



Study Religion & Find Out

Department News from 2021-22

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Changing of the Guard



We've got some news: about a year ago the Chair of the Department, Prof. **Russell McCutcheon**, announced privately to the faculty that he would not seek another 5 year term as Chair, making 2022-23 his last year in that position. With Prof. **Ted Trost** serving as chair for four years (2009-2013), that means that when the coming school year ends Prof. McCutcheon will have served as Chair of REL for a total of 18 years, since his arrival at UA in August of 2001. (For those keeping score, the late Patrick Green, himself a longtime Chair of REL, has the record, by a couple of years.)

That a lot has changed at UA over the past two decades would be an understatement—alums who have not been back to campus recently might not recognize parts or know how to get around in some areas, what with the many new buildings and re-routed roads. (In fact, just this past July 4 Tutwiler Hall, a residence in which many REL students probably lived at one time, was imploded and the new Tutwiler, built right next door, is set to open for the coming Fall semester.) And much has changed in REL as well: we still call the second floor our home, but the building has a new name (Presidents Hall), the size of the faculty has grown dramatically (now numbering 13), and we have five faculty offices on the third floor; our new Admin Secretary, **LeCretia Crumpton**, is in her third year steering the main office and we have a thriving digital lab where the REL Library once was. With an M.A. degree program entering its 6th year, the Asian Studies minor now part of REL, and the faculty considering revisions to the Judaic Studies minor (while also considering how the REL major and minor might need some revision too), not to mention some of the faculty obtaining major grants and often collaborating on their work, it's fair to say that REL is thriving—which is a particularly good time for a change in leadership.

So throughout this past academic year the REL faculty have been discussing the future of the Department (in part as a result of going through its regularly scheduled 8 year review process); and during the Fall 2022 semester we anticipate an internal search process that will result in a search committee's recommendation to the Dean of Arts & Sciences concerning who the faculty would like to see serve as the new Chair. So stay tuned—it's an exciting time to be in REL; who knows what we'll be tackling under our new leadership.

Student News

We're really pleased by how our B.A. and M.A. students continue to succeed—Prof. **Steven Ramey**, our Graduate



Director, taught a full class of graduating REL majors in the Spring, in his required REL 490 (the capstone seminar that rotates among the faculty). And we're very pleased that one of those graduating REL majors, **Sophia Honerkamp** (top right), decided to join our M.A. this Fall. The cohort of incoming MA students also includes: **Casey**



A'Hearn (top left, coming to Tuscaloosa from the University of Rochester), as well as **Castiel Lisko** (at right, who earned a B.A. in English here at UA and who will also be working on an M.A. in American Studies), as well as **Aidan Nuttall** (left, who earned his B.A. in the study of religion at Whitman College in Washington state. They'll be joining six current M.A. students in a degree that, in our estimation, is unique in the country, inasmuch as it does so much more than merely describe and compare religions. Instead, like our undergrad program, student are pressed to use social theory to study how groups and how identity works, while incorporating tools from the digital humanities—a part of our Department that is overseen by Prof. **Jeri Wieringa**.



Faculty News

If you don't already know—why should you?—Academic Analytics is company to which many U.S. universities subscribe for their annual productivity data on faculty: how many books or peer reviewed articles have they published this past year? What are the value of the grants they received? How often is their work cited by others in the scholarly literature? These are among the key ways that modern universities rate their faculty and rank the Departments in which they work: by comparing them to their national peers. Without getting into the weeds of the data we're very pleased to report that REL at UA continues to be among the most accomplished collection of faculty members in the study of religion in the U.S.—not just for a B.A./M.A. program but in any program in the country. So, for a taste of what's going on: Prof. **Edith Szanto** held a

research leave in Spring 2022 and is finalizing the manuscript for her first monograph while editing an intro book for courses on Islam; Prof. **Merinda Simmons** continues to edit a book series and is working on several essays, chapters, and books; Prof. **Mike Altman** published his second book this past year, *Hinduism in America: An Introduction* and co-edits the annual research volumes produced by the American Examples grant that he oversees; Prof. **Daniel Levine** obtained a grant to begin work on an archival project on Judaism and the American south; Prof. **Steve Jacobs**, who had a sabbatical semester last Fall, is working through the final versions of a new book that'll



soon be out; Prof. **Trost**, also on sabbatical and in the UK (last Spring), presented at conferences and continues his work on religion and popular culture; Prof. **Nathan Loewen** co-directs several grants, focused on how to globalize the subfield known as the philosophy of religion, and employed **Phoebe Duke-Mosier** and **Katie Johnson**—both in our M.A.—to carry out some of the work of the grant during Summer 2022; Prof. **Wieringa**, in the midst of establishing our digital lab, has begun work revising her dissertation for eventual publication, both as a book and possibly an accompanying online site; among their ongoing individual projects, Profs. **Vaia Touna** and **Richard Newton** completed a co-edited book that's now at the press; Prof. **Ramey** completed an edited book for the intro class on Hinduism and is nearing completion with a co-written world religions textbook; and Prof. **McCutcheon** published a new collection of his own essays along with two co-authored books and a co-edited volume. So, like we said, the REL faculty continue to be active and widely known researchers and writers. Oh, and did we mention that Prof. **Newton** was awarded tenure and promoted to the rank of Assoc. Prof?

Alum Update

This past year Prof. **Touna** continued to lead our initiative to involve REL alums more in the life of the Department—though classes started meeting back in person (and masked)

in the Fall 2021 semester, we decided that Zoom provided a way to stay in touch with alums, leading to online happy hours and a virtual reading group, with the author of the book joining the conversation. We're hoping to continue this outreach, with the help of the new members of our Alum Liaison Committee: **Andie Alexander**, **Anna Davis**, **Sarah Griswold**, **Christopher Hurt**, and **Jared Powell**—all of whom were honored this past year with our **Betty Dickey Alumni Award** (in honor of the Department's long-serving staff member, who retired back in April 2020).

Bon Voyage & Welcome Aboard



Although we will certainly miss her we're rather proud that Prof. **Lauren Horn Griffin** (left) who joined REL as a full-time Instructor in time for the start of the 2020-21 academic year (working remotely that first year), has been hired into a full-time tenure-track position in the Department of Religious Studies at

Louisiana State University—faculty positions which, due to a variety of factors, are now very competitive to obtain. We wish her luck and know that we'll see her around the region. And into our open Instructor's position we were able to hire Dr. **Oleg Kyselov** (right), who was visiting the Department from October 2021 to July 2022, as a Fulbright Scholar from Ukraine (using Prof. **Trost's** office while he was away). So we're really quite pleased that he and his family will remain in Tuscaloosa for the 2022-23 academic year, working in 100-level intro courses with Profs. **Altman** and **Newton** and also our 1 credit hour REL Goes to the Movies.



Uncivil Religion

Finally, a key contribution was made by Prof. **Altman** this past Fall: leading our three incoming M.A. students—**Phoebe**, **Katie**, and **Ciara**—in collaborating with the **Smithsonian Museum of American History** to create **uncivilreligion.org**, devoted to tracking religion's place at the January 6 insurrection. There you can see media and read interpretive essays from a selection of scholars.

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