



Study Religion & Find Out

Department News from 2020-21

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It's Been a Year...



It's hard to believe that it was a year ago that our lead newsletter article was outlining REL's abrupt move to remote classes, given the impact that COVID-19 was then starting to have on the US in the early Spring of 2020. In some ways it seems like it was only yesterday that the faculty were holding

what were then some pretty novel Zoom meetings, during the extended March break, to discuss a variety of remote teaching techniques, but, in other ways, thinking about all of last summer's virtual faculty meetings, to devise ways of moving forward during what promised to be an unusual 2020-21 school year, let alone the countless Zoom sessions that were to follow with students, the masked and distanced in-person meetings, a whole new way for the main office to work, and a last minute summer search to find a new faculty member, well, it also feels like a very long time ago. But that's what happens when you change your routine—especially a change as radical as what we all went through for the past year, affecting work, to be sure, but also impacting everyone's home life, what with a new way to shop, home schooling for children, and a near complete end to everyone's casual social interactions with their friends and family--you tend to lose track of time. "Is it Wednesday?" you might ask while on vacation, or, this past year, you might have heard someone ask what month it was. But we got through it, with students, staff, and faculty all stepping up and with an ambitious testing and vaccination program on campus. Although we're now not sure exactly what the Fall will look like, we're assuming vaccination rates will continue to improve in the region and across the country and that in-person classes will be meeting hopefully as usual.



Faculty and Staff News



We were joined this year by two new faculty members, one announced last year (left: Assistant Prof. Jeri Wieringa) and the other, Dr. Lauren Horn Griffin (at right), who was hired as a full-time Instructor shortly before the Fall semester began;

they both

hit the ground running despite the curve that COVID-19 threw at everyone. Jeri offered classes in the Digital Humanities, among other topics, enrolling both undergrad and grad students, along with proposing a new graduate level course



for the coming year, while

Lauren focused her teaching on Honors intro students and offering our 300-level REL 605 to the Movies (a one credit hour monthly film course designed to recruit majors and minors). But our news doesn't stop there: come the Fall semester Assistant Prof. Vaia Touna (left) will be tenured and promoted to the rank of Associate Professor—and



that's certainly something to celebrate. And we must also remind readers that LeCretia Crumpton (right), who was hired last Spring as our new Administrative Secretary, joined us in March, just as UA went remote; but she reinvented how to run the main office during a pandemic and we've all benefited tremendously from her professionalism and initiative. Add to this that Assistant Prof. Richard Newton was on a research leave this past Spring, Associate Prof. Mike Altman was on sabbatical last Fall, and Profs. Ted Trost and Steve Jacobs will each hold sabbaticals in the coming year—it's been an odd but good year in so many ways.



Student News

Students in both our BA and MA programs had to adapt this year, with masks in classes, keeping their distance on campus, and figuring out where they stood on the “camera on or off for class” debate. We had 14 REL majors graduate and graduated 4 MA students, one of whom, **Jack Bernardi**, is going on to a PhD program at Virginia Tech. Of the other new MA alums, **Allison Isidore** and **Jeremie Nute** are looking for work on university campuses (such as in their tech/distance ed or student life divisions), and **Morgan Sadie Frick**, who earned her BA with us as well, continues her studies toward being a Physician’s Assistant—her Graduate Research Assistantship this past year, working with UA’s COVID response team, provided her with some valuable experience. This means that, in the first four years of the MA we have graduated 11 students.

New Students Coming to UA

REL was very successful this year in gaining a variety of competitive, university-wide awards for MA students either returning or accepted for the Fall 2021 semester. So we’re excited that we have three new students joining our graduate program in the Fall:

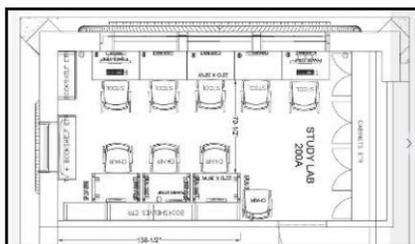


excited that we have three new students joining our graduate program in the Fall: **Katie Johnson** (top left), **Ciara Eichhorst** (far left), and **Phoebe Duke-Mosier** (bottom right)—with Katie holding a Graduate Research Assistantship on campus, Ciara holding a Graduate

Council Fellowship for 2021-22, and Phoebe being awarded UA’s much coveted Francko Graduate Fellowship, which funds her entire degree (one such award is offered annually to an incoming UA grad student).

#RELdl

The last time that we worked on the REL library was in 2005, so this summer the library becomes the REL Digital Lab; reference books remain but the space now enhances digital humanities (DH) work in research & teaching (with new furniture & technology on order). Assistant Prof. **Jeri Wieringa** (a specialist in this area) heads up the initiative, with several faculty already working in this area and with courses in both our BA and MA program already focused on it. So we’re looking forward to this new collaborative space in the Department.



New Publications



Among the faculty publications that came out this past year (including a variety of articles, chapters, books, edited books, etc.), we want to highlight that Prof. **Richard Newton** published his first book, *Identifying Roots: Alex Haley and the Anthropology of Scriptures* (Equinox—in Prof. **Ramey**’s book series); throughout the year he made quite a few Zoom class visits around the country and beyond, discussing

it and acquainting a new generation with a novel and TV mini-series that were once a cultural phenomenon.

Presidents Hall

Long known as Manly Hall, our building was renamed by the Board of Trustees and is now known as **Presidents Hall** (abbrev. PRH). Basil Manly Sr., the second President of UA (1837-1855), is known for, among other things, his outspoken support of the Confederacy and slave-owning. “In 1845,” citing the online *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, “when the controversy over slavery and abolition divided Baptists along sectional lines, Manly argued ... that ministers could own slaves, leading to a split between northern and southern Baptists.” Our building, back when Woods Quad pretty much was UA, once housed the University President’s office, making our new name a fitting one.

Coming Attractions

Prof. **Simmons** continues work on her book on the study of slave religion; Associate Prof. **Altman** still leads our American Examples grant initiative; Associate Prof. **Levine** has a new research project on small Jewish communities in Alabama; Associate Prof. **Loewen** is involved in several grant projects on globalizing the philosophy of religion; Assistant Prof. **Szanto**’s first book is under consideration with a British publisher; Prof. **Ramey** is near done his co-written world religions textbook; and Prof. **McCutcheon** has a new collection of essays out (with the REL mug on the cover, no less).

Stay in Touch

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Be sure to check out our blog!

religion.ua.edu/blog

A Religious Studies Post-Pandemic Proposal

Jeremie Nute

Jeremie Nute (REL MA '21) reflects on the past year to draw some conclusions about the current state of higher education, with implications for the study of religion.

On January 21, 2020, the first case of coronavirus disease 2019 was reported in the United States of America. Then on February 29, the first death caused by the coronavirus was reported in the US; however, it is later discovered that the first death had actually occurred on February 6, in California. And then, by May 27, the US death toll reached 100,000. Eventually, in August, universities started to make a switch from in-person classes to online (Taylor 2020). On September 25, the American Council on Education sent a letter to the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, and the Minority Leader, Kevin McCarthy, arguing that the universities and colleges were going to lose at least 120 billion dollars due to the coronavirus (Mitchell 2020). As of February 11, 2021, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported that the overall college enrollment was down 2.9% compared to the spring 2020 enrollment (NSCRC 2021). With dropping enrollment levels and budget issues, some universities were scrambling to stay afloat.

My undergraduate alma mater, Missouri Western State University announced in May of 2020 that to stay open they would need to cut low enrollment majors and minors, as well as get rid of 50 faculty and 70 staff and administration jobs (Vasquez 2020). Among the majors to be cut was Philosophy, which also allowed for a concentration in Religious Studies (the degree I had earned just a couple years before). Several other US universities decided to cut their Religious Studies Major and/or departments as well, like Canisius College in Buffalo, New York (Rusack 2020), Elmira College in New York (Murray 2020), Hiram College in Ohio (Cohn 2019), and Connecticut College (Hallenbeck 2020). For example, on December 2, 2020, the University of Vermont announced that their religious studies department would be terminated—

though, on April 9, 2021, the University of Vermont's religious studies department announced on Twitter that their major and minor would still be offered, but the department would be merging with the anthropology department. Although good news, this merger would nonetheless pose some problems, such as their "ability to petition for new or replacement hires, create new courses, and [their] ability to offer dynamic programming about religion" (2021). With more and more religious studies majors and departments being cut from universities and colleges, or being merged with other departments as cost-saving measures, we, as religionists, need to rethink about what the academic study of religion is, or can be, to ensure the survival of the field.

Given this context, my modest proposal is that we need to reinvent the study of religion by first understanding why universities and colleges are so quick to cut our departments and majors—this means that we need to understand the interests of the field's various stakeholders. Using my BA alma mater and other colleges as examples, we can see the choices that universities are making when it comes to which programs to cut or not. By looking at these case studies, we can then use those lessons to help reinvent the study of religion. For example, in a report by Missouri Western's former president Matthew Wilson for the Board of Governors, he argues that the programs being phased out make up around 15% of declared majors, and approximately 25% of graduating students are graduating with a major that will be phased-out (Wilson 2020). According to Wilson, Missouri Western's sustainability relies on strengthening the programs that students are interested in and removing programs that have low student interest—and what many students are interested in, or so we're told, seems to be careers in the various professions represented among the modern university's many departments. With this in mind, Lori Valorotta, the former president of Hiram College, argued that a part of their "new liberal arts" approach entailed keeping and adding programs that would prepare students for the 21st century job market (Cohn 2019). Also part of this "new liberal arts" approach is a focus on technology and internships, as a way to prepare students for their future careers. So, as religious studies departments move forward from the devastating effect from COVID-19, they need to be thinking about how to make religious studies a major that these students (and administrators) are interested

in, paying careful attention to how a religious studies major prepares a student for their future career.

In order to reinvent the field of religious studies as something that meets the needs and interests of its stakeholders, we also need to think about what is a field of study. If we mean that there is a common method, theory, and/or object of study, then I would argue that there is no such field as religious studies, at least currently. Look no further than the debates about whether “religion” is a natural thing that just exists in the world or if religion is a tool developed for and by scholars. Add onto this complication the fact that religionists use methods from anthropology, literary studies, history, sociology, critical and social theory to neuroscience and everything in between—undermining the goal of a discipline sharing a unified method. However, if by field we are referring to a social sphere where epistemic, monetary, social, and temporal capital are spent on awards, conferences, courses, degrees, departments, foundations, jobs, journals, grants, research, and students, one that uses the descriptor “religion,” then there certainly exists a field of religious studies. Though we need to acknowledge that this social sphere is shrinking. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reports that the enrollment of students seeking a bachelor’s degree in the Humanities is down by 7.2% from 2020 to 2021. And, the previous year’s enrollment was down by 4.4% from what it had been in 2019 (NSCRC 2021). If this trend continues, our social sphere will continue to grow ever smaller. Add to this long projected demographic shifts in US students, with the number of high school graduates projected to decline in the coming decades (thereby increasing competition within post-secondary schools for their enrollment), and the situation in the Humanities could be seen as dire.

In order to meet the demands of student interest and equipping them for the 21st century job market, we, as religionists who call the Humanities our home, need to make a shift in what the study of religion is or ought to be. No longer would the study of religion be about religious literacy or theology, for the shift that I propose would see the study of religion as a transdisciplinary study of theories of, and methods to study, human actors.

Transdisciplinary means a critical religionist uses what’s at their disposal for their scholarship—they therefore use methods and theories from more than one branch of knowledge. Theory here is referring to “a network of signifiers that casts its web over

meanings, objects, and practices” (Hughes and McCutcheon forthcoming, 279). Therefore, studying theory is “the interrogation of authority and the status quo” (ibid). And method refers to the approach a critical scholar takes to their study, and the tools that they use (ibid, 150). The study of theories and methods of human actors means that a critical scholar views religious acts as being nothing more than products of human beings in specific situations. By making this move back towards the anthropocene, critical religionists are placing their object of study back into history and culture. By doing so, scholars will see that these discourses are in a continual state of flux. Furthermore, religion under this critical view is no longer seen as being transcendent or irreducible; for when critical scholars place their object of study back into the flow of history and culture, they start looking for what choices people made and continue to make and the values these choices either exhibit or make possible—mindful that they study what J. Z. Smith would call an exercise in the economy of signification (1980, 117). So the scholar whom I have in mind studies what was authorized and what was not authorized, who was an authorizer and who was not, and what theory or lens did this person use. Or, as Bruce Lincoln phrased it in the fourth of his theses on method, such a scholar is prepared to ask some “destabilizing and irreverent questions,” such as (citing Lincoln’s own wording): Who speaks here? To what audience? In what context? Through what system of mediations? And with what interests (Lincoln 1996)?

I have been using the adjective “critical” throughout my explanation of my definition of religious studies, and I must define what I mean by critical scholar, critical religionists, critical view, et cetera. Critical scholarship, as I understand it, is fault-finding—meaning that a scholar has a skeptical approach to how people study religion—of course we are not critics of religion, like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, or anyone else that could belong to this New Atheism group. For such scholars/public figures are making value judgments about the systems of practice they study, and judging them to be dangerous and antiquated. Instead, a critical scholar assumes that they have a careful judgment, yes, but not one that is objective. Moreover, the critical scholar is not only fault-finding of others, but of themselves as well—they are therefore self-reflexive. This means that in their scholarly work they aim to “show their work” (as Bruce Lincoln once phrased it in the epilogue to his book, *Theorizing Myth*

(1999)—how they got from point A to point B in their work (which entails making their assumptions known). In this self-reflexive turn, a scholar points out their own set of a prior interest, that which was needed to make something stand out or not (and thus we return to Smith's sense of studying choices that create the conditions for significance). Finally, critical means that a religionist's starting point for their scholarship is the idea that religion is a human category. This is going back to the point that I made earlier: that religionists do not see religion as a byproduct of some transcendental figure, but rather, as a human-constructed category that is used by people in their daily lives, to legitimize and delegitimize, and authorize and deauthorize.

Let's go back to where I argued that the field needs to be distinguished from religious literacy and theology. The religious literacy model of the field tends to focus on teaching students the views and practices of all religions. And, under this model, a student usually learns that because a person is X then that means Y—this line of thinking is problematic, however. An example of its dangers can be found within the American Academy of Religion's Religious Literacy Guideline, such as where they argue that religious literacy is important for the pre-professional program, because "students training in healthcare careers need to learn how religious beliefs affect a person's willingness to seek care or accept certain treatments" (AAR). This is troublesome because people are being taught that if someone is X then that must mean that they believe Y and therefore, in response to them, you have to do Z. And it's this line of thinking that leads people to believe that if someone is Muslim, Christian, or Buddhist then each one of these identities has different conceptions of what it means to, for example, suffer, and therefore, as a medical professional, you should give them different types of treatment for the same illness. (See Lawson and Ramey 2018 for an example of just how problematic this model can be when it comes to nursing textbooks.) Under this assumption, the category matches reality and does not define what counts as reality. A critical religionist would recognize that such a monolithic application of a category is always dangerous. As for theology, it differs from religious studies because it is concerned with the study of the supernatural (Blum 2017, 241). A theologian would therefore be researching and asking questions about God, whereas a religionist would be curious about how others, like theologians themselves, are going about this study of God.

So, how does this Critical Religion approach to religious studies help with student interest and preparation for the 21st century job market? A quick Google search for what skills someone now needs for their career will find several different lists that say they need to be creative, have critical thinking skills, need to be able to collaborate, they need to be able to communicate their ideas, they need to have information literacy skills, they need to be adaptable, they need to be a leader, they need social skills, and finally they need to be productive (Slyter 2019). Another list says that you need all of those skills previously mentioned plus media literacy, technology literacy, and initiative (Stauffer 2020). The third list, by Career Trend, states that you need to be team-oriented, have a positive attitude, have autonomy and problem-solving skills, have computer literacy skills, and diversity awareness (Kokemuller 2017). All of these are skills that students will learn and develop in a Critical Religion department. Students would be taught how to critically assess an argument and break down how that argument functions and its effects. Most importantly students learn how to be autonomous and to take initiative; because of what they learn in a Critical Religion department they can go to any other department or job and apply their skills or be willing to learn the new content and skills needed. Because of this, and as my time ends at the University of Alabama in the Religious Studies department, I now feel more qualified for the 21st century job market than I did at the end of my undergraduate career, just two years ago, when I graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Mathematics Education and Philosophy (with a concentration in Religious Studies).

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