



Study Religion & Find Out

Department News from 2019-2020

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A Curious End to the Semester...

It's already difficult to think about the 2019-20 academic year without also thinking about how the Spring semester ended—concerns for the infectiousness and risks associated with the COVID-19 virus ended the in-person school year all across the country. Here at the University of Alabama it meant that face-to-face classes were suspended as we went into Spring break in mid-March, with UA going to limited business operation mode for the remainder of the semester (and with essential personnel being the only ones working on campus). With the break extended by an additional week, faculty spent their time preparing to move all classes, whether large lectures or seminars, to an online format. And that's precisely how we all completed the semester. While

we sure appreciate the patience in adapting to the remote learning's Zoom meetings (such as an info session, right, with our incoming M.A.



student), Slack working groups, emailed assignments and Blackboard testing or YouTube videos, we also want to recognize the lengths to which faculty went—in the midst of their own health concerns and, for some, the demands of home schooling duties with their own children—to engage their students and keep them in the loop. The Department did not field a single student complaint about how we all adjusted to our new reality; so although we're currently awaiting UA's plan on how we will all move forward for the coming Fall semester, we're confident that REL will be as safe a place for our students as it has been a creative and intellectually challenging place for their studies.

Faculty Promotions

Associate Prof. **Merinda Simmons** is being promoted this Fall to the rank of Professor (sometimes called Full Professor)—and her recent co-authored book, *Race and New Modernisms*, was a finalist for the 2020 Prose Award for Literature!—and Assistant Prof. **Nathan Loewen** is being tenured and promoted to the rank of Associate Prof.—well-deserved recognition for all of their hard work. Congratulations to both of them!

7th Annual Day Lecture

Dr. **Roshan Abraham** joined us in mid-October for the 7th annual Day Lecture, an event established by the generosity of the family of **Zach Day**, a major and REL alum (B.A. 2008). The topic of this year's lecture, always in the broad area of popular culture and religion (which was Zach's, own interests), was “Modern Comics Reimagine the



Biblical Flood,” with attendees seeing a broad range of interpretations and representations of the biblical flood narrative—from comics to depictions in the movies. Find **#Day2019** on Twitter for the live tweets from the event.

American Examples @ UA

Led by Dr. **Michael Altman**, REL was awarded a \$350,000 4-year grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, to establish an annual training program for early career scholars whose

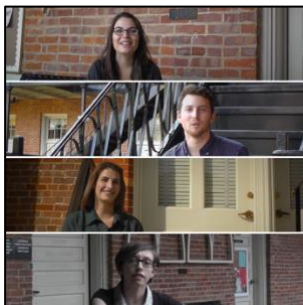


own work is on American religion, broadly conceived. Nine participants were selected this year, for three visits to UA (after REL, assisted by the College of Arts & Sciences, hosted a pilot program in 2018-19), first meeting on campus in March but virtually for their May workshop. Six REL faculty (including **Steven Ramey** and **Vaia Touna**, above) will act as mentors throughout the program, which focuses on research, teaching, and public humanities skills.

Departures & Arrivals



Longtime REL Administrative Secretary, **Betty Dickey**, and REL Office Associate II, **Donna Martin**, both retired as of April 1, 2020. While Donna, part-time in REL for 23 years, was involved in updating syllabi, planning events, and keeping us current with alum addresses, everything required to run REL passed across Betty's desk for 32 years, so many students have her to thank for everything from permits being issued to pizzas being ordered for movie nights. And so REL added **LeCretia Crumpton** as its new Admin. Secretary—a transition that took place during our remote phase this past Spring semester. So, while we certainly wish Betty and Donna well—something the faculty all did online, with a surprise video conference send-off (that's Betty and Donna in the top corners, above)—we also look forward to a new phase in REL, now with Prof. **Ted Trost** as our longest serving Department member (he arrived in 1998). And, finally, **Emily Crews**, our full-time Instructor for the past 2 years, is returning north, to the University of Chicago, to complete her Ph.D. A very popular teacher, who taught Honors intro courses and our evening film course, Emily will be missed.



M.A. Grads

Keeley McMurray, **Matt McCullough**, **Caity Bell**, and **Savannah Finver** are new M.A. grads! Whether work or a Ph.D. is in your near future, we're eager to hear about your coming successes. And with that, REL has now graduated 7

students from our M.A. degree, which is entering its fourth year with 9 incoming, new students for Fall 2020, all of whom will be new to UA.

REL Student Receives Randall Research Award



REL major, **Jackson Foster** (pictured at an REL student association dinner, complete with an REL t-shirt) was given one of the Honors College's Randall Outstanding Undergraduate Research Awards. He was nominated by Dr. **Nathan Loewen**, with whom Jackson is currently working on a digital research project that uses machine learning methods for a comprehensive analysis of scholarly articles published in journals in the fields of philosophy, religious studies and the philosophy of religion.

New Aronov Endowed Chair

Associate Prof. **Daniel Levine**, a current faculty member in the Department of Political Science, was appointed as the new holder of the Aronov Endowed Chair in Judaic Studies and thereby cross-appointed to REL with a 50% appointment. His current work is devoted to the idea fear, a topic on which he presented in the Fall to his new colleagues in REL. He will teach one course for REL annually. And, with that appointment, Prof. **Steven Jacobs** was appointed by the Board of Trustees as the Emeritus Aronov Chair, having held the endowed chair for 19 years, during which time he wrote and published a tremendous amount of his research on holocaust and genocide studies. Congratulations to both Daniel and Steve on these honors.



New Faces on the Balcony



Apart from Assistant Prof. **Richard Newton**, who joined REL last year and whose first book comes out this Fall, in August we welcomed Assistant Prof. **Edith Szanto** (left). Trained at the University of Toronto (Ph.D. 2012), she teaches our courses on the study of Islam, with her first book now being

considered by a publisher in the UK. And, as of August 2020, Dr. **Jeri Wieringa** (right) will also be joining REL as an Assistant Prof.; earning a Ph.D. in History at George Mason (2019), she will bring additional digital humanities expertise to REL.



A Word From Our Students...

I am senior mechanical engineering student who will be graduating from UA in May. I came across REL 100 when I was researching possible courses to count as my last humanities credit needed for graduation. I didn't know much about the topic of religious studies, but it interested me enough to sign-up for the class; I didn't entirely know what to expect from the class but I figured it would be a bias-free, informational overview of different religions around the world, possibly with a heavier concentration of religions popular in the United States. I love history classes and I thought this course may have the makings of a history course that teaches about key figures, events, and time periods that help shape the current world. Two months into the course and I can say that it was not exactly what I was expecting.

REL 100 has been a very interesting class, and a much-needed change of pace from my normal engineering course load. While the class has been somewhat similar to a history class, in that we learn about key figures who philosophized about religion and developed theories that help shape what we call religion in 2020, it has been much more than just a history lesson. REL 100 has gotten me to rethink my own definitions of religion, faith, church, classification, etc. In class, we question the very information that we have been told is a fact our whole lives. We discuss how religions are classified and how those classifications came about. We discuss the effects of money and power and how they can affect how certain religions or rituals are classified. It's been much more than a history lesson.

My favorite parts of the class are discussing or debating why we accept certain aspects of religion as fact despite there being little objective information with regard to religious beliefs. Ultimately, faith is the reason religions exist. However, that doesn't mean we can't question many parts of religion. I also like that we tie different elements into this religion class, such as business, law, politics, economics, etc. Being able to relate all these other aspects of life to religion has shown me the importance of religion to our country and our world. Whether or not someone is religious, religion still can play a large role in their life.

REL 100 has been a good experience for me so far and I believe I can apply what I have learned to aspects of my current life and life after graduation. The class has made me into a more critical thinker and has convinced me to look at and describe topics more as a scholar instead of just a student. I have always been interested in a good philosophical discussion—whether about religion, politics, sports—but now I feel as though I have more mental tools to help me talk and listen and learn about these subjects. I am happy with how REL 100 has turned out and will be recommending the class to friends whom may be interested in taking it. (*Vincent Pawloski*)

My journey to finding the study of religion began as a result of my involvement in the Canterbury Student Forum, the

collegiate ministry of Canterbury Episcopal Chapel in Tuscaloosa. The students in Canterbury who majored in Religious Studies seemed to enjoy their classes as they studied religion from a secular, academic standpoint. As an individual who had participated in the Christian faith my entire life, this approach was both surprising and refreshing. I immediately enrolled in a summer class section for Introduction to Religious Studies. In that class I gained the unique opportunity to critically analyze what constitutes “religion” and “culture,” their intersectionality and the various effects that has on human society. This past semester, I took a class called The English Bible as Literature, and I can honestly say this class solidified my growing passion for the academic study of biblical and canonical literature. Later that semester, I officially joined the Religious Studies Department as a major.

Communication is my first major at the University of Alabama and Religious Studies has helped me to analyze religion in culture through the lens of communication. Just last month I secured a position on the Human Communication Research Lab team in the College of Communication and Information Sciences. My research includes the correlation between levels of humanization and perceived ethical capabilities in non-human animals, as revealed in human interpretation of their behavior. I plan to analyze how the communicative strategies used to humanize animals are weaponized in dehumanizing other human beings. My study of religion provides another important method of analysis, wherein I can monitor the isolating behaviors and attitudes of in-groups towards out-groups in the context of institutionalized religion.

In short, my experience in the Department of Religious Studies has been phenomenal. I have been challenged on a multitude of levels and believe I have come out a better researcher, student, and person. I intend to continue the study of religion in my future academic pursuits. I am currently earning my Master's in Communication Studies (as part of UA's Accelerated Master's Program). During my Junior year, I will begin the hunt for Ph.D. programs and have considered pursuing a Doctorate in Religious Studies in addition to Doctorate in Communication Studies. The skills I have learned in analyzing religion in culture will continue to shape my perspective of the world around me and my vision for how the world can be improved in the future. (*Elizabeth Tagg*)

Stay in Touch

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Alums: we want to hear from you—what have you been doing since leaving Manly Hall? Visit our website to find About Us > Stay in Touch and send us an update—maybe even a pic and blurb that we can post REL's **Facebook**, **Twitter**, or **Instagram**. Don't forget our podcast on **SoundCloud** and the **Vimeo** page.

Be sure to check out our blog!

religion.ua.edu/blog