

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

Welcome to the second issue of the 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).

The photograph to the right is from a dinner event organized to honor our annual awardees: Haley Hubbard, who was awarded the Marjorie Hall Thulin Prize (junior), Anna Piazza, awarded the Hoffman Family Award (senior), and Hannah Gene Kessler Jones, awarded the Marjorie Hall Thulin Prize (MA student). Third from the left is Doug Hoffman, Religion alumnus '75 and sponsor of the Hoffman Family Award.



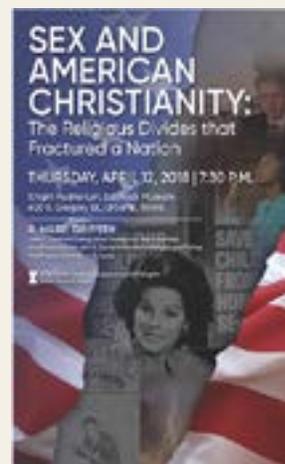
THULIN LECTURE 2018

R. Marie Griffith

The annual Marjorie Hall Thulin lecture was delivered on April 12, Thursday, by R. Marie Griffith, John C. Danforth Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at Washington University and Director of the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. She spoke on the topic "Sex and American Christianity: The Religious Divides that Fractured a Nation." Professor Griffith, who has long been interested in gender, bodies, and sexuality in American Christianity, described the long-standing concern among religious leaders and activists in the United States for articulating and enforcing norms of sexual behavior. She argued that these norms have changed in response to social, political, and scientific developments across the twentieth and twenty-first century, and that we can hardly understand the current state of American politics and American Christianity — from the issues that matter to allegiances between people of faith and political parties — without sustained attention to sex and sexuality.

R. Marie Griffith has authored *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (University of California Press, 1997), *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American*

Christianity (University of California Press, 2004), *American Religions: A Documentary History* (Oxford University Press, 2007), and *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics* (Basic Books, 2017). Her two co-edited volumes are (with Barbara Dianne Savage) *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power, and Performance* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) and (with Melani McAlister) *Religion and Politics in the Contemporary United States* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).



Summary of Thulin Lecture 2017 provided by Jonathan Ebel



Message from the department head

Warm greetings from the Department of Religion at the University of Illinois! Our departmental open house on October 13th led me to reflect on my own history here. I joined the Program in Religious Studies in 1983, with a mission of introducing Islamic studies to the curriculum. Wayne Pitard (Hebrew Bible) also joined that year. At that time the Program was directed by its founder, William Schoedel, a scholar of early Christianity. Robert McKim (philosophy of religion) had joined the faculty in 1982, Rajeshwari Pandharipande (Hinduism) in 1981, and Gary Porton (Judaism) in 1973. Schoedel retired in 1996, Porton in 2007, Pandharipande in 2012, and Pitard in 2016. This year McKim will also retire, the last of my colleagues from the early years. It was under McKim's leadership that the program became a department and proposed a Master's program, which admitted its first students in 2012. Together with Bruce Rosenstock (modern Jewish thought), McKim inaugurated an undergraduate Interfaith Studies Certificate program. McKim's courses on philosophy of religion and religious ethics, especially in the areas of war, religious pluralism, and the environment, have attracted some of the best students at Illinois. Although Professor McKim seeks no recognition, I feel compelled to acknowledge some of what he has done for the department and for Illinois students.

Our faculty continues to be productive scholars as well as teachers. This year Oxford University Press published Professor Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz's book, *Reciting the Goddess: Narratives of Place and the Making of Hinduism in Nepal*, based on Professor Birkenholtz's original study of an important Nepalese sacred text and fieldwork in Nepal. Professor Alexander Mayer's massive, three-volume English edition of a seminal Buddhist text, *Vijñaptimātratā-siddhi* (Cheng weishi lun), written in collaboration with Lodrö Sangpo, with full annotation and commentary, was released by Motilal Banarsidass, a leading Indian publisher of books on Sanskrit and Indology; Professor Mayer is sole author of the third volume of this work. Professor Robert McKim co-edited, with Professor Colleen Murphy of the Department of Philosophy and Professor Paolo Gardoni of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, *Climate Change and Its Impacts: Risks and Inequalities*, to be issued by Springer next month, and he has a sole-authored work, *Religious Diversity and Religious Progress*, that will be published later this year by Cambridge University Press, 2018. Finally, my own edited book, *Making the New Middle East: Politics, Culture, and Human Rights*, will be published later this year by Syracuse University Press.

Our M.A. program has attracted some extraordinary students whose commitment to research and teaching is inspiring. Two of our Master's graduates leave this year to pursue doctorates in religion at first-rate universities: Hannah Gene Kessler Jones at the University of Chicago and Courtney Averkamp at the University of Virginia. We are privileged to have played a part in the education of these and other outstanding students, and look forward to welcoming a new cohort in the fall.

Valerie J. Hoffman
Head, Department of Religion

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DEPARTMENT NEWS

Graduate Students of Religion participate in outreach program

The public library of Mattoon IL reached out to the Department of Religion for a referral for an individual to provide an educational presentation on religious diversity to the community at the Mattoon library. After speaking with Professor Valerie Hoffman, library director Carl Walworth and volunteer Tana Willaredt met with two of our graduate students, Beau Ott and Heather Wetherholt, to develop a program which, ultimately, was presented in January 2018.

Following the program, the library administration sent a letter of appreciation to our department commending Beau and Heather's performance. "All aspects of their presentation were superior: length of program, quality of power point graphics, clarity of ideas, level of information, attire, speaking volume and pace, handling of audience participation during and after their session, and respect shown for and knowledge of world religions," the letter stated. At the library's request, Heather and Beau also provided an annotated list of books, movies and videos/shorter documentaries on the topics they discussed.

The letter further noted that "the presentation was very well received; participants gave rave reviews and requested additional sessions!" The Department of Religion thanks Beau and Heather for taking their scholarship beyond the campus.



Announcement of Beau Ott and Heather Wetherholt's presentation. Courtesy of Mattoon Public Library, Illinois.

REFLECTIONS



Alumna Ryann Craig reminisces ...

I sat in my Grandma's living room during Thanksgiving break of my freshmen year, tabbing the course catalogue for a clue as to what my major should be. I liked history, culture, art, politics, literature, and languages. But most of all, I wanted to understand what motivates people at their core: Are our fundamental convictions determined by holy texts and spiritual encounters, or are they influenced by cultural norms and social practices, or a combination of all that we experience? The reoccurring theme in most of the courses I was drawn to were that they fit the Religious Studies major requirements—and all other interests would complete my Liberal Arts degree from the University of Illinois.

To say that I loved my time at U of I would be an understatement. It shaped the trajectory of my life, providing the foundation for exploring all of the interests mentioned above, which would later become the buddings of my career path. I was particularly interested in how Christians and Muslims talk about the person of Jesus both historically and in contemporary interfaith interactions. I still have my notes from Dr. Hoffman's course on Muslims and Christians and have referenced her course materials on more than one occasion!

From Champaign-Urbana, I landed in Washington, DC, and spent time working for think tanks while pursuing a master's degree in Middle East politics from American University. Because of the variety of courses I'd taken at Illinois—from women in Muslim society and mystics in Islam to the history of the 18th–20th century Middle East—I was well-equipped to digest and evaluate current issues in the region, their relationship to religion, and our shifting foreign policies against the recent backdrop of 9/11.

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Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism

On Making Religious Progress

Scholars often describe Judaism as a religion that tolerates, even celebrates, arguing with authority. Unlike Christianity and Islam, it is said, Judaism endorses the tradition of protest as first expressed in the biblical stories of Abraham, Job, and Jeremiah. Surprisingly, however, no scholarly work has analyzed the pre-modern roots of this Jewish protest theology. Consequently, the tradition of arguing with God is often assumed in contemporary scholarship without consideration of its origins in the rabbinic age (70 CE – 800 CE). This neglect is due in part to the fragmentary nature of the tradition’s earliest expressions in the foundational texts of Judaism-- the works of Midrash and Talmud -- which were produced by rabbis in Hebrew and Aramaic more than fifteen hundred years ago. In my recently published book, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism*, I argue that this particular Jewish relationship to the divine is not simply the result of difficult recent historical circumstances-- as some have asserted-- but is rooted in the most canonical of Jewish works. I demonstrate that in ancient Judaism, the idea of debating God was itself a matter of debate. During the early rabbinic period (second and third century), the sages explicitly opposed challenging God, but in the later rabbinic period, from the fourth to the seventh centuries, a more complex attitude began to emerge, albeit subtly, in some rabbinic circles, as sages began to imagine biblical heroes criticizing God.

By elucidating these competing views about confronting God and exploring their theological assumptions, my study also makes a larger argument about ancient Jewish ethics and theology. Based on the evidence from the later rabbinic period, it challenges the scholarly claim of Jewish philosopher Moshe Halbertal and Talmudist David Weiss-Halivni that the rabbis conceived of God as a morally perfect being whose goodness therefore had to be defended even in the face of biblical accounts of unethical divine action. *Pious Irreverence* examines the ways in which the rabbis searched the words of the Torah for hidden meanings that could grant them the moral authority to express doubt about, and frustration with, the biblical God. Using biblical characters as their mouthpieces, they often challenged God’s behavior. And, remarkably, in a few instances, the sages even envisioned God conceding error, declaring to the protestor, “You have taught Me something, I will nullify My decree and accept your word.” (Numbers Rabbah 19:33)

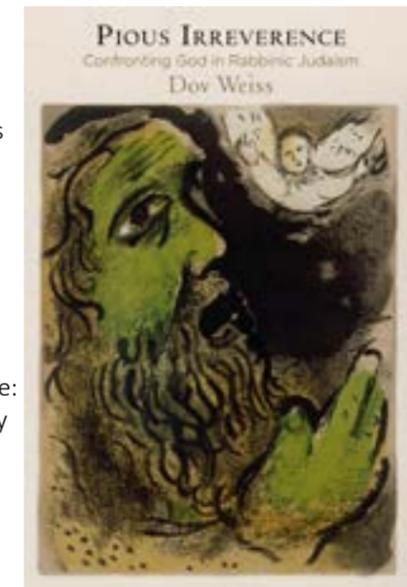
Moral confrontation with the divine in rabbinic theology has been largely overlooked not only because of the scattered and elusive nature of rabbinic texts, but because, methodologically, scholars-- even those trained in Rabbinic Hebrew -- have not considered exegetical narratives when reconstructing ancient Jewish thought. Yet, the rabbis often expressed their essential values and concerns in their stories rather than in their dogmatic pronouncements or maxims. Rabbinic notions of God as well as the rabbis’ understanding of the ideal human-divine relationship cannot be accurately captured in theological categories alone but must also be extracted from their narrative embellishment of biblical accounts.

Professor Weiss’s book, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism* was published by University of Pennsylvania Press in 2017. It received the National Jewish Book Award in the category of Scholarship.

The sages did not base these expanded narratives of theological protest upon their own human authority. Rather, they claimed that these bold scenes had long been hidden within the “divine” words of Torah. As good exegetes, they were merely discovering them. In this way, the rabbis cleverly justified an innovative and religiously risky project. From a scholarly perspective, however, such exegetic literature opened a space for Jewish interpreters of that period to express their personal moral discomfort with specific divine acts found in the Bible. The rabbis’ own claims notwithstanding, this boldness tells us less about the Bible than it does about the rabbis. For example, the late rabbinic response of imagining-- or “discovering”-- biblical characters such as Abraham or Moses critiquing God for administering corporate punishment illustrates how some rabbis grappled with God’s apparent disregard for innocent human life.

I further argue that the rabbinic acceptance of confrontation was, in part, fueled by a radical conception of God that was distinctive of the late rabbinic period. Assuming a human-like body and emotions, the rabbinic God is not an unapproachable being, but a “relational” figure who participates as a member in society, albeit a privileged one. Going beyond the limited anthropomorphism of the Bible, the rabbinic God suffers, laughs, cries, rides a horse, kisses people, studies Torah in a Yeshiva, and even spends His time matchmaking and sporting with Leviathan, the monster of the sea (Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 3b). Thus, I describe the rabbinic God as the “human divine” for two reasons: first, for these rabbis, God exhibits human characteristics; and second, because the divine is typically depicted only in relation to human beings. With this new understanding of the Jewish God, the rabbis were able to minimize the hierarchical divide between heaven and earth. As this informal image of God became more common, many rabbis did not consider protest to be disrespectful; indeed, they could now freely argue with God.

The humanization of God also provided the sages a formal framework to confront God. In some late rabbinic passages, God is described as being subject to the dictates of Jewish Law. Just as humanity must follow God’s commands, so too must God follow His own commands. With this theological assumption, found nowhere in Scripture, the rabbis acquired a standard by which God’s actions could be judged. Indeed, in a dozen or so rabbinic texts, God is taken to task for ignoring, if not violating, His own law. Finally, my book shows that a few sages cited in the rabbinic commentaries of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu (sixth century CE Palestine) took the theology of divine humanization to its extreme: They did not assume a morally perfect deity. While fundamentally good, God, like His human creations, does not always make the correct ethical choice. Hence, the act of protest is not a futile expression but one that could propel God to recognize His own ethical shortcomings.



Although I enjoyed my time in the policy world, the questions that sparked my interest back in my Grandma's living room weren't being addressed in any meaningful way. I wanted to use my knowledge for service, ultimately for the common good. This was an aspect of learning I gleaned from professors at Illinois, that all scholarship has meaning and purpose beyond the acquisition of information. As I went on to earn a seminary degree, I discovered two key facts about myself: (1) studying Arabic at Illinois paid off, as I understood the structure of Semitic languages; Hebrew came far easier than Greek and (2) my vocational calling was in the academy, not in ministry. My seminary professors encouraged the PhD route and I have been working towards that at the Catholic University of America (CUA) in the Department of Semitic and Egyptian Languages and Literatures.

Along the way, I've worked on several cultural heritage projects, including the Iraqi Jewish Archive (IJA) (www.ija.archives.gov), a collaboration between the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration and the Government of Iraq to preserve and digitize materials pertaining to the Iraqi Jewish community recovered during the Iraq War. I served as the Arabic cataloguer, recording everything from marriage certificates and school records to mundane receipts for goods. When our exhibit opened in 2013, I met some of the brave men and women who fled Iraq after 1948, when sentiments turned against the Jewish population there. They left with very little—and seeing their class rosters or copies of birth certificates meant everything to them.

I've had opportunities to work on a Qur'an manuscript project in Berlin; record stories of immigrants and recent refugees from Syriac-speaking Christian communities in the U.S. and Germany for an oral history initiative; serve as a copyeditor for the newly-launched *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* and the online *Mizan Journal for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations*; and return to my seminary as an instructor of a course on Christian Encounters with Islam.

I'm currently taking a break from teaching and working in academic support to spend the year as a Doctoral Fellow at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem. My dissertation has not strayed far from where I began: I am analyzing the use of the crucifixion account in the Qur'an by Arabic and Syriac Christian authors in their polemics with Muslims. Being at Tantur, surrounded by people of all faith traditions, has brought back many happy memories from my cohort; I'm forever grateful for the training and encouragement I received at Illinois.

Ryann Craig, Religion Alumna

Ryann Craig graduated in 2001. She wrote a senior thesis titled *Contemporary Islamic Christologies: Implications for the Emerging American Muslim Community*, for which she was awarded high distinction. She was also James Honors Scholar.

CERTIFICATE IN INTERFAITH STUDIES

The Certificate in Interfaith Studies is a new program for undergraduates in the Department of Religion. It was begun in Fall 2017 after official approval was granted by the University for the addition of this Certificate and for its associated new course, Theory and Practice of Interfaith Studies, proposed by Professor Robert McKim and Professor Bruce Rosenstock. The Certificate in Interfaith Studies requires the completion of the new course together with Prof. McKim's "Religion and Philosophy," and one other upper division course chosen by the student from a number of relevant offerings.

The Certificate in Interfaith Studies offers students throughout the University an opportunity to learn about how religious communities can cooperate to increase tolerance among their members for those of different faith traditions and to work together to create a more just and peaceful world. The Certificate in Interfaith Studies requires not only two courses chosen from a number of departmental

offerings, but also practical engagement in interfaith activities under the supervision of a faculty member. The Certificate provides students with an opportunity to not only learn about how religions can contribute to the improvement of social and environmental conditions in various parts of the world, it also allows students to take an active part in these efforts at a local level.

Because the Certificate has only gotten off the ground this academic year, we are still in the advertising phase. Our campus partners include student organizations like Faith in Place and also off-campus organizations such as the University YMCA and the Urbana Mennonite Church. We are looking forward to cooperating with these and other local community groups to provide the undergraduates with opportunities for learning about interfaith relations through hands-on practical engagement in ongoing community activities.

[Details provided by Bruce Rosenstock](#)

FROM THE PAGES OF OUR HISTORY

Compiled by
Dr. Wayne Pitard
Professor Emeritus

To understand the rise of the Program, one must look at the development of instruction in religion at Illinois prior to its establishment. Religion (specifically Protestant Christianity) played a significant role at the University from its founding in 1867. In fact, between 1868, the year the University opened its doors to students, and the fall of 1894, student attendance at daily morning chapel services was required. The talks at these services were intentionally non-denominational, but were certainly Christian in attitude. In spite of this rather clear violation of the separation of church and state (common in most state institutions of the day), the administration was careful not to allow academic courses that might have been considered religiously motivated into the curriculum. By the 1890s, concerns about the constitutional issue, led the University to drop courses on religion that were strictly historical in nature, such as an early History of Christianity course. Such topics were placed into more general courses on medieval cultures and history.

In the early twentieth century, several Christian denominations and the Hillel Foundation at the University began offering courses on religion for their students, in order to fill in a gap they perceived to be present. In 1919 a group of ten such foundations petitioned the University to allow them to offer some of their religion courses for university credit. The administration approved the petition the following year under the conditions that only incorporated foundations would be allowed to offer the courses, that the instructor must have a Ph.D. or equivalent, that the syllabi of the courses be approved by the University, that the foundations provide their own classrooms, and that freshmen should not be allowed to take the courses. The courses could be counted toward elective hours, but the grades would not be incorporated into the students' overall grade-point average. It seems fairly clear that the University did not pay much attention to the content of the courses that were offered by the foundations. Many of them were clearly sectarian in their outlook and sometimes were obviously geared toward proselytizing students.

Although this arrangement appears highly problematic today, it seems not to have bothered many people in the University administration or elsewhere until the 1960s. The University, which constantly faced criticism across the state for being a "godless" institution, could point to these classes and partially blunt that complaint. To those who felt uncomfortable about them, it could point out that numerous other state universities were using similar systems. But following the Supreme Court's ruling against prayer in public schools in 1963, serious discussions began to arise about whether the program was constitutional.

The Creation of the Program for Religious Studies
By the late 1960s, three primary schools of thought on the Foundation courses had developed at the University: (1) Several foundation leaders, including the Catholic Newman Center, the Missouri Synod Lutheran Foundation, and the Southern Baptist Student Center, defended the system as it stood. They argued that there were sufficient safeguards in the agreement to assure that there was no inappropriate establishment of religion at the University. They urged that the program continue. (2) The Wesley, McKinley and American Baptist Foundations on campus all believed that the foundation courses were no longer the appropriate way for religion to be taught at the University, and they began to support the idea of a Department of Religion within the University. They, along with a number of faculty members, argued that the University itself had an obligation to teach religion to its students in a fully academic manner. They insisted that religion was a critical part of human life and should be studied as an intellectual subject like any other. (3) There were also a number of professors who opposed both the foundation courses and the idea of the teaching of religion in an academic setting at all.

The University was relatively slow to make a decision about the matter, and finally the leaders of Wesley, McKinley and the American Baptist Foundations announced to the administrators that they would simply stop teaching courses, no matter what the University decided.

In early 1967 a committee was formed at the University to determine what should be done. John Bateman, chair of the Classics Department, was chosen to chair the committee, which included professors from several departments, including History and Philosophy. Members of the Philosophy Department generally opposed the formation of a Religion Department, since they felt that the Philosophy faculty already covered religion adequately, with courses on ancient and medieval philosophy, a course on World Religions, and a course on Paul Tillich, the noted contemporary theologian. However, Bateman, Winton Solberg of History and others argued that religion was much wider than what Philosophy covered (where were Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc?), and that the academic study of religion required people who had been directly trained in the field. They proposed that senior-level persons be hired in biblical studies who could become the foundation for a Department of Religion. The proposal was approved, and work began on finding the proposed senior-level faculty members. This proved more difficult than expected, so during the 1967-68 academic year, the committee decided instead to make appointments in Hebrew Bible and New Testament at the Assistant Professor level.

to be continued



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