

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

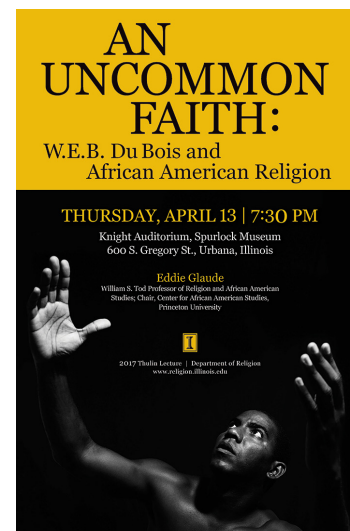
Welcome to the new Department of Religion Newsletter

The Department of Religion at the University of Illinois now offers a major and minor with a wide variety of area concentrations, in addition to a Master's program begun in 2012 and an *Interfaith Studies Certificate* that was launched in 2017.

We cordially invite our alumni to share their stories in future issues of the newsletter. Send us news and announcements; connect to us via Facebook (links on Page 2). And if you are in town on a Monday, come join us for the *Coffee Hour* in our Library (3014 FLB), around noon.



The Anchor Bible series in our library. See story on Page 3.



Poster for the 2017 Thulin Lecture. For details, see the section below.

THULIN LECTURE 2017 Eddie Glaude Jr.

The annual Marjorie Hall Thulin lecture was delivered by Eddie Glaude Jr., the William S. Tod Professor of Religion and African-American Studies at Princeton University, on April 13, 2017. The lecture, entitled “An Uncommon Faith: W.E.B. Du Bois and African American Religion,” took place in Knight Auditorium of the Spurlock Museum. Glaude’s impassioned presentation wove together Du Bois’s own writings and life experiences with elements of the pragmatist tradition of American philosophy and contemporary African-American literature in order to capture the complexities of Du Bois’s relationship to religion, which combined personal agnosticism with a deep appreciation for the central role of religion in African-American history and communal life. Glaude argued for viewing Du Bois “as a figure that represents a third way between William James’s and John Dewey’s view of religion—as someone who enables us to take up the call for a religious ideal and who keeps track of the need for consolation without appealing to metaphysical foundations that provide comfort.”

Glaude’s visit to campus also included visits to the Departments of African-American Studies and Religion, where students and faculty participated in a luncheon discussion on his latest book, *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul*. In addition to his role as a leading voice in the study of African-American Religion, Glaude is a frequent commentator on American culture and politics, appearing on programs such as *Democracy Now* and *Morning Joe* and writing for major national news outlets, including *Time Magazine*, *The New York Times* and *The Huffington Post*.

The 2018 Annual Thulin Lecture will be delivered on April 12, 7:30 pm, by R. Marie Griffith, Jon C. Danforth Distinguished Professor, Washington University. The title of her lecture will be: “Sex and American Christianity: The Religious Divides that Fractured a Nation.”

Summary of Thulin Lecture 2017 provided by Michael Dann



Message from the department head

Warm greetings from the Department of Religion at the University of Illinois! You are reading the first issue of what we hope will be a bi-annual departmental newsletter, designed to record and share the accomplishments of our faculty and students. We have come a long way since the founding of the Program in Religious Studies in 1971. We now have faculty in a broad range of specializations, enabling students majoring in religion (and yes, it is now religion, not religious studies) to tailor their major according to their interests.

The study of religion provides an ever more important lens through which to understand history and global cultures. Religion is one of the primary threads running through the tapestry of human history and constitutes a central aspect of how people have made and continue to make sense of the world around them. The study of religion is fascinating because it explores how human beings face the mysteries of the unknown—how they understand their place in the universe and their relationship to, and experience of, the supernatural realm. On the other hand, religion influences people in very practical ways—how they understand morality, live in the world, organize societies, and interact with members of other groups. Religion has also become an important vehicle for the articulation of political agendas and advocacy of social justice and environmentalism. So the study of religion is inextricably linked to multiple fields—history, philosophy, the social sciences, literature, and the arts. Like these fields, the academic study of religion aims not to promote any particular religious (or anti-religious) perspective, but to study religions, not only as sets of doctrines and rituals, but as textual traditions and conceptions of the world that are variably expressed in different historical and cultural contexts. The study of religion increases our understanding of the world and enhances our ability to interact with diverse cultures and build interfaith cooperation. We are pleased that the study of religion has attracted serious students who have the potential to make valuable contributions to society.

In this issue, you will learn about our faculty, our department's history, and some of our students, alumni, and public events. We have weekly coffee hours and several public lectures in the course of the academic year, to which all are cordially invited.

Valerie J. Hoffman

Head, Department of Religion

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DEPARTMENT NEWS

Alumnus donates Anchor Bible Series to the Departmental Library

Douglas Hoffman, Religion '75, has donated the Anchor Bible Commentary Series—the world's leading academic resource for biblical studies—to the Department of Religion.

Hoffman graduated from the (then) Program in Religious Studies in 1975 and has long retained a keen interest in the study of religion, even as he worked at the Chicago Board Options Exchange (Cboe). At Cboe, his success as a self-employed market maker and senior employee of the Exchange allowed him, as he says, “the great pleasure of supporting Religious Studies at Illinois, because what greater purpose could there be for a public university than to teach students critically about their religions and the faiths of others?”

Doug started collecting the Anchor Bible Series soon after he graduated from Illinois. Now that he and his wife have retired and are downsizing in preparation for a move, Doug decided to donate the entire series to the Department of Religion library.

He and his wife Rebecca have also established the Hoffman Family Endowment Fund to enable the Department of Religion to purchase new publications in the Anchor Bible series, and also to fund the Hoffman Family Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Study of Religion, awarded annually to an outstanding graduating senior.



Douglas Hoffman (second from the left), with Professors Richard Layton, Valerie Hoffman, and Wayne Pitard, photographed in the Religion Department's Library, on October 12, 2017.

REFLECTIONS

Courtney Averkamp, a recent alumna, reminisces ...



My decision to become a graduate student in the Religion Department was initially an act of self-discernment. After a two-year absence from college, did I have the intellectual chops to make it in academia? Did I even have the discipline to study a new language from scratch? I was essentially dipping a toe into the murky waters of academia and the study of religion – and I was so terrified of sinking. But from first contact to May commencement, I found myself buoyed by the kindness and generosity of the department's scholars and teachers. Finding my academic sea legs was by no means an easy feat, but encouragement abounded. So I've decided to stick around.

Irecall an evening in my first semester as a graduate student in Religion: There I sat on the couch, blanket-wrapped, in my very first apartment with a roommate I barely knew. My semesterly cold had hit the day before, I missed my parents, and I anticipated a long night ahead. Every fiber in my body wanted to throw in the towel and go to bed, but I still had to learn five new characters in the Sanskrit script and read 50 more pages and write a quiz and... and! The big question on my mind was “Why did I ever decide to do this to myself?!” Three years later, I know exactly why: Because the work is hard, but the rewards of rigorous study are tremendous. Because whenever I'm feeling unsure of myself, some kind professorly soul comes along and gives me the encouragement I need, whether they know it or not. Because the Religion Department gave me the training and the confidence to jump head first into the academic study of religion.

As I type this, I'm once again huddled on my couch, having just defeated yet another semesterly cold, with altogether too much work to do. But this time, I'm not in unfamiliar territory, wondering if my choices are the right ones and cursing my past self. I'm sitting beside my husband John Plaiss (A fellow Religion alum as it were!), with plans to enroll in a PhD program next year, and I wouldn't choose to be anywhere else.

FEATURE ARTICLE



On Making Religious Progress

What stage should we human beings consider ourselves to be at in terms of our religious development? Infancy? Adolescence? Full maturity? Old Age?

Do the religions as we know them represent the culmination of human religious development so that all or most of the major religious ideas and innovations there will ever be have already appeared? Or might we be just starting out in our religious development, so that what we have on hand are the first rude efforts of a species in its infancy?

The Canadian philosopher J.L. Schellenberg has recently made some interesting and provocative observations about these matters. (His book *Evolutionary Religion* (ER) is a good place to start if you are interested in his ideas.) He proposes that we may be in the early stages of the development of intelligent life on earth and we may currently be living through the infancy of our species. And there have been at most six thousand years of systematic religious inquiry, so religion too may be in its infancy and we may be religiously immature.

Schellenberg points out that if we do not destroy ourselves, human beings and our biological descendants may have as much as a billion years of life on earth ahead of us. Future humans or our descendants may develop mental powers that currently are unimaginable to us. Indeed we can provide a simple inductive argument to the effect that future hominids will have brains that are larger, better, more complex, and more intelligent than ours.

Schellenberg advocates a new conception of inquiry in which we imagine ourselves as “members of a trans-generational community that may together solve the deepest intellectual problems baffling us today – or the even more interesting problems into which they may evolve” (ER, 36).

I think that Schellenberg is correct to this extent: it is possible that we are, religiously speaking, in our infancy. He has also made some interesting observations about factors that may have impeded our progress during our relatively short period of religious reflection. The brevity of human religious exploration is itself relevant, as is the fact that even during this relatively brief period we have had many other things to do. We are prone to rivalry and dogmatism. We become attached to our world-picture, whether it involves religious belief or religious disbelief, and are difficult to budge once we have settled on a position. We are too focused on protecting our beliefs and on defeating the beliefs of others. Even virtues such as loyalty have been obstacles. We suffer from what Schellenberg calls the “end of history illusion.” People in the grip of this illusion think they have no further to go religiously, and indeed that there is no further to go religiously.

Here too I think that he is correct: these are at least potential obstacles to religious progress. I would just add that the fact that religion has played so many functions in human life is also relevant. For example, religion has had a behavioral function. This includes providing guidance in areas of life in which people need guidance. The fact that religions have played this and other functions may also have constituted, and may now constitute, an additional set of obstacles to religious progress. It may have made for conservatism and for excessive caution in reflection. There is always a lot at stake.

So what might religious progress look like? I propose that it is best understood as combining two rather different elements. First, there is the matter of achieving a deeper understanding of the truth, of what is the case. I refer to this as progress in understanding.

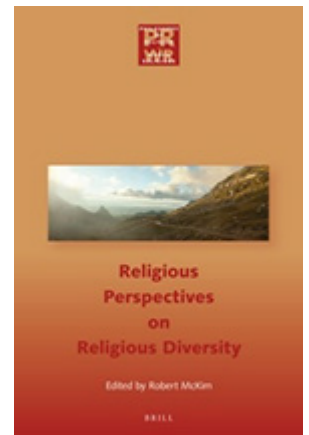
On Making Religious Progress

Second, there is practical progress. For example, progress in the case of the behavioral function will be exhibited in, say, the extent to which participation in a religious tradition leads people to be wiser, kinder, more sensitive, more generous, more concerned about justice, more inclined to care for the earth, more inclined to eschew avoidable violence, and the like. For example, there is the question whether what participants characterize as contact with, or absorption in, or worship of, or guidance by, or communication with, and so on, a putative religious ultimate has such consequences as these in their lives. The issue of whether people are influenced by their religious participation to care for the earth merits special emphasis. One reason this is so is that our survival and probably our flourishing as a species is a prerequisite for human religious progress. And our survival, and especially our flourishing, require that we avoid serious ecological disruption.

How should we set about preparing to make religious progress? The answer seems reasonably clear in the case of practical progress: we should cultivate practices, institutions, leaders, and so on, that will promote such progress.

What about progress in understanding? In this case I would like to propose a 12-step program.

1. The first and most obvious step is to make the topic of religious progress – its character, possible obstacles to it, how to prepare for it, the attitudes it might require, the institutions that would be conducive to it, and so on – a widely discussed topic.
2. We should cultivate any insights that may have already been developed. Even a religion whose overall interpretation of how things are is largely mistaken may be an authentic response to something real and may have insights. Since it is difficult to tell which traditions have made progress, or are about to do so, or are well situated to do so, and so forth, this calls for everyone to adopt an exploratory and inquisitive approach to others and to how they understand things.
3. We need to open up more of the vast array of existing religious perspectives to humanity as a whole.
4. We should all team up together and pool our efforts, with what have been religious foes, or at any rate groups that have operated independently of each other, becoming allies and fellow explorers in joint pursuit of religious progress.
5. The study of religion, and all scholarly work relevant to religion – including, say, work in history, textual scholarship, cosmology, neuroscience, anthropology – should be integrated into the practice of religion so that, for example, it is reflected in the understanding of the tradition and of its history and development that its members have.
6. We need to think systematically about how to circumvent whatever obstacles to religious progress there may be, tackling these head-on.
7. We need to think systematically about the sort of religious leadership that would help us to make religious progress.



Professor McKim's book, *Religious Perspectives on Religious Diversity*, was published by Brill in 2016.

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8. Religious traditions and religious communities can help in a variety of ways. They can encourage their members to take the above steps. Also, for various reasons the pursuit of religious progress needs to be integrated with religious life – something that normally requires a religious community. Thus new ideas about religious matters may need to be given expression in religious practice, sometimes on an experimental basis. There is also the issue of what people intuitively feel to be the case after long-term careful reflection and long-term experience of dealing with the vicissitudes of life while looking at the world from a particular religious perspective – whether, for example, it feels to people that their experience corroborates their outlook or whether, on the contrary, they are left wondering why it fails to do so and hankering for something better.

I would *like* to propose a 12 step program for religious progress. But there are four more steps to go. And this is where you, dear reader, can help. Perhaps you can think of additional steps. If so, I would like to hear from you!

Robert McKim

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These ideas are developed at more length in Robert McKim's "The Future of Religion," forthcoming in *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Paul Draper (Routledge, 2018).

MEET OUR M.A. STUDENTS

Asená Acar has a B.A. in Islamic Theology from Istanbul University, where she studied in Turkish and Arabic, after finishing high school in the U.S. Asena is interested in studying world religions and sects of Islam. She is currently a T.A. for World Religions, and would like to pursue a career in teaching.

Hanan Jaber has a B.A. in Applied Mathematics from UIUC with a minor in Modern Standard Arabic; she also has traditional degrees in the memorization of the Qur'an and the Ten Small and Big Recitations of the Qur'an from Critical Loyalty Institute in Toronto, Canada. Hanan has been a T.A. for Religion in the West, and is interested in Islamic Studies with a focus on the post-modernist period.

Hannah Gene Kessler Jones has a B.A. in Classics from the University of Alabama. Her research interests are in gender and religion in Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquity, rooted in a love for the Ancient Greek and Hebrew languages and literatures. Hannah Gene spent the summers of 2013 and 2015 studying abroad in Greece.

Janani Mandayam Comar received her B.S. in Biology at the California Institute of Technology (2015). As a graduating senior, she received the yearlong Thomas J Watson Fellowship with which she researched the Indian dance form Bharatanatyam in several countries. A native Tamil speaker, Janani is building her proficiency in Hindi; she has a broad interest in Hinduism and religious music and dance in India.

Yonghwa Meling joined the M.A. program in Religion in 2017. She has an M.S. in Plant Biology from Seoul National University in Seoul, S. Korea. She is most interested in healing as it relates to different religious traditions.

Beau Ott has a B.A. in History and Spanish from Illinois State University. Beau is interested in studying modern American religious history, with special interests in evangelicalism, Protestant fundamentalism, and Pentecostalism. Beau will be co-instructing a community crash-course in world religions for the Mattoon Public Library in Spring 2018.

Joshua Reinke is a native of southern California; he came to UIUC with a B.A. in History from the University of California at Santa Cruz. Joshua's research is primarily concerned with religion and material and visual culture, with strong secondary interests in monasticism, asceticism, and religion in popular political movements.

Heather Wetherholt joined the M.A. Program in Religion in 2017; she has a B.A. in Religion and Philosophy from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Heather is interested in studying early Christianity.

Shuncai Yan joined the M.A. program in Religion in 2017, after receiving a B.A. in History from Sun Yat-sen University, China. Shuncai is interested in East Asian Buddhism, especially Chinese Buddhism. She is planning to learn Japanese.

MEET OUR FACULTY

Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz's areas of research include the comparative study of Hindu religious identity, practice, and literature, Hindu goddess traditions in Nepal and India, and gender and religion. Her forthcoming first book, *Reciting the Goddess: Narratives of Place and the Making of Hinduism in Nepal* (Oxford UP), examines the history and development of the *Svasthanivratākatha* in Nepal's historical and political context. She also co-edited *Religion and Modernity in the Himalaya* (Routledge, 2016), and is the Reviews Editor for *HIMALAYA*, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies.

Michael Dann joined the Department of Religion in 2015. He is currently working on a monograph on the emergence and evolution of the Sunni-Shi'i divide in Islam, and an edited volume on the modern study of hadith in a global context. He received a grant from the International Institute of Islamic Thought for research on these projects. His recent publications include "Between History and Hagiography: The Mothers of the Imams in Imami Historical Memory" (in an edited volume with Oxford UP), and entries in Brill's *Encyclopedia of Islam*.

Jonathan Ebel studies religion and war, religion and violence, and lay theologies of economic hardship, all within the American context. He is the author of *G.I. Messiahs: Soldiering, War, and American Civil Religion* (Yale, 2015), and *Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War* (Princeton, 2010), and is co-editor with Professor John Carlson of *From Jeremiad to Jihad: Religion, Violence, and America* (California, 2012). He is currently at work on a religious history of the Great Depression in agricultural California.

Valerie Hoffman has a broad range of research and teaching interests, ranging from the Qur'an, Sufism, and medieval theology to Islamic political thought and gender ideology. She is the author of *Sufism, Mystics and Saints in Modern Egypt* (U of South Carolina Press, 1995) and *The Essentials of Ibādī Islam* (Syracuse UP, 2012). Her edited volume, *Struggling for Justice in the New Middle East: Politics, Culture, and Human Rights in the Twenty-First Century*, is forthcoming with Syracuse UP.

Richard Layton's research interest include History and Reception of the Bible, development of early Christianity, philosophy and religion in the Greco-Roman World. His latest book, *For the Civic Good: The Liberal Case for Teaching Religion in the Public Schools*, co-authored with Walter Feinberg, was published in 2014 by UMichigan Press.

Rini Bhattacharya Mehta works on Indian literatures and cinema. She has designed and taught REL 208 (South Asian Cultures and Literatures). Currently, Mehta is working on a monograph on Indian cinema's history of conflicts, and on a translation of an early modern Indian novel. Her edited volume, *The Indian Partition in Literature and Films: History, Politics, and Aesthetics*, was published in 2014 by Routledge.

Alexander Leonhard Mayer teaches classes on Chan (Zen) and Chinese religions. He has published on Chinese Buddhist biographical literature, especially on the Xuanzang biographies. His current research focuses on problems of the Chinese Tathāgatagarbha and Yogācāra traditions. Mayer's three-volume project with Lodrö Sangpo focuses on the most important Chinese Yogācāra text, the Cheng weishi lun (Vijñaptimātratā-siddhi). His next book will be a study of Fazang's commentary (Tang) together with Shihui's subcommentary (Song) on the Heart Sūtra.

Robert McKim continues to work both on questions pertaining to religious diversity and on the role of religion in the environmental crisis. His most recent book is an edited volume, *Religious Perspectives on Religious Diversity* (Brill, 2016). *Climate Change and Inequality*, a book co-edited with colleagues in Law, Philosophy, and Engineering, is forthcoming from Springer in 2018. Another book, *Religious Diversity and Religious Progress*, is forthcoming from Cambridge UP in 2018.

Bruce Rosenstock has taught Religion and Society in the West, History of Judaism, History of Antisemitism, Postmodern Jewish Philosophy, and Intensive Biblical Hebrew. His most recent book is *Transfinite Life: Oskar Goldberg and the Vitalist Imagination* (Indiana UP, 2017). He is currently working on a monograph tentatively titled *Oedipus: the Enigmas of Bipedalism*.

James Treat's courses include "Fascism, Religion, America," and "Indigenous Traditions." His book, *Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era* (Palgrave, 2003), was a finalist for the 2004 Oklahoma Book Award. He is also the author of *Writing the Cross Culture: Native Fiction on the White Man's Religion* (Fulcrum Publishing, 2006).

Dov Weiss has taught courses on Judaism and Jewish history, theology, and literature. He has developed two new courses: REL 515 (History of Jewish Theology) and REL 344 (Medieval Jewish Thought). Currently, Dov is working on a monograph exploring the complex relationship between ethics, exegesis and theology in late antique Judaism. His first book, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism*, was published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 2016.



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College of
Liberal Arts & Sciences
AT ILLINOIS

OUR HISTORY

Keep reading our newsletter every semester to learn the story of our journey since 1971. In every issue leading up to our golden jubilee in 2021, we will publish a segment from our department's history, compiled by **Wayne Pitard**, Professor Emeritus.

The *Department of Religion* at the University of Illinois traces its roots to the foundation of a *Program in Religious Studies* in 1971. From humble beginnings the Program has come to play an active and significant role in the University's academic community, offering a substantial number of courses designed for the institution's General Education requirements, a major with a wide variety of area concentrations, and a successful Master's program. It has attracted to its faculty many talented young scholars who have become well-known for their scholarly productivity, excellent teaching, and dedication to the University as a whole. The *Program in Religious Studies* changed its name in the late 1980s to the *Program for the Study of Religion*, and it was designated the *Department of Religion* in 2008, although it had been functioning as a department since the late 1970s.

to be continued ...