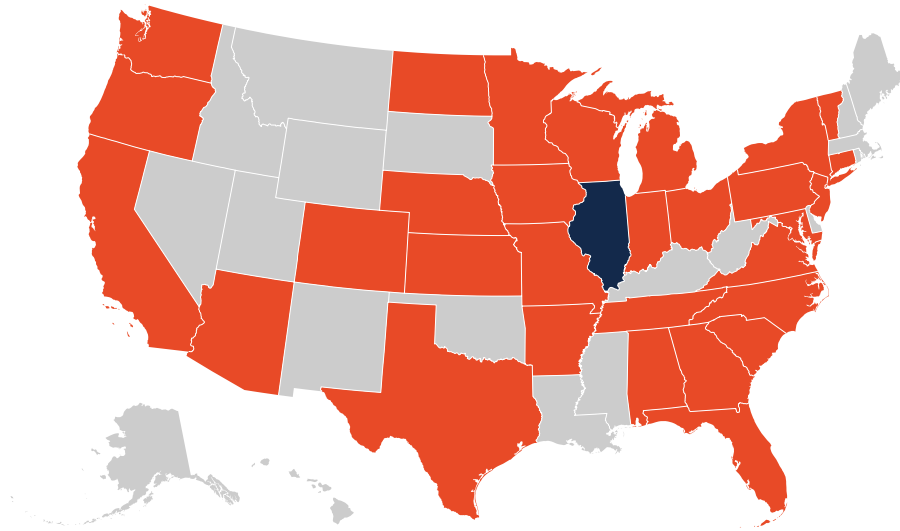


DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION



The publishing schedule for our bi-yearly newsletter has been disrupted this year, like most aspects of our campus life, by the COVID-19 crisis. This issue is a combined one, bringing in the reports for both Spring and Fall semesters of this eventful year. We anticipate our next issue to appear sometime during 2021, marking the Golden Jubilee for the Department of Religion. We have continued to host our Monday Coffee Hour from 12:30 to 1:30 PM virtually. Please write to us (see next page for contact information) if you would like to be added to our virtual list.

Among other things, 2020 has been the year of maps and data. Considering the fact that you have viewed more election maps and COVID-19 maps than you probably needed, we present a map of our own: the spread of Religion Department alumni over the various states. This map was created from the 2019 data by Rini B. Mehta, using d3.js (a Javascript library). You can browse the interactive format on observablehq.com and view the data, under the title “Where the UIUC Religion Alumni Are.”

2020-2021 THULIN SCHOLAR OF RELIGION AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl is one of the world’s leading authorities on Islamic law and Islam, and a prominent scholar in the field of human rights. He is the Omar and Azmeralda Alfi Distinguished Professor in Islamic Law at the UCLA School of Law. A prolific scholar and prominent public intellectual, Dr. Abou El Fadl is the author of 14 books (five forthcoming) and over 50 articles on various topics in Islam and Islamic law. He has lectured on and taught Islamic law throughout the United States and Europe in academic and non-academic environments for over twenty years. His work has been translated into numerous languages including Arabic, Persian, French, Norwegian, Dutch, Ethiopian, Russian, and Japanese, among others.

Dr. Abou El Fadl writes extensively on universal themes of humanity, morality, human rights, justice, and mercy, and is well known for his writings on beauty as a core moral value of Islam. He is one of the foremost critics of puritan and Wahhabi Islam. His most recent works focus on authority, human rights, democracy and beauty in Islam and Islamic law. His book, *The Great Theft*, was the first work to delineate the key differences between moderate and extremist Muslims, and was named one of the Top 100 Books of the Year by Canada’s *Globe and Mail*. Another book authored by him, *The Search for Beauty in Islam: A Conference of the Books*, is a landmark work in modern Muslim literature.

In addition to being a prolific and influential scholar, Dr. Abou El Fadl is also an Islamic jurist and scholar, having received 13 years of systematic instruction in Islamic jurisprudence, grammar and eloquence in Egypt and Kuwait. After law school, he clerked for Arizona Supreme Court Justice James Moeller and practiced immigration and investment law in the U.S. and the Middle East. He previously taught Islamic law at the University of Texas at Austin Law School, Yale Law School and Princeton University.

Look for an announcement of his talk on our website, religion.illinois.edu, our Facebook page, and through Twitter, where we are @ReligionUIUC.



Message from the department head

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EDITOR
Rini Bhattacharya Mehta

This has been a remarkable year.

We have all felt the disruptions, the anxiety, the isolation from the people and the practices that we love and that keep us oriented in the world. Our hearts have been lifted by the dedication of the first responders, nurses, doctors, and epidemiologists in their struggles to save and to heal and to prevent. Our hearts have been broken by systemic injustice, by violent racism, and by the presence of deceit and deflection where honesty and leadership ought to be. And now, after the completion of the fall semester of 2020, we are living the joys and the challenges of serving our students, continuing our research, and sustaining community with uncertainty layered on top of uncertainty. It has, indeed, been a remarkable year.

But as I look back across the last year, I see much for students, faculty, and friends of the Department of Religion to celebrate. We have three remarkable new faculty members: Alexia Williams, Leonard McKinnis, and Adam Newman. Professors Williams and McKinnis are specialists in the religious experiences of African Americans; Professor Newman studies the relationship between sacred narrative and sacred space in Hinduism. You can read more about each of them in these pages. We are thrilled to welcome them to the department. In other great news, Professor Rini Mehta, who is also appointed in Comparative and World Literatures, earned promotion to associate professor. Her expertise in Indian cinema and in the religious and literary dynamics of post-colonial India are on display in the classroom and in her elegant monograph, *Unruly Cinema: History, Politics, and Bollywood*. Finally, Department of Religion graduate students Asena Acar and Hannah Ellingson earned their M.A.s in 2020. Both chose to stay at the University of Illinois, Asena to pursue a Ph.D. in Sociology, and Hannah to work toward an M.A. in Library Science.

In addition to reporting on changes -- arrivals, departures, and promotions -- we need to reflect on what has stayed the same, and why. In the midst of disruptions that few could have imagined, department faculty and teaching assistants continue to teach with passion and professionalism, to reach our students with the courses that help them make sense of the world and define their place in it. The Department of Religion navigated the transition to remote instruction as well as we did for two reasons. First, we have been offering courses online since 2012 and have learned a great deal from our experiences. Second, and more fundamentally, we care deeply about our students, about the craft of teaching, and about creating educational experiences of the highest quality. This commitment defines us whether we meet our students in the classroom or over Zoom.

I do not know what the coming months will bring. The news continues to knock us off balance almost daily. But I do know that the Department of Religion will adapt and excel. These are challenging times, but the future is bright.

Warm wishes,

Jon

LETTER FROM ALUMNUS

After an initial residential teaching position at a small boarding school in the US, Joshua began teaching at India's oldest IB and international school in Tamil Nadu, South India. He writes:

I have been fortunate in my life to have studied with some of the very best teachers and in many of the finest institutions in the world. Of all of these, I am most proud of my time in the Department of Religion at the University of Illinois. During my two years in the Department's Master of Arts program, I received world class instruction in the academic study of religion, as well as personal mentorship and supervision as a teaching assistant. In my chosen profession of education, I have utilized the teaching, research and analytical skills I developed as a graduate student at Illinois each day in my classroom, and I am a better teacher, educator and human being because I came to the University of Illinois to study religion.

One cannot know who we are as human beings without studying the religious practices that shape and animate so much of our common life. As I tell my students here in India, to know people, you need to know their religion, and to understand our past and attempt a glimpse into our future, you need to study religion. I came to the Department of Religion at Illinois desiring to know why we believe in what we do, and the ways that our religious practices are shaping the world that we live in today. Religion is not static and bookishly boring, but a living phenomenon that continues to guide how we see ourselves as people, and all of creation.

I am a teacher of humanities in the International Baccalaureate (IB) in Tamil Nadu, India, and I can attest that any teaching career in the IB or at an international school anywhere is deficient without a strong background in the study of religion. Because religion influences so much of a person's life and the socio-political dynamics of communities, to study and know religion is an important pathway to countless professions where it is necessary to understand people...which describes most jobs in today's world.

I came to the University of Illinois intending upon a career in education. Receiving my Master of Arts in 2018 was a crucial step in beginning my professional path. But even if a person has no desire at all to work in education, studying religion will complement his or her career and also assist in something far greater: building understanding on oneself and of the world we live in.

Though I am still relatively new to my career in teaching and educational management, I know that the intellectual and social riches that I found in the Department of Religion will benefit me for a long time. Without coming to Illinois, there is no way that I would be teaching in South India in the IB. This is now my second year at my school, and I could not be happier. I hope to progress into educational management after teaching, and because I may never have the opportunity to write this again, I would like to thank my teachers and classmates at Illinois for supporting me in the wonderful career that I began as a Master of Arts student. Thank you all for the memories!

Written with much gratefulness, I am,
Joshua M. Reinke
Class of 2018
Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu, India



Joshua Reinke, Class of 2018.

IN OTHER NEWS

We are thrilled to announce the addition of three incredible new scholars of religion to our ranks. With so much turmoil in the world, these new members of our family help us to look at the future of the Department of Religion and to know it is bright. See page 7 for more details.

Thulin Lecture 2020-2021: The pandemic disrupted many plans that we had for spring semester events. For the first time in recent memory, we were unable to host our annual Thulin lecture. We are currently working to reschedule the event for spring 2021 in an online space. We will let you know when plans are finalized.

Thomas Emil Homerin, Professor of Religion and Chair of the Department of Religion and Classics at the University of Rochester, on December 26, 2020. See page 7 for Professor Valerie Hoffman's note on his untimely passing.

SPECIAL FEATURE

HOW RELIGION CAN ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE

Book by Robert McKim, professor emeritus, examines Pope's environmental encyclical.



Climate change is an issue of such concern that Pope Francis in 2015 published “Laudato Si’,” an environmental encyclical calling for protection of Earth and its environment, while also improving the plight of the poor.

A new book analyzes the encyclical and asks whether and how religion can take a leadership role in addressing environmental crises. “Laudato Si’ and the Environment” was edited by Robert McKim, a University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign professor emeritus of religion. McKim specializes in the philosophy of religion and applied ethics. The book features essays from scholars of different disciplines and cultural and religious perspectives, each responding to the encyclical and its implications for environmental issues.

“The religions exercise considerable influence in the lives of many people. They do not hesitate to try to provide guidance in many other areas of life. Why not in the case of this contemporary crisis?” McKim wrote.

In his essay, McKim wrote about Pope Francis’ opposition to what he called in his encyclical the “technocratic paradigm” – the relentless pursuit of profit and the idea that technology that permits ever greater mastery and manipulation of the world is acceptable as long as it is profitable.

“While it’s perfectly legitimate for us to make use of the world around us, (the pope) wants us to pay attention to the value of other animals, the value of ecosystems and the value of places that are precious and that should be approached by us with a sense of belonging in them and a wish to protect them. He’s opposing the idea of the world being up for grabs and exploited by us, with the only limits being what science and technology enable us to do,” McKim said. On the other hand, Pope Francis is not anti-technology. “I see the pope as being solidly on the side of all technologies that enable humans to live rich lives, as long as it’s not at the expense of ecosystems and the long-term flourishing of life in all its forms, and as long as we operate within limits that arise from the value of things.”

A major theme in the pope’s document is the tension between responding to the cry of the world’s poor and the cry of Earth, McKim said. “If we attend to the cry of the poor and the poor become much better off, their energy consumption and consumption in general increases,” which can be detrimental to the environment, he said. Two chapters in the book probe that dilemma.

Darrel Moellendorf, a professor of international political theory at Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany, who researches climate change and justice, argued in his essay that the poor should not have to sacrifice their right to sustainable development and to the increased energy consumption that this development will involve as we attempt to combat climate change, and that highly developed, industrialized countries should bear more of the burden by moving to a zero-carbon economy.

“It’s a call for the better-off to step up and make sure those at the bottom won’t be paying the price for tackling climate change,” McKim said.

Eric Freyfogle, a professor emeritus of property law at the University of Illinois College of Law who specializes in natural resources, land use, wildlife and environmental law, looked at the implications of “Laudato Si’” for private property ownership. His idea is that property ownership should be governed by rules designed to foster the common good. This requires promoting the welfare of all members of society and keeping land productive, resilient and biologically diverse.

An essay by Irish author Margaret Daly-Denton, whose research interests include Biblical interpretation, analyzes the pope's use of passages that Christians point to as evidence that the Scriptures are ecologically sensitive. She also wrote about the view that the Bible should be interpreted in light of current realities. She noted that in the 1960s, Christians in South America found that their fight for social justice led them to read the Book of Exodus in a new way. She suggested that something similar is happening "as Christians become more and more engaged in the care of our common home," and she summarized recent attempts to provide an ecological reading of the Bible.

The essays also cover Indigenous beliefs that reject a view of human domination of nature; treatment of animals; population; the scriptural sources of authority Pope Francis uses in the document; how members of the Catholic Church have responded to the encyclical; and the need to rethink human uniqueness.

Pope Francis' encyclical is a challenge to humanity, and it emphasizes individual action, McKim said.

"We urgently need to reduce the human impact on the Earth," he wrote in the book. "The task we confront is learning to live on this planet without ruining it."

IN MEMORIAM:

It is with great sadness that we note the untimely passing of one of our earliest alumni, Thomas Emil Homerin, Professor of Religion and Chair of the Department of Religion and Classics at the University of Rochester, on December 26, 2020. Professor Homerin, a native of Pekin, Illinois, received his BA in 1977 from what was then the Program in Religious Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, while simultaneously completing a second BA through the Individual Plans of Study program, writing a thesis on Indian and Iranian mysticism. He continued at Illinois with a Master's degree in Asian Studies, for which he wrote on contemporary Egyptian Sufism. He completed his Ph.D. with honors in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago.

Professor Homerin published four books on the thirteenth-century Egyptian Sufi poet 'Umar ibn al-Farid and three on a Syrian female mystic who died in 1517, in addition to an edited volume on Arabic literature in Mamluk domains and numerous journal articles, book chapters, encyclopedia articles, and book reviews. He has been the recipient of numerous grants and fellowships, including a Fulbright fellowship (Egypt, 1988-89) and a research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (Egypt, 2000). He also received an award for translation from the American Association of Teachers of Arabic and awards for teaching excellence from the University of Rochester and from the Golden Key International Honour Society.



Thomas Emil Homerin
(1955-2020)

SPOTLIGHT ON FACULTY RESEARCH

Professor Dov Weiss was named an associate of the Center for Advanced Study for the academic year 2020-2021. He will be using the leave that comes with this honor to work on his second book, *Rabbinic Inferno: Hell and Salvation in Classical Judaism*, which he describes below.

In their 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, the leading rabbis of American Reform Judaism declared that “we reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism, the belief ... [in] Gehenna (hell).” The authors of the Oxford textbook *Invitation to World Religions Today* (2016), studied by thousands of undergraduates across the country, seem to concur. They analyze the doctrines of hell within Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism, but leave out Judaism. Moreover, as a Google search of the words “Judaism” and “hell” reveal, there is a widespread assumption today – even among many Jews – that traditional Judaism rejects the existence of fiery torments in the afterlife. Arguing that these attitudes misrepresent the history of Judaism, my forthcoming book, *Rabbinic Inferno: Hell in Classical Judaism*, produces the first scholarly book on afterlife retribution in the rabbinic era (70-700 CE). Rather than absent in classical Jewish discourse, or occupying its periphery, hell (Gehinnom in Hebrew) played a central role in ancient Jewish literature and culture.

The modern academic study of ancient Judaism echoes the Pittsburgh Platform’s dismissal of hell, as scholars of rabbinic literature (Talmud and Midrash) have given relatively little attention to Gehinnom. We find no sustained treatment of hell in the works of the great twentieth-century scholars of rabbinic literature, such as Ephraim Urbach, Abraham Joshua Heschel, or Arthur Marmorstein. While the word “Gehinnom” can be found close to fifteen hundred times in rabbinic literature, a search of contemporary academic articles on the subject reveals very little by way of scholarship. Strikingly, two well-known scholars of ancient Judaism writing at the beginning of the twentieth-century, Claude Montefiore and Herbert Loewe, admit their lack of interest in hell when defending their cursory chapter on the afterlife. They maintain that the rabbis “thought about [*the afterlife*] in terms and conceptions most of which have become obsolete and remote for us today, and so their ideas are of small interest or profit.” [my emphasis]

Part of the problem is that Jewish studies scholars have not fully appreciated the essential functions of hell more generally within a religious society. Hell satisfies a culture’s fantasies for justice or revenge; it serves as a popular means of literary expression and entertainment (like a horror film today); and it projects people’s own fears of the present into the future. For their part, religious leaders use hell and heaven discourse as a way to mark a life of success or failure, or they dangle the prospect of hell – or the promise of eluding hell – as a weapon to control the behavior of the masses. Because hell is a crucial category within many Western cultures, we have an abundance of scholarship on hell within Christianity and Islam. And most famously, Virgil, Dante, and Milton place hell at the center of their literary universes.

To begin to fill this scholarly lacuna within the Jewish tradition, *Rabbinic Inferno* uses ancient Jewish discourse about Gehinnom – as it emerges in rabbinic biblical interpretation – to unearth the distinctive anxieties, values, aesthetics, fantasies, and hopes within classical Jewish culture. Without such analysis, our understanding of Judaism remains incomplete. My book will trace how Jewry’s once near-unanimous belief in Gehinnom lost popularity in the medieval period when Moses Maimonides (1138-1204, Egypt) rejected its actual existence. Its decline intensified in the modern period when eighteenth-century German Jewish enlighteners, notably Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786, Berlin), rejected it. These historical developments, together with the 1885 Reform rabbinic declaration in Pittsburgh, culminated in the modern Jewish rejection of Gehinnom.

NEW DEPARTMENT FACULTY

Leonard MCKINNIS works at the intersection of race and religion, Black theology, New Religious Movements, and ethnographic approaches to the study of religion. His current book project, *Blackness: Race, Religion, and Imagination in the Black Coptic Church*, is the result of a 10-year ethnographic study of the Black Coptic tradition. McKinnis's research expands our understanding of African American Religion, and demonstrates how Black identity is re-constructed via religious performance. He is committed to a more capacious understanding of the practice and performance of Black religion, one that moves beyond the dominant Protestant narrative of Black religious life and explores the diasporic contours and movements of the religious imagination of Black folk. With the support of the Louisville Institute Sabbatical Grant for Researchers, Leonard will spend the next two semesters working on a new book project, provisionally titled, *Blackontology: On Mysticism and the Possibility of Being in Black Theology*. This fall he is teaching a new course in the department, REL 134: Religion, Race, and Resistance.

Mckinnis earned a Master of Theological Studies in Religion and Culture from Harvard University, and a Ph.D. in Constructive Theology from Loyola University of Chicago. He will hold a 25% appointment in Religion and a 75% appointment in African American Studies.

Leonard relocated from St. Louis with his wife Tamitha, and their children Sofia, Olivia, Leonard III, and Gabriel.

AdAM NEWMAN concentrates on the religious traditions of South Asia, with a particular emphasis on Hinduism in north India. Broadly, he is interested in depictions of sacred landscapes in Sanskrit narratives, religious conceptions of the body, and the relationship between political power and religious authority in early South Asian history. Presently, his research focuses on representations of sacred space in Sanskrit Purāṇas and the intersections between religion, empire, and regional identity in Rajasthan. His current book project is a translation and study of the fifteenth-century *Ekalingamāhātmya*, a little-known Sanskrit Purāṇa from the Mewar region of Rajasthan. This fall he has been teaching REL 104: Asian Mythology and REL 401: Hinduism and Gender. In the spring he will offer REL 120: Intro to Hinduism, as well as the department's new theory and methods class, REL 432: Approaches to the Study of Religion.

Newman earned his Ph.D. in Religious Studies from the University of Virginia in 2019. While studying at UVA, he was awarded multiple fellowships from the American Institute of Indian Studies, and a Fulbright-Nehru grant for research in India.

AdAM is originally from San Diego, California. When he isn't writing or teaching, he is listening to comedy and true-crime podcasts, cooking, or reading Haruki Murakami, his favorite author.

ALEXIA WILLIAMS will be joining the faculty as an Assistant Professor of Religion and African American Studies. An interdisciplinary scholar of race and religion in the hemispheric Americas, Williams explores Black Catholicism over the long aesthetic and political arc of the twentieth century. Her book manuscript, *Black Revolutionary Saints: Roman Catholicism and the U.S. Racial Imagination*, examines the discourse and aesthetic work inspired by African American candidates for sainthood to understand how Roman Catholicism has operated as a site of political organizing and cultural production for Black Americans. Her work has been generously funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Louisville Institute.

Williams earned her Ph.D. in American Studies and African American Studies from Yale University, and her B.A. in English and Spanish from Spelman College. During the 2020-2021 academic year, she will be a post-doctoral fellow at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics.

Alexia is originally from Louisville, Kentucky. In her spare time, she enjoys doing yoga, cooking, and hiking with her dog.



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