

CONNECTIONS

A Newsletter of the Department of Religion at the University of Florida Winter 2008–2009

New Program in India!

Travis Smith received an Internationalizing the Curriculum Award, 2008, sponsored by the UF International Center, to support the UF in India Summer Abroad program that he developed with Anita Anantharam (Women's Studies). In June and July 2008, Dr. Smith and Dr. Anantharam, assisted by Religion graduate student Jimi Wilson, took twenty students from diverse departments for a six-week course. Based at the Navdanya Bijavidyapeeth, a research institute and organic farm nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas, the students nourished themselves on locally cultivated, organic vegetarian fare, engaged in daily farm work, and attended daily yoga sessions, in addition to trips outside the institute. Smith and Anantharam plan to offer the course again next summer.



Faculty News

Robert Kawashima co-edited a *Festschrift*, to which he contributed a chapter as well, that was recently published: *Phantom Sentences: Essays in Linguistics and Literature Presented to Ann Banfield* (co-edited with Gilles Philippe and Thelma Sowley), Bern, Peter Lang, 2008. Dr. Kawashima also spoke at two conferences on linguistics and literature over the spring and summer, in Paris and Berkeley.

Roman Loimeier visited Norway in September, to give a talk titled "What is reform? The dynamics of Islamic reform in Africa," at the annual meeting of the Nordic Network on Islam in Africa in Bergen.

Vasudha Narayanan published "'With the earth as a lamp and the sun as the flame' Lighting Devotion in South India" in the *International Journal of Hindu Studies* (Springer Verlag). In July, she presented a keynote address "Constructing the cosmos, creating communities: Hindu temples from Angkor to Atlanta" for the conference on The Public Representation of a Religion called Hinduism, European Conference of Modern South Asian Studies, held at the University of Manchester. In the fall, she gave talks at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; Rutgers University; Miami University, Ohio; and James Madison University, Virginia. In December, she gave a talk on the relationship between Kanchipuram and Kambuja (Cambodia) at the Prakriti Foundation, Chennai, India.

Jason Neelis has published several journal articles on his work on early Buddhist manuscripts. Dr. Neelis also gave a presentation in June on "Domestication of Gandharan Avadanas in British Library Kharosthi Manuscripts" for a panel on Gandharan Manuscripts and Gandharan Buddhism at the 15th Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies held in Atlanta.

Anna Peterson and **Manuel Vásquez** have published *Latin American Religions: Histories and Documents in Context* (New York University Press, 2008). Dr. Peterson is also a co-principal investigator (PI) on a two-year grant from the National Science Foundation to develop curriculum and teaching materials on the ethics of sustainability, directed by Dr. Charles Kibert of the College of Building Design & Construction.

Mario Poceski has published an article in the *Journal of Chinese Religions*, titled "Lay Models of Engagement with Chan Teachings and Practices among the Literati in Mid-Tang China." He is presently working on a new book, the *Black-*

well Companion to East and Inner Asian Buddhism, which will be published by Blackwell. Dr. Poceski also gave an invited lecture at the University of Oslo on "Monastic and Lay Practices in Classical Chan (Zen) Buddhism" in September. Also in Norway, Dr. Poceski presented a paper at the International Conference on Zen Texts as Public Documents, on the topic of "Popular Remembrances and Literary Transfigurations of the Great Chan Teachers from the Tang Era."

Whitney Sanford discussed her recently published book *Singing Krishna: Sound Becomes Sight in Paramanand's Poetry* (SUNY, 2008) at Goering's Book Center in Gainesville on October 29, 2008. Dr. Sanford traveled to Adelaide, Australia to participate in a conference on "Globalising Religion and Culture in the Asia Pacific" in December 2008. She also presented at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting in Chicago. Dr. Sanford also recently received a grant from the American Academy of Religion for her new project, "Gandhi's Environmental Legacy: Food Democracy and Social Movements." Along with two of our graduate students, Shreena Gandhi and Michael Gressett, Dr. Sanford served on a (nearly) all-Gator panel at the Conference for the Study of Religion in India in September at Marville College in Tennessee.

Zoharah Simmons has published two articles: "Martin Luther King Revisited: A Black Power Feminist Pays Homage to the King," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (November 2008) and "From Muslims in America to American Muslims," *Journal of Islamic Law & Culture* (Winter 2008–2009).

Travis Smith presented a paper at an international conference on "Transformation and Transfer of Tantra/Tantrism in Asia and Beyond" in Berlin in December.

Manuel Vásquez published an article on transnational religious networks in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*. In early Spring 2009, Rutgers University Press is publishing his co-edited volume titled *To Take Place*, which is based on research on the religious lives of new Latino immigrants in Florida.

Robin Wright has published (with co-author Aparecida Vilaca) a book titled *Native Christians*; he has also coordinated a forthcoming issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* on "The Religious Lives of Amazonian Plants" (forthcoming, 2009).

Graduate Student News

Graduate Students Teaching at UF & Beyond

Many of our graduate students are teaching in our department and elsewhere in the University of Florida as well. They are teaching a wide range of courses, including introductory courses in Islam, North American religions, world religions, and Asian religions. They have also taught more specialized classes on Religion and Nature in North America, Religion, Ethics, and Nature, and Social Ethics. Several of our graduate students have also been teaching composition classes in the English Department. While this teaching is part of their professional development, it is also a great service to our department and the university.

We are also proud of our students who have positions outside UF. **Shreena Gandhi** (Ph.D., Americas) is now in her third year as an Assistant Professor in the Religion Department at Kalamazoo College in Michigan. **Gavin Van Horn** (Ph.D., Nature) is the Brown Junior Visiting Professor in Environmental Studies at Southwestern University (Georgetown, TX). During this two-year position, Gavin will contribute to Southwestern's growing campus sustainability efforts and teach courses such as Religion and Ecology and Environmental Studies.

Our graduate students continue to receive recognition of their teaching excellence. **Michael Gressett** (Ph.D., Asia) received a graduate student teaching award last spring, and this semester, **Sean O'Neil** (Ph.D., Americas) has been awarded a Doctoral Student Teaching Award from UF's Latin American Studies Center. Sean is teaching his course on "Religion, Pluralism and Identity in Latin America" during spring semester 2009.

Seth Bryant (M.A., Americas) presented a paper at the annual conference of the John Whitmer Historical Association held in Voree, Wisconsin, which received one of two 2008 Wildermuth Awards for promising scholars of Latter Day Saint history. Seth defended his Master's thesis in Fall 2008 and

is presently applying to Ph.D. programs.

Eleanor Finnegan (Ph.D., Nature) has published a review of *Islam and Ecology*, edited by Richard Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azizan Bahauddin, which will appear in *Islamic Perspective*.

Phillip Green (Ph.D., Asia) presented a paper titled "The Avadana of Kacangala: A Tale of Filial Piety and Debt Reversal" at the 37th Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin in October.

Nathan Herrod, a Ph.D. student in History with a minor in Religion, presented a paper at the Florida Society for the Social Sciences Conference in October in Gainesville.

Gayle Lasater (Ph.D., Americas) presented a paper titled "Mormonism Comes to Santo Domingo: Among Missionaries and Converts" at the meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Louisville in October.

Greg McElwain (Ph.D., Nature) received a research assistantship from the Animals and Religion Department of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). He is also working with Anna Peterson on the NSF grant on "Teaching Ethics in Sustainability."

Bridgette O'Brien (Ph.D., Nature) is working as a consultant to secondary schools with the Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education. She has presented several papers, at the Teaching the World's Religions Institute in Washington, D.C. in July and at the NCDS Campus Ministry Conference in Boston in October.

Robin Globus (Ph.D., Nature) has received an IGERT Fellowship. IGERT is an NSF funded pro-

gram focusing on interdisciplinary learning.

Lucas Johnston (Ph.D., Nature) has presented his work at the Media, Spiritualities and Social Change Conference in Colorado, the Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture conference in Mexico, and will present at the International Conference on Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability in Mauritius in January of 2009. He has recently completed an article for the Encyclopedia of Sustainability on International Commissions and Declarations, and is currently at work on an article for *Religion Compass* and is working on two chapters for an edited volume *Inherited Land: the Changing Grounds of Religion and Ecology*.

Todd Levasseur (Ph.D., Nature) was part of a UF team that undertook a joint research project through the Indo-U.S. Agricultural Knowledge Initiative (AKI). This was a pilot study to incorporate gender analysis into scientific modeling of agricultural cropping systems, with a specific focus on groundwater depletion. This brought the humanities and social sciences together with the natural sciences. Todd spent five weeks working with Indian partners and researchers, along with ten days of fieldwork in the Kothakunta watershed in the Madak district, about 1.5 hours by car from Hyderabad, the capitol of Andhra Pradesh.

Grad Students at AAR: Several graduate students presented papers at the American Academy of Religion meeting, including Leah Sarat, who spoke on "Reinventing the Border: Religion, Tourism and the U.S.-Mexico Frontier"; Bridgette O'Brien, who coordinated a panel discussion on "Exploring the Theoretical Underpinnings of a Green Pedagogy"; and Sam Snyder, who presented on "Ritual and Restoration Ecology on Florida's Ocklawaha River."

First Ph.D. Graduates

We are proud to announce the first two Ph.D.s awarded in Religion from the University of Florida! **Gavin Van Horn** and **Sam Snyder**, both students in Religion and Nature, defended their dissertations early in Fall 2008 semester.

Gavin's dissertation is titled "Howling about the Land: Religion, Social Space, and Wolf Reinroduction in the Southwestern United States." Gavin's committee chair is Bron Taylor; other members are Anna Peterson, Jack Davis (History), and Paul Waldaud (Tufts University).

Sam's dissertation is titled "Casting for Conservation: Religion, Popular Culture, and Politics of River Restoration." Sam's committee chair is Anna Peterson; other members are Bron Taylor, Manuel Vásquez, and Sid Dobrin (English).

Stay in Touch

The next time you're surfing the web, visit the department web site at www.religion.ufl.edu. It's a great way to keep in touch with what is happening in the department. Also, alumni are

encouraged to participate in the Department of Religion alumni listserv. Alumni on this list may post and receive e-mails to and from other alumni and the department. This service

is free, and you may unsubscribe anytime you wish. If you wish to subscribe, send an e-mail to annen1@religion.ufl.edu. We hope you will join us in conversation online!

Undergraduate News

Student Updates

Michael Garrett has been selected as a Fellow with the Interfaith Youth Core for 2008–2009 <www.ifyc.org>. This is an organization that deals heavily with promoting Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Work Internationally. Mike hopes that with their training, support, and resources combined with his initiative, he can contribute to progressive changes on campus over the next year. Mike is also collaborating with the Dean of Students Office, specifically Tamara Cohen, to form the first University of Florida Interfaith Council.

New Organization Formed

In fall 2008, undergraduate religion majors, working with faculty mentor, Dr. Gwynn Kessler, started the Society of Academic Religious Studies (SOARS). The mission of SOARS is to create a community atmosphere within the department that fosters lively and meaningful interaction between undergraduates. SOARS serves as a vital source of information for students new to the major or minor, providing mentoring and practical information and advice regarding (among other things): the career options open to majors of religion after they

Nila Raisz went to India last year to research a particular Hindu deity for her Undergraduate Honors Thesis. According to Nila: “I quickly realized that the people I was observing were as fascinated by me as I was by them. Some journalists who spotted me there while they were attending another function, wrote a little blurb about me in the daily newspaper, and the next day, one of the most famous news anchors for that region came to interview me for the evening news. During the interview, we walked to the building where pilgrims shave

their hair in offering, and I decided to immerse myself in the experience and shave up as well. I appeared in the news again 4 times, all during what I thought was a humble undergraduate thesis.”

graduate; those steps to take in order to make one an excellent candidate for acceptance into masters or doctoral programs in Religious Studies; or even what classes to take in the coming semester.

The members of SOARS hope that graduate students and faculty will also participate in our nascent community. Guest lectures from professionals in the field that passionately describe their current research projects will undoubtedly spark greater interest in Religious Studies among young Religion majors and minors.

SOARS also plays a positive role in the larger Gainesville community, sponsoring inter-religious panels and social justice projects. We hope that alumni will be interested not only in watching our organization grow, but also in helping it to do so. If you would like to support us, either by participating in our events or contributing monetarily, please contact Taylor Sincich (skateman@ufl.edu). SOARS meets every Thursday evening; please contact Taylor Sincich or Dr. Kessler for details.

Alumni News

Charles Cannon (B.A. 1982), Director of Incident Management for Liberty Medical Supply, Port St. Lucie, Florida, was recently appointed Episcopal Deacon in Charge of two small mission churches in Western Palm Beach County. St. John the Apostle Episcopal Church is a 60-year-old multi-cultural mission in Belle Glade, and Holy Nativity Episcopal Church is a struggling 80-year-old mission in Pahokee. Charles notes that “The skills and talents honed while working in the fast paced and ever-changing healthcare industry assist me in exploring creative ideas about building and sustaining mainstream churches in transitional communities.”

Bhakti Cohen (B.A. 1999) has opened a family therapy private practice in the Duck Pond area of Gainesville. She became a grandmother to Katie in May and to another granddaughter in October.

Michael Franks (B.A. 2004) began graduate work at the University of Chicago Divinity School this fall. Michael writes: “I plan to focus much of my studies in the general area of ethics, and predominantly the issues surrounding the two topics of Christian Just War Theory and Christian Pacifism. It is within this realm of theological ethics where my main interest is found and where I plan to frame my academic objectives here. I hope to explore what the Christian ethical tradition can offer in terms of today’s fast paced and quickly changing world where challenges like pre-emptive war, violence, globalism and religious radicalism (to name a few) affect everyone in one degree or another.” Upon completing his M.A., Michael plans to apply to the Ph.D. program at the University of Chicago.

Anne Raduns (B.A. 2000) is a partner in the Law Firm of Appleget and Raduns, with a practice limited to family law. Anne also writes, “following in my footsteps, my daughter Jenna Raduns, has begun her academic journey in the Religion Department Summer of 2008.”

Michelle Thresher Taylor (B.A. 1996) recently started her “dream job” in the Appellate Section of the United States Attorney’s Office for the Middle District of Florida. Michelle graduated from UF’s Law School in 2001.

Daniel Watkins (B.A. 2005) received his M.A. in History at U.F. last spring, and then moved to Columbus, Ohio to begin a Ph.D. program in Early Modern European History this fall. Daniel was awarded the Graduate School’s Distinguished University Fellowship. He is studying French history.

Global Religion in Practice

Vasudha Narayanan, Anna Peterson, Whitney Sanford, and Manuel Vásquez, working with Anita Anantharam (Women’s Studies) and Philip Williams (Political Science), received a grant from the UF International Center for a series of workshops

on “Global Religion in Practice.” The program has four central axes: ritual and performance; immigration; food and agriculture; and everyday ethics. The International Center grant will bring several speakers to UF during the 2008–2009 academic

year to talk about ways to build programs in this area, with a special focus on connections between Latin America and South Asia. Visiting scholars include Joyce Flueckiger (Emory), Tom Tweed (Texas), and Norman Wirzba (Duke).

From the Chair



It has been my privilege to serve as Interim Chair this year. As you will see from this newsletter, our department is thriving with intellectual activities, and we have much to celebrate. Gavin Van Horn and Sam Snyder were our first two students to graduate from our Ph.D. program and are happily placed in other universities.

Our faculty and graduate students have been teaching, publishing, and involved in activities around the university. Perhaps one of the most distinguishing features of our department is its connections with other program units within the University of Florida. We work with several programs including the Centers for Women's Studies and Gender Research; Jewish Studies; Latin American Studies; African Studies; World Arts; Spirituality and Health; the School of Natural Resources and Environment; the School of Music; and the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art. Several faculty members are also affiliated with the Center for the Study of Hindu Traditions (CHiTra). These connections are deep and extensive; you will see in this issue that Anna Peterson is a co-principal investigator along with Dr. Charles Kibert of the College of Building Design & Construction on a grant from the National Science Foundation to develop curriculum and teaching materials on the ethics of sustainability; Whitney Sanford and one of our graduate students, Todd LaVasseur, have been involved with an initiative headed by Dorota Haman, Chair of Agricultural and Biological Engineering, working with integrating gender and social issues in watershed management in the India-U.S. Agricultural Knowledge Initiative (AKI); and our collaborations with the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art and the Center for World Arts continue to flourish. Bron Taylor's work connects him with several units around the university; Gwynn Kessler and Zoharah Simmons work with gender issues; Jason Neelis has courses cross listed with History; and the list goes on.

And yet, despite this extended family, despite being included and being central to many conversations around the university and community, we are a distinctive field and very much a department of *Religion*. Connected with and contributing to conversations in many fields and many disciplines, we are all still scholars of Religion, with an identity distinct from others. The mission statement of the American Academy of Religion captures the significance of the work we do in our department:

In a world where religion plays so central a role in social, political, and economic events, as well as in the lives of communities and individuals, there is a critical need for ongoing reflection upon and understanding of religious traditions, issues, questions, and values. The American Academy of Religion's mission is to promote such reflection through excellence in scholarship and teaching in the field of religion.

Our strength comes from being connected both with other departments and with connections within our own field. Critical reflection on religion from a multitude of perspectives is the work our faculty and students are engaged in; and from this newsletter, you will agree that we do it well!

Despite our many achievements, it has been a year of many challenges, primarily fiscal. As many of you know, our department, our college, and our university have been dealt major budget cuts. We are part of the "finance-demic" that has affected much of the world. We thank our alumni, friends, and our advisory board for their unstinted support over the last few years, and especially over the last few months. There are rough times ahead, but we are in this together and will emerge stronger after this storm.

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!

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