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”—indicates the proposition “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 interaction 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 these two domains periodically bump into each other, for the good or ill of either. In other words, the preposition “and” simplifies 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 is therefore means that one subject of study is a product of human belief, behavior, and social systems. Although it may strike some as a little too subtle, the proposition “Studying Religion in Culture” signals this important information. Whether we or other scholars may or may not be, in a publicly funded university it is at least assumed to be a fascinating element in this 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 was on board in August 2006. Learn more about Steven at http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/appointments2006.html.

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Studying Religion in Culture
At the April 2005 Honors Day lunch, the 2005-6 Silverstein Fellows were able to attend our reception. They were, left to right, Josh McDonough, Brian Robbins, Matthew Satcher, Kristin Bradbury, Samantha Sastre, and Brandon Andrews.

2005-2006 Silverstein Fellows

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, through this kind gift, Amy’s memory will live on through her family’s interest in the work we do.

Attention Graduates
We’d like to know what you’re doing. We’ve 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.

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 Hindmarsh
Barbarra Green
Brian Robbins
Matthew Satcher
Tseleq Yusef

Jennifer Alfano Daniel Cenci
Stephanie Brennan Zachary Day
Timothy Homan Sarah Lukien
Joe Hindmarsh Katrina Rinas
Barbarra Green Samantha Sastre
Brian Robbins Sam Shabel
Matthew Satcher Stephen Sutherland
Tseleq Yusef

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.

In this issue:
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An American in Edmonton
Subtropical Greetings
Glimpsing Professional Life
Lectures and Events
Religion as a System of Signs
Judaic/Jewish Studies
Interview with Prof. Maha Marouan and Prof. Rob Stephens

Sabbatical Greetings
Prof. Maha Marouan
Prof. Rob Stephens

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If you are interested in contributing to this fund, or to any of the endeavors that help to make our work possible, then we encourage you to contact the Department’s main office at 205-348-5271. We’d like to know what you’re doing. We’ve 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.

Sabbatical Greetings
Prof. Maha Marouan
Prof. Rob Stephens

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I was sitting at Tim Horton’s this morning, having a cup of coffee and reading a book, when I encountered a familiar face. It was Melanie, who I often have conversations with in graduate school, as we often had conversations that ranged from academic research to personal interests. She was sitting at Tim Horton’s this morning, and I said hello to her. Melanie: “What brings you here?”

I began to think about how it’s funny where life takes us. I recall that “fateful day” in the Fall of 2002, when I was sitting at Tim Horton’s this morning, and I said hello to Melanie. “What brings you here?”

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Dr. Rob Stephens: “I am working as a research assistant for Dr. Rob Stephens, who I met in Spring 2005. We have been friends for a while, and I am currently in the process of revising the dissertation for publication.”
Judaic Studies/ Jewish Studies: Whither?

The academic study of Judaism is its own inter-disciplinary field of study and sharply a subset of such doing the teaching and when and whether or not it is a de-partmental, as held by the Director of the Department's Aaron Arnon Endowed Chair of Judaic Studies, which is the following courses, not only in our Minor in Judaic Studies: REL190 (Introduc- tion to the Hebrew Bible), REL223 (The Holocaust in Historical Perspective), REL224 (Introduction to the Biblical Experience), REL328 (Philosophy of Judaism), REL332 (Figures in Contemporary Jewish Thought), REL347 (Jewish Reli- gious History), and REL410 (Capstone Seminar: Religion and Genocide).

Prof. Jacobs held the Aaron Arnon Endowed Chair in Judaic Studies, which was initiated in 1981 by the exterior mission of the UA Board of Trustees, and named for the late Mr. Aaron Arnon of Montgomery, A.L. Ms for its endowment was raised 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. It is, especially for someone like me who enjoys traveling, I also mas the English countryside and that in so particular order, put lunches, ten and soups. It seems like food does make me quite happy!

Kim: What is the biggest thing about Eng- land that you miss?

Maha: I would have to say that there’s more than just one, so permit the indulgence! I think that the top of the list would have to be its closeness to other European countries. It takes only a couple of hours by train to get to Spain, to France - it is nice, especially for someone like me who enjoys traveling. I also miss the English countryside and its own way. I hope to do some traveling here. I like food does make me quite happy!

Kim Davis (pictured below right) invited a recent graduate of our program, Katie Mueller (of Marshall University), editor of the Students Desk page, to learn more about some of the things which might potentially be interesting to me and hear about some of the things which interest me.

An Interview with Prof. Maha Maroun

We invited a recent graduate of our program, Katie Mueller (of Marshall University), editor of the Students Desk page, to learn more about some of the things which might potentially be interesting to me and hear about some of the things which interest me.

Kim: What is 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 experiences with counter histories, religious, and racial discourses, in order to challenge traditional constructions of identity and create space for a black consciousness.

Kim: What is different between Judaism in the U.S. and Australia?

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 con- centration on essay work for students.

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

Maha: No, that’s certainly an interesting ques- tion, considering that Tuscaloosa is quite unique in its own way. The first thing that comes to my mind is the amount of students in this city, fried green tomatoes, grits, fried okra and of course I could go on...

Student Publication

Matthew Satcher, a senior double major in religious studies and philosophy, will have his philosophy honors the- sis published in the April 2006 issue of Stoa, a scholarly journal for under- graduate and graduate stu- dents in philosophy. His es- say, entitled “Proper Func- tion Theory: Religious Exclusions and the Chan- nel of Religious Diversity,” is a rebuttal to Alan Plantinga’s “A Defense of Religious Exclusions,” a topic Matthew first tackled in his final project for Catherine Roach’s REL 344 “Of G and Moral Reasoning” class. An earlier draft of this essay was won at the University of Alabama’s 2004 Student Es- say Competition. Matthew presented the paper at the conference in Mobile in October 2004, a trip funded by the Religious Studies department. Mat- thew will graduate in May and begins medical school at the University of Alabama School of Medicine in the fall. To read his essay, go to http:// www.ua.edu/rel/stoakhalter.html.

Matthew: I first came to Alabama from Ohio, from the JCCS program at OSU, during the summer of 2003, and then enrolled as an undergraduate at the University of Alabama in Fall of 2004. I have been working with Prof. Maha Maroun, who taught in the Department from 2000-2005, all of my four years in Alabama, and who is going to be teaching at the University of Virginia in the Fall.

Matthew: I became interested in both philosophy and religious studies because I am interested in the idea that the mind is shaped by the culture and political system in which it is bred, and that culture is constructed from history, religion and social practice. I have always been interested in philosophy for its own sake, and I am deeply interested in the idea that the mind can be reshaped by the ideas that we encounter and the environments in which we find ourselves.

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Goodbye, Kuties

2006-2007 The Fifth Annual Arnon Lecture to be delivered by Prof. Tomoko Masuzawa University of Michigan

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The 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, 2006. 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, Mandy 210.

The Department’s Aronov lecture series and Religion in Culture lecture series are open to the public and are free of charge. The luncheon 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 Fund, Diamond Foundation, Gorgas Library’s Henry Jacobs Fund, and Religious Studies students and faculty at the Aronov site—home of this well-endowed Department of Religious Studies.

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

Theorizing Religion as a System of Signs

There is an old saying that gives a person a fish and you feed them for a day; teach a person how to fish and you feed them for a lifetime. The same holds true in how we study religion. There is a new way to approach the study of religion. It is one which involves new discoveries. An example: for millennia people have searched for a cause to explain the world. Religion is often the first kind of theory, though both amount to the same thing: a view of how the world works, or why people do certain 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 different ideas about religions, especially of course, religions not their own. The process of forming 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 static, and what had to be explained was how they came to be in motion. Isaac Newton proposed a conceptual experiment: suppose the force assumption about motion was simply wrong. The cartoons was, once again: “What Barthes has said about ‘the world’ in general applies to all the more specifically to religion: ‘the world of a text is written through and defensive to the formation of a signifier, transforming their signifieds into new signifiers, infinitely citing one another, no more, one more, one more. The new verbalizing process of signifiers and signifiers is the substance, the specific mode of being, of religion.’ Religion is, in ‘essence,’ of an inductive nature; the inductive process of the relational character of signs, a characteristic which defines 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 to how to handle any kind of symbolic material we find. If we can teach our students to that, we have achieved our goal of ‘teaching’ 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:


Anonimous. A Lecture and Luncheon on the Jacobi Foundation at the student luncheon discussion. Prof. Collection also a spider in front of Prof. Jacobi's chair.

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 held in Convio Library's Henry Jacobs Reading Area.

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