2015 Fall Newsletter
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From the Director

If holiday greeting cards are quickly becoming a thing of the past, the same cannot be said for the annual newsletters of nonprofit organizations. No doubt your kitchen table, like mine, is piled with year-end newsletters from your favorite charities, your alma mater, your kids’ band program, your neighborhood association, etc.

I am delighted to add to that multitude with the year-end newsletter of the Religious Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. As you’ll see in the following pages, we have much to be delighted about. Our faculty and students and graduates study phenomena at the very center of human societies with a sophistication and a degree of substance that is attracting national and international attention. Our course offerings have never been more diverse and exciting, and our numbers of majors and certificate students are robust and rising. Increasingly, we are working to integrate our course offerings with STEM fields and pre-health careers, and are finding new colleagues and combinations across campus, some of which you will read about in this newsletter. But we also value our tried-and-true Religious Studies topics, our scholarly explorations of complex scriptural traditions, our examinations of religions in historical perspective, and our study of religion in relation to the Humanities and Social Sciences.

I hope you will enjoy this glimpse of our current activities and new initiatives. Remember that our public events are public—you are always welcome to come and share in the learning, and we value your participation. Keep in touch as well; we are always glad to know what our friends are up to, particularly as it relates to the study of religions. Best wishes for the year’s end and for the season, Tom DuBois, Director

Fondly Remembered and Usefully Put into Practice by Alumni

One day last spring, Tim Baerg was looking forward to some fairly uneventful sightseeing in the village of Langa in South Africa, while taking a break from his studies at the University of Capetown. But a chance encounter in the market with a man named Babel, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo,

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brought his classroom learning to life. Tim graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in Spring 2015 with a degree in biology and is attending medical school at the University of Michigan. He took his last term abroad, completing his Religious Studies Certificate with a combination of coursework with specialists in African religions and directed study with faculty back at UW. As he spoke with Babel, he learned about the medical issues facing the refugee community in South Africa, in particular a hostile environment and lack of resources.

“Stabbings are not at all uncommon in the townships,” Tim says. For people in Babel’s position, the Congolese refugee church is where they turn for medical and other help. Tim explains, “If a member of Babel’s church… gets stabbed, it’s the pastor they call… They can count on him.” Tim had gone to Capetown to learn more about the connections between health, social issues and religion in South Africa. His familiarity with religious language and a variety of religious expressions, which he developed in classes back in Wisconsin, helped him engage Babel and gain a deeper understanding of religion in the refugee community.

Tim’s experience is not unique. Since 2001, 339 graduates of UW-Madison have completed the Certificate Program in Religious Studies. Although they majored in other subjects, these alumni look back favorably on the program for several reasons. In a survey conducted as part of the recent review of the certificate program, 95% of the respondents answered 4 or 5 (on a 1-5 scale) when asked how satisfied they were with the certificate program. One respondent noted, “I remember almost nothing from my required science courses, but I fondly remember many things about my time in religious studies courses.” It was clear from responses that students enjoyed their Religious Studies work; many found it so fascinating that they’ve continued to build on their learning. Many cited their religion studies as significant in their personal development. A growing majority over time also emphasized the usefulness of their Religious Studies training for their vocations. One commented, “This certificate helped set me apart as a candidate who appreciates, understands, and celebrates diversity. I would not have gotten my current position without it.”

The review of the RS certificate is part of the UW’s required evaluation procedures for programs and departments. At the direction of the RS Executive Committee, the review was conducted by the Director and Associate Director assisted by certificate student Joseph DeGuire (author of this article). The ninety-six-page document included five types of data analysis and nine appendices. It included longitudinal profiles of certificate program students at 3 points in its fifteen-year history, a review of course syllabi and program teaching goals and a preliminary qualitative analysis of the effectiveness of our new requirements for the certificate program. These have only been in place for two years and so the review provided a critical opportunity for a base evaluation of the changes. However, the most compelling information came from the survey of our certificate alumni, over a quarter of whom responded.

Diversity and a greater appreciation for different worldviews was a consistent theme in the benefits that certificate alumni expressed in their survey responses. Some alumni said, “My religious studies classes helped me to frame discussions on religion in a respectful and genuinely curious way,” and “The program provided me [with] an improved critical sensibility and vocabulary, which has facilitated greater understanding in my interactions with people of various faith traditions.” Tim Baerg thinks that his work in religious studies will complement his medical training and allow him “to speak to the issues regarding immigrant and religious healthcare.” Physician-alumni confirmed Tim’s expectations. One commented:

My time spent studying religion at UW has been one of the most valuable experiences in shaping my professional views. As a physician, I deal with death, dying, and crises of faith on a daily basis. My time in the Religious Studies Department has helped shape my world view, and allows me to approach these issues with comfort and compassion. My time studying religion and how it shapes human interaction has been, in many ways, more valuable to me than any science or math class I took in college.

Medical professionals are not the only ones benefiting from their Religious Studies education, however. “I interact with a lot of different types of people in my career,” commented one lawyer, “and having a more

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diverse background when it comes to religion has helped me to identify with more people.” A social worker responded, “Having a broad understanding of how religion influences and impacts lives is essential in social work.”

In the last few years, the program has seen an explosion in the number of certificate students majoring in the social sciences. In 2005, 29% of graduates received a social science degree; in the class of 2015, more than half of the graduates (57%) had majored in the social sciences (Chart A). This trend reflects the efforts made by the program over the last few years to expand from a humanities-centric focus to an interdisciplinary approach that “challenges and enables students to see connections between their major(s) and their coursework for the RS certificate,” according to Program Director Thomas Dubois.

Among the trends that emerged in the review process was the changing pattern of certificate students’ undergraduate careers. Information such as this can help the program develop strategies for growth and meeting student interests and needs. Over the last ten years, a shift has occurred in when students begin taking Religious Studies courses and when they actually declare the certificate program. The time before a student takes their first Religious Studies class (Chart B in blue) has been shrinking over the last decade, so that in the class of 2015, 71% of students had taken a Religious Studies course during their first two semesters at UW-Madison. At the same time, the point at which students declare the Religious Studies certificate has not changed appreciably, indicating that students are spending a larger portion of their undergraduate careers “interested” in the Religious Studies Program but without any official commitment (Chart B, in red). This points to a significant area of potential growth for the certificate program. There are likely other interested students who are taking RS courses but who don’t declare as they develop other commitments. A “next step,” according to Associate Director Corrie Norman, will be to strategize about how to reach out better and earlier to students. “We are already implementing programming, advising strategies and curricular changes that we think will encourage more of these interested students to join us officially and do it earlier,” says Norman. “This benefits the program and also benefits the students as it gives them more time to build connections between their majors and careers goals and their studies in religion,” she continues.

The review confirmed that new strategies are on the right track for building and enhancing the program. The Religious Studies Program recently undertook a reworking of the certificate curriculum, streamlining the requirements while adding requirements at the beginning and end to give it more coherence. Undergraduates are required to take a gateway course and a capstone course, along with an additional 12 credits of Religious Studies coursework. Additionally, the learning outcome goals for the Religious Studies Program have been refined (see box above). “These aren’t really different from earlier goals but we think they are articulated more clearly and some aspects, such as comparative analysis and global/local religious literacy, are highlighted,” according to Dr. Norman.

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The revised requirements have allowed for a greater emphasis on all four learning goals in the two required courses, ensuring that all certificate students can learn the tools they need to successfully study religion and synthesize new information they receive beyond their undergraduate career. The gateway course, Religious Studies 101, is designed to ensure intercultural comparison of religious traditions and substantive engagement with disciplinary perspectives. The course does this through rotating thematic approaches such as “Religion as Relationship,” “Religion in Sickness and Health,” and a new iteration, “Religion and Sexuality” planned for Spring 2016. The capstone course, Religious Studies 600, which is also required for RS majors, is designed to add depth and nuance to the foundation established in 101 and the variety of elective courses students take in between.

“In RS 600, certificate students advance their skills for understanding religion while revisiting topics of interest from previous RS courses and/or related to their majors and career goals,” Dr. Norman explains. Together, these two courses function to provide a solid foundation for, as well as a critical reflection upon, students’ learning in the certificate and for future encounters with religious expression.

Although the new requirements do not mandate a diverse set of courses for each student, the review shows that they have actually encouraged students to explore a greater diversity of traditions over their careers at UW.

“Students who have taken the new gateway requirement, RS 100,” Dr. Norman reports, “have been more likely to take a range of courses and expose themselves to a more diverse range of cultural content and methodological approaches in their course choices.

“This was our hunch, but we are so excited to see it in analysis,” she continues; “I think this is demonstrating that we are enhancing our ability to help our students be effective citizens, particularly in this vitally important area of understanding the complex functions of religion globally and locally.” The certificate holds a significant place in the UW-Madison Religious Studies Program and in the University’s mission to fulfill the Wisconsin Idea. As Professor DuBois summarized at the conclusion of the review:

“We note that students are free at the UW to choose from a bounty of courses that cover religious factors in myriad ways without being in the RS Program. Students can learn writing and other essential skills through many academic venues. What the Religious Studies certificate program uniquely offers is an invitation to explore the breadth of religious phenomena in nuanced and comparative detail, to develop skills in analysis and interpretation specific to the field of Religious Studies but also applicable to other fields or endeavors, and to learn how to communicate and utilize such acquired expertise as individuals, professionals, and citizens.”

The Executive Committee would like thank our certificate alumni for your responsiveness and expressions of support during this review. It has been wonderful to hear from so many of you and we hope to continue to stay in touch. And don’t worry Alumni-Majors. The RS Major is scheduled for review in 2018. We look forward to being in touch with you all too.
Seeing Religion almost everywhere:
RS majors find connections to classroom learning and the value of participatory experience as they travel the world

RS students have been on the move this past year. From seniors working on their capstone projects to intrepid sophomores who have just joined the RS adventure at UW, they are taking what they’ve learned all over the world and finding out how much more it can help them learn when they get there.

Becca Wanta and Saba Moges were among a few lucky first and second-year UW students who were able to spend a month in Shanghai, China, last summer on a program directed by RS Affiliate, Professor Mark Muelenbeld. But Becca and Saba feel that they were even luckier than the other students who traveled with them. Why? One simple reason: They study religion.

“I had a completely different mindset because of my study of religion,” Becca, a double major in RS and Social Work, said. “There’s a purpose behind everything. If you’re not aware how enormous it is, how it extends through everything, you won’t really understand.”

This is Becca’s second time studying abroad. After her freshmen year, she participated in RS Affiliate Professor Anne Hansen’s service-learning course in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Her experience abroad and her study of religion enriched the China experience, but it didn’t necessarily make it easier.

Becca remembers feeling “unbalanced” in her roles as tourist and student of religion. When the group visited the Daoist temple called “Old City God,” watching priests meditating behind a fence as tourists photographed them was disconcerting. “I was appreciative I got to see it, but I wasn’t sure how to interpret (her role in) the situation.” This happened constantly throughout the trip.” While she was able to get much more out of the experience because she had a frame of reference, she also yearned to be able to understand the language and know more about the particular meditative practice and was concerned about being “disrespectful” of the practice as cell phone cameras flashed.

Saba, who hopes to combine RS and Nursing, had similar feelings about wanting to know more and be a respectful observer-participant because she knew something about the significance of religious rituals too. While participating in a ceremony paying respect to three heavenly gods in Maoshan, China, each student was asked to recite a ritual as demonstrated to them. This included receiving three incense sticks, walking to the altar and lighting incense before doing a series of bows, steps and hand gestures.

“As much as I enjoyed taking part in this ritual, one thing bothered me,” Saba said. “Students who went...continued on page 6
toward the end got the ritual wrong. If you’re going to do it, do it right or don’t do it at all, because showing you respect for the religion is important.”

Although both students reported frequently battling within themselves about understanding and participation and wishing they knew more in order to get more out of the experience, that did not discourage them. They realized that they were able to observe, analyze and make connections. One of Becca’s fondest memories includes an insight she had while visiting Buddhist temples in Hangzhou, accessed in progression through a steep ascent.

This reminded her of landscape paintings Daoists create as a meditation practice, which she had learned about in a class back at UW. The painter begins at the bottom left corner and paints a path they imagine traveling up from. For instance, Daoists will paint a village to travel through, then a forest, and as they continue painting upward, they leave “society” behind and rise into the mountains to be closer to the heavens.

“As I was continuously climbing upward at the Buddhist temples in Hangzhou, I couldn’t help but connect it to the Daoist paintings,” Becca said. She recalled a basic lesson in sacred space.

Saba experienced a level of religious diversity she hadn’t expected. Prior to the trip, she was unaware that Jews sought refuge from the Holocaust in China, as it was one of the few places one did not need a visa to enter. She was astounded to learn that more than 24,000 people came to Shanghai to begin their lives anew, while visiting the Jewish Refugee Museum in Shanghai. The exhibit on stories of refugees especially moved her. She experienced that paradox of witnessing and learning and yet knowing one can never fully fathom such an experience. “I can’t imagine,” she said, “but I’m happy to have gotten the chance to witness it with my own eyes.”

Aside from these lessons, both students expressed their gratitude for being immersed in a culture and religion heavily influenced by food. It was key to their study and unlike other students they realized how important (and tasty) it was to dive into vegetarian meals at Daoist temples and pondered the significance of tea in both lay and monastic practice.

“In order to appreciate this kind of experience, you have to believe in the value of religions” and look to an unfamiliar one, as Daoism was to most of the students, as “really real to those that follow it and practice it.”

Back in Madison now, Becca and Saba are excited about delving further into their religious studies degrees. For other tales of RS adventurers, see the photos and captions.

Ken Feuling found a form of spirituality she hadn’t considered before while working the fields of an organic farm in southern Germany last summer. She came to view the communal experience as a “sacred gathering” that culminated each day at the dining table. When she got back to Madison, she found a similar spirituality emerging among the organic farming community in Green County through another kind of fieldwork in her Lived Religion in Wisconsin course. She also learned about the historic importance of food in the civil rights movement and in African American communities today. She is here (4th from right) with other students and the Rev. Alex Gee at the Fountain of Life Church in south Madison.

After “falling in love” with Hinduism in classes at UW, Rashad Price chose to spend his last term in Varanasi, India, where he worked on his thesis on local devotion to the deity Hanuman.

Teja Vemuganti, who traveled to Tanzania with MEDLIFE and plans on a career in medicine, realized how much “studying religion has allowed me to look at the world in a different light” and helped her “listen” to the stories of the people she encountered in Masai villages. She also made a four-legged friend.
A thesis does not begin on the first day of a student's capstone course. Rather, the capstone process starts when a student begins studying religion. For all majors, planning early and building on a topic of interest (which often comes out of their first RS course) or career goal is encouraged by the RS Program. For students who do the honors-in-major option, the thesis has to begin at least a term before it is completed in a one-on-one research course with a chosen faculty advisor. But the research doesn't necessarily end when the final draft is turned in to the professor either. And as two recent graduates of the RS program are discovering, it may never end for them. (They're okay with that.)

**Superman, from Symposia to Seongnam**

Daniel Bliss, one of this year’s Religious Studies Undergraduate Achievement Award winners, gravitated toward courses on biblical literature and found canonicity particularly intriguing. But as a lifelong comic fan, he realized his impossible dream when he got the chance to study comics in a seminar taught by Dr. Jolyon Thomas, a 2015 Religious Studies Mellon Fellow. Another surprise came when Daniel discovered a link between comics and the New Testament studies he enjoyed, one that would become the basis of his thesis. His capstone discussed how the comic, Superman, lends itself to study using methodology employed by scholars of textual canon. He looked further than the texts though, also researching how “comic as canon” is a significant part of everyday life, or the lived religion, of many superhero fans. While hanging out for hours in a local comic shop and talking with fellow comic fans was enjoyable research, the project was tough-going at times. Researching the ritual readings of comic consumers, interviewing “the regulars” and being a participant/observer in regular weekly gatherings of comic discussions falls under “human subject research” and Daniel’s project had to undergo a thorough process of examination by the UW's Institutional Review Board before he could proceed.

“Because of the skills I learned in my religious studies classes, I [was] able to understand how people make meaning, how those processes play out in daily life, and most importantly, how to play the balance between respectful observer and humble participant,” Daniel said.

Halfway through his thesis writing process, Bliss decided to submit an application to participate in the Undergraduate Symposium, an opportunity for undergraduates to present their work while honing public speaking and presentation skills in a 10-minute presentation.

Daniel presented his research, “What Metropolis has to do with Jerusalem,” to an audience of 10 that, at first, expressed confusion as to why religion relates to Superman. However, those confused members showed great interest after his presentation, following up with questions and feedback.

“Overall, the experience was challenging, but a first step toward the final thesis presentation,” Bliss said.

In the new RS requirements, both majors and certificate students cap off their studies with oral presentations open to the entire program.

**Finding the link**

Chelsea Cornelius’s thesis also grew from passions developed in classes – but her passions reach across multiple academic disciplines. Chelsea, who was elected to the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa honor society, earned a BA in Religious Studies and Philosophy with emphases in gender and women’s studies and integrated liberal studies. Chelsea’s senior honors thesis, “Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Mapping Online Feminist-Religious Identity, Community, and Coalition Building,” earned her the Undergraduate Achievement Award in Religious Studies and honorable mention.

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for the Center of the Humanities Iwanter Prize. “I was especially challenged in writing the year-long honors thesis,” Chelsea said. “My attempts to weave together my research interests – contemporary Christian traditions, feminist theory, and rhetorical studies - proved both daunting and rewarding.”

However, her immersion in the disciplines of humanities equipped her for the task of occupying a “small but significant space” in the landscape of religious studies. Chelsea drew from all of her areas of study as well as explored areas she had not encountered to both integrate her research interests and add work to the growing body of scholarship on religious and political intersections in online communication.

“For most of the year working on the honors thesis, I felt like there were hundreds of moving pieces – all related and important – but not yet formed into a cohesive, streamlined paper,” Chelsea said.

It was during the last few months of the process that Chelsea decided, like Daniel, to create a visual presentation and present it at the Undergraduate Symposium, as well as the Undergraduate Honors Thesis Symposium.

“There’s nothing like condensing 50 pages of paper into a ten-slide PowerPoint to force a researcher to choose what is necessary, what is interesting, and what is most important,” she said. “Creating the presentation helped me to craft my writing better.”

Chelsea said presenting the research multiple times on campus was one of her favorite parts of the work she did for the project. Though her final draft was not complete at the time of her presentation, the experience of presenting and responding to questions shaped her work in ways she did not expect, and greatly influenced how she edited the paper. “I see now how influential simplifying complex work, and then presenting it, is for a thoughtfully and carefully written final draft,” Chelsea said.

**Determined futures**

Daniel is currently teaching English in Korea. But his study of comics and religion have far from ceased. He continues to communicate with several scholars and writers who study comics and religion via email and is submitting a paper on his work to a scholarly publication. And Korea is offering new avenues for research. In his first month there, he observed a multitude of super hero images but a lack of comic book shops. Then he began to notice the popularity of “Webtoons,” a type of digital comic Koreans of all generations swipe through on their phones. A new project may be in the works.

“Although crossing into a new culture and a new place is a struggle, there are few things more valuable than the skills I learned in my religious studies classes,” for making the most of this new experience, Bliss said.

As for Chelsea, she is spending the next year as the Ministry Associate at Pres House, the Presbyterian ministry on campus. She will begin a Master of Divinity degree program in the fall of 2016. As she tries to discern what her future work may look like, Chelsea draws on her thesis writing experience as a model for envisioning how to bring all her passions together in a vocation. She said she thrives in the intersections between religious, social and academic institutions, in the overlap of political, social, cultural identities and in the advocacy for and celebration of voice. As she put it in her current work description, “I have a passion for integrating faith, community, and social justice, and seek to create space and dialogue for the Pres House community to engage big questions about what it looks like to be people of faith who uphold values of justice and peace.”

Chelsea and Daniel, we look forward to hearing about where your passions lead you and what you discover next.
Welcome Back, Professor Dunne!

John D. Dunne has already spent five years at UW-Madison, serving as Visiting and then Assistant Professor in Languages and Cultures of Asia from 1999-2005. In January 2016, he returns to UW in both familiar and brand new roles that present exciting possibilities for Religious Studies. He will hold the Distinguished Chair in Contemplative Humanities, a newly endowed position created through the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds, where he will continue his collaboration with its head, Professor Richard Davidson, the William James and Vilas Research Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry. CIHM is especially renowned for its research on meditation and mindfulness. Dunne will also return to Letters and Sciences, in a co-appointment in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literature. The funding for this new co-appointment comes from donors to CIHM and the Morgridge Match for new and enhanced professorships.

During those years away from UW, Professor Dunne was Associate Professor in the Department of Religion and the Graduate Division of Religion at Emory University, where he co-founded the Collaborative for Contemplative Studies, working with an interdisciplinary group of scholars and students from fields ranging from religion and psychology to nursing and global health. His work focuses on Buddhist philosophy and contemplative practice, especially in dialog with Cognitive Science. His publications range from technical works on Buddhist epistemology to broader works on the nature of Buddhist contemplative practices such as Mindfulness.

While Professor Dunne will be diving into a busy schedule, shaping the new position with CIHM and participating in the creation of a new program in Asian Studies, Religious Studies welcomes this returning faculty affiliate who will be teaching religion courses right off the bat, offering Buddhist Thought (RS 466) and a new seminar, RS 400: Mindfulness in Theory and Practice. For more on Professor Dunne and his work, see http://www.johnddunne.net/

Welcome to Our New Faculty Affiliates in 2014-15:

Michael Bell (Sociology, CALS, Nelson Institute)  Mark Landen (German)
Giuliana Chamedes (History)                      Jennifer Pruilit (Art History)
Lori DiPrete Brown (Global Health Institute)     Christine Whelan (School of Human Ecology)

The Wisconsin Idea Alive in WI and Abroad: RS Alumni Updates

Major Alumni

Since graduation in 2011, Elizabeth Hagermoser is working on a doctoral degree in Educational Psychology at UW. For the 2015-2106 academic year she is doing an internship at the Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health in Omaha, Nebraska while working on her dissertation exploring the use of video models in a web-based training on an intervention for anxiety in children age 7 to 13.

Rosemary Othmer-Pesko completed a dual degree program at Boston College, earning a MA in Theology and Pastoral Ministry and Masters of Social Work. After completing a post-graduate clinical fellowship in hospital chaplaincy in northern California, she is a chaplain for Stanford Healthcare.

For the past two years, Tom Jensen has been a Teaching Fellow in the Alliance for Catholic Education through the University of Notre Dame. While in the program he taught junior high religion and social studies at St. Basil Parish School in Vallejo, CA. Tom says, “A very large part of the curriculum I taught was content I had studied in UW’s Religious Studies...continued on page 10
program (Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, and the history of Christianity). He graduated this July with a Masters of Education from UND, and is staying on as a teacher at St. Basil.

Jackson Scott, co-editor of last year’s newsletter, recently started his second term with a Dane County AmeriCorps program called Partners for After School Success (PASS) where he does literacy tutoring and leads an after school recreation program for middle schoolers.

Rachel Krause, after years in managing, marketing, and media is on a mission exploring faith and life in eleven countries in eleven months.

Certificate Alumni

Krissy Wick just completed her first year as the Youth Services Supervisor for the Madison Public Library. She is currently serving on the Wisconsin Children’s Book Award Committee through the Wisconsin Library Association as well as the Managing Children’s Services Committee through the American Library Association’s Library Services to Children Division. BRAVA Magazine named her a 2015 Woman to Watch.

Jacob Riyeff graduated with his PhD in English language and literature from the University of Notre Dame in May 2015. He studies medieval literature with an emphasis on vernacular poetry and religious culture. He will be Visiting Assistant Professor in the English Department at Marquette University this year.

Sarah Bessette is currently attending Midwestern University in Downers Grove, IL for physician assistant education.

For Andrew O’Connor interest in the academic study of Islam “stuck” after UW. Having earned a MA in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Chicago, he is pursuing a PhD from the University of Notre Dame, focusing on the study of the Quran, early Islam, and Christian-Muslim relations.

Having completed his MD at the University of Alabama School of Medicine, Dan Partain is back in the Midwest as a PGY-2 Resident Physician in Internal Medicine at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota.

Matthew Ledin lives in western Washington and pursing graduate studies in social work at University of Washington Tacoma.

Tanner Gregory, who completed the certificate in 2012, is a Police Officer.

After serving in the Peace Core in Tanzania, Valerie Kurka earned an M.Ed. in International Education at The University of Massachusetts-Amherst and has continued to serve multicultural populations. She currently works at an agency that serves low-income families in Milwaukee County.

Best Wishes and Keep in Touch!
Congratulations to 2014-15 Graduates

Majors

Daniel Bliss (Honors in Major)
Chelsea Cornelius (Honors in Major, Phi Beta Kappa)
Carly Ann Bruan Olivia Greise
Leah Hans Max Lukach
Matt Mcelroy Rashad Price
Phil Sorenson Kurt Wieters
Zach Jester

Certificates

Kaitlin Alm Tim Baerg
Rebecca Brower Jess Colton
Aaron Drews Elizabeth Fried
Emily Gray Madelynn Kelly
Anna Louise Marsicek Molly Mesner
Juila Nider Arin Olson
Joseph Orner Juliana Elizabeth Robles
Nathan Roy Michael Staskunas
Steven Suh Emily Tarver
Tyler Wiese

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RS students in Spring Term 2016 have the opportunity to delve into the dark side through a perennial myth and find out how people shop for happiness. They can explore religion through the lenses of sexuality and embodiment, the environment, and contemplative ideas and practices. Along with tried and true courses such as Dante, Food in Rabbinic Judaism and Anthropology of Religion, several new courses make up the wealth of offerings for the coming Spring term.

Professor Ernesto Livorni’s course, Myth: The First Murder, invites students to “consider society as a constant attempt at repairing the evil it was built upon – to continuously vaccinate itself to reflect what went wrong, and what we need to do to have the best possible society” through exploration of the Cain and Abel myth from the Book of Genesis. Livorni expects that students may be surprised by the number of treatments of this story of fratricide and its curious repercussions. Literary and film retellings, from Byron to Baudelaire and the iconic James Dean portrayal in East of Eden among others, will prod students to ponder the “dark” as well as the “luminous” sides of sacred story. Livorni is also interested in connections to moral, judicial and legal considerations evoked by themes in the myth such as Cain’s “untouchability.” This comparative literature course on an important religious myth will also explore how human rights organizations such as the anti-death penalty group Hands Off Cain interpret it.

People don’t just make meaning; they shop for it. In her course called Consuming Happiness, Public sociologist Christine Whelan examines how consumers engage in consumption in pursuit of happiness and the emergence of an “experience economy” that offers many paths to well-being, literally at a price. Religion is a significant factor in this development, according to Whelan, who directs the Relationships, Finance, and Life Fulfillment Initiative in the School of Human Ecology. Texts for the course include guidebooks and other religious resources proffering material and spiritual means to career and relationship success, losing weight, and other “happiness factors” in American culture.

Professor Anna Gade’s course, Religion and the Environment, explores how religious persons and communities confront global environmental questions and challenges today. Drawing on case studies from culturally and religiously plural societies and diverse varieties of Christianity, Islam, Hindu and Buddhist systems, the course is designed to give an overview of some approaches in the environmental humanities related to philosophy, history, sociology and anthropology, and ethics. It asks the timely question, “What are sources on which members of religious communities draw in order to understand and address environmental change?”

“What happens when you wear your religion on your forehead?” That’s one of the questions our Mellon Fellow, Dr. Elaine Fisher, will entertain in her seminar, Ritual and the Body in South Asian Religions. Pointing out that “For the majority of practitioners of South Asian traditions, religion is not something you believe but something you enact,” Dr. Fisher seeks to help students understand religion as something one “does” as she focuses on embodiment and ritual practices in South Asia, including postural yoga and tantric practice. The course also will explore topics such as body images and the importance of ritual practice for community.

RS 101, Religion in Global Perspective, offers faculty the chance to provide a “gateway” into some common elements of religious studies through research themes of particular interest to them. In Professor Jordan Rosenblum’s case, his choice of theme is bound to be an appealing one to many students as well. His new version of RS 101 will focus on Religion and Sexuality, starting with the religions of the Ancient Mediterranean (Greeks, Romans,
Religious Studies say farewell to staff and faculty who have been integral to the Program over many years

Religious Studies plummeted into a primordial abyss last Fall when Susan Fenton, our beloved program manager, was lured away by the School of Library and Information Sciences to focus on graduate student services. Students, faculty and staff who crossed the RS threshold the past seven years know how lucky those SLIS students are. We have nothing but admiration, respect, and an enormous sense of loss when we think of Susan, along with our best wishes to her in this new position. When we asked if she would like to say anything to our affiliates, friends and alums, typical of Susan, she was prompt, clear, gracious, upbeat, and caring:

“I became the program administrator for Religious Studies in September 2007 on a 50 percent basis, and when I left in November 2014, the position had become full-time, which is indicative of the increase in the number of majors, certificate students, outreach activities and collaborations that happened in those seven years. The program is engaged with current scholarship and thought, committed to serving its students as individuals, and motivated to be involved in the community — a real embodiment of the Wisconsin Idea! I am so grateful for the faculty, staff and students I worked with in my years with RS. Though I’m “down the hill” now (in Helen C. White Hall), I’ll always consider myself part of Religious Studies, and would love to keep in touch with students and faculty! “

Indicative of the scope and amount of work Susan had in RS, her former responsibilities are being divided among at least two staff members. The search for the RS program manager position to handle communication and administrative duties has just begun while finance and timetable (courses scheduling) is handled by Diane Bollant in Comparative Literature Folklore Studies.

With great appreciation for his unparalleled contributions to its mission and students The Religious Studies Program wishes Professor Ronald Troxel the very best on his upcoming retirement.

Religious Studies remains a thriving program due in large part to Ron’s past leadership and the impression of the Program that his work with students established. Many comments by alumni in the recent certificate program review reminded us of what we were already well aware: Ron Troxel’s enormous gifts as a teacher, scholar, and mentor. “Please give my thanks to Ron Troxel,“ was a profoundly simple, clearly heartfelt and repeated refrain in our certificate alumni survey. We see it every year in alumni communications. So, Ron, simply and with heartfelt and profound appreciation,“Thanks!”
Events: Focus on Religion and Race

During Spring Term 2016, The Religious Studies Program is planning a series of events focused on religion and race in global and local contexts. Details on the series are forthcoming but for now...

SAVE THE DATE: Thursday, March 3, 7p.m.
The Deluca Forum, Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery
Lecture by Vincent Wimbush, 2015-16 National Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar
Sponsored by The Religious Studies Program, Phi Beta Kappa and the Department of Afro-American Studies
Free and open to the public

Vincent Wimbush is an internationally recognized scholar of religion and academic leader and founding director of the Institute for Signifying Scriptures, an organization representing a new field of research in discourse and power. His current research interests focus on theorizing “scriptures” in terms of cultural practices, their politics and consequences. He is the author or editor of more than 12 books, including White Men’s Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery and African Americans and the Bible. Past president of the Society of Biblical Literature, he has been on faculty at Claremont Graduate University, Union Seminary, and Columbia University. Beside the lecture at 7pm, Professor Wimbush will be speaking to classes and having conversations in the community as well as with faculty and students on campus.

Details about this event and the Religion and Race series will be available on the Religious Studies Program website: http://religiousstudies.lss.wisc.edu/ or by emailing RS at religiousstudies@letsci.wisc.edu in early January.

RS News Co-Editors

RS News was edited by current undergraduates Morgan Haefner and Joey DeGuire

Morgan Haefner is a fourth-year undergraduate studying journalism and religious studies, with a certificate in African studies. Morgan is a statewide communications assistant for Wisconsin Area Health Education Centers (AHEC). Wisconsin AHEC improves access to quality health care by developing community-based health professions training programs and enhancing health education resources across the state. Morgan is also employed as a Writing Fellow through the UW-Madison Writing Center. When she isn’t writing, she is tutoring Arabic or sitting in a dusty bookstore.

Joey DeGuire, co-editor, is an RS certificate student who will graduate in fall 2015. He is currently teaching calculus at a local high school. Joey is discerning spiritual vocation in the Domican Order. Along with distinguishing himself as a religion and math whiz, Joey has earned the eternal gratitude of Drs. Norman and Dubois for his ability to do nifty charts, good humor and consistently excellent assistance with the Certificate Program Review and other tasks last summer.

Alumni support is vitally important to our program. Through generous donations, the program continues to grow as a vibrant intellectual presence on campus.

For more information or to help support Religious Studies at UW Madison, please see the University of Wisconsin Foundation website at www.myuwconnect.org and designate your gift to “Religious Studies.”

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