A Message from Dr. Robinson, Department Chair

As another semester draws to a close, I would like to thank the students, staff, and faculty of the Department of Religious Studies for another wonderful year. Special thanks go to James Tabor for his ten years of service as Chair. We all appreciate his hard work and dedication to our work as a department. Thanks, too, to Jenna Baker, who ably handles day-to-day and extraordinary office issues with humor and hard work. I could not do this job without her.

The department has undergone many changes in curriculum, faculty, and students since 1972, when the separate Department of Religious Studies was established from the combined Philosophy and Religion Department. This year is no exception. On a bittersweet note we say goodbye to Joe Winters, who is moving to Duke University. Our excitement at welcoming Alexandra Kaloyianides to the department in fall 2015 has been tempered by her acceptance of a two-year post-doctoral position at the Ho Center for Buddhist Studies at Stanford University. She plans to join us in fall 2017. With 80 majors, Religious Studies is a small but growing department, graduating about twenty-seven undergraduate students and a half dozen graduate students each year. Undergraduate students choose courses each semester from a diverse curriculum, and many classes afford the kind of close student-faculty contact that is becoming more and more rare as the university grows. Our graduate program continues to prepare students for competitive Ph.D. programs and other career goals. This newsletter captures some of what happened in 2014-2015.

Special thanks go to Editor-in-Chief Haley Twist, whose work on this first department newsletter abundantly illustrates the “transferable skills” provided by a liberal arts education. We hope this newsletter helps its readers feel more in touch with the vibrant life of the department.

Dr. Joe Winters prepares for his move to Duke University

Dr. Joe Winters will be leaving UNC Charlotte at the end of this academic year to teach in Duke University’s Department of Religious Studies beginning next fall. His appointment at Duke will make him the primary professor to teach race and religion and African American religious thought and theory.

Dr. Winters began teaching at UNC Charlotte in 2009, shortly after defending his dissertation at Princeton University. He remembers that in 2008 when he first viewed the job description for the open position, he felt that it would be a perfect fit, aligning nicely with his interests.

Dr. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan visits campus for the 31st Annual Witherspoon Lecture

Dr. Sullivan, professor of religion and law, discusses the difficulty of defining religion and the impossibility of religious freedom

Dr. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan delivered a lecture entitled “The Impossibility of Religious Freedom” on April 2nd for the thirty-first annual Loy H. Witherspoon Lecture in Religious Studies.

Dr. Sullivan is Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University and Affiliate Professor of law at Maurer School of Law. Her research focuses on the intersection of religion and law in the modern period, the phenomenology of modern religion as it is shaped in its encounter with law, and the anthropology of law. She has authored...
Dr. John C. Reeves receives prestigious ACLS Fellowship

He will not teach classes during the fall 2015 semester to pursue his award-winning project “Illuminating the Afterlife of Ancient Apocryphal Jewish Literature”

BY HALEY TWIST

Dr. John C. Reeves is one of seventy scholars chosen to receive a 2015-16 Fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS). These highly competitive fellowships are designed to secure faculty release time from teaching responsibilities so they can devote their time to research projects which a panel of judges have deemed worthy of significant monetary support.

ACLS is a prominent consortium of 72 American learned and professional societies whose Fellowships allow scholars to spend six to twelve months on full-time research and writing. This year, ACLS increased the top stipend level and the number of Fellowships offered through the program, awarding to faculty and independent scholars in order to support research in the humanities and humanistic social sciences. ACLS received over 1,000 applications this year, making the program the most competitive in ACLS’s portfolio.

Dr. Reeves will not teach classes during the fall 2015 semester to pursue his award-winning project “Illuminating the Afterlife of Ancient Apocryphal Jewish Literature.” In this project he aims to unpack the history of the transmission of ancient Jewish literary texts and non-canonical lore among various Near Eastern religious communities and movements during late antiquity and the early medieval period. “Relatively little attention has been devoted to exploring the afterlife of apocryphal works among literate circles within the Islamicate cultural sphere wherein Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and other scriptural communities were active contributors and interlocutors,” reads Dr. Reeves’ project abstract. He will resume teaching classes in the spring of 2016.

Janna Shedd honored with 2015 College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Teaching Award

Shedd was awarded on April 20th for her teaching, dedication, research contributions, and lasting impacts on students

THIS STORY CAN BE FOUND ON EXCHANGE.UNCC.EDU

Janna Shedd has received the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences’ 2015 Award for Outstanding Teaching by a Part-Time Faculty Member. One of three recipients of the College’s yearly Teaching Awards, she was granted the honor at a ceremony on April 20th.

Shedd has taught as a part-time lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies since 2009 after completing her master’s degree at UNC Charlotte. With her tremendous sense of initiative and imagination, she has developed courses including an online version of Death and the Afterlife. Her research interests are South and East Asian religions, the effects of globalization on religion and culture, and multicultural education. For the last 18 months she has volunteered at a weekly community and educational outreach program for local Southeast Asian youth.

Students describe her as engaging, passionate and patient. They express appreciation for the way she shows them other ways of life that differ from their own, and how their respect for other cultures and choices grows through her example.

To explain her motivation for teaching, Shedd said, “By the time they leave my class at the end of the semester, I hope that each student feels more confident in their ability to take on the world and all it has to offer. In the end, I am really trying to teach students how to teach themselves, to value each other, and to see their own education as relevant, active, and ongoing.”

She has traveled to China for month-long excursions to religious sites across the country and was adopted by a monkey on her last trip three years ago. Shedd hopes to expand her travel destinations and the frequency of her trips in the future. Her goals for the next two years include publishing articles on teaching religion, leading a student tour group to Daoist sites in China, and expanding her scholarly expertise to include Japanese religions.
Dr. Dan White will spend nine weeks in India this summer conducting research on how gay and bisexual men in India view themselves in the context of India’s larger Hindu cultural faith traditions. Funded by a grant from the Carpenter Foundation, Dr. White will conduct interviews with over 150 men in nine major Indian cities. This research will explore how these men view their relationship to Indian dharma— the mythic, ritualistic, and festival cultural patterns of “Hinduism”— and aims at producing a careful and sensitive dialogue that engages gay and bisexual men in the journey that all identifying Hindus undertake. Dr. White will receive assistance from non-governmental organizations and individuals committed to celebrating the human rights of gay and bisexual men in the hope that this project will create a more positive platform for dialogue within India and elsewhere on LGBTI issues in India.

By gathering these men’s histories and exploring their commitments to Indian cultural practice, Dr. White expects that a sense of what it means to be Hindu and “Indian” will not differ from that of non-LGBTI Indians. Furthermore, he hopes that greater clarification of what it means to be gay in India will emerge.

Dr. Winters, cont. from pg. 1

Reminiscing about his first interactions with the department faculty, he says he’s always been appreciative of the collegiality he’s felt. “I’ll always remember that openness to me and to my work,” Dr. Winters says.

“The department has been an amazing place to grow, and the kinds of relationships that I’ve been a part of here are very lasting and durable.”

During his six years in the department Dr. Winters has explored topics including religion and critical theory and religion and race, introducing students to the academic study of religion and striving to get them excited about it, “whether it’s about religion, the sacred, the profane, everyday culture, or power,” he says. He hopes that they see the “everydayness and relevance of ideas that may seem very abstract and far away.”

He is finishing his last year at UNC Charlotte by teaching Hip Hop and Religion, also the subject of his next book, and co-teaching The Violence of Hope with Dr. Kent Brintnall, of whom he expresses enjoyment working with as their interests overlap in interesting ways. “Our conversations have shaped and reshaped my thinking about a lot of these topics. My book project is a lot different now because of my conversations with him.”

As the semester is closing Dr. Winters says the feeling is bittersweet. “The department has been an amazing place to grow, and the kinds of relationships that I’ve been a part of here are very lasting and durable.”

The department will miss him, and wishes him the very best in all his future endeavors.
Dr. Abdelmahdi Alsoudi is a professor of political sociology at Jordan University’s Sociology department. Currently on sabbatical leave from the university, he is working with UNC Charlotte’s Department of Religious Studies to conduct research on the political future of new Islamic organizations and their threats to the stability and security of Jordan and other Middle Eastern countries.

A previous professor of Middle East studies at the Graduate School of International Studies at Denver University, he is the current Director of the Jordan Policy Center. He has held appointments at United Arab Emirates University and Princess Rahmeh University College, as well as acted as a visiting scholar at Bonn University and Georgetown University.

After earning his Ph.D. at Keele University, he joined the Center for Strategic studies in Jordan as a senior researcher. His major area of studies include political sociology, peace and conflict resolution, Islam and democracy, U.S.-Arab relations, and democracy and political reform in Jordan and the Arab world.

Dr. Alsoudi is also an active part of larger Arab academics and parliamentarians in the field of democracy and political reform in the Arab world, where they have regular meetings and conferences to devise policies for democracy and political reform, seeking greater cooperation with American and Europeans academics, experts, and policy makers to achieve this goal. On May 1st he spoke about the state of Middle Eastern conflicts and the recent violent incidents aimed at Muslims in the United States on WFAE’s news program “Charlotte Talks.”

Dr. Alsoudi is also using his time in North Carolina to visit with his son and grandchildren, who live in Charlotte. His life in Jordan, when he is not teaching, consists of spending time with his other two children as well as running a business that specializes in marriage and personal counseling.

**ADDITIONAL FACULTY NEWS**

**Kent Brintnall** has accepted a position as Director of Graduate Certificate in Women’s and Gender Studies.

**The faculty** published three chapters in books, presented nine academic conference papers, and gave four invited lectures during calendar year 2014.

**Tina Katsanos** co-created a film called *Stewardship* with Marek Ranis from the Art Department. The film examines how religious beliefs define our perceptions and actions toward the natural environment, and acts as a video installation for the exhibition “Keeping Watch 2015: An In-Depth Look at the Creeks of Charlotte.” The exhibition is currently housed in the Projective Eye Art Gallery at UNC Charlotte Center City where it will be until June 17th.

**FACULTY BOOKSHELF**

**Coming Soon: August 2015**

*Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion. Perspectives in Continental Philosophy*

Kent Brintnall & Jeremy Biles

**Published in May 2015**

*American Possessions: Fighting Demons in the Contemporary United States*

Sean McCloud

**Published in April 2015**

*Race, Religion, and the Pulpit: Rev. Robert L. Bradby and the Making of Urban Detroit*

Julia Robinson

**Published in 2013**

*Paul and Jesus: How the Apostle Transformed Christianity*

James Tabor
Religious Studies faculty involved in online summer teaching initiative

Department faculty have been working with the Center for Teaching and Learning to develop online summer courses and learn how to further utilize Moodle

BY HALEY TWIST

A handful of department faculty have been participating in a series of workshops run by Sam Eneman and Kurt Richter in the Center for Teaching and Learning. The workshops, which were designed specifically for religious studies faculty, assist in the development of online summer courses and advanced utilization of Moodle. Those involved include full-time faculty Tina Katsanos, Celia Sinclair, Sean McCloud, Kathryn Johnson, Joe Winters, and Julia Robinson, and part-time faculty Janna Shedd, Marcy Goldstein, and Chip Trammell. Julie Hawks, part-time faculty, is currently working with them to complete their work.

Lecturer Tina Katsanos, who is slated to teach LBST 2102: Global and Intercultural Connections online during the second summer session and the fall, answers a few questions about her experiences and involvement with the initiative.

Q: How did you get involved with this initiative?
A: “I became involved with this initiative when I requested to teach a 2015 summer class. Dr. Joanne Robinson, the current head of our department, thought it would be beneficial for class enrollment if we offered our classes online, as enrollment for traditional summer classes has been low for the past few summers. In order to help those of us who have never taught online courses she set up training sessions for us with the Center for Teaching and Learning. We were able to take an online course in addition to meeting monthly with the folk from the Center.
In addition to securing those resources for us, Dr. Robinson has provided us with an additional contact, Julie Hawks, for individual guidance and assistance. I know that we are all grateful for her support as we transition into these 21st century online realities.”

Q: What have you learned from your involvement?
A: “My involvement with this initiative has been of tremendous value. I have learned how to navigate Moodle in ways that will be essential for successfully teaching an online course. I have had opportunities to have conversations with peers that have taught online courses and in that way have been able to anticipate and prepare for potential problems. I also realized that I have been under-utilizing Moodle in my teaching. I discovered how many features of Moodle can be used to create a more robust learning environment for traditional as well as online classes.”

JOINING FACULTY

The department successfully recruited Alexandra Kaloyanides to join the faculty to teach Buddhism. Alex will be graduating in mid-May with a Ph.D. in Asian Religions and American Religious History from Yale University. Her dissertation is titled “Heathens, Baptists, Buddhists: The American Missionary Encounter with Burmese Buddhism, 1813-1905.” Alex accepted a prestigious two-year post-doctoral position at The Ho Center for Buddhist Studies at Stanford University and will join us in fall 2017. Janna Shedd, who currently teaches part-time for the department, will be promoted temporarily to full-time lecturer to teach courses in Asian religions and general education.

Shimon Gibson, Ph.D. in Archaeology at University College London, will join the History Department in fall 2015 and will cross-list his courses in our department. His fall course will be “History and Archaeology of Jerusalem.”

Mary Hamner, M.A. UNC Charlotte in Religious Studies, will be teaching “Rumors of Witchcraft” in fall 2015.

Hadid Mubarak, Ph.D. Georgetown University in Arabic and Islamic Studies, will be teaching “Women in Islam” in fall 2015.

Thanks to generous individuals such as Loy H. Witherspoon, Dr. William Pfischner, the Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity, the Phillips family, Alice B. Tate, Carol Ann Douglas, and Joan Underwood, the department is able to award student scholarships and support research and public lectures. If you would like to make a tax-deductible contribution that supports those causes, please visit the department webpage (religiousstudies.uncc.edu) and click on the “Donate Now” link.

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The Department of Religious Studies gets a chapter of the Theta Alpha Kappa Honors Society

The first-ever induction of our chapter, Alpha Mu Theta, will take place in fall 2015

BY HALEY TWIST

The Department of Religious Studies is now an institutional chapter of the Theta Alpha Kappa National Honor Society for Religious Studies and Theology. UNC Charlotte is one of more than 300 schools in the United States affiliated with the society.

Our department has elected our chapter to be called Alpha Mu Thete, which was chartered and founded in spring 2015. The chapter has elected its first officers and is currently in the process of becoming an official student organization.

Alpha Mu Theta is currently only available for undergraduate religious studies majors, however the chapter will possibly establish a component for graduate students in the future.

In order to be eligible for society induction, one must maintain a GPA of 3.5 or higher within the major and a GPA of 3.0 or higher overall, as well as completed at least 15 credit hours of religious studies courses (half of the major) and completed RELS 2600: Orientation to the Study of Religion. There will be new student inductions at the end of every semester, and the first-ever induction will take place in fall 2015.

Theta Alpha Kappa was founded in 1976 at Manhattan College in River- side, New York for the purpose of honoring particularly excellent undergraduate students in the fields of religious studies and/or theology.

OUR 2015-16 UNDERGRADUATE SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

Lambda Chi Alpha - Loy H. Witherspoon Scholarship in Religious Studies:

Gabrielle Haley

The Lambda Chi Alpha-Loy H. Witherspoon Scholarship is named for the founding chair of the department, first hired in 1964 and now Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Religious Studies.

Richard A. Underwood Scholarship in Religious Studies:

Sabeeke Ali
Rhonda Bacon

Richard A. Underwood was hired in 1975 to teach religion and modern culture and to serve as department chair. He retired in 1992. His widow, Joan Underwood, funds the scholarship.

Recipients for both awards are chosen by the faculty annually. Recipients have demonstrated by their academic performance a serious commitment to the field of religious studies.

Thank you to our graduate teaching assistants

The department extends its gratitude to our hardworking and committed 2014-15 graduate teaching assistants:

Julie Bruce
David Clausen
Jason Graham
Joshua Miller
Justin Mullis
Joshua Williams

2014-15 Student Conference Presentations:

Matthew Humphries | Paper Title: “Choose Death: Sacrifice in the World of Professional Wrestling”
American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting 2014

Rob Young | Paper Title: “Religious Dogma and its Influence on the Roman Political State”
UNC Charlotte Graduate Research Symposium 2014

Zannah Kimbrel | Paper Title: “Queering Identities in Jewish Law”
Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion Annual Meeting 2015
Extended outlook: High humidity to the point of supersaturation, despite air-conditioned temperatures dipping into the 50s. Visibility should be good following occasional freezing drizzle.

We want to hear from you.

Send Dr. Robinson an email (Joanne.Robinson@uncc.edu) to let us know what you're doing. Do you have a job as interesting as Eric (Yearick) Fisher's? Do you use what you learned in the major every day in your job, like Hugh Goforth does? Do you run a museum, like Julie Hawks, or did you become a physical education teacher, like David McKenney? Did you do what you set out to do or did life take you in other directions? Send a note letting us know what you've done since you graduated from UNC Charlotte, either as an undergraduate or graduate student. Thank you!
Dr. Kelly Hayes on her ethnographic work in Brazil
She discussed social marginality, morality, and magic from her book *Holy Harlots*
BY ZANNAH KIMBREL

Dr. Kelly Hayes presented a lecture entitled “Holy Harlots: Femininity, Sexuality, and Black Magic In Brazil” on March 26th. Professor Hayes discussed findings she made during her ethnographic research in Rio, and discussed the use of a variety of supernatural figures in syncretistic practices in Brazil focusing specifically on the *Pomba Gira*, a female figure presented as confidently and overtly sexual. Hayes studied the depiction of this figure in images and statuary and examined the ways in which people interact with the spiritual being.

The dominant culture’s attitude toward *Pomba Gira* ranges from condemnation as “black magic” to merely controversial. Dr. Hayes concluded that those who utilize relationships with *Pomba Gira* are involved in a dialogue with conventional morality, using *Pomba Gira*’s status as “independent free agents” who have rejected the dominant society and its institutions as tools to navigate their own situations.

Dr. Hayes holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and is currently an Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Adjunct Associate Professor of Women’s Studies and Africana Studies at Indiana University, Indianapolis.

Durham filmmaker screens
“Brother Jesse” on campus

The short documentary provides a close look into the life of traveling campus preacher Jesse Morrell
BY HALEY TWIST

Durham-based documentary filmmaker Kevin Wells screened his newest film “Brother Jesse” on April 26th on campus. The 28-minute film details the life of Jesse Morrell, a traveling open-air preacher, and highlights his confrontational approach to preaching. Wells’ shows audiences glimpses of Morrell’s homelife with his wife and children, describes Morrell’s childhood and self-proclaimed conversion narrative, and documents Morrell’s various preaching sessions on American college campuses and other public places.

“I wanted to take the approach that was empathetic from his perspective—not from the students’ perspective,” Wells said, as his film shows multiple instances of Morrell’s confrontations with visably upset students. The film raises questions about religious performance, the line between free speech and hate speech, and the motivations behind open-air preaching.

The film screening was followed by a Q&A session with panel participants Wells, Dr. Eric Hoenes of the Department of Religious Studies, who is currently studying campus preachers and the act of “religious trolling” for a future project, and Gregg Starrett of the Department of Anthropology.

Dr. Brendan Jamal Thornton on “Victims of Illicit Desire”
Dr. Brendan Jamal Thornton, Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at UNC Chapel Hill, presented his paper entitled “Victims of Illicit Desire: Pentecostal Men of God and the Specter of Sexual Temptation” at a department colloquium on February 2nd. His paper explored the gender distress for men living in urban poverty in the Dominican Republic and discussed how these men come to experience the initial trials of conversion as tormenting spiritual assaults on their manhood in the form of alluring succubi.

Dr. Mark Rifkin on “Ghost Dancing at Century’s End”
Dr. Mark Rifkin, Professor of English and Women’s and Gender Studies at UNC Greensboro, examined Leslie Marmon Silko’s 1999 book *Gardens in the Dunes* at a lecture on April 6th. He argues that the novel marks and refuses the ways that Native histories are continually translated as times of loss within dominant non-native conceptions of time, and offers an intimate account of the Ghost Dance, emphasizing the possibilities for self-determination that arise in being out-of-sync with settler time.
Discover the details about the yearly Mt. Zion excavation headed by Dr. James Tabor

Students are encouraged to partake in this rare opportunity to explore Jerusalem

BY CHELSEA CARSKADDON

Dr. James Tabor serves as co-director of a yearly excavation in Mt. Zion. Participating in this dig is a rare opportunity as UNC Charlotte is the only American university licensed to carry out such excavations in Jerusalem. Below Dr. Tabor provides answers to some important questions for students interested in participating in future digs.

Why participate?

The combination of being in the historic city of Jerusalem and exploring its ancient past and its diverse and conflict-filled present makes this particular opportunity stand out among other study abroad programs. The participants typically stay at a hotel in the old city surrounded by the sights, smells, and sounds of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim cultures. Students also get a chance to see a bit of Israel including the Dead Sea, Masada, and Galilee. Finding the unexpected during the dig perhaps provides the greatest thrill—and thus to be contributing to reconstructing our understanding of the past.

What should I expect?

This opportunity is challenging but rewarding. The group is up by 5:30 a.m., walks to the dig site and works until noon, but students get free time during the afternoons and evenings other than the days the group participates in special tours or lectures.

Is archaeology experience required?

No prior experience in archaeology is required for this dig. Students will be prepped with orientation sessions and are guided in all aspects of preparation. Students are also put into teams over certain supervised areas, so the primary concern is to work and learn. The program will accept students in good standing regardless of the major or interest. The dig is not limited to religious studies students, but instead draws a diverse mix of students from throughout the university as well as up to 40 other participants from around the world. When participating as a student, one will have the opportunity to earn up to three hours of academic credit through UNC Charlotte’s Educational Abroad Program, though one may also participate as a visitor.