

RELIGION MATTERS

Department of Religion

Rice University

Issue VII, Fall 2020



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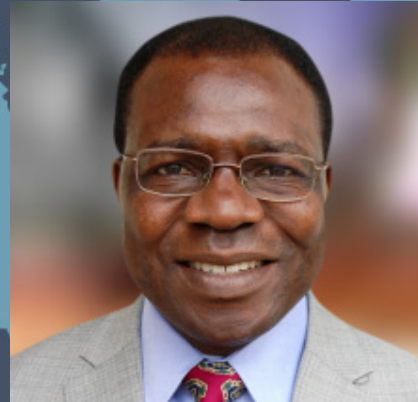
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A Message From the Chair



Chair, Elias Kifon Bongmba

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the Department of Religion and our graduate program in Religion. In keeping with Rice University's open doors and the university's current banner campaign, let me say in IsiZulu, Siyanamkela. We are delighted to welcome you to the global quest for excellence in the studies of religion animated by and grounded in critical research in the different areas of our concentrations. We deploy a methodological pluralism to rethink major paradigms and ask new questions on the major religious traditions and lesser-known traditions of the world.

The Department of Religion has been at the center of rice's intellectual and community life, and we are proud to continue that tradition. Our intellectual culture and innovative research practices have lead us to a position grounded in the best historical traditions in the study of religion, shaping our multidisciplinary intellectual engagements.

The history of religions has offered us a broad place on which to stand, and also to build a community of scholars whose critical investigations and articulations put us on the cutting edge of innovative scholarship in the study of religion. The tradition has created space for us to develop theoretical and methodological groundings in historical and critical textual studies in several religious traditions from around the world: psychological and sociological analysis of religious phenomena; historical studies of many religious traditions; cultural and theological analysis of religious traditions; and their interaction with our environment as well as the human community.

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Our department has a rich tradition of developing research in different religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, African American Religions, and African Religions. Our department, in studying historic traditions, has developed critical tools to analyze their core values and sense of community, but more importantly for us as faculty, promoted the training of the next generation of specialists, who will ask new questions about the human condition, the nature of our common habitat, explore and analyze key texts and traditions that have shaped and will shape our common destiny. We have created the conditions for all graduate studies initiatives to ask important questions about science, art, the meaning of life, as they explore new theories and ask difficult questions about the dynamic intersubjective bonds which we must interrogate through prisms like gender, race, sexuality, class, politics, and for the brave, aliens.

The history of our department is a testament to a commitment to excellence in its intellectual inquiries, which have explored religious, social, political, textual traditions, literary and artistic studies from around the world, even before the conceptualization of the notion of the global in recent decades. To give you only one example from our past, permit me to remind you of the research of the late distinguished Chair of our Department, Professor Niels Nielsen, whose research and publications covered a range of subjects in the Humanities as he studied, lectured, and published papers and books on the political and cultural revolutions that took place in Europe, on Human rights, and the contribution of the literary imagination to Human rights in the work of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. Our legacy of inquiry has included studies in medical ethics and humanities and social ethics, to name only a few.

We are delighted to welcome you to the global quest for excellence in the studies of religion animated by and grounded in critical research in the different areas of our concentrations. Our concerns are broad, including, but not limited to, critical ethics, culture, race, gender, science fiction, emotions and what it means to understand things that are often taken for granted like emotions such as happiness, human well being and thriving, or even how and what to think of the end of life. Our goal is to bring these traditions and themes to the classroom and work with you to build a research and teaching portfolio grounded in the best intellectual traditions of the past but also attuned to the needs of the culture and communities we share in common. As you work on your area of specialization, we invite you to participate in symposiums, seminars, the department's Rockwell Conferences, The GEM Certificate Program, and seminars and programs offered by the Jewish Studies program, and The Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning (CERCL). One more, in Swahili karibu to Rice.

-Chair, Elias Kifon Bongmba

DEPARTMENT & FACULTY *News*

Current Faculty, Department of Religion

ELIAS KIFON BONGMBA

Harry and Hazel Chavanne Chair in Christian Theology and Chair of the Department of Religion (University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology, 1995): African and African diaspora religions, African Christianity/Theology hermeneutics and theology, contemporary theology and ethics

MARCIA BRENNAN

Carolyn and Fred McManis Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religion & Art History (Brown University, 1997): modern and contemporary art history and museum studies, gender theory, mysticism and comparative religion, medical humanities

DAVID COOK

Professor (University of Chicago, 2001): early Islam, Muslim apocalyptic literature and movements for radical social change, dreams, historical astronomy, Judeo-Arabic literature, and West Africa Islam

NIKI K. CLEMENTS

Watt J. & Lilly G. Jackson Assistant Professor of Religion and Director of Undergraduate Studies (Brown University, 2014): Christianity in late antiquity, asceticism and mysticism, religious ethics, theories and methods in the study of religion

APRIL D. DECONICK

Isla Carroll & Percy E. Turner Professor of New Testament & Early Christianity; Professor of Religion (University of Michigan, 1994): New Testament, Christian origins, early Christianities, apocryphal literature, history of Christian thought, sexuality and Christianity, early Christian mysticism, Nag Hammadi literature, classic gnostic studies, coptic language

CLAIRE FANGER

Associate Professor of Religion and Director of MA Studies (University of Toronto, 1994): medieval Christian thought, devotional literature, saints' lives, history of magic, modern occultism, esotericism

MATTHIAS HENZE

Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism; Director, Program in Jewish Studies (Harvard University, 1997): Hebrew Bible, Second Temple Judaism, apocalyptic literature

ANNE C. KLEIN

Professor (University of Virginia, 1981): Tibetan Buddhism, comparative contemplative epistemologies, Buddhism and feminism, esoteric views of embodiment

JEFFREY J. KRIPAL

J. Newton Chair in Philosophy & Religious Thought; Associate Dean of Humanities Faculty & Graduate Programs (University of Chicago, 1993): history of religions, colonial and western Hinduism, comparative erotics and ethics of mysticism, western esotericism

BRIAN OGREN

Anna Smith Fine Associate Professor of Judaic Studies (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008): early modern Jewish thought, philosophy and kabbalah during the Italian Renaissance William B. Parsons Professor and Director of PhD Studies (University of Chicago, 1993): comparative mysticism, psychology of religion, social scientific interpretations of religion, religion and culture, religion and gender

WILLIAM B. PARSONS

Professor and Director of PhD Studies (University of Chicago, 1993): comparative mysticism, psychology of religion, social scientific interpretations of religion, religion and culture, religion and gender

ANTHONY B. PINN

Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religion; (Harvard University, 1994): African American religious thought, liberation theologies, African American humanism, religion, and popular culture

JOHN M. STROUP

Harry and Hazel Chavanne Professor of Religion (Yale University, 1980): history of Christianity, Protestantism and modernity, New Age and contemporary eschatology

Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies

By April D. DeConick, Executive Editor and Co-Founder

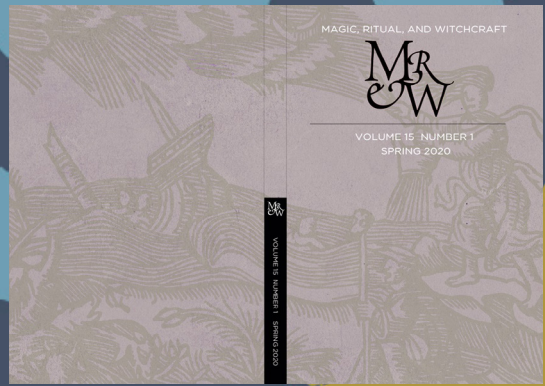
The timely publication of issues of the journal Gnosis continue.

This year we completed the publication of three volumes of papers selected from the Gnostic America Conference hosted by our department in 2018 (volumes 4.1, 4.2, and 5.1). In August 2020, we published issue 5.2 with papers that included one authored by our own graduate student, Cindy Dawson, who wrote a brilliant feminist-critical analysis of Gnostic mythology entitled, "Assaulting Sophia, Protecting Sophia: The Female Body as a Symbolic Artifact in Gnostic Mythology." Also in August, we published Gnostic Countercultures as an independent Brill book. Originally the articles in this book appeared in the first two issues of the Gnosis journal. But I was asked

by the publisher to compose a new introduction and re-edit the papers to make them available as a separate book. Hwankyu Kim, a first-year graduate student who is studying early Christian diversity, compiled the indices, making the papers more accessible. I am very grateful to him for his careful studious attention to this project. My thanks also go out to our graduate student copy editor team (Vic Nardo, Brett Carollo, Hwankyu Kim, Thomas Millary, and Stan Panin) led by Naamleela Free Jones. They make sure that each paper in the issues of Gnosis are ready to be typeset. I hope that this opportunity to copy edit for the journal provides our students with valuable work experience and insight into the publishing process and professional writing.

Magic, Ritual, & Witchcraft

By Claire Fanger



The Covid-19 pandemic has not stopped work on the journal, and in fact both the press and our contributors seem to have been especially active since the quarantine began. We had a new cover design appearing with the first issue of 2020 (seen above this section). Over the past two months we have also received a rather higher than usual number of interesting submissions and some early revised drafts; it seems at least some people are managing to do more writing under quarantine restrictions. Among many interesting articles, some highlights forthcoming in the 2020 volume include articles by Gunnar Knutsen on Witchcraft and Slavery in Cartagena de Indias, Hien Nguyen on Vietnamese spirit mediums, Annie Thwaite on “witch bottles,” and Eva Pocs on talismanic magic in the Balkans.

In the last issue of Religion Matters, I mentioned that I was working to acquire a new collaborator ultimately to replace me as editor of Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft. This summer I am pleased to welcome Michael Ostling of Arizona State University, author of *Between the Devil and the Host: Imagining Witchcraft in Early Modern Poland* (Oxford, 2011), editor of *Fairies, Demons and Nature Spirits: Small Gods at the Margins of Christendom* (Palgrave, 2018), and (with Laura Kounine) *Emotions in the History of Witchcraft* (Palgrave, 2016). Michael is a careful editor and gifted writer who has worked with us before on a special issue concerning Witch Flight in Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft Volume 11 (also in 2016). Over the past year he has been serving as associate editor while he learns the tasks associated with the general editorship, but his name appeared at the top of the masthead with the first issue of 2020. I will continue working to support Michael for the next three years, retaining supervision over the aspects of the process that are working well here with our team of diligent and knowledgeable book review editors, Ben Mayo, Sam Stoeltje, and Arina Zaytseva.

Religious Studies Review

Managing Editor Anthony B. Pinn

Religious Studies Review remains one of the significant journals in the study of religion—offering scholars and students critical engagement with key publications within the major fields of study. And, having it housed in the Department of Religion, speaks to the significance of the study of religion at Rice, as well as offering opportunities for our faculty and students to help shape the production and reception of cutting edge scholarship in a variety of areas.

This was a good year for Religious Studies Review. The journal is in good financial shape, and circulation has increased to include roughly 1,000 institutions. This increase speaks to an expansive and growing readership. This growth is matched by a roughly 14% increase in Wiley Online Library downloads. The international attention to Religious Studies Review is reflected in this growth, and it is expressly evident in the significant growth (8%) in two key regions—China and Germany. This increase in readership has been matched by growth in the number of pages per annum over the past few years.

With respect to growth, we have also increased our active outreach to potential contributors by participating in targeted events at the national American Academy of Religion meeting as well as several regional meetings where Dr. Spencer Dew (Short Review Editor) and Dr. Jessica Davenport (RSR Coordinator) led workshops that introduced AAR members to the journal and the opportunities available to them through the journal.

In addition, we began working on a re-envisioned advisory committee that allows the journal to secure more focused and consistent use of advisors. For example, advisors provided insights that helped us to address journal infrastructure issues. Because of this, we were able to fill gaps in our coverage of key disciplinary areas by bringing on board editors in areas such as Islam.

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In order to make certain RSR reflects and is responsive to current and evolving intellectual concerns, we also added a new area in Political Theology. It remains to be seen exactly how the COVID-19 crisis will impact the journal. But at this point, we are in good shape and look forward to continuing Religious Studies Review's important role in the study of religion.

Finally, Dr. Jessica Davenport has done outstanding work as the Coordinator of RSR. And while, we would love to have her remain with us, an exciting opportunity means she will be leaving to take up her duties as a Postdoctoral Fellow at Colgate University. All of us associated with the journal wish her well as she begins this new phase of her professional life. We look forward to hearing about her outstanding work at Colgate and beyond.

Conferences & Events



Rice Experiences at AAR & SBL 2019

American Academy of Religion & Society of Biblical Literature

2019 Annual Meeting, San Deigo



Photo taken at the Society of Biblical Literature

Society of Biblical Literature Annual Conference Cindy Dawson | San Diego, CA | November 2019

On November 23, 2019, I presented my paper, “Body Danger: 1QGenAp and Bodily Agency in Historical and Literary Movement,” at the Society of Biblical Literature (San Diego) Pseudepigrapha section, Journeys: Textual, Literary, and Otherwise. Randall Chesnutt (Pepperdine University) was presiding.

My purpose was to examine 1QapGen’s embellishments of Genesis 12 and 20, especially the new poem dedicated to a description of the minutiae of Sarai’s body. From the perspective of body theory and New Materialism, this expanded description of Sarai’s body is most telling. Scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz and Samantha Frost have destabilized the entrenched mind/body dualism—a dualism that strips from the body any superior value—by demonstrating each body’s agency in its specific environment. And indeed, in the Genesis Apocryphon, the human body generally and the female body especially function as the central plot point at every turn. It is the needs of the body—survival—that necessitate the journey to Egypt and Abram’s deception. It is the possible danger posed to Sarai’s body that triggers exegetical maneuvering. And it is a description of Sarai’s body that assists in assuaging androcentric angst. Theorizing the body as an agent in its historical and literary contexts clarifies not only the characters’ movement within the story but also their movement across multi-generational retellings.

A primary objective of my work at this conference was to “test run” New Materialism as a theoretical lens for religious texts (in this case, the Genesis Apocryphon). I was pleased with the results. I made at least two contacts with other junior scholars who focus on women’s bodies in religious literature. Unsurprisingly, I fielded a question about the wisdom in applying anything beyond historical-critical approaches to ancient literature. Perhaps most importantly, I found at least one other author who is using New Materialism in a literary (rather than literal) setting. I am grateful to the Dean’s Conference, Research, and Professional Advancement Fund for supplying full travel funding for this trip.

American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting

Renee Ford | San Diego, CA | November 2019

The Dean's Conference, Research, and Professional Advancement Fund offered funding to me so that I could attend and present at the national AAR conference in San Diego, CA. My paper, "Scandals Heard Around the World: How the Internet Changes Vajrayana Buddhism" was part of a six-paper panel that focused on digital tantra. Digital tantra is part of a larger study of religion, specifically digital religion, that looks at how religious groups incorporate digital platforms, such as the world wide web, and the implications of these media networks on those religious communities. My paper specifically looked at how Vajrayana Buddhism, normally a secretive community, is changing for American Buddhist communities when it communicates through social media like Facebook.

Our panel hopes to follow up the conference with publishing our papers into an edited volume. So far, digital tantra as a study of religion is far underlooked. Our work contributes to future understanding on how tantric religions, particularly in South Asian and Buddhist religions, incorporate social media and internet communications into their practices.

American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting Stanislav Panin | San Diego, CA | November 2019

The Annual Meeting of American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature took place this year on November 23-26. The meeting that I was able to attend thanks to a support of the Dean's Conference, Research, and Professional Advancement Fund included intensive sessions that touched on the whole spectrum of topics within the study of religion, as well as book exhibits, and business meetings dedicated to planning of the next year's meeting and discussing the work of AAR.

During the conference, I attended sessions of Western esotericism unit and presented my paper at a joint AAR/SBL session, "The Pre-Modern and Modern Use of Ancient Texts." My presentation was dedicated to a transfer of Gnostic ideas in the twentieth century Russian esotericism and traced it back to a nineteenth century Russian academic philosopher Vladimir Solovyov whose publications inspired growing interest to the subject in Russia in the first decades of the twentieth century. I also tried to show how these ideas were later picked up by esoteric communities and incorporated into new esoteric narratives. After return from the conference, I am currently reworking this material to incorporate it in my dissertation where it serves as a foundation for a chapter about Gnostic ideas in Soviet esotericism.



Reading and Dreaming: Reflections on the Process of Knowledge

Dr. Claire Fanger | GEM Forum
Lectures | January 17, 2020



I've been working for sometime on accounts of visionary dreams recorded by medieval monks. I'm interested in how dreaming is framed in monastic writings as a source of divine knowledge on par with Scripture, but also to some extent reproducing Scripture.

This bald fact—that monastic dreams reproduce biblical ideas in personal ways—is unsurprising in as much as prophetic dreams are already linked to ingestion and regurgitation of books in Scripture itself. The medieval image above (from a glossed Apocalypse in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Français 403) depicts an incident from the book of Revelations: an angel is handing a book to St. John, who is putting it in his mouth. The angel has commanded him to “take the book and eat it up. And it shall make thy belly bitter: but in thy mouth it shall be sweet as honey”(Revelations 10:9). John eats the book, and then the angel tells him to go and prophesy. John here is apparently redreaming a similar incident from the Book of Ezekiel where God holds out a book to Ezekiel and tells him to eat it up, and Ezekiel says “it was sweet as honey in my mouth” (Ezekiel 3:3). He is similarly commanded to go and prophesy.

In a similar way, monks ingest Scripture and spew it out in their dreams. They dream figures that appear regularly in the Bible: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Mary, and the archangels. Phrases, stories, and images familiar from liturgy and scripture appear both in the framing and content of medieval dream accounts. Monks represent their dreams as sites where they have consulted Christ or the Virgin Mary; they pray for specific answers to specific questions about their lives or about previous dream messages, often from specific biblical figures. And they get answers, though not always the answers they wanted to hear.

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I wondered about the relationship between reading and dreaming. How likely is it that your reading will become involved in your dreams? How hard is it to get questions answered in dreams? What is the likelihood that you will dream of a particular figure summoned in a prayer (whether God or a dead person, or a fictional character)? I thought I might find out about the potential types of relation between reading and dreaming by keeping a log of my dreams, which I have now been doing for over a year. I reported on these experiments in dreaming in the GEM forum of January 17, 2020.

In a nutshell, my findings so far suggest that these things are far from difficult. Even the modest effort required to keep a dream log yields interesting things that I am able to bring back to my historical study. What I am reading often appears in my dreams and affects them strongly; so do movies—indeed anything occupying my imaginative life, including perhaps especially my own writing. My dreams seem to be interested in my problems, and are always trying to solve them for me, sometimes cleverly, sometimes badly. Reading about angels has prompted dreams of angels. Going to bed with a problem on my mind not infrequently yields a dream that seems to be trying to help with it.

After presenting the preliminary results of my project in relation to dreams, I encouraged others to share experiences of dreaming. The topic generated a fertile and interesting conversation and I'm most grateful for the input of those that attended and participated in the discussion.

GEM Forum: Race and the Study of Esotericism By: Justine Bakker

In February 2020, Dr. Kripal invited me to host one of the GEM forums. An honor, certainly, and a wonderful occasion to discuss with fellow students and with faculty a topic that I have been interested in since writing my undergraduate thesis: the intersections between race and the study of (Western) esotericism. In preparation for our meeting, I shared with the group two texts: an article that I published in the summer of 2019 (“Hidden Presence: Race and/in the Construct, History, and Study of Western Esotericism,” published in the journal *Religion*) and a book chapter I was still

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working on (“Race and the Study of Esotericism,” to be included in the forthcoming anthology *New Approaches to Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Julian Strube for Brill). We used these texts as starting points to enter into a fruitful and productive discussion pertaining to, among other things, the usefulness and limitations of the adjective “Western,” the overwhelming whiteness of esoteric studies, and the possibility of raced and gendered extraterrestrial and spirit subjectivity. I want to thank Dr. Kripal for inviting me and those present for their challenging and constructive questions, suggestions, and critiques.

Leslie Kean Rockwell Lectures

By: Christopher Senn

Over the course of two days—November 14 and November 15, 2019—the Department hosted author and investigative reporter for the New York Times Leslie Kean. On November 14, Ms. Kean spoke about the research conducted for her most recent book, *Surviving Death: A Journalist Investigates Evidence for an Afterlife*. Using research pioneered by the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia Medical School, she explored Cases of the Reincarnation Type (CORT). Ms. Kean described how most children who recall memories from a previous life do so between the ages of 5 and 7, which can include memories of career-related information—such as a young boy who recalled dying in combat as a World War II pilot and could effortlessly catch errors about WWII planes in television documentaries—but also often demonstrate personality traits and talents that can be recognized by their friends and family from the previous life. The presentation also explored her work with mediums who communicate with the spirits of the deceased, which sometimes manifest as disembodied hands or inexplicable movements of furniture in the rooms where such communications happen. Between her riveting lectures, Ms. Kean enjoyed meals and informal discussions about her work investigating the paranormal with faculty and students from the Department.

Leslie Kean G.E.M. Forum Lecture

Christopher Senn

The lectures on November 15, focused on UFO phenomena, which was the subject of Kean's 2017 book *UFOs: Generals, Pilots, and Government Officials Go on the Record*. Prior to her presentation at the GEM Forum, Texas attorney and author of the book *Incident at Devil's Den* Terry Lovelace described the terrifying events of his own UFO abduction experience while serving in the US Airforce in 1977, and the experiences that resulted in the decades that followed. At the GEM Forum, Ms. Kean shared her experiences covering government-sponsored UFO research programs in France, Chile, the United States, and elsewhere. The encounters documented in her book ranged from the strange but relatively benign case of false information being given by the US Federal Aviation Administration when a UFO was spotted at O'Hare Airport in 2006 to the account of an Iranian General whose airplane was attacked by a UFO. Between her riveting lectures, Ms. Kean enjoyed meals and informal discussions about her work investigating the paranormal with faculty and students from the Department.

Rockwell Lecture on West African Manuscripts

By Dr. David Cook

On Sept. 16, 2019 Prof. Amidu Sanni Vice-Chancellor of Fountain University, Osogbo (Nigeria) lectured to the faculty, students and visitors on the issue of West African Arabic manuscripts. These manuscripts are of critical importance for the reconstruction of West African history, as well as the recovery of historical memory. The lecture took place in the late afternoon, and was attended by about 35 people, including Prof. Toyin Falola of the University of Texas, Austin, who is considered to be one of the leading scholars on Nigeria. Debate afterwards was contentious, as there were many questions asked concerning the state of these manuscripts, whether they were authentic—as questions have arisen recently about major publications and catalogues—and whether they constituted an antidote to the dominant use of European travelers' materials. Prof. Sanni parried all of these questions with aplomb, and the discussion lasted for almost an hour. Previously during the morning, Prof. Sanni had met with President David Leebron in an effort to improve bilateral educational relations between Rice University and Fountain University.



Faculty Publications

Join me in congratulating Professor Henze for his latest book, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Fifty Years of the Pseudepigrapha Section at the SBL* edited by Matthias Henze and Liv Ingeborg Lied, in the series, *Early Judaism and Its Literature 50* Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2019. Pp. xvii + 448

This landmark publication celebrates and also offers a critical appraisal of The Pseudepigrapha Unit at the Society for Biblical Literature which was founded in 1969. Professor Henze tells me that Psuedepigrapha is one of the oldest, continuous units at the SBL. In anticipation of the anniversary of this prestigious unit of the SBL, Professors Lied and Henze decided to edit a jubilee volume to celebrate 50 years of the Pseudepigrapha at the SBL. Some of the scholars who started the unit 50 years ago attended a special, celebratory session in San Diego, with cake and champagne, and were acknowledged for their contribution to this important field. Once more, we extend our congratulations to Professor Henze and Professor Lied for this remarkable achievement.

We are happy to report that *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, which our chair Elias Bongmba edited, has been published. He worked with 28 scholars in Africa, Europe, Asia, and the United States on this project. The publisher's promotional materials state that the book "charts both the historical developments and contemporary issues in the formation and application of theologies across the member countries of the African Union . . . chapters firstly cover the various methodologies needed to carry such a survey. Various theological movements and themes are then discussed, as well as biblical and doctrinal issues pertinent to African theology."

Congratulations to Professor Marcia Brennan for her new book, *Put it on the Windowsill: An Italian American Family Memoir*. In this book, Professor Brennan tells stories, and at the center of the stories is the journey of her own Italian-American family. Academic writing is challenging, but to invite the whole world into the journey of your own family calls for courage, and Professor Brennan is no stranger to that kind of courage, given the many years and months she has spent with others listening to their stories and helping them continue to take bold steps, often with an illness they know could bring their lives to an end. Reviews of this beautiful book point out that it falls into the genre of cultural history filled with “the magic of blessings, curses, and other forms of creation. From the rituals employed to ward off bad luck, to the mischief of older family members, to Italian toasts and swear words—*Put It On The Windowsill* shines a light on the multi-faceted world of Italian-American people.” But it is more than these things because Brennan shares ideas which many Italian-Americans around the world can relate to, and do so because she draws from her rich interaction with “sacred objects, near-death experiences, and transcendent visions.” For those of you who cannot have enough of Italian cuisine, reviewers have noted that book includes more than 40 traditional family recipes.

Congratulations to Professor DeConick. Her essay “Mentoring Women as Women: An Autobiographical Reflection” has just been published in *Women and the Society of Biblical Literature*, (SBL) an invitation only book that celebrates 125 years of women in the Society of Biblical Literature 1894-2019.

DeConick starts by discussing her surprise when she received the SBL Women’s Mentoring Award, when she was not in the same spaces or institution with the women who nominated her. DeConick discusses the role mentoring Professor Jarl Fossum gave her education, organizing conferences, writing, and publishing. The other important academic that had an impact on DeConick’s intellectual life was Professor Jane Schaberg, whose thesis on the Illegitimacy of Jesus brought many attacks and threatened her.

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DeConick highlights many things women and mentors have to take into consideration such as patriarchal obstacles, nepotism in the profession, sexual harassment, and what she calls the x-factors, all the personal things which tend to hold women back. DeConick points out that the advice she received early on and now passes on to younger colleagues is to take writing as a sacred practice. In addition, one should set boundaries to the work schedule, carry on intentional advocacy on behalf of women because many professional societies do not have formal mentoring programs for women. Women should ask difficult questions because it is asking the tough questions that have shaped her studies of early Christianity.

Asking these questions and mentoring future scholars is what DeConick has done in her career. As I have followed her work, it is clear that DeConick's enduring legacy and example to future scholars is her ability to follow the evidence, challenge, and chart new paths as she has done in (if I can mention only two publications) *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says*, and the highly thought provoking *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter*. These are path breaking texts that have changed studies of Early Christianity.

We are proud of Professor DeConick's work in the SBL and her innovative scholarship and glad she was invited to reflect on the 125th anniversary of the Society for Biblical Literature.

Departmental Awards & Achievements

Congratulations to **Professor Niki Clements** who has won the Sarofim Professor Distinguished Teaching in the Humanities Award. Professor Clements is a devoted teacher whose scholarship illuminates and inspires intellectual dialogue in and outside the classroom on diverse issues in the Humanities. Clements brings her amazing grasp and interpretation of philosophical, religious, and cultural theories to the multiple dimensions of life to her teaching and has generated a new appreciation for the discipline of religion and the Humanities among our graduate and undergraduate students who are inspired and challenged to appreciate the humanities.

Congratulations to **Professor Anne Klein** for receiving **The Khyentse Foundation Grant**. This grant will support her research and work “in introducing and translating *Lamp Lighting the Way* by Adzom Drukpa (1842-1924), founder of a major Dzogchen Garor study-practice center for monks and nuns where he also oversaw the third most significant publishing house in Tibet.

Adzom Drukpa was a major religious and political figure at a time when eastern Tibet was experiencing many changes. The Qing dynasty’s grip on eastern Tibet was weakening in this period and the contemporaneous non-sectarian Gemang movement took the opportunity to strengthen ancient Buddhist (Nyingma) educational institutions. Adzom Drukpa influenced and was influenced by this movement and *Lamp* reflects this interest, partly through emphasizing citations from prestigious Indian texts in ways that other commentators did not.

Lamp comments in crisp detail on a highly influential text by the iconic Jigme Lingpa (1730-1798) whom Adzom Drukpa met in direct vision and to whom he felt a life-long gratitude. *Lamp* helped usher Jigme Lingpa’s Dzogchen traditions into Tibetan modernity and is still widely studied today. This is the first time *Lamp*, or any of Adzom Drukpa’s major works is translated into a Western language.” Congratulations and we look forward to the fruits of this project.

Congratulations to Professor Brennan, whose book on the modernist artist Hyman Bloom has received a wonderful review in *Art In America*.

Join me in extending congratulations to **Professor Jeff Kripal**. Kripal has received funding from the Humanities Research Center at Rice for a conference. The topic of the conference will be, "**Opening the Archives of the Impossible: Writing the History of Religion & Science After the Normal.**"

Congratulations to Professor **Niki Clements**. Clements has received funding from the Humanities Research Center at Rice for a conference. The topic of the conference will be, "**Foucault, Christianity, and Sexual Ethics: Contextualizing Confessions of the Flesh.**"

Professor Brennan shared a wonderful podcast with me on which she was interviewed by Linda Lorelle, the Emmy-Award winning journalist who was a news anchor in Houston for many years. I have enjoyed listening to this podcast, and want to share it with you. The interview covers Professor Brennan's research, her teaching and work in Medical Humanities and at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Hospital, and the covid-19 pandemic. **Congratulations Professor Brennan.**

You can find the podcast online at
www.ourvoicesmatterpodcast.com
under the title "The Backside of the Tapestry"

Annual Awards

Saba Prize

Elizabeth Weeks

The Saba Prize is the most prestigious award bestowed by the Department of Religion. It is given as a result of departmental consideration majority vote, carries with it a substantial financial gift, and designates the graduating senior and religious studies major who has demonstrated the highest form of academic excellence over a four-year period.



Congratulations to our very own Administrator, **Marcie Newton** for receiving the 2019 Shining Star Award from the School Humanities. Assistant Dean Anita Norwig presented the award to Marcie at the School's Staff Event, lauding Marcie's creativity, devotion, and outstanding service to the school and the university.

We certainly agree and are very proud of Marcie and the dedicated staff of the School who serve diligently to ensure that our school and Rice University function efficiently.

We congratulate Marcie for this achievement.

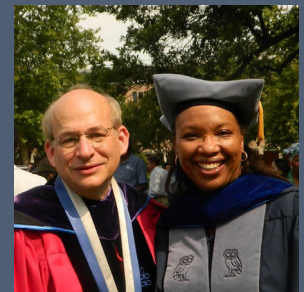
Department Service Award

Claire Fanger



**Alumni Flame 2020
Outstanding Graduate**

Aundrea Matthews



Faculty Achievements

Join us in congratulating **Professor April DeConick** for publishing a peer-reviewed essay titled “**Traumatic Mysteries: pathways of Mysticism among the Early Christians.**” This is the lead essay in the book *Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism* edited by Andrei Orlov, and published by Brill. DeConick’s begins with the premise that the ancient did not employ the term mysticism to point to their interactions with the divine, but talked of them as revelations that were further described as “waking visions, dreams, trances, and auditions that can involve spirit possession and ascent journeys of the soul.” In light of the idea of the apocalyptic, DeConick then discusses “early Jewish and Christian mysticism as the belief that a person directly, immediately, and before death can experience the divine, either as a rapture experience or as one solicited by a particular praxis.” We trust this whets your appetite to read and enjoy ancient wisdom, traditions, and practices at a time when we are all in some ways, trying to make sense of life in the wake of a pandemic. Congratulations to Professor DeConick.

Additionally, Her essay “**Mentoring Women as Women: An Autobiographical Reflection**” has just been published in *Women and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL)* an invitation only book that celebrates 125 years of women in the Society of Biblical Literature 1894-2019.

Join us in congratulating **Professor Anthony Pinn** for receiving the **Presidential Mentoring Award.** Professor Pinn has established himself as a leading scholar of religion, race theory, the Humanities, and Arts, and in doing so built an intellectual profile, practice, and publishing that has made him a pacesetter and intellectual mentor for many in the Humanities. One would think given that profile, he is a desk scholar, but Pinn is active in the community and has established a robust center that prepares High School Students in the Houston area for college and university education. Pinn has trained and placed many graduate students who are leading scholars in the study of religion and race. Pinn has provided leadership to the Humanist Society of America and travels frequently around the world to lecture on religion, race, humanism and mentor scholars and thought leaders. Pinn is also the inaugural director of the African and African American Studies Center at Rice University. Congratulations to Professor Pinn.



Annual Awards

G.E.M. Certificate

Learned Foote

Stefan Sanchez

Stanislav Panin

Oihane Iglesias Telleria

Kyle Smith

Benjamin Mayo

Distinction in Research and Creative Works

Distinction in Research and Creative Works is a university award for select undergraduates, granted at commencement, which appears on the transcript and diploma.

Students must apply to be considered for the award with a letter from a faculty member (or Center director) to the student's major department. A student whose research or other creative project is in a field outside of his/her major should submit an application to the academic department or program most closely associated with the subject matter of their project. Eligibility for the award extends widely to include a variety of research, design, and other creative projects, as well as persistent dedication to research. Projects completed in part or entirely at other institutions or with community partners will be eligible for consideration. This year, the award was bestowed on:

Akhil Jonnalagadda

"Finding Freedom: In Conversation with Nagarjuna & Deleuze"

Advisors: Dr. Niki Kasumi Clements and Dr. Anne Klein

Michael McDowell

"Part of the Story: St. Bernard of Clairvaux's Hermeneutic of the Second Crusade"

Advisors: Dr. David Cook and Dr. Matthias Henze

Congratulations Graduating Class of 2020

Chabrielle Allen

Pavan Pinnamaneni

Ariana Engles

Sunee Quirante

Akhil Jonnalagadda

Elizabeth Weeks

Michael McDowell

Anthony Saliba (minor)

Current Undergraduate Students

Robert M Alexander
Cognitive Sciences
McMurtry College

Aruni Areti
Anthropology
McMurtry College

Martin Berg
Mechanical Engineering,
Religion
Wiess College

CJ Cook
Kinesiology, Religion
Wiess College

Munever Duran
Kinesiology, Religion
Baker College

Lauren Hampton
Engineering Division,
Religion
Baker College

Suzanne Frances Harms
Mathematical Economic
Analysis, Religion
Duncan College

Josiah Jones
Religion, French Studies
Lovett College

Stefanie King
Biochemistry and Cell
Biology, Religion
Martel College

Romi Lee
Kinesiology, Religion
Martel College

Theresa Marie Leibig
Religion
Jones College

DNew Newsome
Psychology, Kinesiology,
Religion
Baker College

Mariana Nájera
Ancient Mediterranean
Civilizations, Religion,
Anthropology
McMurtry College

Lidia Jaqueline Ochoa
Religion, Visual and
Dramatic Arts
Duncan College

Logan Braden Rance
Biochemistry and Cell
Biology, Religion
Jones College

Norman Chen Zheng
Bio-Engineering,
Religion
Duncan College

RELI TEA @ Rice



Graduate Students

The Department of Religion celebrates all of our graduate students and their wonderful achievements. We could not be prouder of you, well done! The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Spring of 2020 has severely disrupted our Spring semester in many ways. All of us have been affected, but not equally so. The graduate students have been especially hard hit, both in their personal lives and in their academic pursuits. It has been wonderful to see how our reli community has come together in this time of crisis. I am proud of our community, and I am most grateful for the continuous support from the office of the Dean of Humanities. Together we will continue to support each other and move forward into an uncertain Fall semester.

Written by Matthias Henze
Supported & seconded by Bill Parsons

Introducing the Third Masters of Arts Cohort

Matthew Gregory Conrad

Buddhist thought, history of religions in America

Zachary Schwarze

History of religions in America, religion & culture

Angela Elaine Steiber

History of religions in America, religion & culture

Rochelle Herbst Willingham

GEM, new testament and early Christian studies

We are looking forward to this third year for our new thesis MA degree program. The last academic year brought abrupt changes to our activities in the form of Covid-19, a global pandemic that has not yet receded from us. Classes were cancelled the week before Spring Break, and when we resumed teaching two weeks later it was by Zoom. Students and faculty continued to work together and support each other through ensuing challenges of new teaching technologies, economic hardships, and illness. We hope to resume teaching in a new dual format, balancing ongoing mutual support with physical distancing to further our common need to learn and study and write.

We are grateful to the students moving forward with us in these unpredictable times. We welcome the third class of MA students: Matthew Gregory Conrad, Zachary Schwarze, Angela Elaine Steiber, and Rochell Herbst Willingham.

Professor Claire Fanger will continue to serve as the current Director of MA Studies in collaboration with Brian Ogren.

Introducing the Doctoral Class of 2020

Abby Crowetipton
The Bible & Beyond

John Allison
Buddhist thought, contemplative

Mai Lootah
GEM, Jewish thought & philosophy

J.D. Reiner
New testament and early Christian studies

Stefan Sanchez
GEM, Contemplative studies

Zach Feltey
Buddhist thought, contemplative studies

The following students have PASSED their Comprehensive Examinations:

Tim Grieve-Carlson

Oihane Iglesias-Telleria

Konner Childers

Naamleela Jones

DeAnna Daniels

Kyle Smith

Learned Foote

The following students have defended their thesis:

Justine Bakker

Jason Ford

Gregory Perron

Simon Cox

Renee Ford

Thesis MA Program Graduate

Stephan Sanchez

Candidacy MA Graduates

Tim Grieve-Carlson

Naamleela Jones

PhD Graduates

Simon Cox

Renee Ford

Cleve Tinsley

Jason Ford

Gregory Perron

RELIGION

M.A. in Religion at Rice University

The Department of Religion at Rice University is now accepting applications for a two-year, full-time M.A. in the study of Religion. This degree will provide a broad background in the study of religious currents, including the marginal and transnational, and will provide a strong theoretical framework for the academic study of religion.

- Acquiring the necessary background and credentials for admittance in competitive divinity and doctoral programs, or
- Developing the skills necessary for other vocational or professional options that do not require a Ph.D., or
- Exploring personal and professional interests

Students accepted into the M.A. program are eligible to participate in our unique GEM (Gnosticism, Esotericism, Mysticism) Certificate Program.

For inquiries regarding the application process, please contact: humagradadmissions@rice.edu. For academic inquiries regarding the program, please contact Claire Fanger, M.A. Director: cfanger@rice.edu or Brian Ogren, M.A. Director: beo1@rice.edu

For more information:
reli.rice.edu/graduate/ma-religion
Apply at:
religradapps.rice.edu/



RICE

GEM Seminars 2019- 2020

(Gnosticism, Esotericism, and Mysticism)



Fall 2019 & Spring 2020 Seminars

- | | |
|--|--|
| <u>Friday, September 20th</u> | Dr. Niki Clements, Rice University
TOPIC: Foucault, Asceticism, and Mystical Marriage |
| <u>Friday, October 18th</u> | Simon Cox, Rice University
TOPIC: A Genealogy of the Subtle Body |
| <u>Friday, November 15th</u> | Leslie Kean, Author & Independent Investigative Journalist
TOPIC: UFOs: On the Record |
| <u>Friday January 17th</u> | Dr. Claire Fanger, Rice University
TOPIC: Reading and Dreaming: Reflections on the Process of Knowledge |
| <u>Friday February 21st</u> | Justine Bakker, Rice University
TOPIC: Race and the Study of Esotericism |
| <u>Friday March 27th</u> | Dr. Hussein Ali Agrama, University of Chicago
TOPIC: Working-Through UFOntological Shock: An Open Exploration |

GEM Certificate Testimonial

**Kyle Monroe Smith,
Graduate Student**

The GEM certificate was deeply impactful for me academically, socially, and personally. Academically, I have been interested in alternate modes of rationality since I began my academic career. However, I learned very early on that researching these alternative methods can be difficult because to engage with the material one must undergo a kind of paradigm shift or, to use a phrase from class, a gnostic flip. The certificate was invaluable in helping me to understand, and in some ways undergo, that gnostic flip. It is an experience that has been extremely impactful for me academically, and I don't know if I would have been able to undergo the experience without the help of the GEM community. As impactful as the classes associated with the GEM certificate were, in some ways the most impactful part of the certificate was the community that formed around the program. The GEM program created an opportunity for people to form deep relationships and enter into meaningful exchanges with people from diverse religious backgrounds. Usually, when graduates discuss the value of "community" they are referring specifically to the student community. However, my experience with the GEM program was that the professors were also actively involved with the community and willing to go out of their way to assist students in understanding the material both academically and personally. The program was also impactful to me on a personal level as it allowed me to reconsider many of the assumptions I had made about reality. Through undergoing an academic gnostic flip, I was able to reimagine what it means to be human and what it meant to engage with religious studies both as an academic practice and as a way of life. The experience, overall, was one of the more impactful things I have experienced in my life.

Parapsychological Association Annual Convention Chris Senn | Durham, NA | July 2019



Thanks to the Dean's Conference, Research, and Professional Advancement Fund, I was recently able to attend the 62nd Annual Convention of the Parapsychological Association, which will benefit my personal academic development as well as the university community as a whole. At the conference, I presented a paper titled "Experimental Parapsychology as a Methodology for the Study of Religious Discourse in the Work of Joseph Banks and Louisa Rhine." This qualitative, historical approach was well received, and I was invited to speak about my research to other groups, including the Rhine Research Center (RRC) in Durham, North Carolina. Also, after a conversation concerning his recent work on therapeutic pluralism in the area of mental health, I was invited to submit articles that engage in scholarly boundary work to *Mindfield: The Research Bulletin of the Parapsychological Association* by one of the current editors, Dr. Renaud Evrard.

At the conference, I also had the opportunity to speak with scholars regarding my recent work in the Woodson Research Center. First, Dr. Edwin May, the physicist who served as the director of the US military's psychic research program (Stargate) 1985-1995, donated his papers to the Woodson Research Center and I have been processing this collection since September 2018, a work that I continue to be involved in as a Fondren Fellow. May attended the convention, which gave me the chance to meet the donor whose papers I have been processing and discuss several questions that have arisen. I also had the opportunity to have lunch with Dr. Dean Radin, the current president of the Parapsychological Association, who offered to deliver lectures to Rice students about his recent research on the intersection of parapsychology with Western Esotericism via Skype. During our conversation he also mentioned that he had been asked by several historians about what he intends to do with his papers since he is nearing retirement age and expressed that much of his life's work is now held in digital form. I took this opportunity to talk to Dr. Radin about digital archives and how this is something that we do at the Woodson Research Center, which already has experience dealing with similar collections.

Boston University “Religion and the Strange”

Arina Zaytseva | Boston, MA | September 2019

On the 15th of September I attended the “Religion and the Strange” Graduate Conference at Boston University. My paper focused on transgressive nature of the image of the devil in a Late Medieval treatise entitled *Satan’s Process Against Humanity (Processus Satanae Contra Genus Humanum)*.

The conference allowed me to engage with fellow religious studies scholars and present my research. I especially appreciated being part of the panel presided by Dr. April Hughes. It was interesting to see parallels between my research and that on the Chinese medieval literature. I am glad I could point my colleagues to some European medieval literary phenomena (namely, Caesarius’ of Heisterbach collection of legends) that can be fruitfully compared to their objects of study. Additionally, it was a pleasure to meet Professor Frankfurter, whose book *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History* was indispensable for my previous research, and discuss some aspects of the concept of “strangeness” and the image of the devil.

Boston University “Religion and the Strange”

Thomas Millary | Boston, MA | September 2019

Boston University’s “Religion and the Strange” conference provided a unique opportunity to dialogue with other scholars who are drawn to the weird and uncanny aspects of religion and spirituality. I presented on a panel with the theme of ‘Transcendence and Transformation,’ delivering a paper entitled “The Word of Alien Enemy Imprisons Thee in Time: The Occult Temporality of William S. Burroughs.” My essay focused on this iconic author’s little-known fixation on time-sorcery and how this occult theme underlies many widely recognized aspects of his transgressive life and literary output. It is likely that the research conducted for that essay will become the foundation for a chapter of my eventual dissertation (tentatively planned to be on the topic of posthuman temporality).

A highlight included Stephen Finley’s keynote on “The Afro-Theosophysics of Robert T. Browne.” Finley, being a former student of Jeffrey Kripal, provided a wonderful opportunity for me to discuss my own work on the methodology that Kripal refers to as “the new comparativism” with Finley and others. Given my general research focus on paranormal experience, it was greatly beneficial to see what elements of religious strangeness were part of discussion that took place at this conference. Professor Elias Bongmba and Professor Anthony Pinn were co-chairs of Stephen Finley’s dissertation. Finley studied esotericism with Professor Kripal.

Boston University “Religion and the Strange”

Chris Senn | Boston, MA | September 2019

On September 15, I attended the annual conference sponsored by the Boston University Religion Department, which provided important networking and presentation opportunities. During the first panel discussion of the day, I presented a paper titled “Chaos Magic as Mad Science: Utilizing the Methodology of Logic to Overcome the Limits of Rationality,” which explored the contemporary occultist movement of Chaos Magic through the lens of the popular mad scientist literary trope. This paper was well-received by the respondent Dr. Margarita Guillory, an alumnus of the Rice Religion department. Additionally, Dr. Guillory agreed to provide reference materials concerning several other contemporary esoteric groups that are similar to the research interests that were expressed in my paper. After the conference, I was also invited to consider contributing to the academic journal *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural*.

Experimental Utopia and the Politics of the Paranormal in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*

Timothy Grieve-Carlson | Irving, CA | December 2019

This November, thanks to funding from the Dean’s Fund, I was able to present my paper “Experimental Utopia and the Politics of the Paranormal in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*” at the annual conference of the Society for Literature, Science and the Arts Annual Conference at UC Irvine. The impact of financial assistance from the Dean’s Fund for my research and professional development cannot be overstated.

This award enabled me to travel for a conference presentation at which I shared some of my very early dissertation work with a community of scholars working in similar areas. I was also able to make professional connections with other individuals working in the field. Finally, I received important feedback and encouragement on my paper as I revise my work for its eventual form as a dissertation chapter.

The expenses of conference travel can be overwhelming for a graduate student, and thanks to the Dean’s Fund I was able to make invaluable steps in my research and professional development.

American Society for Church History 2020 Annual Meeting

Charles J. Schmidt | New York, NY | January 2020

Receipt of the Dean's Award allowed me to travel to NYC to participate on a panel that addressed teaching ancient Church History in our present political moment. Not only did this financial assistance allow me to share my experiences teaching Early Christian Studies at both Rice University and University of Houston it also helped me attend this small conference for the first time. Given the nature of this small conference, I was able to meet many important scholars in the sub-field and rekindle many other professional relationships. To date, I've mainly attended the major joint annual conference (AAR/SBL), which attracts some 10,000 scholars of religion, so getting to attend and contribute to a small conference consisting of about 300 people was a welcome change of pace.

One of the panelists is an editor with the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. I greatly enjoyed making this personal connection with them and sharing teaching tips with each other after our panel. With my interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning, inspired through Rice's Center for Teaching Excellence, I am sure this professional relationship will become important for both my research and teaching interests.

Sanneh Institute Inaugural Conference

Azizou Atte-oudeyi | Accra, Ghana | February 2020

From February 25-29, 2020, the Sanneh Institute, named after the late religious scholar Lamin Sanneh organized its inaugural conference in collaboration with Yale University where Sanneh taught for 30 years. The Sanneh Institute is unique in its nature in Africa because it is the first institute in West Africa dedicated to the study of religions. The institute is located on the campus of the University of Ghana at Legon in Accra, Ghana. The theme of the conference was ‘territoriality and hospitality: Christians and Muslims sharing common space.’ Participants came from all over the world and the conference was honored with the presence of the former archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, and Professor Farid Esack, one of the prominent South African Muslim Theologians, who both gave the inaugural lectures.

During the conference, I presented a paper on “Religious territoriality and the building of a nation state in Cote-d’Ivoire.” My paper was about the role of religion in the two civil wars of 2002 and 2011 in Cote-d’Ivoire. These civil wars were about sharing the same land between Christians and Muslims. Because Cote-d’Ivoire is territorially divided in two, with most of the Muslims in the north and a majority of Christians in the south, the country was divided into two during these wars and was reunited in 2011 after violent clashes between the two protagonists. Many other papers were presented ranging from the role of food in territoriality and hospitality to land ownership by Godas related to religious divide. The last day was marked with the inaugural lectures. When the Sanneh Institute opens next year, it will serve West Africa and beyond.



Professor Niki K. Clements with students

Graduate Student Teaching

RELI 270: Introduction to the Black Church in the United States

Spring 2020 | Sharde' Chapman

This spring I had the privilege of teaching RELI 270 “Introduction to the Black Church in the United States” for the Religion department. This was my first time engaging with students as a solo instructor in a college course. It was an experience that I greatly enjoyed.

Through a series of interactive lectures, seminar-style discussions, writing assignments, and discussions of current events, the course charted the development of the Black Church as part of a broader framework of African American experience in this country. We engaged the possibility of retention from the African continent, Black church theology and practice, and how the Church as an institution responded to social, political, and economic challenges that African Americans continue to confront.

Over the course of the semester, the students not only engaged with material, and other perspectives within the academic study of African American religion, but also clergy and activists within the local Houston community. Students also had the opportunity to respond to one another in discussion, but reflected in written form on how they were reading texts and making connections about the material and today’s cultural climate. The semester ended with students sharing their field observations of Black churches across the eight historical Black Christian denominations.

I am grateful to the department for allowing me this opportunity to teach and engage with Rice students. It has been a tremendous benefit to have had such a valuable teaching experience as I continue to refine my pedagogical methods, and getting feedback over the course of the semester will serve me well throughout my teaching career.

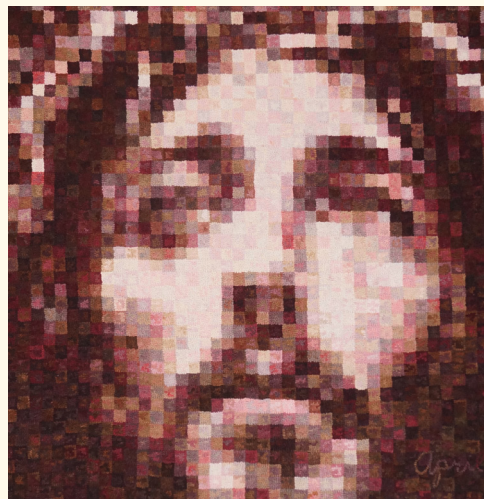
RELI 304: Jesus and the Gospels

Fall 2019 | Cindy Dawson

A primary goal of the class was to “pixelate” students’ understanding of Jesus and demonstrate how the homogenous picture of this central figure is actually constructed of various and often conflicting portraits. The syllabus was divided into three sections, arranged chronologically so that students could track how communal memories of Jesus changed (or not) over time.

The first section focused on two objectives, both introductory. The first objective was an introduction to early pictures of Jesus in canonical non-gospels—the Christ of the parousia in 1 Thessalonians, for example, or the “Cosmic Christ” of Colossians—in order to give students a starting point for the shifts that would take place in later traditions. The second objective was an introduction to wider topics that guide an academic study of the gospels, such as the Synoptic Problem and the Historical Jesus.

In the second section, “Canonical Gospels,” the pace slowed considerably, dedicating a week to each book. At this point, the students were becoming much more adept at isolating each gospel’s contribution to the overall picture of Jesus. In a somewhat surprising development, a class favorite was the very human Jesus as depicted by the gospel of Mark. We also continued our focus on academic approaches by introducing source, redaction, and feminist criticisms.



This course examines the various portraits of Jesus in the New Testament and in the extra-canonical gospels. We will reconstruct each gospel’s Christological interpretation of Jesus as well as the “Historical” Jesus himself.

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The third and final section focused on extra-canonical gospels such as the gospels of Thomas, Mary, Judas, and more. Because students had never read these gospels, we spent much of our class time doing close readings of texts, parsing out new and often delightful portraits of Jesus that were often wildly different than those painted by canonical texts. In a very unsurprising development, the students did not like the “mean Jesus” as depicted by the gospel of Judas.

Although the first half of most class sessions was necessarily lecture-driven, student participation was compulsory and multi-faceted. A highlight of the semester was student presentations, 15-minute talks on gospel-adjacent topics such as “Paul vs. James,” “John and Jewish-Christian Relations,” and “Marcion.” Students also represented close readings of the texts via interpretive assignments, and our discussion of Dale Allison’s *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* at the end of the semester was entirely driven by “thick questions” provided by students beforehand.

RELI 233: Introduction to Buddhism Fall 2019 & RELI 253: Introduction to Tibetan Language Spring 2020

Learned Foote

The Khyentse Foundation has generously offered Rice funding for a number of courses on Buddhism and Tibetan language, among which were two courses I taught in Fall 2019 and Spring 2020, respectively Introduction to Buddhism and Introduction to Tibetan Language, Literature, and Culture. It has been wonderful to explore a variety of Buddhist texts, films, and songs in these classes. I have learned much from seeing how students engage the material with respect to contemporary issues in their own lives.

In Introduction to Buddhism, we read primary sources from various schools of Buddhism, along with historical analysis to contextualize this material. Though we sampled from Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, we spent the most time in an in-depth reading of the Heart Sutra in the Tibetan language. We first practiced pronouncing *Photo: Introduction to Buddhism* (Fall 2019), with special guests Lama Tenzin and Dr. Anne Klein.

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Piece by piece, we discussed the radical philosophy of emptiness that it contains. We discussed how scholars have proposed histories of the text's composition, and looked at how it is practiced around the world today. At the close of the semester, we invited Lama Tenzin to explain the Heart Sutra and answer questions about Buddhism from the students. Along with looking at the various schools of Buddhism, we also considered how Buddhists have interacted with figures from other religious traditions, such as Hinduism and Daoism, as well as the place that Buddhism occupies in the contemporary global context. In Introduction to Tibetan Language, Literature and Culture, we discussed the Tibetan alphabet and basics of grammar. We looked at a number of primary texts, including a story of the Buddha's past life in a prior incarnation. We read a popular philosophical depiction of emptiness, and excerpts from a historical account of the founding of the Tibetan empire.

We also looked at a documentary about the system of identifying reincarnations in Tibetan culture. The texts we read were each many centuries old, but we also contextualized this material with regard to 20th and 21st century scholarship. We examined a number of the difficulties inherent in analyzing

Tibetan culture, especially in the context of the American university given the complex history of colonialism. We sought to better understand how popular narratives, philosophical ideas, religious practices, and historical understanding contribute to Tibetan culture.



RELI 424: Religion and Politics in Africa

Spring 2020 | Bradley Johnson

During Spring 2020, I taught RELI 424: Religion and Politics in Africa. The course covered postcolonial politics across the African continent, and how religious movements and ideas were interacting with, influencing, and impacted by the public use of power. A seminar setting allowed for in-depth discussions of case studies in Zimbabwe and Kenya, histories of Islamic law and practice in Egypt and Algeria, the rise of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, and theologies against apartheid in South Africa. Though the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our in-person meetings, the substance of the course changed little, as students were able to give well-organized and thoughtful presentations of readings both in the classroom and on Zoom. By the end of the semester, students produced wonderful research papers that explored topics outside the syllabus while expanding on the themes and issues that were introduced in discussions. I thoroughly appreciate the department allowing me to teach this rewarding course, and for giving me the opportunity to create my own syllabus to go with it.



In this course, we explore the intersections of religious traditions and political movements across the African continent, with a focus on the post-colonial era. By examining how Christians, Muslims, and traditional practitioners use, conceptualize, and respond to power in different spheres, our goal is to understand some of the complex dynamics surrounding poverty, gender inequality, democracy, education and climate change, among others. This class consists of discussions and presentations, and papers—no exams.

Bradly Johnson, Course Instructor bmj3@ice.edu



course flyer used for advertisement

RELI 300: Religions in America

Spring 2020 | Timothy Grieve-Carlson

In the Spring semester of 2020 I had the opportunity to teach RELI 300: Religions in America. The course convened a group of about ten remarkable undergraduate students, some of whom were majors, and some of whom were simply interested in the topic.

We took a wide-angle approach to the topic, beginning with theoretical and historical reflections on the meanings of both “religion” and “America,” both as categories of our individual and collective experience and as critical objects of study in the classroom. From there, we moved into the indigenous



history of the continent, exploring Native history with scholars like Vine Deloria and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. As we turned to the colonial period, we read *Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca's Chronicle of the Narvaez Expedition*, both as an exploration of the historical atrocities of the Spanish colonial enterprise and as a memoir of the indigenous and religious history of the greater Texas region.

Our subsequent exploration of American religious history touched on topics like the religious meanings of the Superbowl, the history of the Jewish community in the city of Pittsburgh, the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the religious lives of enslaved people, and the religious dimensions of political struggles for civil rights in the American twentieth century.

Our course was, along with everything else last Spring, disrupted by the pandemic, but the students gamely took up the challenge of exporting our critical learning community into an online format as we conducted the final month of seminar over Zoom. The students planned and executed their own final projects, which they presented over Zoom during the last week of class. The final projects were superlative in every sense: students produced original journalism essays, historical research papers, photo essays, virtual museum exhibits, paintings, plays, historical fiction, podcasts, and original gaming modules, all of which were based on their own deep readings of American religious history.

RELI 384 – Pilgrimage and Crusade

Spring 2020 | Waleed Rikab

I taught RELI 384 – Pilgrimage and Crusade in Spring 2020, with the generous support of the Department of Religion, Rice University. In studying the Crusades from their inception in 11th-century Europe to their decline in the 14th-century Middle East, we close-read firsthand accounts from participating combatants, historians, and observers on both sides, as well as secondary literature from the 20th and 21st centuries.

Our goal as a class was to gain a deep insight into the actions and motives of both the Crusaders and the inhabitants of the affected regions and societies in the Middle East and Europe. We then examined the enduring legacies of the Crusades in popular culture and reflected upon how this complex history has been mobilized in service of competing ideologies.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the second half the semester required us to adopt new modes of online learning, and I appreciate my students' patience in adjusting to these new circumstances. Overall, I believe we met and even exceeded my initial class goals.

RELI 384 - Pilgrimage and Crusade

Waleed Rikab

The Crusades (ca. 1000 – 1300 C.E.) were one of the lengthiest periods of conflict between European and Islamic societies, featuring both villains and heroes, atrocities and acts of valor. As a result, the Crusades left a lasting impression on Islamic and European history and produced a host of ideals that influence world affairs to this day.

With these thoughts in mind, we will discuss the religious and historical background of the Crusades, follow their different stages, engage with primary texts from the period, and look into the role that the holy sites of the three major Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam—played during this period.

Students will be able to explore the legacy of the Crusades through a chosen topic of interest, and present their insights in class discussion and in written form.

RELI 384 satisfies the D1 requirement for all majors

course flyer used for advertisement

Rice Ph.D. Recipients



By Jason Ford

My research was in the field of apocalyptic Jewish literature from the early centuries of the Common Era. When the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem's temple in 70 CE, it altered Jewish imagination and compelled religious and community leaders to devise messages of consolation. These messages needed to address both the contemporary situation and maintain continuity with Israel's religious history.

For my dissertation, I analyzed three important witnesses of that pivotal period in Israel's history: 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, and Apocalypse of Abraham. In particular, I focused on each text's application of the religious theme of judgment. Regarding 4 Ezra, I argued that by focusing our reading on judgment and its role in the text's message we uncover 4 Ezra's essential meaning. 4 Ezra's main character misunderstands the implications of the destroyed Temple and, despite rounds of dialogue with an angelic interlocutor, he only comes to see God's justice for Israel in light of the end-time judgment. Woven deeply into the fabric of his story, the author of 2 Baruch utilizes judgment for different purposes. With the community's stability and guidance in question, 2 Baruch promises the coming of God's judgment on the wicked nations, as well as the heavenly reward for Israel itself.

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In that way, judgment serves a pedagogical purpose in 2 Baruch to stabilize and inspire the community. Of the three texts, Apocalypse of Abraham explores the meaning of judgment most directly. It also offers the most radical portrayal of judgment. For Apocalypse of Abraham, the violent judgment of Israel's enemies serves as Israel's own reward for their faithfulness. My work helps to provide a more robust understanding of Early Judaism's theological development in the years after 70 CE.

I'm grateful to Rice's Department of Religion and the opportunities provided to me during my time at Rice. In particular, I have immense gratitude for Matthias Henze's mentorship and guidance. I owe much to him for helping me become a more critical thinker and a better teacher. I now teach at Strake Jesuit College Preparatory here in Houston.



Gregory Perron | Ph.D 2020

My dissertation, “Open Secret: Henry Corbin, Elliot Wolfson, and the Mystical Poetics of Deification,” emerged from the almost thirty years I have spent as a Benedictine monk and my decades-long study of comparative mysticism and practice of interreligious dialogue. In my dissertation, I seek to answer two fundamental questions. First, what is theosis or deification? And second, given that mystics in the three Abrahamic faiths have written experientially of deification, what might be some of the phenomenological and anthropological lessons that we can learn today from their insights into the nature of reality and from those of the scholars who study them?

To answer these questions, after initially offering my preferred working definition of theosis or deification from the Christian tradition, I subsequently refract it through the lens of what is essentially a history of religions or reflexively comparative approach to a deep reading of the same theme in some representative texts of two major authors in the modern study of Islamic and Jewish mysticism respectively, Henry Corbin and Elliot Wolfson. This exploration is done in the service of gaining greater insight into the phenomenological and anthropological



significance of the specific mystical category of deification via the “academic esotericism” (to borrow Dr. Kripal’s designation) of these two authors. The goal of undertaking such a dialogical study of each author’s treatment of deification is to journey toward a more mystical, poetic, and, hence, constructive understanding of what it means to be human. My fundamental argument is that, when viewed in the dialogical light of Corbin’s and Wolfson’s esoteric works, deification can be seen to be pointing to a relatively common cross-cultural nondual mystical experience that bears witness to the essential and paradoxical oneness of humanity and divinity.

In this, my dissertation extends Dr. Kripal’s fundamental insight into the entangled relationship between the history of mysticism as an academic discipline and the history of mysticism as a historical phenomenon, and it develops his key notion of “the Human as Two” (and One). As such, my dissertation is basically a comparative exercise in attending to the “open secret” of our inherent paradoxicality and an invitation to reimagine our human identity in the light of the impossible possibility of becoming divine.

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In the next year, I look forward to dedicating as much time as I can spare from my monastic duties to revising and publishing my dissertation as an academic monograph, even as I continue my research into the mystical phenomenon of deification. In the meantime, I am and ever shall remain

profoundly grateful for the friends I have made and the support I have received over the past four years from the Department of Religion, its faculty and staff, my committee, and above all my advisor, Jeffrey Kripal, without whose scholarship and mentorship this degree would not have been possible.

Simon Cox | Ph.D. 2020

My dissertation, “A Genealogy of the Subtle Body” is an historical genealogy of the term “subtle body,” tracing it from where it was coined among the 17th-century Cambridge Platonists back to the late-antique Greek sources from which they drew the concept, then forward through colonial Indology, Theosophy, Carl Jung, and into the New Age. I did not intend for this project to become my dissertation. It was a sort of groundwork to what I thought my dissertation might be, namely comparing different subtle body schemes in Tibetan Tantric and Daoist alchemical contexts. But as so often happens, the preface took on a life of its own. So I rolled with it. It turns out the subtle body was just a pretty messy concept that was in need of some housekeeping. My tool of choice was the freewheeling genealogy.

I was happy to have wrapped everything up in August of 2019, looking forward to taking a break from this project that had occupied the last several years of my life. My partner

Brandi welcomed the reprieve from my exuberant soliloquies on Ralph Cudworth and Helena Blavatsky. I even began to start sleeping like a normal human again.

But my book was picked up by Oxford University Press and it is now forthcoming through their series: Studies in Western Esotericism. They want me to add a chapter on Aleister Crowley. So as a devoted acolyte of Jeff Kripal’s, I am back to waking up at 4 a.m., reading everything I can find on The Beast, and ruminating endlessly over word choice and footnotes.

I have to thank my co-advisors Jeff Kripal and Anne Klein for allowing me the space to write this odd dissertation that has unexpectedly come to have utility outside the confines of our rather idiosyncratic department. I wrote the whole thing in a spirit of sacrifice, casting it onto the funeral pyre. The sage is detached from the fruits of his actions, etc. But I guess this book still has some work to do on our material plane.

Stefan Sanchez | M.A. 2020

In a 1993 interview, Chicana feminist, queer theorist, culture critic, fiction author and activist Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa criticized scholars that had been studying her works for ignoring unconventional, “unsafe” spiritual aspects of her work, in favor of more easily digestible aspects of her work that dealt with much more secular ideas of oppression, gender, and race. My M.A. thesis focuses on the significance of these neglected spiritual aspects of specifically Anzaldúa’s later works.

While the aforementioned “safer” aspects of her corpus are what she is most known for, particularly in the Southwest Studies and Chicana studies spheres, all aspects of her philosophy were deeply informed by her understanding of not only Western canon, but of Gnostic and Esoteric literature, and Mexican Shamanism as well, all framed through attempts to



study the inherent religious and cultural hybridity of her own upbringing. These have always been prominent elements of Anzaldúa’s work, but the texts published from 1987 onward contain exceptional examples of mystical experience interlaced with cultural and political commentary that remain largely unstudied and, when these are studied, they are largely treated as literary or metaphorical devices, not as a portion of Anzaldúa’s worldview.

Her 2015 posthumous volume *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, which is just as much a work of cultural criticism and a call to political action as it is an exploration of Anzaldúa’s views of divinity, the nature of the soul, and the ecological nature of trauma and growth, has received almost no attention from the field of religious studies.

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The goal of my thesis work has been to bring to light the usefulness of Anzaldúa's later works by taking her philosophy seriously, following it to its logical conclusions, and situating it in relation to the various traditions that Anzaldúa was in conversation with. Specifically, my work has focused on the aforementioned dynamics of growth and trauma in relation to the human soul according to Anzaldúa's system.

Anzaldúa's system, although somewhat ill-defined, is of historical importance because it seeks to bring the unique spiritual landscapes of the Tejanx and Chicanx communities into focus as legitimate subjects of philosophical and theological inquiry. Anzaldúa's anthropology of self opens the door to answer an important question: What does contemporary psychology and phenomenology

look like from the position of the indigenously-derived philosophies of Latin American spiritualities? Authors such as Anzaldúa need to be studied by our field as more and more traditional worldviews from outside of the academically established world religions, and to understand how these traditions hybridize with others, forming entirely new ones. To truly understand the historical nature of religious thought, we must be willing to understand how traditions unfold and combine within our own lifetime, as well as be willing to understand where and how these collisions arise.

Alumni News

We proudly congratulate **Reyhan Erdogdu Basaran** who has published two papers.

The first is titled:

“Comparing Scholarship: The assessment of the Contemporary Works the Links Alevis with Either Shi’ism or Sunnism” in *Lis 7 Aralik Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 2018/2 31-337.

The second is titled:

“Does Being Rafidi Mean Shi’te?: The Representation of the Kibilas Belief in the Sixteenth Century Ottoman Records” *Trabzon Theology Journal*, Spring 2019.

Big congratulations Reyhan!

Dr. **Rachel Schneider**, has published her essay **“Whither Whiteness and Religion?: Implications for Theology and the Study of Religion”** in *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Rachel, a recent graduate from our doctoral program currently holds a postdoctoral position with the Religion and Public Life Program at Rice University. The research for this essay was conducted in South Africa. The essay offers interdisciplinary analysis of race and religion and discusses how new terminologies like “whiteness” open the door for scrutinizing systemic inequality and extremism and is therefore a worthy category of theorizing and analysis.

Congratulations Rachel!

Congratulations **Dr. Ann Gleig**, 2010 alumni of our Department and the Certificate Program in the Center for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality will receive the 2019 Distinguished Alumna award on the evening of October 30. Dr. Gleig is serving as teaching fellow at Millsaps College. She specializes in Asian religions in America and psychology of religion.

Congratulations Ann!

Our own alum, Dr. David Kline, has published, **Racism and the Weakness of Christian Identity**. Kline's book gives a philosophical analysis of what he describes as a constructed Christian immune system that white Christians have used to neglect Christ's command to love and treat their neighbors kindly.

A reviewer states: "this book traces how the racism and violence of modern Western Christianity is a symptom of its failure to secure its own myth of sovereignty within a complex world of plurality. . . This wide-ranging and interdisciplinary view of Christianity's relationship to racism will be of keen interest to scholars of Religious Studies, Theological Studies, Cultural Studies, Critical Race Studies, American Studies, and Critical Theory."

This book began as his doctoral thesis directed by Professor Pinn. Dr. Kline is currently teaching at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

Congratulations David!

Congratulations to **Rachel Schneider** who has accepted and started her tenure as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Religion and Public Life Program (RPLP) and the Department of Sociology. The Fellowship which is under the direction of Professor Elaine Howard Ecklund, at Rice University, and is for an initial three year term, August 1, 2019-July 31, 2022 with the possibility of extension pending the availability of funding.

Schneider is no stranger to the program. She has served as researcher for the Religion and Public Life Program for the past year. We are delighted that Schneider will continue to be a vital part of all our community take part in our academic and community events.

Congratulations again Rachel!

Remembering Rabbi Samuel E. Karff, 1931-2020

Werner Kelber

The death of Rabbi Samuel E. Karff on Shabbat, August 15, was widely reported in the local and national news, many of which chronicled the basic data of his life and career. Rather than reiterating what has already been made public, I will, therefore, take the liberty and enlarge the profile of the man by recollecting aspects of the professional and personal relationship I was privileged to share with him.

Our professional relationship originated in and was nurtured by a team-taught course on Jewish-Christian Dialogue at Rice's Department of Religious Studies (as it was called at the time). The course was offered for many years every other semester. Once every week, after completing a full day's work at Beth Israel, one of the largest Reform congregations in the country, Rabbi Karff joined me in teaching the course from 7:00pm-10:00pm. By the standards of Humanities courses at Rice, it was a rather large and steadily growing class. We soon realized, and Sam, as his colleagues and friends affectionately called him, helped me understand, that the course was concerned with matters that were of existential relevance to many students. Some came from Jewish-Christian homes, and others had a girlfriend or boyfriend raised in a faith other than their own.

This may explain why students were uncommonly eager to absorb information about the history of the two faiths, quite often engaged in lively discussions, and at times were inclined to voice rather strong opinions. Throughout the course, and especially at moments of heated debate, Sam proved himself a masterful teacher. His pedagogical style was of an irenic kind, attentively listening and always (even in private conversations) meticulously articulating, but arguing not without a good measure of intellectual toughness. Students came to know him as a pedagogue who was fond of making them see issues in broader perspectives and in relation to other, often suppressed or forgotten facts.

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He was the kind of teacher whose answers to students' questions ever so often left them amazed that theirs had apparently been questions of considerable profundity. I learned much in these years of working together with Sam, not only about ancient, medieval, and modern Judaism, but, importantly, about the art of teaching.

The longer Sam and I worked together, the more I thought I recognize the roots of his thinking in the deep space of biblical storytelling and in the rabbinical culture of dialogue. In different words, Sam was the rabbinical sage in class, acting both as the embodiment and the transmitter of the Jewish tradition, while all along teaching our students exquisite lessons in cultural sensibilities.

When as chair of the Department I asked Sam whether he would be interested in helping me securing a full-time academic position in Jewish Studies at Rice, his answer was spontaneously in the affirmative. The Anna Smith Fine Chair in Judaic Studies has laid the groundwork for rapidly evolving academic interests in Judaism, being pursued both in the humanities and social sciences, and culminating in the interdisciplinary Program in Jewish Studies under the directorship of Matthias Henze. Manifestly, Sam's contribution to Rice extended far beyond the team-teaching of a course.

With the passing of Sam, I have lost one of the closest friends I have had. Our bonds were continuously strengthened by the unusual manner in which our lives intersected over the years. We both lived at the same time in Chicago's Hyde Park, Sam as a Senior Rabbi at the Sinai Congregation while also teaching at the University's Divinity School, while I was a struggling PhD candidate at the same School. We both arrived at about the same time in Houston, and in the early 90s started teaching the Jewish-Christian Dialogue course. Quite unexpectedly, we were both stricken with the same disease at the same time, and for some time regularly met at the Medical Center for testing and treatment. Almost four years ago, our wives died on the same day and at precisely the same hour. Those were all experiences that brought us ever closer together.

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The last time I saw Sam was on a visit to his place of retirement a few weeks before he died. Our conversation soon turned to his autobiography, *For This You Were Created: Memoir of an American Rabbi* (2015) which represents a fascinating slice of American-Jewish cultural history. I came away from reading the book and from my last conversation with Sam deeply impressed with the way he was able to unify profound religious sensibilities with a remarkably worldly disposition toward life. It became very clear to me: he viewed religious faith and a radically prophetic practice of social justice as part of one and the same reality. As he was looking back upon his life he truly felt that he was created for the very life he had been able to live.

Remembering Dr. Lynn E. Mitchel Jr.

Information taken from the Funeral Home, UH Website, and Kathy Straker

We have received the sad news that Alumni Dr. Lynn E. Mitchel Jr. passed away in a hospital in Sulphur, Louisiana, July 20, 2019. Dr. Mitchell was born in La Feria Texas on August 15, 1940, to Lynn Mitchell Sr. and Hazel Mitchell. Dr. Mitchell earned his undergraduate degree from Abilene Christian University (ACU) in Bible with minors in Greek and English. He earned a Masters Degree from ACU in Doctrine, writing a thesis on “The Apologetic Method of C.S. Lewis.” Mitchell did his graduate studies in the Department of Religion at Rice University where he earned a Masters Degree in Religious Studies in Theology and Theological Ethics, and his Doctor of Philosophy in Religious studies after defending his dissertation, “Two Ages and Two Communities: Implications of an Eschatological Duality for Construction of a Social Ethic.

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Dr. Mitchell was a member of the American Academy of Religion(AAR), The Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), American Society of Christian Ethics (SCE), and Restoration Theological Research Fellowship. Dr. Mitchell taught and served for many years as a Resident Scholar in Religion in A.D. Bruce Religion Center at the University of Houston. He also served as Director of the Religious Studies Program for the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, University of Houston, 1985 -2014. He was a Distinguished Visiting Scholar in Religion at the GraduateSchool, Religion at Pepperdine University in 1993. Mitchell served as Associate Professor in the Department of Theology at the University of Saint Thomas, Houston, Texas, 1974-1985. Mitchell taught and served as a mentor for many students at both institutions and was admired as a Professor and caring individual and a trusted adviser to students.

Mitchell's publications include: *Walking in the Light: How Christians Face Ethical Issues*, and *The Two Books of God: Science and the Bible*.

In 2010, the Religious Studies Program at the University of Houston established The Lynn E. Mitchell Distinguished Professorship to recognize Dr. Mitchell's teaching, achievements, and sacrificial service to the University.

Dr. Mitchell is survived by his wife, Carolyn Kellogg Mitchell; two children, Anne Mitchell Liscum of Sulphur, LA, and Jon Colin Mitchell of Katy, TX. Messages to the family can be left at www.robisonfuneralhome.com. Donations in honor of Dr. Mitchell should be directed to a charity of your choice.

What We Learned in the Classroom: The Gift of Presence in the Age of Social Distancing

Marcia Brennan

This was a poignant semester, one that was disrupted at mid-term due to the outbreak of COVID-19. In the blink of an eye, we no longer met one another's gaze directly in the classroom. Instead, we began engaging through the multiple windowpanes of Zoom classroom technology. We learned so much and had so many meaningful conversations—especially in my seminar on “Medicine and the Museum” (RELI 335)—and I will briefly share some of the insights.

Because the class was filled with seniors, this experience of profound disruption was felt acutely. Many students expressed a sense of mourning for the experiences they lost during the last part of their senior year, a time of great personal transitions and once-in-a-lifetime rituals. While the grief was palpable, it also inspired a heightened sense of appreciation for what we were still able to share together, as a group. In our classes, the spirit of gratitude was always palpable. Just as a pandemic is a game-changer, we recognized that we were living through a kind of *force majeure*, just as we still found ways to honor our commitments to one another.

Because so much of the class focused on issues of representation, care, and caregiving, many conversations focused on the themes of communication and interpersonal relationships. If I were to phrase this in technical terms, I might say that the class spent a good deal of time reflecting on the ontology of presence in the age of social distancing, as mediated by digital technology. Many of our discussions concerned the online experience offers—whether in distance learning or in telehealth—and what it can and cannot replicate. Thus we discussed questions of authenticity and reproduction, resiliency and vulnerability, while considering how we navigate the unknown, and how we negotiate our responses of fear and faith.

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Because a substantial portion of the class dealt with end of life issues, related questions also arose regarding: How do we know when someone is nearby or far away? How do we know when someone is here, or when they are gone? Just as these issues relate to the disruption our culture was experiencing with collective grief rituals such as funerals, an analogous question arose in the age of Zoom technology regarding how we know when someone is present, or not present. With Zoom, a person can be as close as a block (or even, just a room) away, yet they still cannot be seen or touched directly. Key questions arose concerning proximity and distance, intimacy and isolation, as well as the need to rethink beginnings and endings, hellos and goodbyes.

Zoom also requires us to consciously consider questions of how we communicate with one another, and how we meet another person's gaze. When two people in a group of fourteen are talking with one another, it feels like an exchange. For everyone else, it feels like they are spectators witnessing a conversation. Regarding such reception dynamics, we found ourselves consciously asking: Who is in the audience, and who is the subject of the conversation? We also reflected on issues of intentionality, masks, and identity. We considered how each of us defines topics such as acceptable risk, how we allocate resources, and how we value life itself on both the individual and collective levels. These experiences made us question whether access to technology is a new human right. Everyone agreed on the need for a moving humanism when facing such practical and ethical complications associated with our current age.

As I said, this was a poignant semester. Our experiences with Zoom showed us the ways in which personal settings are extensions of both our self and our world. The spaces behind each of us were individually curated, just as they coalesced on the surface of a shared screen that brought us all together. And together, we lived the paradox of how Zoom both separates and connects us. We came to appreciate the ways in which our computer screens are at once windows, filters, barriers, and lifelines. Ultimately, this complex technological paradox provided the opportunity for a cherished sense of continuity during a time of massive disruption, which brought us the gift of presence in an age of social distancing.

Become a Department Partner

The work of our department, from its teaching mission to its published research, explores vital questions of religion, human diversity, and meaning in our complex world. Our aim as an intellectual community is unified as we seek to help individuals and communities overcome religious intolerance by learning about other religions and viewpoints, challenging religious stereotypes and addressing fears that can lead to hostility and violence.

We equip undergraduate and graduate students with insight, reason, and compassion, hoping that, as they go into their own communities, they will pay it forward and positively impact the way we live together.

The vision of our students and faculty is imaginative and bold. But we need financial support to make it real.

The Department of Religion gratefully acknowledges the financial support of our donors including Dr. Ben Worsley (B.A., 1991) & Mrs. Monika Worsley, Dr. Mary Ann Clark (PhD, 1999), Sylvia Y. Louie (retired Religion Department Administrator for more than 40 years), and the many anonymous donors who are supporting our department as Partners on all levels.

Become an Undergraduate Partner \$100

Please consider supporting the future of the study of religion at Rice as we seek to provide undergraduate students with new academic and experiential learning opportunities, including research internships in the Houston community and abroad.

Become a Graduate Partner \$200

We also need to increase our support for graduate students so that they have more opportunities to share their knowledge globally.

Become a Faculty Partner \$500

We ask too for help in supporting the research of our faculty, especially their travel to archives and conferences, and their increasing need for subventions for publications and exhibitions.

Become a Scholar Partner \$1000

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