

THE ETHICS OF FOOD CHOICE AND OTHER MATTERS: an Interview with Andrew Grace

“If we think about it, we see how food intersects with culture, social justice, public health, the community. People can speak volumes by choosing their meals differently.”—**Andrew Grace**

Andrew Grace was born and raised in Alabama. He is an independent documentary filmmaker whose films have aired on Public Television stations and at film festivals across the country. As an undergraduate at the University of Alabama, he double-majored in Religious Studies and American Studies. After a few years in the West, making films, freelancing for magazines, and working as a producer for NPR News, he moved back to his home state to tell stories about the Deep South.

The following conversation took place in February. Mr. Grace’s conversation partner was **Madison Langston**, a Religious Studies major and Silverstein Fellow who participated in last summer’s REL study-abroad program in Greece.

Madison Langston: *Why did you choose to major in Religious Studies?*

Andrew Grace: I initially took classes in the department because of my interest in the art of stories and in particular, the nature of narrative—which remains my primary interest. I was also inspired by Dr. Patrick Green and his teaching methods. As an undergrad I always imagined I would continue in academia, so Dr. Green’s role as a professor interested me and pushed me to take as many classes with him as I could. After accumulating a certain number of hours in the department I decided to major in Religious Studies as well as American Studies.

What class as an undergraduate had the biggest impact on you?

Dr. Ted Trost’s class on the film *Apocalypse Now* was great. I would love to teach a class like that—one that focuses on one film and dissects it weekly over the entire semester.

What did you do after graduation?

I went to the University of Wyoming and received my M. A. in the American Studies program. During that period a friend and I made our first documentary about the reenactments of “Custer’s Last Stand” in southern Montana. We had worked together on a film project during my senior year at Alabama and the summer before graduate school.

What projects are you currently working on?

I teach an interdisciplinary course called “Documenting Justice,” which is taught over two semesters through the Telecommunication and Film Department at the University of Alabama. It focuses on portraying social justice through documentary by familiarizing students with similar projects in the field during the first semester and allowing them to make their own documentaries during the second semester.

I’m also working on a number of films, while finishing up my biggest project, a documentary called “Eating Alabama.” “Eating Alabama” focuses on a year-long commitment, made by myself and three others, to eat foods grown or raised in Alabama exclusively. The project has been

picked up by the Independent Television Service who is now funding the process and will be debuting the film nationally on PBS later this year.

How did you come up with the idea to only eat locally for a year?

My wife, Rashimi, and I participated in community-supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives. Consequently, I became interested in our state’s agricultural history and how the food industry largely reproduced American society’s emphasis on “productivity” above all else. Because of changes in the industry, the produce from small farms was essentially unavailable in the usual venues: supermarkets and corner stores. We were interested in reconnecting with local farmers: seeing how they operated; learning what food choices they made available to us; and exploring how our relationships with food might change if we devoted ourselves exclusively to “eating Alabama.” Inspired by the stories these farmers had to tell, and inspired by other members of the “local foods movement,” we joined another couple in making this project work.

What obstacles did you meet during the project?

In the beginning, it was hard to find local farmers. We couldn’t find any kind of grain, milk, eggs, or meat. But after traveling and networking we were able

to meet a group of farmers within the state who were able to provide all local food. What we couldn’t find we attempted to grow ourselves, or we simply did without.

What are the most common misconceptions about eating locally or sustainable agriculture?

I think many people believe local sustainable agriculture is a fad, or that it’s somehow outside the mainstream in almost an elitist way. But if you



talk to older folks about how they used to eat, you'll find a lot of local food systems, a lot of organic agriculture, and much closer connections to the land. When we advocate for local food systems and sustainable agriculture, we're not trying to create something new—we're trying to regain something fundamental that we've lost!

What tips do you have for other people looking to make changes in their diet?

Pay a good price for good food. If you have enough money to be thoughtful about the food you feed your family, don't snicker at the prices your local organic farmer charges for heirloom tomatoes. Think about the lives of those farmers—their kids, their retirement funds, their dreams of buying a bigger tractor! We're so seduced by the availability of cheap food that we become almost defensive when we're asked to pay fair prices to support a farmer's livable wage. It's an unfortunate consequence of the fact that we, as Americans, pay less for food as a percentage of our income than any other nation anywhere and at any point in all of history. But not all people have enough money to feed themselves and their families organic, locally-grown food. If you can't do that, plant a garden and at least visit the farmer's market regularly. Share a local meal with friends and talk about your sources, your conversations with farmers, your connections to the com-

munity. Food is powerful stuff. For too long we've taken it for granted.

How do you think the documentary as a storytelling medium compares to other forms of narrative?

I love documentary because, like all film, it synthesizes story with image and sound. Film is such a powerful medium! You can combine brilliant imagery with evocative music and thoughtful dialogue. The camera allows us to get into spaces that might otherwise be inaccessible to a large audience. For me, film is the ultimate artistic medium.

What are some of the documentaries or directors that inspired you?

I'm a big fan of Errol Morris (*The Thin Blue Line* [1988]; *The Fog Of War* [2003])—although I'll probably never make a film that looks like his—and the Maysles brothers (*What's Happening! The Beatles in America* [1964]; *Gimme Shelter* [1970]). As a Southerner, I'm particularly drawn to the work of Ross McElwee (*Sherman's March* [1986]; *Bright Leaves* [2003]). But actually, I'm probably more inspired by novelists, visual artists, and narrative filmmakers than I am documentary filmmakers.

If you could have five people over for dinner, dead or alive, who would they be and what would you cook them?

That's tough—five people all together? Maybe

Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Barack Obama, and William Faulkner. I'm not sure what we'd talk about, but I'd serve (assuming this is happening during the winter) an arugula salad with pecans and goat cheese, collard greens, shrimp and grits and cornbread. There'd be rye whiskey at the table (for Faulkner and me) and a pecan pie for dessert. ❖

ASIAN STUDIES

In the Spring of 2009, **Dean Robert Olin** in the **College of Arts and Sciences** asked **Steven Ramey** to revive the **Asian Studies Program** and serve as its director. For the past year and a half, Steven has worked with other faculty who teach and research topics related to Asia in an effort to revive and revise the curriculum for the Asian Studies minor and to promote it across campus. The revitalized Asian Studies minor became an option for students beginning this past Fall 2009 semester and is currently housed in the Department of Religious Studies, supplementing the department's major and minor in Religious Studies and its minor in Judaic Studies. Betty, Donna, and student workers in the Religious Studies office assist with the administration of the program, and the Asian Studies program cooperates with the department, including co-sponsoring this year's Aaron Aronov Lecture in the Study of Religion. ❖

A NOTE FROM THE DEPARTMENT



Greetings, Friends of the Religious Studies Department at the University of Alabama! It has been a productive and memorable year here on the veranda of Manly Hall.

TRANSITIONS IN THE DEPARTMENT

It has also been a year of transitions. In the fall of

2009, Russell McCutcheon returned to full faculty status—having served as department chair since 2001. Russ has also been appointed Associate Information Officer in the College of Arts and Sciences. Maha Marouan came to this campus initially from England in 2005 as a participant in an international conference sponsored by the Religious Studies Department. She will relocate to the Department of Gender and Race Studies in the fall of 2010. Also this fall, Merinda Simmons will assume the position of assistant professor in the Religious Studies department. Merinda served for two years as an Instructor in the department prior to this new appointment. The department has welcomed Vaia Touna into our midst as an Instructor this spring. Vaia assisted Russ McCutcheon with the “Religious Studies Goes to Greece” course in her hometown of Thessaloniki during the previous two summers. Finally,

Christopher Johnson assumed the role of faculty advisor to the Theta Alpha Kappa Honors Society in November. He will continue his advising role and will take on teaching responsibilities as Instructor in the department this coming fall.

AWARDS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS

The Department is fortunate to be able to provide a number of learning and scholarship opportunities for our majors and minors. The **Silverstein Scholarship** is named after the late Dr. Joseph Silverstein who earned his B.A. ('30) and his M.A. ('32) from the University of Alabama. Each year, students who have excelled academically receive one of these monetary awards. The **Amy Lynn Petersen Endowed Support Fund** is dedicated to providing, at the instructor's discretion, a gift of one book for each student in the Capstone seminar. This REL 490 course is required of all majors and minors and is offered each spring semester. The fund was established in memory of Amy Lynn Petersen, a Religious Studies minor who died unexpectedly in October of 2003. The Department also features the **Aaron Aronov Lecture in the Study of Religion**, which enters its ninth year in 2010-2011. The aim of this annual lecture series is to introduce to the University of Alabama community a nationally recognized scholar of religion who is capable of reflecting on issues of wide relevance to scholars from across the humanities and social sciences. Dr. Nathan Katz of Florida International University delivered a memorable lecture last November. In the coming year our lecturer will be Aaron W.

Hughes, Gordon and Gretchen Gross Professor of Jewish Studies at the State University of New York, Buffalo. More information about our scholarship recipients and our lecturers is available at the department's website: <http://religion.ua.edu/>. Those so inclined will also find on our website information about how to contribute financially to these on-going academic endeavors.

ALUMNI CONNECTIONS

In addition to the website, we invite all alumni and friends of the department to keep connected with us through two pages on Facebook: “Religious Studies Student Association” and “Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama.” **Currently we are inviting people to recommend a name for this newsletter.** Please participate in the effort and use it as an opportunity to update us on your activities!

IN THIS EDITION

This edition of the newsletter contains articles that focus on the activities of our alumni, students, staff, and faculty. Thanks to all who contributed to this newsletter, and in particular: to Donna Martin for newsletter design; and to John Lyles and Madison Langston for the interviews.

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

Theodore Trost
Chair, Religious Studies Department

FACULTY/STAFF NEWS



As well as being the Administrative Secretary to the Department, **Ms. Betty Dickey** had the opportunity to support the University of Alabama Crimson Tide football team as they won their 13th National Championship by attending the SEC Championship game in Atlanta,

GA, and the BCS National Championship game at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California. **ROLL TIDE.** ❖

In the aftermath of his sabbatical last academic year, **Dr. Steve Jacobs** is completing a number of publishing projects.

His book *The Jewish Experience: An Introduction to Jewish History and Jewish Life* was just published by Augsburg Fortress Press. He has

also submitted the manuscript of “50 Key Thinkers on Holocaust and Genocide” to Routledge Press. Two additional manuscripts are on their way to the publishers. Dr. Jacobs is also an active conference participant with presentations scheduled for Tempe, Arizona, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Sao Paulo, Brazil, during the coming months. ❖



Dr. Christopher D.L. Johnson is a native son to Tuscaloosa who recently returned to the South after finishing his doctorate in Religious Studies at The University of Edinburgh in Scotland. He joined the staff of the Religious Studies Department during the fall semester of 2009 as

faculty advisor to the local chapter of Theta Alpha Kappa (TAK), the National Honor Society for Religious Studies and Theology. He also teaches courses in the University Honors program, New College, and International Honors, including “The Spirituality of the Christian East,” “The Holy Fool,” and “Culture and Human Experience.” Dr. Johnson’s first book, scheduled for publication later this year by Continuum Press, is titled *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer: Contesting Contemplation*. Please see his faculty profile on the Religious Studies website for information about Theta Alpha Kappa. ❖



In her capacity as part-time Office Assistant, **Donna Martin** is working on new layouts for our newsletter as well as updating our website. In the afternoons she helps her husband with their engineering and inspection business. ❖

In collaboration with Dr. Phil Beidler of the English Department and Merinda Simmons, **Professor Marouan** helped organize last fall’s “Race and Displacement” conference at the University of Alabama. She also organized the “African Diaspora Religions” panel for the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion in Montreal. She is the recipient of a significant grant from the College Academy for Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity (CARSCA); this grant will enable her to pursue research for a project entitled “Rethinking Moroccan History and Identities through Women’s Oral Narratives.” Beginning with fall semester 2010, Maha Marouan’s appointment will move to the newly-constituted Department of Gender and Race Studies. ❖



After eight years of service as Department Chair, Prof. **Russell McCutcheon** stepped down from that office in August. He had the Fall 2009 semester off from teaching but continued to serve the Department and the College of Arts & Sciences—where he has been appointed the Communications Director for Technological Resources; in this role, Russ has developed web-based resources to orient new Department chairs to their jobs. In the Spring 2010 semester he returned to the classroom, co-teaching two courses with Vaia Touna. He also continues writing. *The Sacred is the Profane: On the Political Nature of “Religion,”* a collection of essays co-written with his friend Bill Arnal of the University of Regina, Canada, has been contracted with Oxford University Press and should appear in the coming year. ❖

Dr. Tim Murphy is on research leave or sabbatical, using this time to write a book that will be the summation of his life’s work to date. The title of the book is: “*By this Sign You Shall Conquer*”: *Elements of a Semiotic Theory of Religion*. Semiotics is the study of symbols, or signs, as they actually function within culture. In a related activity, Dr. Murphy is creating an online, virtual institute

dedicated to the use of semiotic theory to study religion. This project is being pursued in conjunction with William Deal of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, where the virtual institute will be



housed. It will be called the “Institute for the Semiotic Study of Religion.” With respect to teaching, Tim Murphy taught a seminar on the religion of the Lakota Sioux Indians last spring. Next fall, he will be teaching a course on

the history of Christian theology and another course, “Theories of Religion.” The latter course will be devoted to the concept of interpretation both as it is used by scholars of religion and by practitioners of religion. The Department congratulates Dr. Murphy on his nomination as a candidate for the “Last Lecture Series” sponsored by the Graduate School of the University of Alabama. ❖



In addition to serving as Director of Asian Studies, **Dr. Steven Ramey** has begun developing his next research project.

It incorporates theoretical reflections from his research on Sindhi Hindus and on Indian-Americans in the Southeast and analyzes the

web of relations connecting Indian-American cultural and religious practices across the region. He continues to conduct fieldwork in Alabama and Atlanta. Recent research will be published in the forthcoming chapter in an edited volume on Sindhi culture. He also presented a paper at the regional AAR meeting in Atlanta in March at which gathering he was elected vice president of the American Academy of Religion, Southeast Region. ❖



Dr. Simmons is working on revisions to a book manuscript based on her award-nominated dissertation “After Mary Prince: Navigating ‘Authenticity’ in 20th-Century Diasporic Women’s Migration Narratives.” She also completed editing

a volume of essays with Dr. Maha Marouan that resulted from the Race and Displacement Symposium held on campus in October 2009. Her essay “Placing Theory: Thinking and Teaching ‘Women

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and Religion” is forthcoming in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. During the last academic year, Dr. Simmons taught large-enrollment and honors Introduction to Religious Studies classes, as well as the writing seminar “Myth, Ritual, and Magic: Religion and the South.” Along with completing a few writing projects on the horizon, she is looking forward to teaching the graphic novel *Blankets* in her honors intro course in the Fall. ❖

Ms. Vaia Touna arrived in New Orleans in November to attend the annual conference of the Society of Biblical Literature. She has been living in Tuscaloosa since then. She is co-teaching two classes with Russell McCutcheon: a large enrollment introduction to the study of religion class (REL 100) and an advanced seminar on “authenticity” (REL 480). She is also teaching the Honors introductory course and, as our ambassador to the Modern Languages and Classics Department, she is teaching a course in Modern Greek. In March, she presented her paper “Redescribing Iconography” at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. ❖



In August, **Dr. Trost** was appointed chair of the Religious Studies Department by Dean Robert Olin and with the recommendation of the Religious Studies faculty. He serves as co-chair of the Music and Religion consultation of the American

Academy of Religion. In that capacity, he moderated the panel “Explorations in Music and Religion” at the Academy’s November conference in Montreal. His paper, “Site of Anxiety: The *Quipper* as Harbinger of Pan Am’s Fate,” was presented at the Popular Culture Association’s annual conference in Saint Louis. ❖

READ, LISTEN, WATCH

I am currently reading *Humanity* by Jonathan Glover. It is an exceptionally well-written history of a concept central to the notion of civilization. I am also reading *Heat Wave* by Richard Castile—a delightful whodunit. For my recent birthday, daughter Naomi and son-in-law Chris Pryor gave me a set of CDs by the famous (infamous?) Dr. Demento. This is a collection of humorous songs (e.g. “I’m My Own Grandpa”) from the ‘40s, ‘50s, ‘60s, ‘70’s, and 80’s. What a hoot! ❖ **—Steve Jacobs**, Associate Professor, Aronov Chair Judaic Studies

I have recently rediscovered the joys of primetime television, my typical diet consisting of *Big Bang Theory*, *Fringe*, and *24*. We’ll see how long this sordid love affair will last!

The music I’ve been enjoying: Andrew Bird’s rendition of “How we gonna keep em down on the farm?”; Simon and Garfunkel; Radiohead’s *In Rainbows*; Sigur Rós; Shugo Tokumaru; Iron and Wine’s *Creek Drank the Cradle*; The Byrds’ *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*; Rachmaninov’s “Vespers”; Bill Frisell’s *Good Dog, Happy Man*; Sufjan Stevens; Sun Kil Moon; and plenty of Byzantine chant. Most of these are old favorites, with the exception of Shugo Tokumaru—whom I recommend to anyone wanting to fill the day full of sparkling Japanese bliss-pop.

My reading has been related to the course I am teaching on holy fools (watch the film *Ostrov* for a good example); on orientalism as it relates to Eastern Christianity; and on a unique tradition of using nonsense syllables in Byzantine chant. I am telling myself that I will eventually have time for some pure pleasure reading before I pass on. That could be a sign that I should cut down on the primetime. ❖ **—Christopher Johnson**, Advisor to Theta Alpha Kappa

Recently I watched a movie: *Angels and Demons*, starring Tom Hanks. He plays a professor whose specialty is religious symbolism. As the process of selecting a new Pope is taking place, several Cardinals are abducted and a terrorist attack is threatened on the Vatican. This action movie opens with the burial of the just-deceased Pope, followed by scenes on some history of Catholicism, including depictions of notable sites, religious symbols, and the tension between science and the Church.

With spring not quite yet arriving, I thought I could get an early start on it by reading Mel Bartholomew’s *Square Foot Gardening* for planning my new garden ideas for this year. ❖ **—Donna Martin**, Office Assistant

Apart from Thaddeus Quince & The New Originals’ latest CD, I’m listening to Blue Rodeo’s new release, *The Things We Left Behind*, and, as I type this, Patty Griffin’s new CD is playing off the web in my office. In terms of reading, I’m trying to figure out just what’s being reconsidered in Anne Taves’s new book, *Religious Experience Reconsidered* and I recently read David Lodge’s novel, *Deaf Sentence*. I am now almost through his earlier novel *Think*. And as for watching, I’ve just discovered *Outnumbered*, a British sitcom—it’s hilarious—while rediscovering the fun of watching Dr. Who. ❖ **—Russell McCutcheon**, Professor

Watching. I recently saw the film, *Avatar*. While I was awed by the visual elements of the film there were aspects of the plot that I found problematic. I am considering writing an article on the film that will discuss the paradoxical situation wherein the colonizers are the oppressors of the indigenous population on the one hand, and the colonists are

the saviors of the indigenous people on the other hand. This is a typical feature of contemporary films dealing with the issue of Euro-American contact with indigenous peoples (e.g., *Dances with Wolves* has a similar plot). I am also watching the NFL playoffs and following the “hot stove” period of Major League Baseball trades and deals.

Reading. I am reading two books. *Dissent, Injustice and the Meanings of America* by Steven Shiffrin which argues, as the back cover says, “Americans should not just tolerate dissent. They should encourage it.” The other book is *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* by William Connolly. Connolly is one of the best political theorists around and I cannot recommend his work too highly.

Listening. I’ve been listening to various Delta blues artists and “retro-rock” groups such as the Allman Brothers, Cream, the Doors, and the Beatles (*Revolver*). ❖ **—Tim Murphy**, Associate Professor

Recently I watched *The Cup* (1999), directed and written by a Tibetan Buddhist Lama, Khyentse Norbu; it is a feature film that depicts World Cup Soccer fever in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery. The film juxtaposes the exuberant novice monks, who sneak out of the monastery to watch soccer matches on a local television, against the staid leaders of the monastery. The multiple twists in the story, however, highlight how the caricatures of the formal leaders and the playful novices do not represent the depths of the characters as Norbu fleshes them out. Filmed on location in Bhutan, the movie also addresses the struggles of Tibetan Buddhists to maintain their heritage outside of Chinese controlled Tibet. It is a fascinating film for people interested in globalization and contemporary constructions of traditions, particularly in contexts of migration. ❖ **—Steven Ramey**, Assistant Professor

With the college radio station that our students must suffer, I’m betting you all might like a little salve for your wounded ears. Here are some things that have been recently hanging out with my ratty bookmarks and with my iTunes files.

First, a playlist of just a few artists (and specific albums) you should take a listen to. There are some undeniable gods on the list (does anyone *not* love DOOM, after all?), but I’ve squeezed in just enough so that you can impress your friends with your iconoclasm: Dirty Projectors—*Bitte Orca*; Beirut—*The Flying Club Cup*; Blitzen Trapper—*Furr*; Coconut Records—*Davy*; Leadbelly—*When the Sun Goes Down*; The Roots—*Game Theory*; The Felice Brothers—*The Felice Brothers and Yonder Is The Clock*; Joanna Newsome—*Ys*; Bon Iver—*For Emma, Forever Ago*; Brian Eno & David Byrne—*Everything that Happens Will Happen Today*; Thao Nguyen & the Get Down Stay Down—*We Brave Bee Stings and All*; Passion Pit—*Chunk of Change*; Talib Kweli—*Eardrum*; DOOM—*Born Like This*; Patrick Watson—*Wooden Arms*; Bill Callahan—*Sometimes I Wish We Were An Eagle*.

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And here's some stuff I've been reading recently: Sawako Nakayasu—*Texture Notes*; Matvei Yankelevich—*Boris by the Sea*; Zoë Wicomb—*The One That Got Away: Short Stories*; Jonathan D. Culler—*On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*; Harry G. Frankfurt—*On Bullshit*; Sarah Vowell—*The Wordy Shipmates*. ❖ —**Merinda Simmons**, Instructor

I have enjoyed reading *Small World* by David Lodge, an interesting novel about the academic life. While Lodge gives insights about theoretical issues, the story, with its peculiar characters, unfolds in a very funny way! I have started reading *Her Fearful Symmetry* by Audrey Niffenegger, recommended to me by Marcia Hay-McCutcheon. And since I was asked to make reference here to something exotic (i.e., Greek), I'm also reading—well, when I find time—Greek poets, such as Kiki Dimoula and Odysseus Elytis (winner of the 1979 Nobel Prize for Literature). Among the latter's poems I particularly like "Drinking the Sun of Corinth":

Drinking the sun of Corinth
Reading the marble ruins
Striding across vineyards and seas
Sighting along the harpoon
A votive fish that slips away
I found the leaves that the sun's psalm memorizes
The living land that passion joys in opening.

I drink water, cut fruit,
Thrust my hand into the wind's foliage
The lemon trees water the summer pollen
The green birds tear my dreams
I leave with a glance
A wide glance in which the world is recreated
Beautiful from the beginning to the dimensions of the heart!

I'm listening to a wide range of Greek, American, and Canadian singers and it is hard for me to decide my favorites. As for what I'm watching, I'm not a big fan of television; I prefer the big screen. So lately I have seen *Up in the Air* with George Clooney and *It's Complicated* with Meryl Streep, Steve Martin, and Alec Baldwin. ❖ —**Vaia Touna**, Visiting Instructor

I have been watching *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Mad Men*, and *Heroes*—with particular interest in how religious rhetoric and convictions are portrayed in these modern myths. In addition to René Girard's *To Double Business Bound*, I have enjoyed reading the novel *The River of Strange People*, by Jonathan Rowe; Wendy Rawlings's *The Agnostics*; and David Gewanter's recent poetry collection, *War Bird*. As far as music is concerned, I'm listening to The Pogues' *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash*; Wire's *Pink Flag*; Dusty Springfield's *Dusty in Memphis*; and Miles Davis's *Big Fun*. I am also always listening to Joni Mitchell's albums *Hejira* and *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* as well as Bob Marley and the Wailers' *Burnin'*. ❖ —**Theodore Trost**, Associate Professor and Chair

RELIGION, FOOD, AND FOOTBALL: a Conversation with Vaia Touna



During the Spring semester, 2010, the Department of Religious Studies has had the extraordinary good fortune to welcome Ms. Vaia Touna into our midst. Ms. Touna was trained at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki where she earned both the B.A. and M.A. degrees in the study of religion. She is currently an ABD ("All But Dissertation") doctoral student at the Aristotle University. Although Greek is her first language, she is fluent in English, French, and Italian. In her scholarly pursuits she works primarily with ancient Greek source materials.

In the following conversation, Ms. Touna chats with **John Lyles**, a Religious Studies major and Silverstein Fellow who participated in the Department-sponsored study-abroad program in Greece during the summer of 2009.

Mr. Lyles: I suppose there is no really easy way to jump into these sorts of things so here we go. How did you become acquainted with our Department?

Ms. Touna: The first time I heard about it was in 2006 from Prof. McCutcheon whom I met during a conference in Thessaloniki, Greece. When he returned to Alabama, he sent me the newsletter of the department so that I could get to know you a little bit better.

Could you explain your previous involvement with the Department prior to this semester?

For the past two years I have been assisting Prof. McCutcheon with his study-abroad trip to Greece by leading two groups around Thessaloniki and other historic sites in Northern Greece. Prior to last year's trip I had the opportunity to come here and teach four classes to the students going on the trip.

So during these classes, what did you teach the students?

Well you were one of them so you should know the answer to that (haha)! I tried to teach them some basic Greek vocabulary. I think you still remember *Me lene...*?

Yes, Me lene John! ("My name is John" for those unfamiliar with Modern Greek.)

Good. I also taught a brief history of Thessaloniki and continued my interest in Euripides' *Hippolytus*—the topic of my M.A. thesis.

Well, you did a lot of work when we went to Greece.

I was wondering how much convincing Professor McCutcheon needed to do to get you so significantly involved in the program.

To prepare the trip and make arrangements for the site visits took a lot of time. Prof. McCutcheon and I emailed back and forth to work through the logistics, but he didn't have to convince me because I was showing people who were not from Greece the "authentic" Greece if you will (laughter). I was able to show you my country, and in exchange I got to meet a lot of interesting young people. He did not have to do much convincing at all. I enjoyed being with you all and discussing various topics relevant to our mutual interests!

Indeed, I recall that some of your colleagues—Katerina, Klearhos, and Athanasios—often found it interesting to go to some of the historic sites (like Mount Olympus, Vergina, Pella, and Phillip's tomb) because they had not been to them since they were in grade school.

Right. But that is not the case with me because I have always had an interest in the historic sites and museums. Of particular interest to me in my role as guide for the study-abroad group was the way I was also reinventing, shall we say, these places—because of the questions and interests you had. However, there are many people who don't visit these places regularly.

That's fascinating to hear. Greece has such a long history compared to America. I mean, we take for granted our museums and visits to the state capitol as young students, but not returning to these places isn't a big deal. Our history seems short and comparatively insignificant. But when you say that Greek people also ignore the history that's all around them, I find it kind of shocking.

Well, we are similar in that way. We don't live our everyday life thinking "we have an ancient past"; however, whenever we have a chance to show others our country, we are being reminded that we have one to take pride in. Yet, prior to that we don't feel pride; we feel pride only because someone else is reminding us of our past. Pride needs two people, the outsider and the insider.

So all the preparation, all the pride, everything associated with the trip, would you say that the trip was a success?

I think that the trips were successful, but I think you have to judge the success based on what the students think. You really need to look at what they have gained from it.

I know we would all like to go back.

I guess it was a success then because it made you all want to go back again.

Let's change roles here. What is the thing you remembered that makes you want to go back? What influenced you?

I really loved the day trips, especially going to Phillip's tomb. That was awesome. That whole day was amazing because we saw Vergina, Pella,

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and Phillip's tomb. It was just shocking. Now that we are teaching the authenticity class and are involved in that discussion, I wish I could go back now because you could tell that a lot of it had been rebuilt, even the foundations. Knowing that, one can actually tell what is taking place at these archaeological digs, primarily the discourse on the past and authenticity. Take for example the city center, they flat out told you that they had rebuilt this section and that section because they wanted to give you a sense of the "past." Without these "rebuilt" cues, the visitor would have no idea what it would have been like, whereas the archaeologist uncovering little foundations or edgings can picture the building in their minds because of all the previous knowledge that he or she has gained over years of study.

So combining the trip with the discourse on authenticity would be interesting to revisit and talk about again?

I think if we would have had the authenticity course last spring before we went to Greece, then we would have had a lot more to discuss concerning the historical sites.

Yeah that's a good idea actually. We might have to consider including it on our next trip. Let's switch the roles back: what are you doing this semester at the University?

I'm teaching four courses. One in Modern Greek in the Department of Modern Languages. I'm co-teaching two classes with Russell McCutcheon, REL 480 "The Politics of 'Authenticity'" (which we have just been discussing) and REL 100; on my own I also teach the honors introduction to religious studies.

Do you like it so far?

Very much. It's a great experience because I get to know a very different educational system, and I really do enjoy it from that perspective. I am getting to know people and what they think about the topics we are covering. So it's very good and rewarding for me.

Do you find the students much different in Alabama as opposed to Greece? Is their thinking different in terms of the topics?

The truth is that any comparison would be unfair because I don't teach things like this in Greece. But there are differences. What I find interesting here is that the students are easily convinced to talk. That is quite nice. They probably talk because I make the lessons so interesting (laughter)!

Of course, of course. However, you'd be surprised because there are many times when we students will sit in class and refuse to talk. So you should consider yourself lucky. I'm guilty of not talking too. That's too bad for your professors. . . or maybe not. . . .

All right. You got me there. So you've been in Tuscaloosa now for two months. Have you been to Hooligan's?

Of course I've been there. The food is very close to what I'm used to tasting and that is a great thing to have.

So is it "authentic"?

HAHA! So all of our discussion is going to revolve around "authentic or not"? Yes it was very "authentic." When I tasted it I said, "This is the taste of home." Still, just because the food is like what I am used to eating doesn't mean all Greeks eat like I do. I find everything here rather spicy. The good thing is that you have many different foods from all over the world to choose from.

What's too different? What's a restaurant in town that you would act as the food critic and say "You need to lighten up on the spice"?

Steak is an issue. We also have steak in Greece, which I like very much, and I haven't yet eaten the steak that I have in my mind. It would either be too rare or well done, which here means burned. You wouldn't find that in Greece.

Could it be that you just haven't found the right place or the right chef that would meet your steak qualifications?

Any suggestions? I want to try a good steak.

DePalma's has pretty good steak.

Yes, I went there for lunch. And I had one of the best pizzas ever. See, I'm not whining about everything. I do like most of the food. I'm starting to like sushi—really it's my new passion, sushi.

So Surin? Ruan Thai?

Yes, Surin has this great appetizer with cheese in it. I can't remember the name of it. . . .

Crab angels?

Crab angels! Oh I love that. This is the closest thing to doughnut. It's a weird comparison, I know, but those who know me well will understand, because I like doughnuts very much. One thing that I love being here is the delicious doughnuts. It's on these terms that I equate crab angels to doughnuts.

Shifting back to religion, how does the study of religion in Greece compare to our study of religion?

In Greece, Religious Studies is a sub-department of Theology, but you can also find religious studies courses in other departments, for example, archaeology. Actually we have two professors one studies Islam and the other studies ancient Greek religions—though he also does theories of the study of religion. And of course we look at Buddhism, Hinduism etc. The rest of the theological department's courses focus primarily on Orthodox Christianity.

If you had to describe the University of Alabama, what would say?

Although I've been here only two months, I do like it a great deal, the architecture of the buildings, the fact that there is a lot of green—the trees and the park-like environment—is basic. And of course I'm

amazed by the technology in the classrooms; it makes the life of a professor easier and benefits the students a lot. You are lucky to have such rich libraries. I like the sense of openness. What I find sad is that people do not walk much but prefer driving. That is very different from what I'm used to.

I hear from an anonymous source that you watched both championship games (SEC and BCS). Who did you root for?

That's right! I'm starting to become quite the fan!! Of course I rooted for our team and was very pleased that my being here coincided with Alabama winning the Rose Bowl! Roll Tide Roll! Isn't that what you say?!

Yes, that's right (ha)! So, closing this brief interview, is there something you want to say to the readers of the newsletter?

Well, I want to thank those who made it possible for me to come here. I have been given a great opportunity to meet different people and learn a different culture. This has been a wonderful experience!❖

ALUMNI NEWS

Alison Bell (2002)

Since graduating with a Religious Studies and American Studies degree from UA in 2002, I've relied on the skills attained through those programs during my graduate studies and in my career in the public policy field. Currently, I am a consultant for an Affordable Housing firm located in San Diego, California. In this role I travel across the country assisting Public Housing Authorities (PHA) improve their programs through the re-engineering of internal operations, utilization of new technology and the documentation of policies and procedures. Basically, I write a lot of very long, detailed (and some would say, quite dry) documents for clients. Prior to becoming a consultant, I graduated from Johns Hopkins University in 2004 and then worked as an education budget analyst for two years. After working as a budget analyst I worked in a PHA as a business analyst for two years.



Although I gained the technical expertise of my current field while in graduate school and

Bell, continued

subsequent employment, I learned the writing skills that I often rely on while a student at the University of Alabama. The many lengthy papers required by each Religious Studies course helped me improve my grammar but also helped develop the ability to flesh out an idea into a well thought out argument with solid evidence to back it up. Perhaps most importantly, however, my degree in Religious Studies taught me a way of viewing the world that demands respect and understanding of people's beliefs and way of life regardless of my own personal opinion. Without that perspective it would be impossible to work closely and successfully with clients, affordable housing participants, and others throughout our country. ❖

Darren Surman (2003)



My first class in the Department of Religious Studies was in 1998: a "Religion in America" class and taught by Dr. Ted Trost. (I believe it might have

been his first semester at UA as well.) I still have not forgotten the class discussions of movies such as *Blade Runner*, *Being There*, and *The Big Chill*, as well as the music of Bruce Springsteen and "The Eagles." I just remember having a GREAT time! It was my first introduction, not only to the department, but to those types of discussions and analyses that students of the department benefit from on a daily basis. It was exciting to find wonderful, new ways of thinking about religion and the various ways it can manifest itself throughout our daily lives and culture, ways I had never thought of before. A nice benefit was that, because of that class, I forged a close friendship with Dr. Trost that has remained to this day.

I graduated from UA in 2003 with a B.A., not from Religious Studies, but from New College. My work in the Religious Studies department, however, was foundational for my later academic pursuits and decisions. I am currently completing my Ph.D. in Political Theory at UA. My interests—ranging from the Existentialism of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, to the art and politics of creating music, to Environmental Political Theory—still draw on the discussions I was introduced to back in 1998. So, although I was not an official graduate of the Department of Religious Studies, I nevertheless consider my time in the department to be a crucial and wonderful part of my development as a scholar. I wish the Department of Religious Studies at UA nothing but the best for the future! ❖

Samantha Sastre (2006)

I entered the University of Alabama in the fall of 2002 with somewhat unusual goals and aspirations as I firmly declared my major as "Religious Studies." I will have you know outright that none of them were met and all of them have changed significantly. But I digress. I shall start at the beginning, where things generally start.



After plunging into my first Religious Studies course, "Intro to World Religions" (as it was then called), with Dr. McCutcheon, I had the first of many revelations that were to come during my time with the department. We are all searching for something. The difference is in where and how you find whatever that something is. A myriad of courses and accompanying revelations later, I graduated and began my life as an alumnae instead of a student. Since then, I have been a bookseller, a veterinary assistant, and a reservations agent for a major airline. I also had a brief stint in grad school studying Information Technology. I feel that my experiences in the Religious Studies department have made me a more well-rounded individual, able to easily mesh with people from a myriad of backgrounds, and to look at situations from a perspective that is unique among my peers. ❖

Matthew Satcher (2006)

I'm finishing my senior year of medical school at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and making preparations to apply to residency programs in family medicine. Medical school has certainly been a different experience than being a double major in religious studies and philosophy at UA. I dare say



I was spoiled by the close contact with my professors and being treated like a colleague who could make serious contributions to our discussion. Things are a bit more impersonal and routine at this level, as one might expect. Nevertheless, making a difference for patients can be very rewarding as one moves up the ranks in the hierarchy of medicine.

I'm sure most would think a background like mine wouldn't be very useful to a future physician, but I have found things to be quite to the contrary. The

critical thinking one learns as a religious studies major and the ability to consider the "varieties" of human experience are crucial to the field of medicine. It is a simple matter to cast off groups of patients for poor lifestyle choices or failure to adhere to treatment regimens. What's more difficult is to consider why these things might occur, how a person's background, experiences, or worldview might affect behavior, and consider ways to confront those things to improve a person's health. I am a prime example of this, as I credit my undergraduate background with influencing my choice of medicine—and my further choice to become a primary care physician in family medicine. I look forward to the next few years as I complete my residency training and have the opportunity to fully put into practice the skills I learned as an undergraduate at UA. ❖

Sarah [Luken] Hydrick (2007)



I entered the University of Alabama as a Freshman in 2003 with intentions of becoming a doctor.

On the way to fulfilling University Honors Program requirements, I enrolled in REL105, an honors section of the Introduction to Religious Studies course. The methods and conversations really sparked my interest. I was expected to truly think rather than memorize facts or train myself in a specific skill set. In short, I was hooked pretty quickly.

I reconsidered my goals and my plans and realized how much I enjoyed the academic study of religion. Still, I eased into the department slowly by declaring a minor, then major and finally fully crossing over as an Office Assistant. Working in the department for two years never failed to surprise me. The atmosphere is creative and respectful, and my experiences there have served as a learning experience for which I have come to be very thankful.

After my undergraduate graduation, I obtained my MBA degree from UA and currently work as a Financial Analyst for the Ford Motor Company in Michigan. Although business, especially finance, may seem unrelated to liberal arts, my undergraduate education in Religious Studies taught me to approach issues with different perspectives and to consider all ideas with an open mind. Creativity is a driving force in business today, and the Religious Studies Department at UA helped me develop mine. ❖

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RELIGIOUS STUDIES STUDENT ASSOCIATION

This has been an exciting year for the Religious Studies Student Association. After a successful “Get on Board Day” that boasted great crowds, beach balls, and clever sandwich boards (and that was just at the Religious Studies table!), we made plans for a cookout for REL students, faculty, staff, and friends. Nearly a hundred people turned out for food, lawn games, and the chance to meet other people in the department. Many thanks are due to Betty Dickey and Donna Martin for all their help and support. Off the heels of those events, the RSSA has enjoyed record numbers at dinners-out twice a month, and our membership on Facebook has doubled since the summer.

This semester, officers John Lyles, Chris Scott, and Madison Langston have a few new ideas in the works. The term begins with a game night, but we also have plans to pair some of our dinners with other events—gymnastics meets and bowling, just to name a couple. We are also working on plans for a RSSA trip to the International Museum of Muslim Cultures in Jackson, Mississippi. If all goes well, we hope to make a trip at least once a year to other sites of interest to our majors and minors.

Stay up to date through the RSSA Facebook page, where events are announced and where everyone can post ideas for the future and see pictures of what the RSSA has been up to. We are eager to get as much feedback as possible from our majors and minors about what they want to see happening in the RSSA. After all, it is our department’s student association. To that end, our vice president Chris Scott has posted a link on Facebook to a short survey about ideas for the group. Take the survey and make your voices heard! It’s a great time to get involved with the RSSA! ❖ –Merinda Simmons

Congratulations to Our Honor Students

2010-2011 Silverstein Scholars

Jason S. Crouch	Ralph McElvenny
Jill C. Heintzelman	Amy K. Richards
Quintus J. Langstaff	Christopher Scott
John L. Lyles	David Woodington

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John L. Lyles