

# CONNECTIONS

A Newsletter of the Department of Religion at the University of Florida Spring/Summer 2009

## Graduates!

A big congratulation to Religion Department graduates. We are especially proud of the Religion majors who received their Bachelor of Arts degrees at the Spring 2009 Commencement.

Many of our newest alumni will be attending graduate school in the fall, while others have plans for work, rest, and travel. We will miss you, but we hope you stay in touch, come back for a visit, and let us know about your adventures and achievements in the coming years.

This year we had an especially strong set of graduating seniors. It was difficult to limit the annual Jaberg Award presentation, but finally the faculty decided to give the award to Hilary D'Angelo and

Brandon Velez, shared with runner-up Cez Generoso. All three are outstanding students and citizens, who enriched our department and the university. We wish them and all our graduates the very best in their new adventures.

We are also very happy to congratulate Luke Johnston, who defended his dissertation in April, becoming the third Ph.D. graduate from the Department of Religion. Luke is heading to Wake Forest University—his alma mater—for a postdoctoral fellowship. His wife, Dedee DeLongpre, will be leaving her job as Director of UF's Office of Sustainability to become director of Sustainability at Wake Forest. We will miss you both!



Top to Bottom: Jaberg Award Recipients Hilary D'Angelo, Cez Generoso, and Brandon Velez with Dr. Gwynn Kessler; Religion majors line up for graduation.

## Around the Department

Two visitors came to UF this spring as part of the Global Religion in Practice (GRIP) initiative, funded by UF's International Center and coordinated by Professors Narayanan, Sanford, Vásquez, and Peterson, along with Dr. Philip Williams from Political Science and Dr. Anita Anantharam from Women's Studies. As part of this program, Professor Tom Tweed of the University of Texas-Austin visited in January, who spoke on "Toward an Ethic of Civic Engagement: Reflections on a Kinetic and Relational Theory of Religion." In February, we had a visit from Professor Norman Wirzba of the Duke University Divinity School, who spoke on "The Grace of Good Food."

Other visitors included Dr. Livia Kohn, who visited March 24–25, and Josh

Feinberg, and Javad Butah, who visited in January.

Religion majors helped organize UF's first Interfaith Forum in April. The purpose of the event was to spread dialogue and discussion about the interfaith movement and bring it to UF. About 300 people attended the event, which was featured on the front page of the *Alligator*, our local student-run newspaper. The forum had five panelists representing Islam (Islam on Campus), Christianity (Campus Crusade for Christ), Judaism (Jewish Student Union), Secular (Gator Freethought), and Hindu (Hindu Student Council). Religion major Michael Garrett moderated, on behalf of the Religion Department and the Inter-Religious Alliance. The organizers hope



to hold similar forums in the future.

And on February 19, the Religion Graduate Student Association, along with UF Amnesty International, co-hosted a talk by School of the Americas Watch founder, Fr. Roy Bourgeois, entitled "Latin America Project." His talk covered the history of SOA Watch's efforts to close the School of the Americas.

Above: Clint Bland, Jacob Jones, and Amy Brown.

## Faculty News

Gwynn Kessler will be moving to Swarthmore College to begin a new position in Fall 2009. We thank her for her many contributions during her time at UF, and especially for her outstanding work as undergraduate coordinator. We wish her and her family the very best in their new home! Dr. Kessler's book *Conceiving Israel: The Fetus in Rabbinic Narratives* will be published later this year by Pennsylvania State University Press.

Vasudha Narayanan gave two talks this spring on Hinduism in Southeast Asia: "Kanchi, Kambuja, and Kamban: Tamil connections with Cambodia" in the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley and "Angkor Wat and Hindu Temples in the Khmer Empire" at the University of California, Davis.

Jason Neelis received a research fellowship to participate in a project on "Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe" (<http://ikgf.ev-theol.rub.de>) at Ruhr University in Bochum, Germany from late April 2009 through March 2010. He is studying processes of religious formation and patterns of expansion with German colleagues and other international fellows while finishing a book on trade networks and the transmission of Buddhism.

Anna Peterson gave a keynote lecture at the Ohio Northern University conference on "Recreate, Replace, Restore." She also completed a new book, *Everyday Ethics and Social Change: The Education of Desire*, which will be published by Columbia University Press in August 2009. In April, Dr. Peterson was named a University of Florida Research Foundation Professor for 2009–2011.

Mario Poceski published a new book, *Introducing Chinese Religions*, which will be published by Routledge in June of this year. More

information is available at [www.routledge.com/books/Introducing-Chinese-Religions-isbn9780415434065](http://www.routledge.com/books/Introducing-Chinese-Religions-isbn9780415434065).

Whitney Sanford presented papers at several meetings this spring, including one on "Re-thinking Gandhi and Global Nonviolence" at the Global Nonviolence International Conference at James Madison University in April. In December she traveled to Australia to participate in a panel on "Playing God? 'GMOs,' Miracles, and Monsters." She also published an essay titled "The Future of Food: Assessing Agriculture, Livelihoods and Food Security in a Hungry World" in the *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*.

Bron Taylor presented three invited lectures abroad this year, one at the Arne Naess Symposium, Centre for Environment and Development in Oslo, Norway; another at the Universidad de Magallanes, Punta Arenas and Unidad Académica Puerto Williams, Chile's, and at the Freiburg Forum on Environmental Governance, Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. Last fall he also presented the prestigious Wrigley Lecture at Arizona State University entitled "Beyond Taboo: The Interdisciplinary Imperative in Environmental and Sustainability Studies" and a talk at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting. This spring he presented an invited Earth Day lecture at Syracuse University and a keynote address at a conference on the Humanities and Sustainability at Florida Gulf Coast University. Professor Taylor also continues to serve as Editor-in-Chief for the quarterly *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*. This year he has published two book chapters, "From the Ground Up: Dark Green Religion and the Environmental Future" in *Ecology and the Environment*, ed. Donald Swearer (Harvard University Press, 2008) and "Sea Spirituality, Surfing, & Aquatic Nature Religion," in *Deep Blue: Critical Reflections on*

*Nature, Religion and Water* (Equinox, 2008). Additionally the first paperback edition of his *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* was published. His next book, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (University of California Press), will be published in Fall 2009.

Manuel Vásquez will attend the Latin American Studies Association meeting in Rio de Janeiro in June, where he will present on his research on Latino migrants in the New South, along with Philip Williams from Political Science, Tim Steigenga from Florida Atlantic University, and their Mexican, Guatemalan, and Brazilian collaborators. Rutgers University Press published their co-written book, *A Place to Be: Brazilian, Guatemalan, and Mexican Immigrants in Florida's New Destinations*, in March 2009. The book presents the results of the first phase of a multi-year, cross-disciplinary research project supported by the Ford Foundation. Preliminary results of the second phase, which has focused on Latino immigrants, religion, and inter-ethnic relations in Atlanta, will be presented in March 2010 at major conference co-sponsored with the Candler School of Theology at Emory University.

Robin Wright co-edited a new book titled *Native Christians: Modes and Effects of Christianity among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas*, in collaboration with Aparecida Vilaça. The book, published by Ashgate, reflects on the modes and effects of Christianity among indigenous peoples of the Americas, drawing on comparative analysis of ethnographic and historical cases. It includes essays by a number of prominent Latin American, North American, and European scholars. Dr. Wright has also edited a forthcoming special issue of *The Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* on the theme of "The Religious Lives of Amazonian Plants."

## Stay in Touch

As we say goodbye to recent graduates, we remember our department's friends and alumni fondly. We thank you for all your contributions over the years, and we hope you will stay in touch. Please contact us with your news, announcements, and changes of address.

## Graduate Student News

Seth Bryant defended his M.A. thesis in Fall 2008 and will be moving this summer to Nashville, where he will begin Ph.D. study at Vanderbilt University.

Rose Caraway will present a paper as part of a panel on "Revolution and Christianity in Cuba" at the Latin American Studies Association International Congress in Rio de Janeiro in June. Rose is traveling with support from a travel grant from the UF Center for Latin American Studies.

Eleanor Finnegan presented a paper titled "Unearthing Aspects of Lived Religion: An Investigation of Rural Muslim Agricultural Communities in the United States" at the Sixth Annual Duke/UNC Islamic Studies Conference, which was held at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, April 4-5, 2009. In July Eleanor will be presenting a paper titled "Meaning Making in an American Medinah and Mazar Defining Progress among Muslim Farm Communities in the United States," at the Third Annual International Conference of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture in Amsterdam. Eleanor has also received a Graduate Student Course Development Grant from the Center for European Studies. She is developing and teaching a new course, which will be cross listed with Religion and European Studies, entitled *Stories and Histories of Muslims in Europe*. This course will use literature as a starting point to explore the historical interactions between Muslims and the West and their influence on issues today. Finally, she has been invited to join the editorial board of the journal *Islamic Perspective*.

Robin Globus presented a paper at the "Recreate, Replace, Restore" conference on environmental philosophy at Ohio Northern University in April, on the topic of "Recreation's Shadow Side: Exploring Narratives of Apocalypse."

Gayle Lasater received a CLAS Dissertation Fellowship this year and was a finalist for the 2009 Madelyn Lockhart Dissertation Fellowship. Gayle will be finishing her dissertation on Mormon missions in the Americas this summer and moving to Philadelphia, where she will teach at Temple University.

Todd LeVasseur presented a paper titled "Replacing Ice with Water" and also served on a panel on ecological restoration at the "Recreate, Replace, Restore" Conference at Ohio Northern University in April.

Leah Sarat has written an entry on "Mexico: Indigenous Religions," which will be published in *The Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, edited by Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (CQ Press, 2010).

Caleb Simmons gave several presentations this spring, including a talk on "Ka-ma and Commodification: Misappropriations of the Ka-ma Sutra" at the Ka-ma Sutra Forum here in Gainesville in January; a presentation titled "Severed Heads and Intersubjectivity: Gaze Politics in Anti-British Political Iconography of mid-20th-Century India" at the South Asian Studies Association Annual Conference in April, and a talk at the Florida State University Graduate Symposium in February, titled "A Sight that Beholds: Gaze Politics and Religious Intersubjectivity."

This summer, recent Ph.D. graduates Sam Snyder and Gavin van Horn will both be attending a summer institute funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities at Arizona State University on environmental philosopher Aldo Leopold. Sam also received a fellowship to conduct research at the National Sporting Library in Virginia, where he will study the historical connections among conservation and fly fishing. Sam is presently teaching in the Department of Religion at Kalamazoo College in Michigan.

## CHiTra Events

The Center for the Study of Hindu Traditions (CHiTra) continues to have several co-sponsored events with academic units around the campus. In January 2008, it collaborated with The School of Music and The Center for World Arts at the University of Florida to have a fabulous sitar recital. Josh Feinberg, the featured artist, was accompanied by Javad Butah on the tabla. Both Josh and Javad have played in many prestigious venues around the world. The HPNP auditorium at UF was packed with more than three hundred students, faculty, administrators, and members of the community. Josh also gave talks on Hindustani Music and a sitar-demonstration to two sections of the Introduction to World Music class.

In April, CHiTra worked with the UF chapter of The Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture (SPIC-MACAY), a vibrant student organization to organize "Sangeet Sammelan: A Weekend of Classical Indian Music and Dance." The event featured several accomplished musicians and dancers. Mrs. Abhilasha Chawdhary gave a lecture-demonstration with the Kathak style of classical Indian dance. Mrs. Mathura Alladi (vocal music), founder-director of the Jathiswara School of Dance and Music in Gainesville, and Dr. Meera Sitharam (veena) gave a superb concert of south Indian classical (Carnatic) music.

CHiTra also co-sponsored the Global Religion in Practice lectures by Professors Tom Tweed (University of Texas) and Norman Wirzba (Duke).

## Undergraduate News

The undergraduate students and all the members of the department are sad to say farewell to Dr. Gwynn Kessler, who has been an outstanding mentor for our majors and minors during her time as undergraduate coordinator. Thank you Dr. Kessler for all your contributions!

The Religion undergraduate organization, SOARS, was active this spring in defending

the department and the study of religion at UF in the wake of threatened cuts. SOARS continues to grow and is an active and constructive presence in the department and the university.

Rebecca Quinones, who graduated from UF in December with a Religion B.A., is now interning at a non-profit organization in Jacksonville called Dreams Come True, which

grants dreams to children with life-threatening illnesses. Rebecca recently received a full scholarship to Harvard Divinity School, where she will begin work in Fall 2009 on a Masters in Theological Studies with a concentration in Religion, Ethics, and Politics.

At Harvard, Rebecca might run into fellow Religion major Hilary D'Angelo, who will be attending Harvard Law School.



## Department of Religion

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

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## From the Chair

It has been an eventful spring semester for our department. First, the good news: our department, as you can see from the newsletter, is thriving. We have been engaged in teaching, graduating doctoral students, writing articles and books, editing journals and anthologies, getting fellowships and grants, and serving the university and our profession in several capacities.

In addition to all the exciting events noted in this newsletter, students, faculty, and friends of the department were keeping a close eye on the University of Florida's budget crisis. As many of you know, the state and the university have faced a large decrease in revenue this year. Anticipating greatly reduced funds from the legislature, the university administration asked all colleges and departments to prepare for a possible ten-percent cut. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences administration developed a plan that would include greatly reducing a small number of departments and programs. Religion was one of those, along with the Departments of Geology and Communication Sciences and Disorders. In the event of worst-case scenario cuts from the legislature, Religion faced layoffs of up to nine faculty members. Many of you were aware of this potential crisis, and we appreciate very much your expressions of support. It has meant a great deal to us to know that we have such good friends.

After all the worry of the past few months, we are very happy to report

that neither Religion nor either of the other targeted departments in our college will face cuts. The state budget cuts for our university came in at \$72.7 million. But when one added tuition increases and other line item income from the state, the overall number was a bit better than expected. Obviously, the recurring cuts will be a major setback to UF as a whole, but the university administration has found ways to meet these cuts without widespread faculty layoffs. Many people, including many of you, lobbied legislators to preserve funding for education in our state, and your efforts paid off—not just for the Department of Religion and UF, but for public education at all levels.

The crisis has helped clarify both our strengths as a department and some areas in need of improvement. We will be working on those issues in the months to come. In the meantime, we are especially proud of our students, undergraduate and graduate, who continue to excel despite uncertain times.

We are planning some exciting events for the next year and will keep you informed about them. We hope you will be able to join us for some, if not all of them.

—Vasudha Narayanan, Chair



## Alumni Lecture Fund

The Department of Religion hopes to provide students with academic experiences that will offer perspectives on religion's role in our everyday lives. We hope that through an Alumni Lecture Series and other activities, both students and alumni will gain insights from some of today's most brilliant minds. These occasions will also offer the opportunity for today's classes to connect with those who came before them.

Please consider a gift to the Department of Religion to support the department's critical educational activities for those following in your footsteps. Please complete the form and return to the address below. Thanks for your support!

Yes! I would like to support the Alumni Lecture Series! (Fund #00767)

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