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RELIGIOUS  
STUDIES

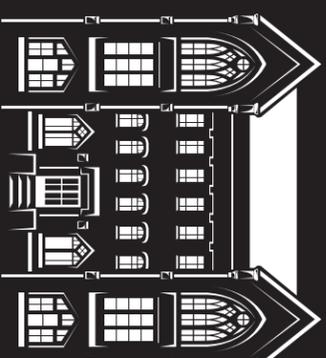
## Studying Religion in Culture

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ARTS & SCIENCES

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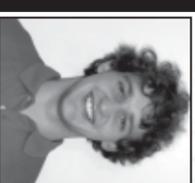
# RELIGIOUS STUDIES NEWSLETTER

Spring 2007 • Issue 4

## What is the Academic Study of Religion?

*Before he graduated in the Spring of 2006, REL/Spanish double major Tim Davis was asked to think about some of the misconceptions of the academic study of religion. Here's what he had to say.*

Tim Davis



As an entering freshman at The University of Alabama I knew that my older sister, a junior at this time, was a Religious Studies major, but I had no clue as to what she studied. Because she told me that she had taken courses in Tibetan Buddhism and the Hebrew Bible, I assumed that Religious Studies majors did all of their coursework studying descriptive information about the different religions that are found throughout the world. In other words, I thought that my sister spent her day listening to lectures on topics like why Hindus don't eat cows and what is the special relationship between Native Americans and the environment. So, I entered the program with the hopes of obtaining general knowledge about the major religions of the world, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

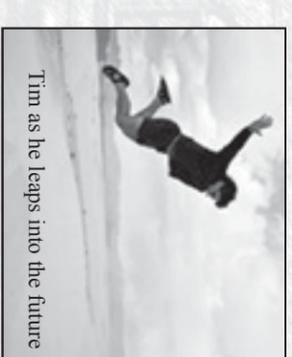
Now, as a Religious Studies double major on the verge of graduation, I realize that my assumptions about Religious Studies, or the Academic Study of Religion, were only partly correct. While I still have my original major in Spanish, I decided to declare a Religious Studies major in the Spring of my junior year, after taking several courses in the department at the urging of my sister. Like many students, I had an array of preconceived notions about Religious Studies, and since not everyone has an older sibling that can explain the ins and outs of Religious Studies to them, I hope that the following list of assumptions about the Academic Study of Religion will serve to illuminate exactly what a Religious

Studies major studies.

But before proceeding, I should say something about why the field, known in North America as Religious Studies, is sometimes also called the Academic Study of Religion—in fact, the latter name might better describe what a scholar of religion does. By calling the field “Religious Studies,” one can see how someone who is unfamiliar with this discipline could mistakenly think that Religious Studies is a religious exercise. Put differently, the “studies” of Religious Studies scholars and students are not “religious”; rather, scholars and students in Religious Studies study that set of data that humans classify as religious, while asking questions such as “What gets to count as ‘religious?’” and “What are the implications of classifying something as ‘religious?’”

### Is “Religion” a Stable Category?

One of the first questions a student in an entry level Religious Studies class, such as REL 100, investigates is “What is Religion?” Students soon realize that defining religion is not an easy task, for they discover that opinions differ widely as to what practices, beliefs, and institutions get to count as religious.



Tim as he leaps into the future

For example, it is clear that Karl Marx, who claimed in his work *The German Ideology* that “it [religion] is the opium of the people,” and further that “the abolition of religion as the *illusory*” hap-

piness of the people is required for their *real* happiness,” would not agree with someone such as Mohandas K. Gandhi who, instead, claimed that all religions were true and beneficial to humanity.

These respective definitions vary widely on how religion should be classified. Without a doubt this classification matters, because it portrays the interests of the respective definers. For instance, Marx's definition of religion serves his ideology of revolution that would create a nonreligious communist state, and Gandhi's definition serves his interest of bringing together Hindus, Muslims, and other religions to create a unified, independent India. Given these differences, students can come to recognize that religion, as a category, is not stable but, rather, is a highly debated topic. Further, students see that defining what gets to count as religious is one of the most important studies that the scholar of religion can undertake because many times much is at stake in definition and classification. To take one final example, a group's status as a religion in the United States is decided by the Internal Revenue Service, and whether the IRS recognizes a group as a religion or not has implications ranging from the group receiving or not receiving nonprofit tax breaks to receiving the protection of free exercise of religion under the Constitution of the United States.

### Only Adherents Study Religion?

Another misconception that is widespread regarding the study of religion is that one must be religious in order to study or know about religion. This assumption comes from the fact that many people believe religion to be a word that names a collection of privileged—beyond critique—beliefs and behaviors. On the contrary, religion, as it is studied in the secular state univer-

## Getting in the Last Word

If you've made it all the way to the last page then I'm hoping that you agree that we have some pretty good students and pretty active and engaging faculty members, who are all at the top of their game. As readers of past issues of our newsletter may have noticed, we've highlighted our students in this issue even more than in the past—both current students and some of our recent graduates. We're proud of them all, and their accomplishments—both while on campus and long after they leave Manly Hall—shine a very kind light on us all.

Russell T. McCutcheon  
Department Chair

## Amy Petersen Memorial Book Fund

On October 26, 2006, Amy's mother, Ms. Jo Petersen, came to Tuscaloosa to deliver, in person, the final installment that allowed the Amy Petersen Memorial Book Fund to reach its initial goal. The fund has therefore now been endowed and will provide a book each for all students in our Department's senior seminar, beginning the Spring 2008 semester. Amy's family hopes that the fund will continue to grow and, perhaps someday, endow a student scholarship. The Department is grateful for this fund—which is in memory of Amy, an REL minor who died quite unexpectedly October 26, 2003—seeing it as tangible evidence that our work with our students is valued far beyond the classroom.

## This Just In...

For the sixth year the Department hosted an Honors Day reception following the College's Undergraduate Convocation, where we were able to meet the friends and families of our students. And, once again, Silverstein Fellowships were awarded—varying from \$500 to \$1,000—to the Department's most promising REL majors and Judaic Studies minors. Among those who were able to attend were (left, bottom to top): Jennifer Alfano, Keke Pounds, Jaci Gresham, Sarah Luken, and Harrison Graydon; (right, bottom to top): Stephanie Brennan, Sarah Kelly, Karissa Rinas, and Dan Mullins.



For more pictures, see

<http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/honorsday2007.html>.

## Studying Religion in Culture

[www.as.ua.edu/rel](http://www.as.ua.edu/rel)

## Davis - cont'd

sity, is both a category and an aspect of human behavior that must be subjected to the same types of scrutiny as any other category of human behavior that one may study. Putting the word “academic” in the phrase “The Academic Study of Religion” indicates that one uses the same methods in Religious Studies that would be used in the study of other social sciences. Bruce Lincoln, a prominent University of Chicago scholar, makes this point in a brief article entitled, “Theses on Method” by saying: “The same destabilizing and irreverent questions one might ask of any speech act ought to be posed of religious discourse... Reverence is a religious, and not a scholarly virtue.” By pointing out that one ceases to be a scholar when certain sets of data (in this case, religious data) are placed beyond critique—and by critique I mean granting no concession to a set or sets of data while evaluating the motives behind the data and historical context within which the data is situated—Lincoln makes clear that religion (both the word and that which it identifies) is not privileged. Therefore, one does not have to *be* religious to *study* religion, much like one does not have to be an artist to study art.

### Does Religious Studies Market Religions?

When people learn that I was a Religious Studies major, it is common for them to ask me, “What religion are you?” People most likely pose such a question because they assume that Religious Studies markets different religions to its students so that they can each pick one from the list and become an adherent. In the same vein, Religious Studies does not seek to dissuade anyone from their particular religious beliefs; rather, it merely studies religion as human behavior in the same way Political Science or Psychology studies particular human behaviors. Hence, the scholar of religion studies and teaches religion without advocating or denouncing the object of study (an approach known as methodological agnosticism, meaning that the types of tools, or methods, that scholars use to prevent them from ever taking a stand on the truth of the thing being studied—what they may think in their personal life may be another thing); the scholar’s approach, then, seeks to ask questions about and find answers to those human behaviors categorized as religious. Religious Studies, as pursued in the secular state university, helps one to critically analyze the beliefs, practices, and institutions classified as religious but does not teach one how to be religious. Since The United States’ Constitution guarantees that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” and because state institutions (e.g., The University of Alabama) receive federal funding, then Religious Studies, as pursued in such institutions, must take the methodologically agnostic approach elaborated above.

### Conclusion

With these common assumptions on the table, one can now see what the student pursuing a de-

gree in Religious Studies strives towards: studying

the who’s, when’s, what’s, where’s, and why’s of that set of data referred to as religion. By asking these questions with the methodology of a scholar such as Bruce Lincoln, the student of religion sees his or her object of study as an interesting facet of a complex human socio-behavioral world. Thus, the student of religion studies those human behaviors that discourse—the sum total of assumptions, ideas, convention, etc., concerning a subject—deems as religions. When one begins to ask the right questions and looks into the historical context of the data being studied, then one realizes that people the world over contest the category “religion.” In this light, one sees that the student of religion not only studies world religions, but also evaluates how and why an institution, movement, or group gets to count as a world religion.

So if studying both religion and the category “religion” as an interesting feature of the complex system of human behavior called society sounds appealing, then perhaps the Religious Studies major is right for you. ■

## (Almost) Everything I

### Needed to Know I Learned at Manly Hall

Mark Premo-Hopkins



As my law school graduation draws near, I find myself growing fearful of what the working world will require. What do I know? What do I not know? And do I know the right things to survive in the vast land outside of Studentdom? I’ve never really been anything but a student for the last 20 years. As I look back on my education I realize that for the most part, wisdom is not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but instead amongst the airy walkways and classrooms of **Manly Hall**. Now I’d like to share a few of teachings that Manly Hall has to offer—three basic lessons that I trust will provide a strong foundation for anyone’s post-Studentdom endeavors.

#### Don’t take things that aren’t yours

For me, my time at Manly Hall involved writing many essays and papers. Now most of these involved the critique of someone else’s ideas (usually someone much smarter than me). That meant that I relied, at least in part, on someone else’s writing to provide some foundation for my important reflections. Whether I was borrowing an entire block quote or just a catchy turn of phrase, I learned the importance of citing my sources. It really was helpful—without this lesson I could have been kicked out of law school for plagiarism, disbarred for intentionally mischaracterizing the law in a brief,

and eventually fired from my cushy law firm job. But my time at Manly Hall taught me an important lesson that will help for years to come—don’t take things that aren’t yours (whether those things are ideas or something else entirely, like a bicycle).

#### Don’t judge a book by its cover

I’ll tell you the first thing I learned when I began my classes in religious studies: the books are quite ugly. My personal favorite was a Rudolf Bultmann reader that I used for one class. As I remember it, the book was an oversized paperback, with its cover a gloriously repulsive faded tangerine color. Giant, white block letters—reminiscent of a sign for the DMV in Communist Russia—alerted the reader to the book’s title. And behind the title, covering the entire front of the book sat a crude white etching of the theologian’s head. It was so frightening that I lent the book to one of the local churches for their annual Scare-o-Ween house. However, focusing entirely on the ugly book jackets would be disingenuous, and miss the point because these hideous wrappers hid interesting and beautiful pearls of wisdom illuminated and elaborated by my teachers. Perhaps the teachers selected these books intentionally to teach this extra lesson—only by overcoming our initial judgment would we be able to truly appreciate the actual contents of a text (or a person perhaps?). Regardless of whether it was intentional or just a lucky side benefit, I know I’ll be better prepared for life thanks to the ugly books in Manly Hall.

#### An afternoon snack covers over many sins

Whether you suffer from writer’s block, a post-lunch slump, or some inner-office tension, an afternoon snack is the salve you need. A Jones Soda and oatmeal raisin cookie saved many of my days as a student and employee at Manly Hall. If you’re mentally or physically tired, a snack will give the calories you need to get back on track and last until it’s time to clock out. And if, heaven forbid, you are having problems with someone close to you, try sharing an afternoon snack with them. It’s tough to stay mad at someone when you’re both sipping on a Fuji Berry drink and munching on a Snickerdoodle cookie, and those interesting photos on the soda bottle labels can provide you with something non-confrontational to discuss. Now I know that many professionals prefer a half-caf, low-fat mocha, but consider stocking your office with Jones sodas and cookies—it just might save everyone’s career.

Aside from the brilliant teachers and the exciting material in the courses, people can learn more fundamental lessons while in residence at Manly Hall—even after you’ve left Manly’s friendly confines. I’m sure these lessons will aid your journey in the sometimes-frightening world outside of Studentdom. ■

*Mark, who double majored in REL and Communications, graduated in the Fall of 2003, worked in the Spring of 2004 in our main office, and then began law school, that Fall, at the University of Chicago.*

## An Interview with Dr. Steven Ramey

*Heldi Hentrix, a minor in REL who is soon graduating, was invited to pose a few questions to Dr. Steven Ramey, the latest addition to our faculty.*



**Question:** Why did you decide to focus on India during your graduate studies at the University of North Carolina?

**Answer:** I enjoy investigating different cultures by visiting different places, so it is great to be able to do that as a part of my career. I chose to study India because of its religious diversity. Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Sikhs, Christians, and others have lived together in India for centuries. I wanted to investigate how those interactions, both positive and negative, have developed beyond the extremes that commonly make the news. From my research in India, I have learned that these interactions, and the labels that we use to describe them, are much more complicated than I could have imagined.

**Question:** What is one of the most memorable things you experienced during your fieldwork in India?

**Answer:** Having my shoes stolen at a temple. I left my shoes, with everyone else’s, outside a temple where I did much of my research. When I was ready to leave that afternoon, my shoes were no longer there. Apparently somebody decided to “upgrade” to my pair of shoes. However, that person wore them back to the same temple later, and the temple officials retrieved my shoes for me. They were quite excited to give me back my shoes the next time I went to the temple.

**Question:** What does your current research entail?

**Answer:** I am working on issues related to the migration of people from India into the southeastern United States. Building on my dissertation research on South Indians, I am looking at how Souths and other groups within the larger Hindu community construct their traditions in the context of the US South, which highlights the diversity within Hinduism and the complex identifications of people whose formation of Hinduism is inseparable from their national and ethnic heritages.

**Question:** If you could only eat one food for the rest of your life, what would it be and why?

**Answer:** Now that’s an interesting question. Choosing just one food is really tough, so I think

that I will cheat a little and choose dosas, a common food in South India. To make a dosa, you use a thin batter of ground rice and lentils and cook it like a thin pancake, similar to a crepe.

**Question:** So how is that cheating?

**Answer:** Well, like with crepes, you can fill them with different vegetable mixtures, so it would still give some variety within the one food restriction.

**Question:** Is there a chance, now that you live in Alabama, that you will ever switch your loyalties from Kentucky basketball?

**Answer:** Despite spending almost a decade around the University of North Carolina, I remained faithful to my UK heritage, so I doubt that I’ll be converted to the Crimson Tide completely, but I don’t see my loyalty to UK preventing me from rooting for Alabama, except when UA plays UK. ■

## Moving Forward

Josh McDonough



As I sit in this cold classroom learning the difference between an assignment and a sub-lease, I try to remember how I came to be here. Two years ago, I was in Tuscaloosa studying Asian religions, enjoying the more moderate climates of central Alabama. Now I am in Chicago, and the wind chill is negative twenty degrees, and Buddhism has been replaced by the equally cold and dispassionate law. One year ago, I was visiting Northwestern to learn of their Ph.D. program in Buddhist Studies. What I learned merely reaffirmed what certain professors had communicated to me during my four undergraduate years: a career in academics is an arduous path; traverse it at your own peril.

So, it may seem to you fresh-faced religious studies novices that I am a turncoat. I have chewed off the hand to which my academic experience was shackled. But this is not so. I have carried my academic training with me into the alien lands of the legal profession, and it has served me well. Basically, all my Religious Studies courses involved reading and discussion. There was a lot of difficult reading, but I found it enjoyable. I dodged classes requiring mathematical acumen for a reason. If I remember the past six months correctly, I have read somewhere close to 1700 pages of law school assignments. Thus, the assignments with which I am currently confronted are more of a challenge in terms of quantity than those I faced during my undergraduate tenure, but I honestly believe that I comprehend the content of these legal assignments with minimal difficulty thanks mostly to the academic training I received from the department.

It is true that the Sanskrit, Pali, and Tibetan vocabularies have been exchanged with a strange collection of Latin phrases, but the overall framework remains the same. I spend my hours reading opi-

ions, arguments, critiques, and reasoning. Current students may worry, as did I, that upon graduation you will have a degree that, while engaging and enjoyable to earn, will put you at a disadvantage in this fast-paced, gnaw on the skulls of your neighbors world; however, allow me to convince you otherwise. You are not just learning about different religions and social theories. You are not a mere input device for raw data. Quite the contrary, the important skills you are learning are not so simple. You are learning, among other things, how to approach a rich and complex area of human endeavor. You are learning a methodology which translates beyond the field of Religious Studies and can assist you in most areas of professional life.

Oh, and one more thing, as Lieutenant Columbo would say: I arrived in Tuscaloosa in the Fall of 2001. At that time, the department basically consisted of offices, some chairs, and a classroom. During my four years, the department was transformed through the efforts of hardworking individuals. These cyborgs do not rest, even during the summer. Almost every moment of their time is devoted either to their course material or bettering the department in some way. I would like to thank the faculty and Betty (I only mention you specifically because it will probably embarrass you) for their enthusiasm and dedication to providing a quality academic environment. ■

*Josh worked in the main office for his senior year (2004-5) and is now completing his first year of law school at DePaul in Chicago.*

### Brennan - cont'd

standing of human behavior and interaction but has also fulfilled that dichotomous paradox presented even in the mission statement of the College of Arts and Sciences: “The College holds to the principle that knowledge must serve humanity and our environment.” What better way to fulfill this proposition for serving humanity and the environment than the pursuit of majors both in the humanities and the sciences? So, maybe the combination of Biology and Religious Studies should not be considered the anomaly; it is so often presented as; rather, it should be viewed as a desirable, even necessary, component of a well-rounded education. ■

*Stephanie, who was awarded this year’s Outstanding Student in the Academic Study of Religion award, will be attending medical school in the Fall.*

### News Flash

Dr. **Maha Marouan**, who worked in the Department last year as a one year Instructor, has been hired as a tenure-track Assistant Professor, teaching courses on such topics as African American religion and literature.

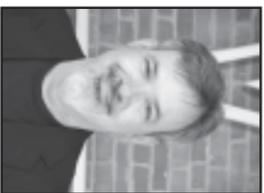
## Faculty Update



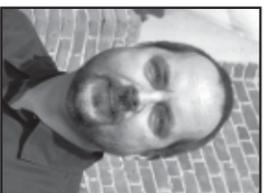
**Ted Trost** is currently pursuing two research projects. He is writing a series of articles on a television advertising campaign designed to counter the membership decline in the once-mainline American denomination, the United Church of Christ. He is also editing the book *The African Diaspora and the Study of Religion* for Macmillan Palgrave Press. With Phil Stolzfus of Saint Olaf's College, he is planning a session on "Religion, Theology, and Music" for the upcoming American Academy of Religion meeting in San Diego.



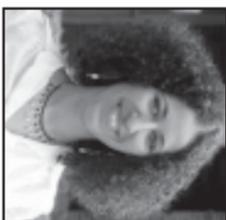
**Steven Ramey** is focusing on the Indian-American communities in Atlanta and Tuscaloosa, and has been reflecting on the ways ethnic associations and religious traditions overlap. His observations reinforce the critique of the divide between religion and culture, which seems to be missing in the common surveys of the religious diversity in the U.S. He has also recently completed a book manuscript that brings together his research on Sindh Hindus and their recreation of their practices outside of their homeland in modern day Pakistan.



**Tim Murphy** is completing work on a book-length project entitled *The Politics of Geist [Spirit]: A Genealogy of the Phenomenology of Religion*, which details the way in which the academic study of religion both reflected and reinforced European colonialism. He is also completing work on an edited volume, *Defining Religion: A Reader*, to be published by Equinox Publishers, UK. He teaches in the areas of comparative religion and theories of religion.



**Russell McCutcheon** recently completed a small introductory book on the study of religion, devoted mainly to the problem of how to define religion. *Studying Religion: An Introduction* will be published later in the year by Equinox Publishers in the UK. Otherwise, apart from teaching and other writing projects, over the past year he has delivered a variety of invited lectures—most notably, two lectures at universities in Switzerland, one in Greece, and he will soon participate in a conference at the University of Copenhagen devoted to the idea of secularism.



**Maha Marouan** has been working on a paper on David Bradley's novel, *The Chaneysville Incident*, which she is giving at the College Language Association conference in April. The paper explores the representation of gender and heroism in African American literature, and situates Bradley's novel in the context of current dialogues about race, gender, and cultural representation.



**Steve Jacobs's** current project is *A Brief History of Judaism*, written for Blackwell Publishers, England, for their 'Brief Histories' series. Other volumes include *A Brief History of Christianity*, *A Brief History of Islam*, *A Brief History of Heaven*, *A Brief History of Heresy*, and *A Brief History of the Saints*. Before the year end, two further volumes, *A Dictionary of Genocide* (Westport: Greenwood Press; co-authored with Samuel Totten and Paul R. Bartrop) and *Genocide in the Name of God: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books; editor and contributor), will be published.

## Books the Faculty Recommend

Ever wonder who you really are? Well, Prof. **Steven Ramey** thinks that William F. Fisher's *Fluid Boundaries: Forming and Transforming Identity in Nepal* (Columbia University Press, 2001) won't help with your identity questions, but it provides an interesting account of a Nepali community that has its own identity crisis, vociferously debating the meaning of their religious and ethnic heritage.

Prof. **Ted Trost** recommends *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton University Press, 2005), James B. Bennett offers a view of the role religion played both to resist, and eventually to further, racial separation in New Orleans during the period following the Civil War. He counters the prevailing notion that the Jim Crow condition, or segregation, arose almost immediately after that war and was, in any case, firmly in place by the time Reconstruction ended in 1877. *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* serves to highlight a heroic era when a new hope was articulated and, for a brief time, foreshadowed. But it can also be read as another example of a recurring pattern in American history, one whose underlying malignancy is revealed from time to time—often after the most recent tidal wave recedes.

Prof. **Tim Murphy** recommends Michael Oren's *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present* (W.W. Norton, 2007) which is a detailed historical study of the remarkably consistent and negative view that Americans have had of Islam and the Middle East from the American Revolution to the current war in Iraq.

Prof. **Maha Marouan** suggests Tama Janowitz's novel, *A Cannibal in Manhattan* (Bloomspury Publishing, 2002) which is a satirical novel which poses important questions about the representation of "otherness" in the west. It tells the story of a reformed cannibal from an imaginary island who marries a narcissistic Peace Corps volunteer from New York and moves to Manhattan. While he wants to discuss Thoreau at a cocktail party, she tells him "If you can't think of anything interesting to say just lean against the wall and look savage." It is a wonderfully sharp satire on the study of the Other. It is very witty and will definitely make you laugh!

Prof. **Steve Jacobs** recommends *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), Robert Sattloff explores a little-known

and less-told story of those who saved and/or attempted to save Jews from the Nazi machine's encroachment into the Middle East during the Second World War. Fluent in Arabic, with both an historian's eye for detail and a journalist's skill in writing, he brings to the reader's attention a part of the Holocaust story otherwise lost.

Prof. **Russell McCutcheon** says that Stephen Prothero's *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (And Doesn't)* (Harper San Francisco, 2007) argues that Americans today know little about their own traditions and those of their neighbors. He argues that the sort of religion that finds salvation in private experience has helped to decrease knowledge about the beliefs, rituals, and institutions of other peoples—whether down the street or across the globe. In places, Prothero's book reads like a nostalgic lament for some bygone era that may never have actually existed; and for those who think that the colonial era notion of "world religions" is today of questionable value (such as our 2007 Aronov Lecturer, **Tomoko Masuzawa**), calling for people's better use of this category surely will be an odd sort of argument. Nonetheless, given that he appeared on "The Daily Show" to discuss the book, it surely will be a hot seller.

## Book Review: No god but God

Karissa Rimsa



*No god but God*, by Reza Aslan (Random House, 2006), is inundated with a discriminating history of Islam in order to advance "an argument for reform." According to the author, this reformation is inevitable, and has already begun. The text is meant to reveal that this is indeed the case. *No god but God* asserts that characterizing the reformation as a clash between the West and the Middle East, rather than an internal struggle between Muslims, is inaccurate. However, the data presented reveals more about the author's preferences and methodology than it does about Islam.

Aslan's text contains a fair amount of data about the "sacred history," or myths of Islam. Aslan first focuses on the emergence of Islam and the life of Muhammad, claiming that Islam, originally, was essentially religiously tolerant, just, and egalitarian—suggesting this is what Islam should espouse today. The text states that the Prophet's faith was a confirmation of the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity, and all three religions worship the same god. Islamic women are represented as integral to Muhammad's success. The veil—now viewed as a symbol of oppression—was intended only for Muhammad's wives. This kind of incongruity between sacred Islamic history and modern symbolism calls into question the "authenticity" of modern Islam as opposed to a nascent form of Islam, one that Aslan seems eager to endorse and contextualize. Ancient Islamic traditions, he contends, must be understood as embroiled in their time period and specific circumstances. Contexts to be considered include the tribal ways of life versus the more sedentary ways of life, the traditionalist doctrine versus the rationalist doctrine, and the influence of other cultures and religions. Aslan also writes extensively about Islam after the death of Muhammad, emphasizing subsequent interpretations that "corrupted" the original Islamic faith.

Aslan's causal recounting of change over time in the Muslim faith culminates in explicating the situation Islam finds itself in today—which he uses to justify his assertion that an Islamic reformation is necessary. Reza Aslan targets his book to Westerners who are unfamiliar with Islam beyond representations of the religion/faith in their own popular media. Additionally, his ideal audience values "typically Western" virtues—democracy, equality, faith-based morality, and freedom of religion. This kind of audience is most likely to sympathize with Aslan's agenda and the reformation he argues for. To meet the needs of his target readers, Aslan's book often resembles a history of Islam. This abbreviated, selective history is often presented in story form,

descriptively embellished like a standard fictional novel. Such a method is efficacious; it caters to Reza Aslan's audience by making the material easier for them to engage in, and capitalizes on Aslan's abilities as a trained fiction writer.

There are at least four other systematic ways in which Aslan's scholarly motives are served within the book, including: appealing to historical and scholarly data, appealing to scriptural data, maintaining analogies/references to other cultures, and exposing authenticating devices of a given "other."

His appeals to historical and scholarly data are the most copious of these four literary/argumentative mechanisms. Aslan takes some historical assertions to be true while rejecting others. Similarly, he relies on the interpretations of various scholars to validate his work while discrediting the claims of scholars whose work does not flatter his ideals. For example, in chapter four, he quotes Max Weber: "Islam was never really a religion of salvation...Islam is a warrior religion," and then immediately contrasts this quotation with a historical (and political) claim: "This deep-rooted stereotype of Islam as a warrior religion has its origins in the papal propaganda of the Crusades, when Muslims were depicted as the soldiers of the Antichrist" (79). Later on, he praises Karen Armstrong's work and uses it to bolster his own (93).

Throughout the book, quotes from the Quran are used to justify a particular point. For example, Aslan claims that "the Quran goes to great lengths to emphasize the equality of the sexes in the eyes of God," relays his own translation of some Quranic verses, and finally clarifies that "the Quran acknowledges that men and women have distinct and separate roles in society. It would have been preposterous to claim otherwise in seventh-century Arabia" (60-61). Aslan uses the Quran to justify some types of practice or interpretation and discredit others. In chapter three, he presents two translations of Quranic verses that pertain to the relation between men and women, pointing out that "if religion is indeed interpretation, then which meaning one chooses to accept and follow depends on what one is trying to extract from the text" (70).

*No god but God* abounds in references to other religions and/or cultures. Aslan seems to often use this as a means of showing the similarities between Islamic tradition or history and other "major" religions. In this way, the author can legitimize Islam as an entity evolving just as other religious traditions have. From chapter nine: "[The] remarkable evolution in Christianity from its inception to its Reformation took fifteen vicious, bloody, and occasionally apocalyptic centuries...Islam has finally begun its fifteenth century" (248).

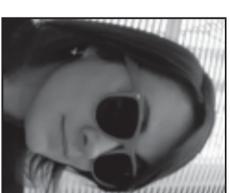
Lastly, Reza Aslan also points out the authenticating devices of a distinct "other" to undermine their claims. These legitimizing mechanisms are usually social, political, or economic in nature. Concerning the validity of the hadith in chapter three, Aslan's readers discover the following statement: "with each successive generation, the 'chain

of transmission,' or *isnad*, that was supposed to authenticate the hadith grew longer and more convoluted, so that...the great majority...were unquestionably fabricated by individuals who sought to legitimize their own particular beliefs and practices by connecting them with the Prophet" (67). Although Reza Aslan is himself prone to a particular context that prompts this very same kind of attempt at authentication, he nevertheless postulates many historical mechanisms that originate from others.

These devices found in Reza Aslan's writing serve to authenticate his own particular perception of his topic while undermining the opposing view. In this way, Aslan's thesis is made all the more clear—by positing an oppositional 'other' that challenges his own assessment, he reveals just what his view is not, and his preferences are both readily maintained and made accessible in *No god but God*. ■

Karissa is a graduating senior major in REL and Philosophy, whose current interests include applying findings from cognitive psychology to the study of religion.

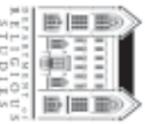
## So, Thinking of a Double Major?



Stephanie Brennan

Sure, religion is a good thing to have sometimes (before a heinous exam or prior to the drop on the free fall at Six Flags), but in all seriousness whatever one's involvement with religion may be, it is undeniable that it is often viewed as a thing to be practiced on Sundays and certainly not as the ideal field of study to pair with a major in biology and an interest in medicine. However, I would have to disagree with the latter claim. As both a biology and a religious studies major, I have often been questioned on the combination of majors—and for the past three years as a biology and religious studies major I have often floundered to find an appropriate and accurate answer to such queries. Now, as a senior headed for medical school in the fall, I realize the true benefits of such a partnership. I came to the University of Alabama as a biology major with a minor in liberal arts through the Blount Undergraduate Initiative. I have always had a strong proclivity toward science, and participating in laboratory research and internships in the Biology Department over the past four years has given me even greater insight into the importance of academic science. However, just as there is more to an individual than DNA, there is more to a good college education than can be found in a single department. I feel that majoring in Religious Studies has not only broadened the scope of my understanding, but also provided me with a unique perspective on the world around me.

Continued on Page 7



## 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**, Room 205. We also follow many of these with a Religion in Culture Student Luncheon, which involves the guest speaker and many of our students who spend the lunch hour discussing a piece of the guest's current research. This gives the students an opportunity to interact with our guest speakers and with the department professors, many of whom attend.



In March, Prof. **Ted Trost** hosted a lunchtime discussion on the 100-level introductory course. Pictured attending (left to right): **Sarah Luken**, **Barclay Owens**, and **Sam Shabel**. Other lunch-time discussions this year focused on the work of the philosopher, Dr. Barbara Forest (SE Louisiana University, who also delivered a public lecture as part of the Alabama Lecture's on Life's Evolution), along with our very own Profs. Jacobs, McCutcheon, and Ramey.

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



**Maha Marrouan** (right) introduces our History Department's **Josephine Nhonggo Simbanegavi**, in January; she spoke on African traditional religions.



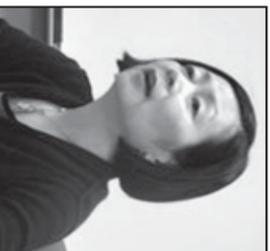
**Alexis McCrossen**, of Southern Methodist University, spoke in September on documenting religion in the Depression era.

## Aronov Lecture Series



**Robert Olin**, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, not only helped fund this year's **Aronov Lecture** but also welcomed those attending. This year's lecturer was Dr. **Tomoko Masuzawa** (Univer-

sity of Michigan). Her work is on the study of religion's relations to the era of European colonialism. Her lecture attracted a diverse group (pictured below): **George Williamson**, of History, and **Marcia Barrett**, of the University Libraries) and was on the concept "world religions," first developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The annual Aronov Lecture,



which was founded in the Fall of 2002, aims to present a nationally recognized scholar of religion capable of addressing topics of wide relevance throughout the Humanities.



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## Thinking Mythologically

William G. Doty



Preparing for an extended interview with Dr. Max Vogt about my approaches to mythology—it will be podcast in the zines *MunBein*g and *Mythic Passages*—here I avoid covering the mythological studies waterfront and highlight just a few of the emphases that I have developed in recent publications and work with graduate students at the University of Alabama and at Pacifica Graduate Institute near Santa Barbara. *Myth: A Handbook*, in the *Greenwood Folklore Handbooks* series (2004; and in licensed paperback, 2007, The University of Alabama Press) reflects many of my orientations, but a number of essays and books (such as *Myths of Masculinity*, 1993) have also created a few waves in the field.

For this brief article I select just a few emphases—not, I hasten to add, necessarily my own inventions (I could cite chapter and verse for many of the points), but certainly emphases combined in ways peculiar to my own scholarly viewpoints. Constantly across my work I have emphasized the ethnographic contexts and the history of reception of mythological items (such as narratives, images, characters). Often I have been able to point out that mythological accounts represent daily life, although they may be regarded variously across any particular society—normative for some folks.

## Alumni News—Where Are They Now

**John Parrish** (2004) has been working on a Master of Arts in Religious Studies at the University of Alberta, Edmonton. Hoping to defend his thesis soon, John spends most of his time checking for acceptance letters from Ph.D. programs. So far, no luck, but in just in case, John will gladly accept your generous donations to the "Send John to Grad School Fund."

**Marianne Stanton** (2005) moved back to Dallas and is working as a private tutor at Lutheran High School. Her concentrations include upper level math and science, but she tried out her coaching skills in cross country and soccer this past year. Marianne is contemplating going after a teaching certificate in hopes of propulsing into a full-time job.

**Peter von Herrmann** (2003)—he reports that nothing's new. (Thanks for the update, Peter.)

**Melanie Williams** (2006) fled the country after graduation and was wandering around Europe. She backpacked until she reached a preset degree

mere entertainments for others. I am less interested in how something originated than in how it is originaly—that is to say, how its multiple possible interpretations seed revisions and reimaginings of social significance. And while my approach has been criticized for my functional, practical bias, I still emphasize very strongly the importance of social modeling. Myths have a great deal to do with gender ideals, national identity, and the way reality is represented—it is never "natural," but always socially constructed (the word *natural* makes me break out with hives no less than the terms *true*, *real*, etc.). We look at the broadest contexts, including other mythologies, to gain a sense of influences and intertextualities.

Furthermore, I am particularly interested in the affective aspects of myth—whatever it is that constitutes "mythicity." We might speak of the sort of "existential grab" by which we recognize a story or image as more important and enchanting than the columns in the daily newspaper. Myth importantly conveys a sense of significance that can usually be felt across cultural or linguistic boundaries.

That means, of course, that mythological materials have long-term importance to their users, and in most cultures, they are materials that have importance in education or ritual—or today, in advertising and the televisual equivalent of pulp fiction. Such leads me to question strongly the twentieth-century emphasis upon "personal appropriation" of myths—the sort of thing highly visible in various religio-psychological "how-to" therapies, which often boils down to "A Venus-identified woman should seek an Ares-identified male."

While most dictionary definitions of myth stress a narrative, I am more and more impressed with how the mythic functions quite apart from particu-

of cultural intelligence (or March). Then, it's off to Northwest Culinary Academy of Vancouver to learn to cook foie gras and such.

**Kristin Bradbury** (2005) began medical school after graduation. Currently a second-year student at Quillen College of Medicine, she anticipates receiving her M.D. in May 2009 and hopes to return to Alabama to complete residency and set up shop. Without a declared specialty, her interests linger in emergency medicine and pediatric rheumatology.

**Samantha Sastre** (2006) was accepted into a graduate certification program at Southern Polytechnic State University in Marietta, Georgia, and is currently studying Information Technology. Though this area of study may seem like a far cry from Religious Studies, she feels that the lessons and methods of study gleaned from her time in the REL department will be invaluable in such a field. Despite having presently traded Nietzsche for networking, Samantha believes her mold is not set yet.

lar stories. It may be represented by themes, characters, images, attitudes, and so forth. And those whose attention to mythology ends with the Greeks or Romans seem to me to have cut off a vital source of cultural creativity that is hardly limited to antiquity, but remains vibrantly active in our contemporary worlds—for instance, in The Matrix or Star Wars franchises, even Fight Club. Perhaps it will have become clear that I see myths everywhere, though I often recognize them only after doing my historical homework. And I think we experience myths as traces (in language, in social patterns) and fragments, very much as folks in antiquity did. There were no "handbooks of myth" in the Greek world, for instance—until it began to decay and Alexandrian intellectuals undertook to create universal models for what had previously been strictly-local deities (the Zeus of Gordo, the Achilles of Demopolis).

And finally, I'll just stress that myths are not merely conservative, but also evocative, stimulating by educating variant imaginings of possible psyche- or role-models. As with any aspect of the religio-political system, they can shut down creativity when it is insisted that they are never-changing or god-sent (the fundamentalist interpretations, especially of scriptural stories). But myths can also provide re-thinking, alternative views of what is possible for the commonweal, and that means that those in political power will always take Plato's perspective that myths are dangerous and must be limited to only those the rulers approve. ■

*Prof. William Doty retired from the Department in the Fall of 2001 and has since then been busy with writing projects, consultations, and teaching for such other units as the Honors College.*

## Now

**Kim Davis** will finish her Master's degree in May 2007 in French linguistics from the University of Alabama. Upon graduation, she hopes to find a job teaching French in the Birmingham area. Also involved with the Alabama Academy of Irish Dance, Kim is a dancer and assistant for the Tuscaloosa area.

**Tim Davis** (2006) tries to teach eighth graders the "ins and outs" of the meaning system English speakers commonly refer to as the Spanish language. In addition, this newfound position within Alabama's highly bureaucratic public education system is really making it difficult for him to live the authentic existence he pursued as a college student.

**Casey Matz** (2004) is currently working in loss prevention for Target. He reports he's completely not utilizing his degrees but having a blast because no two days are the same. He married his college sweetheart, Rebecca (Hammel) Matz, and lives in Pflugerville, TX, with their two dogs.

## It's So Much Fun, We're Surprised They Call it Work



**Tsy Yusef** and Prof. **Tim Murphy** clowning around prior to class. Tsy worked with Prof. Murphy assisting him with his REL100 class in Fall 2006.



Spring 2007 Student Workers, left to right: **Sarah Luken**, **Karissa Rinas**, and **Jennifer Alfano**. Sarah and Jennifer also worked this past Fall in our office, along with **Tsy Yusef**. Our student workers are all also **Silverstein Recipients**.



Prof. **Steve Jacobs** taught a REL100 this Spring and was assisted by **Karissa Rinas**, pictured here on our second floor balcony.

