

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

Welcome to the fourth issue of the
Department of Religion Newsletter



Three students who received this year's departmental awards are photographed with the Head of the department and the sponsor of the Hoffman Family Award. From the left: Heather Wetherholt, Douglas Hoffman, Professor Valerie Hoffman, Haley Hubbard, and Janani Mandayam Comar.

In the fourth issue of our departmental newsletter, we thank Professor Valerie J. Hoffman for her leadership as the Head of Religion from 2015-2019. Her latest edited volume is the subject of our feature article on pages 4-6.

Professor Jonathan Ebel will begin his position as the new Head of the Department in Fall 2019.

We will resume our Monday Coffee Hours, from 12:30 PM to 1:30 PM in our Library, in Fall 2019. Please stop by if you happen to be on campus on a Monday, during the semester.

AWARDS FOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Haley Hubbard (BA Dec. 2018) is this year's recipient of the Hoffman Family Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Study of Religion. This award is funded by a generous endowment from Douglas Hoffman, a 1975 graduate of our department, and is awarded each year to an outstanding graduating senior in the Department of Religion. Haley will continue her education at the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work.

Two of our Master's students were selected as recipients of the Marjorie Hall Thulin Prize for Excellence in the Study of Religion: Janani Mandayam Comar, who will enter the doctoral program of the University of Toronto's Department for the Study of Religion in the fall, and Heather Wetherholt, who will enter the doctoral program in religious studies at Arizona State University's School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies. This award is funded by a generous endowment from the late Marjorie Hall Thulin.

Congratulations to these outstanding students!

ALUMNI NEWS

Ryann Craig (Class of 2001) received her PhD in Semitics from Catholic University of America. Justin Doran (Class of 2008), who received his PhD in Religion from University of Texas (Austin) in 2016, has joined Middlebury College as Assistant Professor of Religion in Fall 2018.



Message from the department head

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

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EDITOR

Rini Bhattacharya Mehta

The end of the academic year is a time when we review the events and accomplishments of the year that just ended. We are a small department, but our faculty is productive in research, writing, and publishing. We attend conferences and give lectures not only beyond the confines of our University, but beyond the borders of our country: this year alone, our faculty gave presentations in Spain, Austria, Germany, England, Israel and Nepal. Members of our faculty make important contributions to the life of the University as a whole, serving on committees, meeting with colleagues across campus, and initiating creative programs and public events. All three of our assistant professors were selected as faculty fellows of research institutions on our campus for the 2019-20 academic year: Jessica Birkenholtz at the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities, Michael Dann at the Center for Advanced Study, and Rini Bhattacharya Mehta at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications. As the previous edition of our newsletter announced, Professor Mehta also received a major grant from the new Presidential Initiative to Celebrate the Impact of the Arts and Humanities. Recently we also learned that she has been selected as a recipient of the Public Voices Fellowship in its inaugural year at the University of Illinois, 2019-20. This program is sponsored by the office of the Executive Vice-President/Vice President for Academic Affairs, which describes it as providing “a cohort of twenty thought leaders, the majority of whom will be underrepresented (including women), with extraordinary support, leadership skills and knowledge to ensure their ideas shape not only their fields, but also the greater public conversations of our age.” I extend my congratulations to Professor Mehta, and am delighted by all these recognitions of members of our faculty.

Teaching lies at the heart of what we do as a department. The number of our majors is small, but our courses teach nearly two thousand students each year, and we often hear from them that our courses are not only enjoyable and stimulating, but also deeply meaningful. In our courses and our public events, we deal with some of the most important issues of our time. Our Master’s program, begun in 2012, attracts students who are nothing less than outstanding; three of this year’s recipients of a Master of Arts in Religion were accepted into excellent doctoral programs, and two of our M.A. students gave papers at regional conferences.

Alas, the end of the academic year is also a time of farewells. This year we bid farewell not only to some wonderful students, but also to Professor Jessica Birkenholtz, who has accepted a position at Pennsylvania State University. We are saddened by her departure, which is a great loss, but we wish her well in her new position and thank her for her many contributions to our department and its students.

This is my last greeting as head of the department: I will be stepping down from the headship in mid-August. I am happy to say that the department will be in capable hands, as the position passes to Professor Jonathan Ebel. I congratulate him on the faith his colleagues have placed in him, as I thank my colleagues for the faith they have had in me over the last four years.

Valerie J. Hoffman

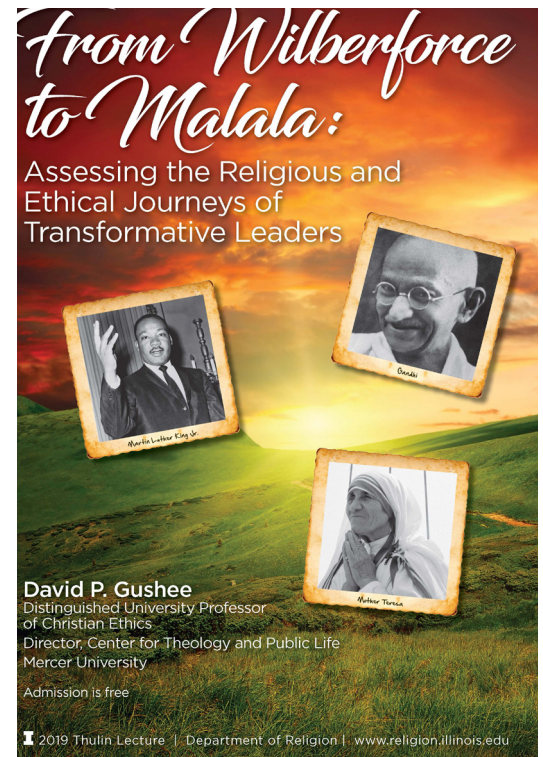
Head, Department of Religion

ANNUAL THULIN LECTURE, 2019

Professor David P. Gushee, Mercer University, Georgia

This year's **Marjorie Hall Thulin Lecture in Religion and Contemporary Culture** was "From Wilberforce to Malala: Assessing the Religious and Ethical Journeys of Transformative Leaders," delivered on **March 6** by David P. Gushee, Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics and Director of the Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer University. A self-described "progressive evangelical" until 2015, Dr. Gushee was expelled from the Southern Baptist Convention and excluded from the evangelical world for his criticism of evangelical modes of exclusion and marginalization, particularly his advocacy of full inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in the church. His 2017 memoir, *Still Christian: Following Jesus Out of American Evangelicalism*, describes this conflict and others, such as his opposition to torture during the administration of George W. Bush, and his efforts to get churches, government and businesses to make the changes necessary to meet the greatest moral challenge of our time, global climate change. By the time he finished his memoir, he had grown tired of confrontation and sought rejuvenation through studying the lives of moral leaders. In *Moral Leadership for a Divided Age*, co-authored with his student, Colin Holtz, Gushee describes how some of the great moral leaders of modern history, such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, and others, became leaders of transformative social justice, developing a religio-moral vision and sustaining it despite intense criticism and conflict.

Gushee believes that ethics is best taught through moral exemplars; the admiration we feel when hearing of their lives opens us up to new moral growth. Describing highlights from the life stories of fourteen moral leaders, he pointed out that religion played a constructive role for almost all of them. Each of them embraced a particular cause that galvanized them; many of them have been criticized for failing to embrace other causes, but the transcendent commitment required to become a great moral leader tends to coalesce around a single overriding cause. In fact, when moral leaders ventured beyond their particular areas of focus, as when Martin Luther King, Jr. publicly opposed the Vietnam War or when Mother Teresa tried to help bring reconciliation to war-torn Lebanon and apartheid South Africa, their reputations suffered. All moral leaders have personality flaws and blind spots, but they change the world with respect to the cause they espouse. Younger people are less willing to accept moral preachers who aren't perfect exemplars in every way. Gushee's students, for example, felt that Gandhi should no longer be considered a moral leader because of revelations about racist comments and quasi-sexual relations with young women. Gushee pondered whether the students are guilty of absolutist zealotry or whether he was insufficiently horrified at moral failings in such leaders. But, he asked, if a single offense disqualifies a person from moral leadership, what would count as disqualifying? Moral leaders, like the rest of us, have "feet of clay," but they can also embody transformative love. Mandela's attitude toward his prison guards at first was defiance, a refusal to let them break his spirit by being consumed with hatred; ultimately, he learned to be their friend, a love that transformed both them and him.



Marjorie Hall Thulin (1910-2009) graduated from the University of Illinois in 1931. She enjoyed a successful career in advertising. She also published poetry and children's literature, and edited a book on the history of Glencoe, Ill., where she was a longtime resident and active community member.

Mrs. Thulin's desire for students to understand how religion grows and functions in a complex society, especially Christianity in American society, led her to endow a fund that makes it possible for an internationally known scholar of religion and contemporary culture to be resident on the Champaign-Urbana campus for several days each academic year. One of the main duties of the Marjorie Hall Thulin Scholar of Religion and Contemporary Culture is to deliver the annual Thulin lecture, which is a major public event on campus.

FEATURE ARTICLE



The Role of Religion in the Making the New Middle East

Since the mid-twentieth century, the Arab world has been dominated by corrupt, authoritarian regimes that deployed modern surveillance technology to brutally suppress opposition. It is a region of rampant human rights abuses, but entrenched state power made active struggle for justice seem hopeless. So when protests in Tunisia brought down the government in January 2011 and inspired a series of “Arab Spring” uprisings catalyzed by demands for democracy, dignity, and human rights, the world was riveted by the unfolding drama. Many people began to speak of a “new Middle East,” pondering the possibility of democracy in the Arab world.

In a catharsis of shared passion, Egyptian protesters emphasized the unity of Muslims and Coptic Christians, who took turns guarding each other as each group worshipped in Cairo’s Tahrir Square. Ecstatic demonstrations of interfaith unity were represented in art that appeared on formerly blank walls all over the city. The only Arab Spring uprising that rapidly took on a sectarian hue was in the tiny island nation of Bahrain, where an oppressive Sunni monarchy rules a Shi’ite majority. Qatar and Saudi Arabia had armed rebel groups in Libya and Syria, but in Bahrain Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates assisted the government in crushing the protests.

Religious tensions and divisions rose to the surface in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings. Repressive regimes had prevented the development of viable political parties capable of contesting their stranglehold on power, so political opposition had coalesced in mosques and Islamic organizations. In the first elections held soon after the uprisings, Islamists won major victories in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Yemen. None of these signaled major changes; in Tunisia, for instance, Islamist efforts to overturn the rights given to women in the Personal Status Code of 1956 were rapidly squelched. But hardline fundamentalists, known as Salafis, suddenly entered the political arena in Tunisia and Egypt, former bastions of secularism, and violent radicals took advantage of the post-revolutionary chaos to assassinate secular politicians and bomb Sufi shrines. The fall of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt was followed by numerous bombings of Coptic churches, which the military-controlled transitional government proved unwilling to stop—in fact, the military reacted with shocking brutality to a Coptic protest against government inaction. The inspiring interfaith unity evinced during the uprising had been savagely suppressed.

The Islamist victories were ephemeral: in Morocco, the king remained firmly in charge; in Egypt, the courts dissolved the Islamist-dominated parliament and the military removed Islamist president Mohamed Morsi from power after only a year in office; the Islamist party of Tunisia, Ennahda, avoided a similar fate by calling for new elections and forming an alliance with secularists. In Yemen, Sunni Islamists faced an unexpected incursion of “Houthis,” Zaydi Shi’a from the northern part of the country, and the country collapsed into civil war, exacerbated by the intervention of the Sunni-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who saw the Houthis as proxies of Shi’ite Iran.

The Syrian uprising began as a nonsectarian demand for democracy and the ouster of Bashar al-Assad, but the structure of the state made it inevitable that it would take a sectarian turn. The French, during the period of their mandate over Syria (1920-1946), had placed the military in the hands of a minority, the Alawites, an offshoot of Twelver Shi’ism, who were only 12 percent of the population. The Alawites continue to dominate the Syrian army, and seized power under Hafez al-Assad in 1970.

Professor Hoffman’s edited volume, *Making the New Middle East: Politics, Culture, and Human Rights*, was published by Syracuse University Press in 2019.

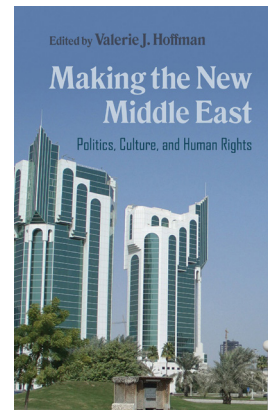
Making the New Middle East

Although the Ba'ath party guarantees the secularity of the regime, Syria's closest ally in the region is Iran, and Iran's proxy, Hezbollah of Lebanon, is a key player in the civil war that has engulfed Syria since 2012. The Syrian opposition is divided, and foreign intervention deepened its disunity: the U.S. supported the Free Syrian Army, and Qatar and Saudi Arabia funded rival Islamist groups. As jihadists came to dominate the opposition, Syria's Alawites and Christians linked their survival to that of the regime. As the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) became the greatest threat to U.S. interests in the region, U.S. demands that Assad step down faded away.

ISIS is an outgrowth of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which grew from resentment over Sunni disempowerment after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. In 2014, as the Shi'ite-dominated government of Iraq lost its grip on parts of the country, ISIS seized large swaths of territory, first in Iraq and then in Syria, and declared the establishment of a caliphate. The proclamation of a caliphate resonated with Muslims around the world as an overturning of all the humiliations brought upon the Muslims by European colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and the establishment of the state of Israel in the heart of the Arab world. While the world gazed in horror at ISIS's mass executions, crucifixions, beheadings, and the enslavement and rape of Yazidi women, tens of thousands of alienated young Muslims flocked to join ISIS from countries around the globe. Russia joined the U.S.–French campaign against ISIS in Syria, but targeted Syrian rebels that were a much more direct threat to Assad's hold on power. The Syrian war became a humanitarian catastrophe on a scale unseen since the Second World War.

Despite the rise of sectarian conflicts in the Middle East since the collapse of the regime of Saddam Hussein, Sunni–Shi'ite conflict is not inevitable and has not been the historical norm. The rise of sectarian conflict in the Middle East is due to a confluence of factors, including:

- 1.** Colonial policies of divide-and-rule favored minority domination in Iraq (Arab Sunnis) and Syria (Alawites). The distribution of power and privilege according to sectarian affiliation heightens sectarian identification; the majority resents the ruling minority, and the ruling minority fears the ascendancy of the majority. Non-Muslim minorities ally themselves with the minorities in power, in a pact for their common survival in the face of a seething majority.
- 2.** Saudi Arabia has used its oil wealth to spread Wahhabi Salafism, an often militant form of radical Islamism that is hostile to Shi'ism and Sufism. The alliance of the United States and Saudi Arabia with Pakistan in support of the struggle of the Mujahideen against the Soviets in Afghanistan encouraged the spread of radical Salafism in South Asia and the Middle East.
- 3.** The overthrow of the Shah of Iran and the establishment of a regime hostile to the United States alarmed the U.S., and the establishment of a Shi'ite Islamic republic alarmed Saudi Arabia. Like Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic of Iran sought, at least initially, to spread its ideology. The rise of Hezbollah as a major player in Lebanon and in the Arab-Israeli conflict pointed to Iran's reach in the Arab world.
- 4.** The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 removed an authoritarian Sunni minority regime and instituted free elections that gave power to the Shi'ite majority. The disbanding of the army, the banning of former Ba'ath party members from government employment, and the empowerment of a formerly persecuted majority was a recipe for sectarian conflict. The presence of the U.S. as an occupying power galvanized Muslims from many Sunni countries to join the resistance in a struggle that came to be identified as a Sunni jihad.



continued on Page 6 ...

5. In Syria and Yemen, grievances based on political and socioeconomic injustices were sectarianized by the involvement of Iran and Hezbollah, on one side, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates on the other. The rise of sectarian conflict is due not to the differences between Sunnism and Shi'ism, but to the leveraging of sectarian identities for political purposes.

The Arab Spring uprisings may have begun as nonreligious demands for democracy, freedom, dignity, and a living wage, but the removal of powerful authoritarian regimes paved the way for the opening of religious conflicts on multiple fronts: Salafis against Sufis, Salafis against secularists, militant Islamists against Christians and Yazidis, and Shi'a against Sunnis. A region in which, fifty years ago, the political salience of religion had faded and conflict between Sunnis and Shi'a barely existed is now boiling over with violence, often justified on the basis of religion or fears of domination by opposing religious groups. The removal or weakening of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East led to civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, in which neighboring states and nonstate actors from other countries became directly involved. The politicization of religion, a trend that had been building since the 1970s, attained its final, horrific end.

Professor Valerie J. Hoffman is Professor and Head of the Department of Religion at the University of Illinois. She is the author of *The Essentials of Ibadi Islam* (Syracuse University Press, 2012) and *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt* (University of South Carolina Press, 2009).

FIRST ANNUAL INTERFAITH PROGRAM: Cultivating Hope in Anxious Times

For the past year Professors Valerie Hoffman, Bruce Rosenstock and Robert McKim have been part of an interfaith program planning group, along with the leaders of the First Mennonite Church of Urbana, the Central Illinois Mosque and Islamic Center, and Sinai Temple of Champaign-Urbana. The goal is to organize a series of public events that encourage interfaith engagement and mutual understanding. In fall 2019 we will launch the first annual interfaith program, "Cultivating Hope in Anxious Times." The program is still being planned, but here's what we have so far.

Thursday, October 10, at 4 pm: a lecture by Harvard professor **Francis X. Clooney**, SJ. Professor Clooney, a Jesuit priest and a specialist in Hinduism, will talk about how the study of Hinduism has given him new insights into Christian theology and practice.

Thursday, November 7: Eboo Patel, Ph.D., an Illinois alumnus, former Rhodes Scholar, and founder of Interfaith Youth Core, will visit our campus, meet with student and community leaders in the afternoon, and give a major public lecture in the evening.

Friday, November 8, at 4 pm: A lecture by **Mark Swanson**, the Harold S. Vogelaar Professor of Christian-Muslim Studies and Interfaith Relations and Associate Director of the Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

Friday evening, November 8: There will be a **dinner and panel discussion** on the benefits and challenges of interfaith relations at the Central Illinois Mosque and Islamic Center. Panel speakers will include **Mark Swanson** of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, **Marcia Hermansen**, professor of Islamic studies at Loyola University at Chicago, and others to be determined.

Saturday, November 9: There will be a **luncheon** at Sinai Temple in Champaign, followed by a possible joint service project.

Watch for announcements and [more details on the timings](#) on our website and Facebook page!

FROM THE PAGES OF OUR HISTORY

Compiled by Dr. Wayne Pitard, Professor Emeritus

... continued from Fall 2018 issue

From the mid-1970s onwards, the Program was allowed to hire scholars specializing in Hinduism, Buddhism, Philosophy of Religion, and Islam, each of these as joint appointments with other departments. The early 1980s saw the rise of a second generation of faculty members that included Robert McKim (Philosophy of Religion), Rajeshwari Pandharipande (Hinduism), Valerie Hoffman (Islam), Peter Gregory (Buddhism), and Wayne Pitard (Hebrew Bible), all of whom (except Gregory) spent their careers at the University.

Early in its existence, the Program became noted for the quantity and quality of its General Education courses. Schoedel and his colleagues considered these courses to be a critical part of the Program's mission, and each faculty member taught at least one, and usually two such courses a year. For many years the number of students taught per faculty member in the Program was greater than any other department in the College of LAS, with the exception of Rhetoric (which taught everyone). By 1975, the Program had developed an undergraduate major in Religion that provided nine different possible fields of concentration.

During the late 1980s the faculty voted to change the Program's name to the Program for the Study of Religion, which it felt described the nature of its mission more clearly. The change was done cleverly, not through a long and cumbersome administrative process, but simply by placing the new title on the Program's stationery.

The 1990s and 2000s saw a slow but steady expansion of the size and scope of the Program, with the additions of positions in Sociology of Religion, American Religions, Western Religious Intellectual History, Native American Religion, Renaissance and Reformation Europe, and Japanese Religion. By the early 2000s the Program's faculty had almost doubled in size compared to what it had been in the mid-1980s.

Although several Directors of the Program occasionally asked the Deans of LAS whether it made sense to try to petition to change it into a Department, the regular answer was not to tamper with something that was working just fine. But finally, in 2008, it became clear that programs with tenured faculty lines should be converted into departments, and the Program for the Study of Religion, after over thirty years of acting like one, finally became one.

Over the course of its history, faculty in our program/department have authored 45 books and edited or co-edited 14 multi-authored collections while serving on the faculty. Many received prestigious grants from outside agencies, including six from the National Endowment for the Humanities, three from the Guggenheim Foundation, three from the Fulbright Scholar Program, and one from the Carnegie Corporation.

In addition, six faculty members have received major awards or recognitions from the University. Since the mid-1970s, the Program/Department has produced hundreds of majors who have gone on to a wide range of careers. Many went on to graduate school in a variety of fields and have established successful careers in the study of religion, the ministry, law, medicine, dentistry, political science, psychology, literature, area studies, business and finance.

The Department of Religion has continued to expand with its new name. The most significant development in recent years was the establishment of a Master's Degree Program that accepted its first class in 2012. The program has been well-received and has already produced many successful graduates. And in September 2017, the department launched a new undergraduate Interfaith Studies Certificate.

This concludes the serialization of our department's history compiled by Professor Wayne Pitard. Thank you, Professor Pitard!

Heather Wetherholt, Hanan Jaber, and Beau Ott, graduating students with M.A. in Religion, with Professor Jonathan Ebel and Professor Valerie J. Hoffman, on May 11, 2019.





University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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