **Maha Marouan** (left) Prof. **Steve Jacobs**, and **Jennifer Goodman** (right).

Theorizing Religion as a System of Signs

Tim Murphy



There is an old saying: give a person a fish and you feed them for a day; teach them how to fish and you feed them for life. There is a clear analogy to this in the human sciences, including the academic study of religion: do not simply give students a lot of information, but teach them

how to analyze any kind of information they happen to find. The analysis of information is a pliable skill that can be applied to virtually anything. Another word for the analysis of information is "theory." There are two ways to understand this term. One way is to see "theory" as technical, jargon-laden, and having a questionable relationship to reality. Another way to understand "theory" is more basic: all of us have assumptions about how the world works and why people do the things they do. That set of assumptions, taken as a whole, is every individual person's "theory" of the world. A critical difference between the first view of theory and the second is that the first is very *explicit*, while the second type of theory is most often very *implicit*. Sometimes, of course, our assumptions, or "theories," about the world are not accurate. Obviously, it is easier to test a theory or assumption if it is clearly articulated and explicit. Hence, the advantage of the first kind of theory, though both amount to the same thing: a view of how the world works, or why people do certain kinds of things.

This is the underlying basis for studying, criticizing, and proposing theories in the study of religion. Over the last couple of centuries, many people have proposed very mistaken ideas about religions, especially of course, religions not their own. The process of correcting and refining these assumptions is the work of academic study in general, but theory in particular. That is, much of scientific change comes about through conceptual revolutions rather than "new discoveries." An example: for millennia people thought that the natural state of a physical object was to be at rest, and what had to be explained was how they came to be in motion. **Isaac Newton** proposed a conceptual experiment: suppose the core assumption about motion was wrong? Suppose that the natural state of a physical object was to be in motion, and what needed to be explained was how it came to rest? Well, the force that makes bodies come to rest is called gravity, and with that simple, yet profound, conceptual inversion, modern physics was born.

A similar kind of inversion has occurred in the study of religion: early theorists sought for universal causes underlying the appearance of all forms of religion. Different theorists proposed contradictory causes, each of which, however, was persuasive to a degree. After a century of this endeavor, we were no closer to agreement on the universal cause of religion than we were at the beginning. New idea:

maybe there *is* no universal cause at all? Maybe the search for a cause is applying the wrong kind of model to religion in the first place? Maybe religion is not to be studied like mechanics or physics, but to be read or interpreted like a text? What if we read culture/religion rather than explained it? How would we do that? What method would we use?

Fortunately for the study of religion there is an answer to those last questions, and this answer forms the basis of how I theorize religion and how I teach students to analyze it. The answer is contained in a funny sounding word: "**semiotics**." The founder of modern linguistics, **Ferdinand de Saussure**, defined semiotics as "a science that studies the life of signs within society" (1959, 16). The term comes from the Greek word, *semeion*, or "sign." In contrast to linguistics, which studies only language and speech, the broader question which semiotics,—which **Roland Barthes** (one of the premier semioticians) called "the science of the signifier" (1977, 167),—tries to answer is: "how does humanity give meaning to things which are not sounds?" (Barthes 1988, 179). What semiotics analyzes is not simply the meaning of a symbol, nor the act of communication for which a sign or symbol is used, but the total process of signification. Speaking about the way in which even material, utilitarian objects signify, Barthes makes this point clear: "I am giving a very strong sense to the word *signify*; we must not confuse *signify* with *communicate* to signify means that the objects carry not only information, in which case they would communicate, but also constitute structured systems of signs, i.e., essentially systems of differences, of oppositions and of contrasts" (1988, 180). The relationship between an individual sign and the system to which it belongs is the key premise of semiotics and is that which differentiates it from **hermeneutics** or traditional exegesis. Everything can signify, but signification of any and all kinds presupposes some conventionalized "system" of meaning: "Semiotics is thus based on the assumption that insofar as human actions or productions convey meaning, insofar as they function as signs, there must be an underlying system of conventions and distinctions which makes this meaning possible" (Culler 1986, 106).

This becomes the basis for a theory of religion in the following way: human beings constitute themselves and their relations to the world and to each other through multiple systems of signification. One species of systems of signification is that which scholars and practitioners have come to call "religion." What Barthes has said about "the world" in general applies all the more specifically to religion: "the world is written through and through; signs, endlessly deferring their foundations, transforming their signifieds into new signifiers, infinitely citing one another, nowhere come to a halt" (1977, 167-68)—and let me say that the more Barthes one reads, the smarter one becomes! The never halting procession of signifieds and signifiers is the substance, the specific mode of being, of "religion." Religion is, in "essence," semiotic—the term essence is put in quotes because of the relational character of signs, a characteristic which defies the singularity of traditional notions of essence.

So, does semiotics answer all the questions about religion? No. But it does give us a set of assumptions as to how to handle any kind of symbolic material we find. If we can teach our students to do that, then we have achieved our goal of "feeding" them for life. Because when you grasp the breadth of the human symbolic universe, and you see what theory allows you to do with that vast array of information, *everything* becomes interesting.

For Further Reading:

- Roland Barthes. *Elements of Semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1973.
- Roland Barthes. *Image-Music-Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Roland Barthes. *The Semiotic Challenge*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1988.
- Daniel Chandler. *Semiotics: the Basics*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Jonathan Culler. *Ferdinand de Saussure*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Tim Murphy. *Representing Religion: Essays in History, Theory, and Crisis*. London and New York: Equinox Press, forthcoming, 2006.
- Ferdinand de Saussure. *Course in General Linguistics*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1959.
- Kaja Silverman. *The Subject of Semiotics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983. ■

Cartoon Caption Contest



The Department's second annual cartoon caption contest took place last Spring, open to all majors and minors in the Department, as well as all students currently taking courses in the Department. The cartoon was, once again, by *The New Yorker* cartoonist, Frank Cotham.

And the winners, who received their awards from Prof. Trost prior to a Religion *in* Culture Lecture, were:

"Would you mind if I waited inside?"

- **Melanie Williams**

"I'm sorry sir, but due to recent security issues I'm going to have to ask you to check the bag."

- **Meredith Griffin**

"I don't know if that's Juan Valdez behind me—is my name on the list or not?"

- **Matthew Satcher**

The original caption read, "I'd have been here sooner if it hadn't been for early detection."