A Message from Dr. Robinson, Department Chair

As spring semester ends and summer sessions begin, I would like to extend my appreciation to all students, staff, and faculty of the Department of Religious Studies. My deepest appreciation goes to Jenna Baker, who keeps the office running smoothly and makes coming in to work a pleasure. Special thanks as well to Haley Twist, Editor-in-Chief of this newsletter and our in-house graphic designer, and to all of the students who contributed to this edition of our department newsletter.

This newsletter aims to capture some of what happened in 2015-16, a year of change, productivity, and recognition. Our changes are many, and some are still in process. Our excitement at welcoming William Sherman (Ph.D. Stanford University) to our position in Islamic Studies has been tempered by his acceptance of a prestigious ACLS/Mellon Post-Dissertation Fellowship. He and Alexandra Kaloyanides (Ph.D. Yale University), who is currently in a two-year postdoctoral position at the Ho Center for Buddhist Studies at Yale University, will join us in fall 2017.

Quite a bit of change has happened in the M.A. program, which has been revised to improve time-to-degree and allow faculty to mentor our students more closely. In March, an extraordinary group of graduate students joined together to host the inaugural graduate student conference on the topic “Religion and the Other.” Graduate students came from UVA, SFU, Arizona State, Vanderbilt, UC Santa Barbara, Harvard, University of Denver, and Concordia Seminary for an evening and a day of rich intellectual exchange. Joe Winters, now of Duke University, and Eric Mortensen, Guilford College, gave plenary addresses. Thanks to the ingenuity and drive of the graduate students, we are also now the hosts of Resonance: A Religious Studies Journal, which publishes a peer-reviewed article by a graduate student each month (resonanceRSJ.org).

Scholarly productivity abounded in 2015, with the department receiving three awards for external funding in addition to publishing four monographs and six peer-reviewed journal articles; giving twelve conference papers and nine invited lectures; and contributing two chapters to academic books. Graduate students also gave four papers at academic conferences in 2015.

Recognition for our work has come from many places. John Reeves was the 2015 recipient of the Graduate Medallion, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, in recognition of ‘outstanding contributions to scholarship’ and ‘commitment, dedication, and service to Judaism and the Jewish people for the past 25 years.’ Barbara Thiede was named a finalist for the CLAS Award for Outstanding Teaching by a Full-time Lecturer in spring 2016. Joanne Robinson received the American Academy of Religion Award for Excellence in Teaching in spring 2016. James Tabor’s blog (http://jamestabor.com) is consistently rated in the Top Ten of the “Top 50 Biblioblogs,” (the list includes more than 500 blogs) with over 1.5 million page views since 2012.

On the student front, M.A. student Josh Williams was a nominee for the Graduate School’s Outstanding Assistant Award in spring 2016. M.A. students Chelsea Carskaddon and Haley Twist received second and third place respectively in the “Best Oral Presentation in the Arts, Humanities, Education” category at the spring Graduate Research Symposium. Among undergraduates, Casey Aldridge will work as a Charlotte Research Scholar this summer under the direction of Barbara Thiede. Undergraduate student Jarred Batchelor Hamilton won first place for Religious Studies and Jacob Groves, major in Religious Studies, won the department award for History in the Undergraduate Research Conference.

Here’s to looking forward to another year of positive change, remarkable productivity, and continued recognition of faculty and students for their hard work and contributions to the field of religious studies.

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FACULTY NEWS

Introducing our Early Entry M.A. program

Undergraduates, get a jump start on your graduate work in Religious Studies

Beginning in the spring of 2016, we offer the opportunity for students interested in our MA program to earn up to 12 graduate credit hours while completing their undergraduate religious studies major. Students accepted into early entry will be able to count up to 12 hours of their 4000-level undergraduate courses toward the 30 hours required as part of the completion of the religious studies MA, at the undergraduate cost of tuition. Graduate School Early Entry Program Form and Description

Early Entry: Get a Jump on Your Graduate Education

Exceptional undergraduate students attending UNC Charlotte are encouraged to apply to graduate programs and begin work toward their graduate degree before completion of their baccalaureate degree. In those programs offering this outstanding opportunity, undergraduate students can get a head start on their graduate degree.

Benefits:

• Early Entry students will have provisional acceptance to the graduate program, pending the award of the baccalaureate degree, generally within two semesters.
• The MA in Religious Studies early-entry program is accelerated. Under this model, up to twelve hours earned at the graduate level may be substituted for required undergraduate hours. In other words, up to twelve hours of graduate work may be “double-counted” toward both the baccalaureate and graduate degrees. Individual programs may allow additional hours at the graduate level to be substituted. In no case may more than 12 hours be double-counted.
• Early Entry students will be charged undergraduate tuition and fees for all courses (graduate and undergraduate) for which they register. Upon completion of the baccalaureate degree, students will be charged graduate tuition and fees.

Requirements:

• To be considered for Early Entry admission, a student must be enrolled at UNC Charlotte and complete and submit an application via the Graduate School’s admissions system, https://mygradschool.uncc.edu, and supply supporting documents.
• A student may be accepted at any time after completion of 75 or more hours of undergraduate course work, although it is expected that close to 90 hours of undergraduate course work will have been earned by the time the first graduate course is taken.
• A student must have at least a 3.2 overall GPA
• Taken and earned an acceptable score on the appropriate graduate standardized test.

For more information, see the website of the Department of Religious Studies. Please speak to the department’s graduate program director (Sean McCloud) and undergraduate program director (Dan White) if you are interested in this opportunity.

Julia Robinson continues research on the First United Presbyterian Church of Charlotte

Examining the history of the church, she looks at how its formation impacted Charlotte’s planning and communities

BY HALEY TWIST

After publishing her most recent book last April, Race, Religion, and the Pulpit: Rev. Robert L. Bradby and the Making of Urban Detroit, Dr. Julia Robinson is now at work on her next book project.

Her research focuses on the history of the First United Presbyterian Church of Charlotte—the first African American Presbyterian society in Mecklenburg County—and how it has formed the larger African American community in Charlotte since 1866. Arguing that the church’s formation impacted all major categories of Charlotte, including its education, politics, economy, and urban planning, Robinson is looking at the ways African Americans and whites utilized Christianity to form identities and power equities.

Since last summer, she has been interviewing the descendants of some of the original establishing church members, and also looks at the Church’s relationship with Charlotte’s First Presbyterian Church. On May 15th and 22nd, 2016, she spoke at First Presbyterian Church about the history of both churches as part of the Divided by Race Joint Discussion Series.

After completing additional research in the coming months, which includes conducting more oral interviews and examining original papers and ledgers at the Presbyterian Heritage Center in Montreat, N.C. and the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, Pa., she hopes to have the first draft of her monograph completed in 2017.
Department receives grant from the Wabash Center

With grant funding, the Department is researching RELS student experiences

BY CHELSEA CARSKADDON

Last fall, Kent Brintnall and Joanne Robinson were awarded a grant through the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. Since, the two have been working to ensure the Department faculty are making their excellent teaching explicit.

Our faculty has long been told by students that it is the professors who ultimately convince students to become majors and minors in the program. Brintnall and Robinson wanted to look further into this, seeking what it was about the professors that was drawing students to become religion scholars.

The grant is allowing them to conduct a three-phase study. The first phase, a focus group, took place earlier this semester. Students who had taken at least two courses within the Department were invited to participate in an online survey and/or focus group, answering questions about their experiences within the classroom. The survey data and focus group transcripts were used to develop the curriculum for a faculty retreat that was held in mid-April. After the retreat, there can be no doubt that our faculty are excited and energized to dig deeper into this discussion about teaching and to further develop skills as excellent professors.

Information gathered at the faculty retreat is now being used to develop phase two, which will take place in fall 2016. This will consist of three to four focus workshops during which the faculty can work on different aspects of their teaching, such as assessment—including development of assignments and evaluation of writing—and recruitment. Phase three will begin in spring 2017, as students will again be brought into the project and given the opportunity to respond to what the faculty think they have learned about effective teaching. The project will end with the faculty participating in a regional conference with Religious Studies faculty from nearby universities to discuss teaching techniques. Dr. Bobbi Patterson, a Professor of Pedagogy from Emory University, will be the keynote speaker at this conference.

Brintnall explains how this project, although only finishing up its first phase, has already been a success because it has given the faculty, who already care about teaching well, the time and resources to talk to and learn from one another. He hopes this project will help the Department organize a clear operational list that can both guide the work of current faculty and inform the work of new faculty members, so that the Department can develop a common vision of effective and engaging teaching.
Get to know Shimon Gibson, visiting scholar

Gibson, the man behind the Mt. Zion Excavations, has worked with the Religious Studies and History Departments as a visiting professor of archaeology

BY CHELSEA CARSKAODON

Shimon Gibson served as an adjunct faculty for the Religious Studies Department for some time, and is now a visiting professor of archaeology in the UNC Charlotte History Department. Gibson developed a passion for archaeology as a young child. As early as nine years old he became involved with archaeology in Israel and began a self-teaching regimen learning to survey the deserts of the Holy Land. He received formal training from the Institute of Archaeology at the University College of London and the University of the Holy Land. From his BA to his Ph.D, Dr. Gibson focused on the landscapes of Palestine, and for the past 30 years he has conducted numerous excavations and surveys in different parts of Israel.

Gibson became involved with UNC Charlotte when he came across a cave west of Jerusalem, which had drawings of John the Baptist. He was looking for someone to help him excavate and study the cave when he heard about the Department’s own James Tabor. Gibson and Tabor excavated the site with help from UNC Charlotte students from 2000-2003. When that project was complete Gibson made mention of some old excavation sites from the 1970’s that had been left to him. It was from there that the Mt. Zion excavations were given a new life, and in 2009 Gibson and Tabor began bringing students to help rejuvenate the old excavation sites of Mt. Zion.

Currently Gibson and Tabor are working to make the Mount Zion Project more interdisciplinary by getting engineering, history, and religious studies students and faculty more involved. Gibson hopes the project will help create enormous amounts of research and create many opportunities for scholarship and new publications. Ultimately his goal is to inspire others to seek out new knowledge by creating opportunities for students to enrich their lives and follow their own interests. Gibson is very happy to be involved with UNC Charlotte, and grateful to those who made it possible.

ADDITIONAL FACULTY NEWS

Barbara Thiede was a finalist for the CLAS Award for Excellence in Teaching by a Full-Time Lecturer.

Sean McCloud and Kent Brintnall both gave talks as part of the Thinking Matters series for the inaugural New Student Convocation in August.


Julia Robinson will be part of the CLAS Personally Speaking Lecture Series in January 2017.
Religious Studies faculty involved in online summer teaching initiative

Department faculty continue to work with the Center for Teaching and Learning to develop online summer courses

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, and Julia Robinson, and part-time faculty Janna Shedd, Marcy Goldstein, and Chip Trammell. Part-time faculty, has been working with them to complete their work.

Last year we spoke with Katsanos about her experiences with this, and this year Sinclair has answered similar questions about her own involvement with the initiative.

Q: How did you get involved with this initiative?

A: I've taught face-to-face in the summer sessions for the past few years so I signed up to do it again last summer. In the meantime, and I'm not exactly sure how this happened, the department made the move to put all of our RELS summer offerings online. I wasn't sold on the idea at first, but we had some training sessions at the Center for Teaching and Learning in Kennedy. We asked for an online course to teach us how to set up online courses. CTL delivered (Sam Eneman was in charge of that piece). Even with this experience, I still needed lots of time in May to set up my online LBST 2101 class for Summer Session 2 and I required lots of tutoring and trouble shooting from Julie Hawks.

Q: What have you learned from your involvement?

A: The biggest takeaway for me occurred after the class was over. Fall session was about to begin and I was in my office when there was a knock on my door. A student I had never seen before introduced himself; I recognized the name from my online roster. He was an exceptional student, one who doubled the required word count on every post and assignment and who made connections with other students in the class. He shook my hand warmly. He said, and it was obvious, that he was shy and he had a speech impediment. What would have been almost debilitating in a face-to-face class was a non-issue online, as this student soared above and beyond my expectations for student participation and involvement. That was enough to make me declare that I am SOLD on the online experience. This is a format where writing is valued, where participation matters, and where deep learning is evident.

Barbara Thiede is at work on two IRB-approved studies

BY ZANNAH KIMBREL

Dr. Barbara Thiede is currently involved with two IRB-approved pedagogical studies. Here, she gives us an idea of what she has been working on, and what her future research looks like.

Project #1: “Location, Location: Comparing Student Outcomes in a Synchronous Online and Onsite Course in Religious Studies”

Figuring out what works and what doesn’t in online learning settings has generated plenty of wry discussion among the academic community. Unfortunately, little research has been done to compare online and onsite student performances based on the same course, taught at the same time, with the same delivery of components and content and with the same instructor. Studies that have attempted to base their comparisons on like components base their conclusions on insignificant data. Existing research in the field has also not included efforts to determine whether statistical tests are appropriate to the data. Not sure whether I can rectify all that, but I plan to try to do my part. I was able to teach RELS 2104 Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament simultaneously onsite and online for a full year. This summer I'll analyze the data.

Project #2:

The second project, unfortunately, is going to have to remain something of a mystery for now. According to IRB protocol for this particular study, not much information can be revealed. So for now, we will have to be satisfied with the knowledge that the study has something to do with religion and gender (in addition to race), and make sure to be on the lookout for next year's newsletter, at which point all will be revealed!
Dan White spent nine weeks in India last summer conducting research on how gay and bisexual men view themselves in the context of India’s larger Hindu cultural faith traditions. His research, which was funded by the Carpenter Foundation, and allowed him to conduct interviews with over 100 men over the age of 21 in nine major Indian cities.

White felt that he was able to have truly honest conversations with the men he interviewed, and he came away with three major findings:

1. Most men he spoke to were still afraid of being “out” as gay or bisexual—primarily because their parents were not accepting and/or they did not want to bring about any social embarrassment on their parents.

2. Many of these men either are or will be married to women because of social expectations, and many will not let anyone know about their sexuality (it is still considered a criminal offense to be gay in India).

3. Most of the men he interviewed are deeply committed to the mythological rituals of Hindu traditions, and they do not see their gods and goddesses as being offended by their sexuality.

Sadly, in conducting his interviews and working with some non-governmental organizations that offer support for Indian gay and bisexual men, White found that most of the men know others who have attempted suicide over similar issues. He found that his interviewees wanted to be honest, but feared being ostracized by their society. Many of his interviewees continue to be in touch with him—even almost a year later—to ask questions and offer additional thoughts. White hopes that he can return to India in the near future so that they may continue to talk with someone who listens, has some empathetic understanding of their cultural issues and the problems they are facing, and who will keep in confidence their real identity.

As White is finishing his secondary research, his findings will appear in book form in the near future.

John C. Reeves continues his research after receiving prestigious ACLS Fellowship

He continues to pursue his award-winning project “Illuminating the Afterlife of Ancient Apocryphal Jewish Literature”

John Reeves continues his research after taking an educational leave last fall funded by a prestigious ACLS fellowship. His current research focuses on the transmission and preservation of Jewish Pseudepigraphic and Apocryphal literature within Muslim, Christian, and popular literature of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. These sorts of texts have been a point of interest for Reeves “since graduate school,” and have been a driving force in the scholarship that has made up his career.

Reeves’ research works to explore, “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.” He attempts to trace the paths of literary transmission of these texts in order to explain how they moved from Jewish communities in the East, through various other scriptural groups, and ultimately became re-absorbed by Jewish communities of the West.

He has recently given lectures in Philadelphia and Chapel Hill on his current work and is in the process of authoring a book with Annette Yoshi-ko Reed (University of Pennsylvania) to be released by Oxford University Press. In the future Reeves also plans to author a book that endeavors to give a comprehensive explanation of the transmission of these texts through the Late Antique and Medieval world. Scholars of pseudepigrapha are excited about his research and, though there are a limited number of scholars in this field, the study is energetic and growing. While Reeves is hopeful for the continued growth of scholarship in extracanonical texts, he notes that some are “still resistant to bible being supplanted from its point of dominance.”
Celia Sinclair talks her experience with e-portfolios

BY HALEY TWIST

In keeping with the campus-wide effort to utilize digital technologies, a handful of Department faculty are involved in an e-portfolio initiative. These are intended to collect students’ work and ideas for future reference, and to evolve as their studies evolve. Among those who have implemented e-portfolios into their syllabi, Celia Sinclair shares her experiences with the tool thus far.

Q How did you get involved with this initiative?

A “Tina Katsanos and I were involved in a pilot for the CTC (Critical Thinking and Communication) initiative in the General Education offerings. There were five of us who worked with First Year Writing folks to extend their work into the LBST curricula. FYWP has always used portfolios, more recently ePs, to address their student learning outcomes. When we upfitted our LBST classes for the pilot, we decided to build on students’ work in FYWP and to make explicit the CTC objectives via an end of semester eP project. We had lots of help from FYWP folk and our collaboration was, for me at least, a success.”

Q What have you learned from your involvement?

A “I am sold on the value of “portfolio thinking” for my LBST courses. I am requiring ePs as the ‘final project’ in all four classes. They will be coming in soon (I write this the last week of Spring term) and I can’t wait to see what is submitted on exam day.”

Joanne Robinson receives AAR Excellence in Teaching Award

She will also appear as a featured speaker during the 2016 annual meeting

BY: ADAM AUSTIN, EXCHANGE.UNCC.EDU

For innovative teaching methods that extend well beyond a traditional classroom setting, Joanne Maguire Robinson has received the 2016 American Academy of Religion Excellence in Teaching Award.

Since joining the UNC Charlotte faculty in 1996, Robinson has focused on how students engage with the classroom environment. She sees the job of a teacher as creating an environment that helps students leave as more informed, more reflective, and more capable and resourceful thinkers.

“I now see that classrooms are a space for learning how to take chances, for testing out new knowledge, and for playing with ideas,” she said in her teaching statement for the award.

In 2011, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded her funding to develop a new course called “Ordering the World.” The course, while focused on the foundational concept of order and how it affects human systems, also provided her with a chance to apply and refine her new teaching dynamic.

Robinson wanted students to gain not only religious literacy, but also a passion for intellectual exploration, resulting in skills and knowledge they could use in their future lives. Class projects included creating collaborative websites, conducting fieldwork, and staging debates on controversial topics.

Engaging students proved the key to the development of more complex views of the abstract ideas studied. She considered students’ commitments, how prepared they were for the rigors of college work, and their drive in courses that not connected to their academic majors.

She will receive the award on November 20, 2016, during the annual national meeting in San Antonio, Texas. She will be a featured speaker during the event. The award comes with a $1,000 cash prize.

RESONANCE

A RELIGIOUS STUDIES JOURNAL

RESONANCE is a new digital journal edited by graduate students in UNC Charlotte’s Department of Religious Studies. It offers scholars of religion a forum to explore critical issues within the field.

The journal has a yearly theme that corresponds with our Religious Studies Graduate Student Conference, and this year that theme is “Religion and the Other.” We feature a monthly graduate student spotlight that challenge ideas of identity, diversity, and normativity, as well as questions the presence of those items historically and modernly within religious contexts.

Visit ResonanceRSJ.org to read the current spotlight.
The Department’s Theta Alpha Kappa Honor Society, Alpha Mu Theta, hosts its first induction

The chapter honored faculty and exceptional students last December

BY HALEY TWIST

Last year, the Department became 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 chapter, Alpha Mu Theta, was chartered and founded in the spring of 2015. Served by Tyler Blevins as the president, Rhondra Bacon as the vice president, and Gabrielle Haley as the secretary, the inaugural induction ceremony took place last December, as students and faculty were individually recognized.

OUR 2015-16 UNDERGRADUATE SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

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

Jacob Groves

The recipient of the Richard A. Underwood Scholarship in Religious Studies has not yet been determined.

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.

Spring 2016 Graduate Students

Julie Bruce | Thesis:
“Apocalyptic Mother: The World Turned Upside Down in The Book of Margery Kempe”

Joshua Williams | Thesis:
“Soaring with Dragons: Finding Intimacy and Play in Young Adult Literature”

Steven Jedael | Thesis:
“Counting Days in Ancient Babylon: Eclipses, Omens, and Calendrics During the Old Babylonian Period (1750-1600 BCE)”

Fall 2015 Graduate Students

Joshua Miller | Thesis:
“Utopic Pessimism: The Messianic Underpinnings of the Antinatalist Polemic”

Fall 2015 Undergraduates

Cohen Atkins • Kelsey Briddle
Joshua Cable • Adam Hinesley
Christopher Holland • Kaitlyn Hubbard
Sean Kane • Igor Khodochinskiy
William Melton • Catherine Miller
Joshua Nguyen • Alex Psaroudis
Hayley Smith
The strange disappearance of our Department yard signs

Where did they go? No one knows...

In early January, the Department placed a variety of yard signs around campus as part of our “Religion Matters” campaign to alert folks that we exist (and are more relevant than ever). Quickly, however, the signs began to disappear one by one, and left no traces of who or what abducted them. Luckily, our own Zannah Kimbrel has some theories that might just lead us to the truth:

• Ancient aliens
• Taken by the demon/dibbuk that resides in the Macy 2nd floor bathroom
• Archeologists from the future are time traveling and taking the signs back to their societies as proof of our primitive religious system.

Support your Department

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.
Reflections on the AAR and why religious studies matters
A grad student talks navigating the 2016 American Academy of Religion conference

BY ZANNAH KIMBREL

Last November, a few zealous graduate students (Julie Bruce, Chelsea Caruskadden, Haley Twist, Josh Williams, and myself) decided to make the trip to Atlanta, where the national AAR/SBL (American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature) conference was hosting their yearly meeting.

For the uninitiated, academic conferences are where graduate students and more seasoned scholars within a certain field come together and theoretically share their most recent projects. Sections based in different areas of the field organize even more specific panels; each of these feature a few paper presentations or panelist speakers. There are receptions (and free food, as we learned!) galore, filled with enthusiastic, (bordering on desperate, in the case of graduate students) shmoozing.

None of the UNCC grad students was scheduled to present at this conference, something that has become essentially a requirement for entry into Ph.D. programs and the later securing of a faculty position. However, we wanted to soak up some academia, and to see what all the proverbial “fuss” over the AAR was about. We also wanted to watch some of our illustrious faculty (including Joanne Robinson, Sean McCloud, and Barbara Thiede) and alumni (Mary Hamner and Justin Mullis) present their work.

Do I sound skeptical? Academia, after all, is not always the fantasy of sitting quietly in an office hidden behind stacks of books, immersed in writing yet another award winning book. Maybe this eventually comes true for some of us, but it takes a long time to get there. You have to go to a lot of conferences, shake a lot of hands belonging to men in argyle socks whose research you don’t care about, and face a lot of rejection-facts which we, as graduate students, are just beginning to understand.

Objectively, this does not sound like fun. It is grueling, infuriating, and exhausting. So why do we it?

Let me let you in on a little secret. The world of the academic study of religion is amazing. Thousands of people from all over the globe come together every year to discuss topics as dissimilar as “Coptic Biblical Lexicography” and “Made for TV: The Popular Religion of Television Shows, Real or Not”. It is a unique and profound experience.

The conference was an opportunity to be around people who, like us, are utterly fascinated (and in some cases, obsessed) with religion. We, who are so used to reactions like, “oh...that’s nice I guess”, or, “I’m not really religious” (what does that even mean??), when telling anyone outside of our small department that we do Religious Studies.

In a big way, it showed us that we are not alone. And that what we are passionate about matters to a surprising number of people.

This is an incredibly important thing for those of us who are just beginning on our academic journeys. We are still trying to figure out how to navigate all of the complexities of this intensely interdisciplinary field, and figure out exactly where we fit inside of it.

The tweed jacket, of course, is optional.

What I learned as a first-time teacher
A grad student reflects on teaching his first course, “Black Mirror,” this semester

BY JOSH WILLIAMS

From the chaos of finalizing a syllabus to the chaotic rush of grading final papers, teaching can be overwhelming. Being on my own has been stressful at many times. Teaching and the preparation for class each week takes exorbitant amounts of time and excessive amounts of effort. However, the experience of teaching in front of a classroom is well worth all the time and effort. Through this experience, I have found that undergraduates hold amazing insight into the world, and their thoughts challenged how I think about certain issues. My students engaged with the discussions and enjoyed thinking through difficult subjects and ideas.

One rewarding part of teaching comes from seeing students excited about a topic. When your students come into class already talking about the material for the day, then you know it is going to be a class full of intense, well-rounded discussion. Students’ excitement pours out of them energizing the room, making the entire class period fun and engaging. At these times teaching is the best activity; you can watch as students think and actively work problems out with each other.

By far, though, the most rewarding aspect of teaching comes when students take things away from the class. Whether it is improvement on developing a written argument or taking ideas into the world, students pondering the thoughts you present to other places and hearing about them is the

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The beginnings of the RELS Graduate Student Committee

A warm welcome from the Committee president, Chelsea Carskaddon

BY CHELSEA CARSKADDO

I am sure it comes as no surprise that our department, as wonderful as it may be, is constantly concerned about funding for students, faculty and its various events. I became well acquainted with the limits of ‘discretionary’ funding as several students and I planned the inaugural Religious Studies Graduate Student Conference back in March.

The process was not as tedious as I initially thought it would be. I simply needed to find a couple of students willing to be on the board: Haley Twist volunteered to be the VP, Zannah Kimbrel was more than excited to be the secretary, and Josh Williams was informed that he was the treasurer. We wrote our committee constitution, and after a few meetings over a few short weeks, the Religious Studies Graduate Student Committee was official and in dire need of a nickname (which is still in the works).

The committee has already been able to help our funding crisis. We were able to acquire partial funding for the Graduate Student Conference, we were able to get almost $400 to help a student present a paper at a conference in Syracuse, and we hosted an end-of-the-year graduate student celebration at Exit Strategy. We have plans to use funding to send a few of our students to the 2016 AAR annual meeting in San Antonio, to host several more graduate student events, and to help relieve the Department of the expenses for the 2017 graduate student conference.

But, most importantly, we hope this committee will create a space for all of the graduate students to have more of a voice in creating a better, more unified, and more active Religious Studies Department.

Reflections on SECSOR: An undergraduate’s conference experience

BY CASEY ALDRIDGE

This March, I had the opportunity and honor to travel with a cadre of graduate students in the Religious Studies’ M.A. program to Atlanta, Georgia for the Southeastern Conference for the Study of Religion. I was attending to present my paper, “Contextual Theology in Context: Roles of Afrikaner and African Theologies during Apartheid” at Saturday afternoon’s undergraduate panel.

In the weeks leading up to SECSOR, I had presented two other class papers at regional and statewide conferences, but nothing on the level of SECSOR. It was exciting to be a very small part of a much larger academic conference, but also very daunting to have to present my own work among so many other undergraduates and graduates producing fantastic research. In just the panel I sat on, other undergraduates presented research on “ISIS Brides,” narratives of Mary Magdalene, and analysis of “commemoration in colonial India.” Fortunately, several of the graduate students came and listened to my talk – a favor that I tried my best to return during their presentations – and I was able to hold my own during the Q&A. It was a phenomenal learning experience, which I hope I will draw on for years to come.

While it was great to present at SECSOR, what I most appreciated of SECSOR was a) being able to listen to presentations in fields relevant to the coursework and research I’m doing now, including talks on the political theology of Karl Barth and on Second Temple Judaism, and b) the opportunity to spend time with and get to know some of the students in Charlotte’s graduate program. Having taken classes at the 4000 level on campus, I’ve been in classroom settings with many of the graduate students before, but SECSOR was the first time that I’d actually talked to many of them.

In a world where it’s all too often unfashionable to talk about religion, even or especially in an academic context, it was refreshing to spend the weekend (and the start to spring break) with other students just as passionate about their studies as I am about mine.
Revisiting our Inaugural Graduate Student Conference

On March 18th and 19th, 2016, the Department hosted its inaugural graduate student conference. Inspired by the theme “Religion and the Other,” the conference hosted graduate students and professors from nine universities across the country.

Department alumnus Joe Winters (now Duke University) returned to UNC Charlotte to kick off the two-day event with his lecture on “Black Bodies that Matter,” accompanied by respondents William Jarrett (Dept. of Anthropology) and Mark Sanders (Dept. of Philosophy). The following day featured twelve impressive student presentations, including the Department’s own Jason Graham and Zannah Kimbrel, across three panels with respondents Kent Brintnall, Sean McCloud, John Reeves, and Gregg Starrett (Dept. of Anthropology). Eric Mortensen (Guilford College) delivered the keynote speech, “Re-Mythologizing Shangri-La.”

Planned by students Julie Bruce, Chelsea Carskaddon, Josh Williams, and Haley Twist, the conference was a successful and strong start to what will hopefully become a yearly Department event.

The Department extends our thanks to everyone who attended and supported the conference, and we look forward to hosting the next one.
Alumni Update: Gabrielle Alsop

The 2014 RELS graduate reminisces on the Department, her religious studies background, and talks her future in public policy

BY GABRIELLE ALSOP

It’s hard to believe that it’s been a year and a half since I graduated from UNC Charlotte with my BA in Religious Studies. It’s amazing how fast time flies. Every single day that goes by I miss UNC Charlotte, and the Religious Studies department in particular just a little bit more. Currently, I am getting my Masters in Social Work and graduate certificate in Management from Winthrop. Don’t get me wrong, I’m having so much fun pursuing my academic career, but my time in the RELS Department will always be my first love. I feel so fortunate to have somehow found Religious Studies in the myriad of majors at UNC Charlotte. Truly, a hidden gem.

I can say without hesitation that my studies in the department have served me well moving forward. Social Work is so different from Religious Studies, however I feel better prepared to interact with diverse groups of people coming from this background. Religion is important in everyone’s lives, and whether they are participating in it or not, it affects the world around us. The ability to understand other religions and how they affect people and the world around them is, in my opinion, invaluable. I also feel like I was more prepared for the workload of graduate school in general after my time in the Department. A 12-page paper just seems like writing a brief summary after some of those RELS classes.

I know so many of us students of religion get strange questions when we tell people our major, “What kind of job can you get with that degree?”, “Oh, so you couldn’t decide what you wanted to do?”, and my personal favorite, “So you want to be a pastor?” Don’t get me wrong, some of us did and do want to be pastors, but there are so many reasons for picking a major in religious studies, and some of them are hard to even put into words. For me, religion taught me things about people and cultures that I couldn’t find anywhere else. I also found a camaraderie among the other students that I hadn’t found before, and honestly haven’t felt since. I love my cohort at Winthrop, but as I said, the RELS Department was my first love, and we all know nothing in the world can compare to that.

I’d also like to take a moment to acknowledge the RELS faculty. As a student I was very unsure of myself coming into the program, and by the time I left I knew that I could do anything I wanted to do. I know enough to know that that change came from great help from every single professor I encountered. I have never felt such support from faculty as I did with you all. Everyone pushed me to do my best, and cared about me enough to call me when I wasn’t doing just that. I am in graduate school now because of the support from you all, and I will forever be grateful.

Current RELS students, know that you are so lucky to have faculty that really care about you and want you to succeed. I believe in myself because you all believed in me.

So, what’s next for me? This month I will be attending the NEW Leadership South Carolina summit. It’s a conference to get women involved in policy and politics in the south. Since I began my Masters I started learning more about public policy and it is something I am very interested in. I would like to get my PhD in Public Policy once I finish my current degree, but one step at a time. So, be on the lookout, as I may end up back at UNC Charlotte getting my PhD.

To everyone in the department—I miss you. I think about you all frequently, and I hope that things are well.

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The most satisfying thing when teaching being the catalyst for further thought and exploration of the world we live in, for me, expresses the central point of what we do. When you see students actively participate with material in this way, teaching becomes that much more valuable.

Overall, the experience of teaching has been an enjoyable one, even the days where everything went wrong. One thing I have learned through this teaching experience is that students make all the difference. You can be the most interactive, exciting teacher ever, but without students it is all meaningless. Before this experience, I did not have the greatest opinion of students’ abilities to think broadly or process information on a higher level. Now, having taught an entire semester, I can say that students make the teaching worthwhile and turn the chaos into a wonderful experience.
LECTURES & COLLOQUIA

Religion Matters: A documentary film series
Julie Hawks reflects on the six-film series that aimed to increase religious awareness

BY JULIE HAWKS

Recent events in the world and on the campus of UNC Charlotte encourage us to be more deliberate and open in our discussions about religion and religious difference. As a 2010 Pew Forum study showed, Americans know very little about religions other than their own. Stephen Prothero, scholar of religion at Boston University demonstrated in Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn’t (2007) that Americans are deeply “religious” and yet remarkably ignorant about religion.

To help expose students to the complexities of religions in cultures around the world and to help students navigate media representations of those complexities, Joanne Robinson developed “Religion Matters: A Documentary Film Series” for which she received a grant from the Chancellor’s Diversity Challenge Fund. The one-credit course was offered during the Spring 2016 semester. The six films focused on a wide range of topics, including rumspringa (a little-known aspect of Amish life), Jim Jones and the murder-suicide of 900 members of the Peoples Temple, the fundamentalist Taliban regime and its treatment of women, cycles of life and death around the world, college students traveling through Morocco and confronting the supposed “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West, and the growing scandal of religious infiltration in the U.S. military and the terrible consequences of religion’s influence on America’s foreign policy.

Discussions followed each film, led by a faculty respondent. The films and respondents were Crossing Borders with Celia Sinclair; Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple with James Tabor; Devil’s Playground with Sean McCloud; Osama with Kathryn Johnson; Samsara with Janna Shedd; and Constantine’s Sword with Julie Hawks.

“Thank you for an insightful and well-rounded class without which I might never have gotten the chance to truly learn about religion as a pillar of our foundation as the human race.”

Feedback from the students proved that the series was a success.

Student Sebastian Alvarez Espinoza said, “I loved this class very deeply, it gave me a sense of understanding of other religions through different perspectives which has in a way made me a better person. From the first movie we watched about Amish culture, the Taliban government in Afghanistan, to the origin of the cross in the Christian church. For every single one of these faiths one tends to look at the just what is shown to one without actually understanding the meaning behind what every faith actually is. These are movies which I had no knowledge of and now are part of the person I come to be today.”

And E.W. said, “I very much enjoyed this class and all the inner perspective it gave to many different religions and even just ways of life across the globe. Thank you for an insightful and well-rounded class without which I might never have gotten the chance to truly learn about religion as a pillar of our foundation as the human race.”

Many thanks to everyone who contributed to the series success.

Rebekka King on “Proportional Prosperity”
The Middle Tennessee University professor visited campus in early April

BY ZANNAH KIMBREL

On April 4th, 2016 the Department was fortunate enough to host Dr. Rebekka King (Middle Tennessee University). King delivered a talk entitled, “Proportional Prosperity: Class, Language, and Philosemitism in American Evangelicalism”.

The project, one which is relatively new for King, grew out of local ethnography in Tennessee’s non-denominational charismatic Christian church, “Shield of Faith.” The church is affiliated with the Oklahoma-based “Covenant Ministries.”

King’s research involves a study of the “Shield of Faith” community, which is one of a number of Jewish-affinity Christian groups who claim to be Jewish or partially Jewish, despite no traditional Jewish cultural, ethnic, or religious family or heritage.

Her investigations have examined how this group relates to Judaism, and how this specific version of prosperity gospel has gained traction in this particular southern community.

We want to hear from you.
Send Dr. Robinson an email (Joanne.Robinson@uncc.edu) to let us know what you’re doing.
Michael Stone’s visit to campus to discuss “Secret Groups in Ancient Judaism”

The former Hebrew University of Jerusalem Gavin Levin de Nur Professor of Religious Studies spoke on campus last September

BY JULIE BRUCE

Dr. Michael Stone visited our campus on September 21st, 2015 for a lively discussion regarding “Secret Groups in Ancient Judaism.” Professor Stone presented his newest research on the social function of secret societies in Ancient Judaism, the topic of his forthcoming book on esoteric (knowledge hidden from outsiders) trajectories in early Judaism.

He made a thought-provoking distinction between the secret books of Qumran and what he calls “pseu doesoteric” literature. Further, he elaborated that the books at Qumran were found by archaeologists, that they genuinely possessed the protected teachings, knowledge, and practices of a secret group because, before their discovery, those secrets were unknown to everyone outside of the initiated group.

In more detail he explained that the group at Qumran was a hierarchical society, allowing their secrets to be revealed only to a selected number of individuals through stages of initiation where the initiates received closer contact with the “purity of the many” as they moved up in status towards the level of their leader, who possessed the greatest number of secrets. Stone made a point to note that no sort of knowledge is inherently esoteric, but societies privilege the knowledge and it becomes esoteric.

Therefore, he compares what he calls “pseu doesoteric” literature to pseudopigraphy—literature that is written in the name of a prophet, usually to justify its authority. This connection led to his final insight, that just as pseudopigraphy is sometimes read, not as the author’s experience, but as the seer’s experience, “pseu doesoteric” literature may be read as secret, when it is actually quite public.

Stone holds a PhD from Harvard and a DLitt. from the University of Melbourne. He was appointed to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1966 and became Gavin Levin de Nur Professor of Religious Studies and Professor of Armenian Studies in 1980. Now retired, he holds an Honorary DHL from Hebrew Union College, an Honorary Doctor from the Armenian National Academy of Sciences, and he is the recipient of the Landau Prize for Contribution to the Humanities from Israel.

Dr. William Sherman, a recent Ph.D. graduate from Stanford University (who will be joining the Department in fall 2017 after his completion of an ACLS/Mellon Post-Dissertation Fellowship) presented a lecture entitled, “The Unpredictable Pasts and Apocalyptic Futures of Afghan Genealogies: The Entangled History of Christian and Muslim Approaches to the Mythological Origins of the Afghan Tribes” at a Department colloquium on April 7th, 2016. The talk explored narrative tropes associated with the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.

Jason Bivens on “Jazz and American Religion”

Dr. Jason Bivens, a professor at North Carolina State University who specializes in religion and American culture, gave a talk entitled, “Jazz and American Religion” at a Department colloquium on April 13th, 2016. The talk explained the research behind his recent book, Spirits Rejoice! Jazz and American Religion, his exploration of the history of jazz and jazz musicians, and the music’s indisputable ties to race, religion, and American culture.

Sarah Dees on Native American religions

Dr. Sarah Dees, a lecturer at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, gave a talk entitled, “The Materialization of Native American Religions” at a Department colloquium on April 18th, 2016. As an ethnohistorian whose research examines the relationship between race and religion as it has been articulated in scholarly, legal, and popular realms, her talk was based on research from her book, The Scientific Study of Native American Religions, 1879-1903.
Dr. Jeffrey Kripal delivered a lecture entitled “Biological Gods: Science (Fiction) and Some Emergent Mythologies” on February 29th, 2016 for the thirty-second annual Loy H. Witherspoon Lecture in Religious Studies. Kripal is the J. Newton Rayzor Chair in Philosophy and Religious Thought, and his research focuses on “New Comparativism” and paranormal communities within the study of religion. His fascinating lecture delved into a variety of case studies involving UFO abduction and mythology mapping, and prefaced his next book, which is coauthored with Whitley Strieber—the author of Communion, 1987.

The Loy H. Witherspoon Lectures in Religious Studies, the oldest and most prestigious endowed lecture series at UNC Charlotte, was established in 1984 to honor the distinguished career and service of Professor Loy H. Witherspoon, the first chairperson of the UNC Charlotte’s Department of Religious Studies. He is currently Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Religion within the department.

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 James 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 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 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.