New Religious Studies Director: Prof. Jordan Rosenblum

The Faculty Director of Religious Studies is appointed annually by the Dean of the College on recommendation of the RS Executive Committee (comprised of elected tenured faculty and the Associate Director). We are grateful to Professor Thomas Dubois, who served as director in recent years. This year, Jordan Rosenblum is taking on the task of Director. He is the Belzer Professor of Classical Judaism. Professor Rosenblum holds a BA in Religion from Columbia University (2001); a BA in Ancient Judaism from The Jewish Theological Seminary (2001); an MA in Jewish Studies from Emory University (2003); and an MA (2005) and PhD (2008) in Religious Studies from Brown University.

Professor Rosenblum came to the study of religion as many students do: through a course he took to meet a college requirement. Although Professor Rosenblum was not particularly interested in the academic study of religion when he enrolled at Columbia, his plan changed with his first course in religious studies, and subsequent courses taught by “great professors in medieval Jewish studies and medieval Christianity.” As his interests developed, they turned toward ancient Judaism, particularly, rabbinic literature, law, and culture. While searching in the library for a paper topic during his junior year of college, he discovered some scholarship on food in ancient Judaism. That paper sparked an interest that now forms the core of his professional research. In particular, he became most interested in how rabbinic food regulations enact and maintain distinct identities. This became the subject of his graduate research and first book, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge University Press, 2010; paperback, 2014). His new book, *The Jewish Dietary Laws in the Ancient World* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), explores ancient Jewish, Christian, Greek, and Roman discourse on kosher regulations (kashrut) from biblical texts through rabbinic literature of the 7th century. For Professor Rosenblum, studying food and law is a great way to make connections between many aspects of religion and culture. This is reflected in his teaching as well as his research.

Professor Rosenblum “fell in love with teaching” during his first semester of graduate school, and began teaching at UW-Madison in 2008. While he teaches courses in his area of research, such as “Introduction to Judaism” and “Food in Rabbinic Literature,” he also loves to engage students more broadly in religious studies. Working on food and rabbinics has led him to some fascinating observations on how food is used to encode gender, which has generated both new research and a new RS course on gender and sexuality. He is also leading the capstone seminar for senior majors this spring. In addition, Professor Rosenblum is developing a new course in partnership with Jewish and Legal Studies on Judaism, law, business, and ethics for fall 2017. During his tenure as the Director of the Religious Studies Program, Professor Rosenblum “intends to build on what Associate Director Dr. Norman has accomplished.” This includes, “continued growth of the Religious Studies Program, increasing student numbers in RS 101 and other courses,
more RS major and certificate students and increased faculty engagement in RS.” He spearheading the rejuvenation of the Religious Studies Ph.D. Minor, which will help graduate students in other fields develop research and teaching expertise in religious studies. He also hopes to “increase the academic inquiry about religion” in the broader UW-Madison community. Recently, he, along with Professor Ridgely (see article) and Dr. Norman, participated in a community forum on “Religion and the Wisconsin Idea” associated with Sociology Professor Chad Goldberg’s “Wisconsin Idea” class. While Professor Rosenblum has been a fixture in RS for several years, we warmly welcome him to his new leadership role as the Director of the Religious Studies Program.

**Religious Studies Program Now Home to Professor of American Religions**

As an interdisciplinary program, Religious Studies at UW benefits from the collaboration of other units and the cooperation of faculty from a range of fields across campus. It has never, however, had its own professoriate dedicated full-time to Religious Studies. This changed last March with the tenure-track appointment of Susan Bales Ridgely as Visiting Associate Professor. Professor Ridgely joins UW-Madison from UW-Oshkosh, where she taught in the Religious Studies Program for ten years. She is a specialist in religion in the United States, pioneering ethnographic research with, rather than simply about, children. After growing up in outskirts of Philadelphia, Professor Ridgely did her undergraduate work at Princeton University. Her doctorate is from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has also done post-doctoral work at Carleton College in Minnesota and at Princeton and taught at Wake Forest University, in addition to UWO.

Like some of our current RS students, Professor Ridgely majored in Religious Studies while fulfilling pre-med requirements, intending to pursue a medical career after Princeton. However, the more courses she took, the more invested she became in RS, because the subject matter was deeply interesting and because she enjoyed the small class size and ability to converse easily with professors. Eventually, a scheduling conflict forced a decision. She had to make a choice between taking an organic chemistry class necessary for her pre-med track or a course with the renowned philosopher of religion and scholar of African American studies, Cornel West. She made her choice and has not looked back. Professor Ridgely still enjoys “the freedom and variety of research methods” that RS offers; although she found a favorite form of research in ethnography. She credits this in part to the inspiration of her thesis advisor, American Religious Historian, Leigh Schmidt, who is still a mentor for her. Even before her graduate studies at UNC began, she knew she wanted to continue her training in ethnography and that she wanted to focus on children’s perspectives on religion. At UNC, she learned that no ethnographic work had been done with children in Religious Studies (as in psychology and education). In her dissertation research, Professor Ridgely worked with Catholic children preparing for first communion. Attending mass, Sunday school, and first communion practice with them for over a year, she found that the children were very interested in the ritual aspects of their religion. She also found that the children wanted to be taken seriously as they made sense of what they were experiencing. “They wanted to be accepted and respected as part of the faith community,” she said, “rather than as ‘just little kids.””

Subsequently, Professor Ridgely would write a book based in that research, *When I Was a Child: Children’s Interpretations of First Communion* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005). It was followed by a second edited volume, *The Study of Children in Religions: A Methods Handbook* (New York University Press, 2011). Her most recent book, *Practicing What the Doctor Preached: At Home with Focus on the Family* (Oxford 2016), draws on interviews with parents and children to explore how actual families put the conservative Christian childrearing principles of James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, into practice. Examining their changing needs and changes in Focus over the organization’s first thirty years, the book reveals a surprising flexibility in the way “Focus Families” actually use Dobson’s materials. In Fall term, Professor Ridgely taught a special topics course, “Religion and the Election” in which students observed and analyzed the use and impact of religion in U.S. politics and popular culture as election events unfolded. “We have spent some time this week looking at religion, race, and politics,” she said when asked to give examples of class sessions. “We read Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and listened to Cory Booker’s speech from the DNC comparing their use of American history, African American heritage, and the theme of Jesus’ love to conjure an image of the Beloved Community. Then we read James Baldwin’s exploration of African American life in the
Urban North and juxtaposed this description with the concerns currently being expressed in the Black Lives Matter movement. Next we turned to examine how the rise of identity politics and new immigration policies of the 1960s are championed by some as the fulfillment of America’s chosen mission, while others view these as the splintering of common American religious values. Americans of the former mindset became progressives, while many of the latter understanding joined the religious right.” Honors students did research projects in the course, including one focusing on the 50th anniversary of “Foodarama,” a luncheon/bake sale, community-building civic celebration organized for every Election Day by the women of Madison’s Temple Beth-El (see the photo on page 6 and the RS Facebook page for more). Professor Ridgely is also teaching the RS junior capstone course this year and we look forward to new courses she’s bringing to our program soon. These include: "African American Religions,” "Religion and American Culture,” "Christianity and the Almighty Dollar,” and "Sects and Cults”.

We caught up with Director of Religious Studies, Professor Rosenblum, to hear his thoughts on Professor Ridgely joining UW-Madison. “The Religious Studies Program is very fortunate to have a scholar of Prof. Ridgely’s caliber. Not only is her scholarship revolutionary in the field, but her research directly connects to important – and hot-button – issues in the United States today. From religion and the election, to the role that religious beliefs play in contemporary parenting strategies, Prof. Ridgely has much to offer our students, colleagues, and community. As the Religious Studies Program continues to serve as the center of the academic study of religion at UW-Madison, it is exciting to know that Prof. Ridge will be helping us to educate in the classroom and beyond, in the spirit of the Wisconsin Idea.”

Welcome Our New Religious Studies Program Faculty Affiliates

Religious Studies Faculty Affiliates have academic homes in other departments but share an interest in and expertise in religious studies. Their courses are often cross-listed between RS and their departments and also some teach courses specifically for RS. We are grateful for this interdisciplinary collaboration and welcome our newest affiliates.

Anthony Cerulli, Associate Professor of Asian Languages and Cultures, is new to UW this year and specializes in religions of South Asia. His current research projects are an edited volume on the gift in India, an English translation of a Sanskrit allegory, and a monograph exploring modern education in the classical Indian medical tradition, Ayurveda. His books include Somatic Lessons: Narrating Patiethood and Illness in Indian Medical Literature (2012) and Medical Texts and Manuscripts in Indian Cultural History (2013). This academic year, he is teaching Hinduism, Buddhism and Religion in South Asia.

Alice Mandell, Assistant Professor of Classical Hebrew Language and Biblical Literature and is also new to the UW. Her book, Cuneiform Culture and the Ancestors of Hebrew, is planned for Routledge’s The Ancient World series. She is also co-authoring a book examining the materiality of ritual and religious spaces in ancient Israel and Judah, Reconstructing Israelite and Judean Religions: Religion as Performance and Materiality (2017). She taught a course on this topic in fall 2016.

Jeffrey Beneker, Chair and Associate Professor of Classics is the author of The Passionate Statesman: Eros and Politics in Plutarch’s Lives (Oxford University Press 2012) and a recently completed a co-authored edition of the progymnasmata of Nikephoros Basilakes for the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Harvard University Press 2016). He is currently writing a biography of Pompey the Great, and co-editing a book on the discourse of marriage in the Greek and Latin literature of the Roman Empire (under contract with University of Wisconsin Press). This spring, he is teaching Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean.

Christopher Livanos, Associate Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature and Folklore Studies, is currently researching the mutual patterns of influence between Indian Hatha Yoga and Western physical culture. With the National Alliance on Mental Illness, he develops projects using yoga to improve mental health and well-being. He also contributes to the magazine Brahmaloka or Bust.
In January 2016, Bernadette Witzack became the Religious Studies Program Manager. She is in the RS Office three days a week, handling communications and office management. She sends out a regular e-news to current students and organizes our affiliate and student events. When you email us at religiousstudies@letsci.wisc.edu the courteous and efficient response you’ll receive will be from Bernadette. Bernadette holds a BA in Studio Art from Beloit College, a MA in Public Service from Marquette University, and an MFA in Fine Art from the University of Michigan. She is also currently pursuing a degree in Graphic Design and Web Design and was recently awarded a grant for University Staff to continue to build expertise in these areas. Luckily for RS, she is eager to put all these talents and skills to work in creating a media presence for RS and keeping up with our students, alumnæ and friends. She’s quickly building a presence for RS on Facebook where you’ll find posts about RS’ers from all over the world as well as right here in Madison.

Did you know that RS students are:
- Circumambulating the Dali Lama’s residence in India?
- Examining the papers of William James, a pioneer of Religious Studies, in the Harvard Archives?
- Speaking about internship experiences with the Wisconsin Medical Society in RS 101?
- Assisting a professor with research on Muslim communities?

And so much more we want to tell you about. Please click here to visit our page, and "like" us at UW Madison Religious Studies Program if you haven’t already. Please send photos and updates to Bernadette.

This photo is from RS Major Page. “Last spring, I spent a semester studying in Fez, Morocco. With the help of a fantastic faculty team, I learned colloquial Arabic and analyzed the intersections of Moroccan politics, human rights, and Islam. This picture is from an overnight excursion to the Sahara desert. At night we climbed atop the dunes and watched the stars overhead.”

This picture is from RS Major Audrey who studied abroad in India last summer. In her own words: “Here the group and I are in the Northern Indian town of Dharamsala. The town is known for being a refugee area for all Tibetans, as India has allowed the Tibetan exiled community and government to settle and grow here. I took this picture as the group and I were walking (circumambulating) around His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s home and temple. Along the path are prayer wheels, which are filled with mantras and when spun, they are supposed to send these mantras into the universe.”

Fernanda is double majoring in Religious Studies and Art History, with an emphasis on Islamic Art. Fernanda is part of the Undergraduate Research Scholars Program (URS), working with RS Affiliate Professor Katrina Daly Thompson. Professor Thompson is conducting a Linguistic Ethnography of Progressive Muslims. Fernanda will help with an analysis of how progressive Muslims use language to express their faith.
RS Major Alumni Profile: Austin Scher

A lifelong love of baseball and a degree in Religious Studies led to the first Interfaith and Community night in Professional Baseball

When Austin Scher returned to UW-Madison in the fall of 2013 after a year of academic suspension, he was determined to succeed in college. He knew he needed to find courses that excited him, even if nothing could compete with his extracurricular passion for baseball. In the second week of classes that fall, he was assigned a reading in Professor Rosenblum’s “Introduction to Judaism” class about Sandy Koufax, the legendary Dodgers’ pitcher who is Jewish. His learning began to connect rather than compete with his passion. Austin wound up majoring in Religious Studies.

Austin had always dreamed of working in professional baseball but was not sure how his RS major could connect practically to his career aspirations. While he was working as an intern with The Burlington Royals, a minor league team in North Carolina, the connections began to come together. Soon after he began with the Royals, Austin noticed a group of players gathering in the dugout on Sundays before games. He discovered they were holding religious services led by a chaplain associated with an evangelical Christian organization called Baseball Chapel. Austin was curious about Baseball Chapel and wanted to understand how the dugout—a profane space—could become a sacred space. Upon further investigation, he decided to pursue this in his RS thesis.

Austin discovered that evangelical Protestantism in a variety of forms had carved out much space in the history of baseball. He learned that this was a history intertwined with a developing mythology of baseball and American cultural trends. Remembering Koufax, Austin also knew baseball had a complex legacy when it came to religious pluralism. He wondered about baseball as “America’s Game” and the implications for a religiously diverse fan base. For example, Austin knew of the common marketing practice of holding special “church nights” to increase attendance at games.

"Baseball has the power to build remarkable bridges, something that is sorely needed at this divided time in our nation's history."

Rev. David Fraccaro, the Greensboro Director of FaithAction International

After graduating from UW-Madison in Fall 2015, Austin realized his dream and was hired as a Sales Associate with the Greensboro Grasshoppers in Greensboro, NC. On his third day, he pitched the novel idea of an interfaith night recognizing the diversity of the community and baseball to his supervisor. While supportive, his supervisor made it clear that Austin would be completely responsible for the event. He got to work right away, contacting local interfaith groups and nonprofit organizations. Interfaith and Community Night was a huge success. Fourteen organizations representing nine schools of thought or religions were represented. Austin was moved by the enthusiastic response of these communities who were acknowledged and brought together in baseball’s space.
RS Certificate Alumna Profile: Krissy Wick

Krissy Wick believes in the importance of community. As Madison Public Library’s Director of Public Services, she oversees the operations of nine libraries, including the work of the library’s Youth Services and Bubbler programs. She is responsible for managing strategic partnerships and expanding the library’s community engagement efforts. Krissy graduated from UW-Madison in 2003 with a Major in English and a Certificate in Religious Studies and subsequently earned a Master’s Degree in Library Science at the UW as well. Krissy says she “felt lost” when she came UW as a freshman. As a child and adolescent, she had found community in the Presbyterian Church USA in Monroe, WI, so she decided to get involved with religious groups on the UW-campus. That led her to be more curious about religion beyond what she’d known in her home community. She signed up for a course on Judaism with Dr. Ron Troxel, who became one of her favorite instructors. She realized that asking questions about religion and thinking about faith from an academic perspective were not only enjoyable to her but also great ways to learn about and get to know people. Krissy’s interest in widening her understanding of community that RS fueled and fed is still with her and an “important tie” to her current work. Krissy believes that her background in Religious Studies helps her particularly with a main objective of the Library: “to listen to people in order to meet them where they are, instead of telling them what they need.”

The Diversity of Divinity: A Range of Experiences Among Graduates

Many people assume that Religious Studies can only lead one way: to divinity school followed by a career in ministry. While we all know that RS can lead down many paths, we recently heard from a few RS graduates who are pursuing theological education. What their news tells us is how different that education can be and how varied our “divinity” alums’ paths can be. The common theme: their learning in RS stays with them and keeps evolving.

Chelsea Cornelius, Major, 2015 is currently a first-year student in the Master of Divinity Program at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Chelsea is planning to focus specifically on issues of feminist ethics, feminist theology, and bioethics. Her first-term impression of Chicago: “I feel very at home at the University of Chicago! The caliber of study and commitment to intellectual rigor is something I highly value, and the University of Chicago does not disappoint! The Divinity School is at the heart of the ongoing academic, intellectual, and moral conversation on campus, physically and metaphorically. Physically, it is located on the main quad of campus, taking up space in the midst of so many diverse conversations.” About her preparation at UW, Chelsea says: “My work in Religious Studies at UW is making its way into my graduate work in so many ways! Many of the texts I am reading are texts I first encountered in RS courses. Because RS at UW is so rooted in theory, it has prepared me well for graduate work. Moreover, my experiences conducting original research at UW have prompted my continued interests. I am incredibly thankful for the ways in which I was equipped, challenged, and encouraged at the UW!”

Joe Orner, Certificate 2015, is studying at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. Joe says Luther creates a great balance of theological training, practical application, and biblical scholarship. He is especially grateful that his coursework in biblical studies helped him with advanced standing at Luther. His favorite class so far is “Death and Resurrection,” which examines theologies of death and death’s death (resurrection), as well as how to help grieving people. Alex Sieber, Major 2013, completed an M.A. in Religion, Ethics and Society at the Claremont School of Theology (Claremont, CA) in 2015 with a thesis, “Sudan: A Case Study in Legal Authoritarianism.” The 60-page paper included themes he learned about first in UW classes. He moved to New York this fall to pursue an M.A. in Human Rights Studies at Columbia University with a focus on indigenous peoples’ rights. Stephen Buting, Major 2014, is studying at the Pontifical North American College in Rome (the residential college for American Catholic priests-in-formation), where, among other things, he has enjoyed discussing his RS Honor’s thesis on the Peruvian shrine, El Señor de los Milagros, with a Vatican diplomat to Peru. Read about Steve’s Pauline adventure on the RS Facebook page. It is journey that’s taken him from UW and RS 361 (Pauline Christianity) to studying Paul (in Italian) in Rome and to Pauline sites in Greece.
A Visit from Donor Mr. Dick Cable

This summer RS hosted a special guest, UW-Alumnus and long-time supporter Dick Cable, Class of '55. Mr. Cable recently bestowed a generous gift upon the UW Religious Studies program: a facsimile edition of the Saint John’s Bible, the first hand-written and illustrated edition of the Bible in 500 years (follow this link to learn more). Mr. Cable, who was a UW basketball star, (click this link to learn about Mr. Cable’s basketball career), was never able to take an RS class as an undergraduate (the RS Program began in 1998). He has, however, had a long-term interest in religion and encouraging conversation about it. Mr. Cable visited campus to see the Heritage Edition of the St. John’s Bible, which he donated to the Memorial Library, and to learn about the Religious Studies Program. He also was able to participate in an RS class, Dr. Norman’s summer course on early Christian literature. Afterwards, he treated RS students to lunch at the University Club. Mr. Cable was interested in hearing how students are studying religion to prepare for future careers in fields as diverse as speech pathology and clinical psychology. Thank you to Mr. Cable for his gift and interest in RS!

Religious Studies Executive Committee

The Religious Studies Executive Committee is the governing body of the Religious Studies Program. The Executive Committee is comprised of RS Faculty Director Jordan Rosenblum, RS Associate Director Dr. Corrie Norman, RS Program tenure-track faculty Professor Sue Ridgely, and tenured faculty affiliates who serve annual terms, including Professor Thomas DuBois, Professor David Hildner, Professor Ernesto Livorni, Professor Mark Louden, and Professor Gene Phillips.

The New Religious Studies Program Fund

Thanks to the generosity of previous donors, the Religious Studies Program has established the “Religious Studies Program Fund.” This interest-generating endowment allows us to access a modest yearly budget to support innovative undergraduate education such as student research projects and learning opportunities that connect RS with “real life” experience beyond campus. It also supports two new student awards (See RS Award Recipients, May 2016 on page 8) If you would like to help grow our endowment, which will directly impact our vibrant and engaged undergraduate students in Religious Studies, please follow this link.

Religious Studies Open House

Senior RS Majors chat during the Fall 2016 RS Open House. Pictured here from left to right are Sam, Becca, Sabrina and Page.

RS students make buttons with the Assistant Director of Wheelhouse Studios, RS Alumna Emily Tarver (far right), at the RS Open House.
Congratulations to our 2015-2016 Graduates  Best Wishes and Keep in Touch!!!

Majors
Lauren Christian
Joey DeGuire
Sara Duesterhoeft
Keni Feuling
Morgan Haefner
Kenzie Hughes
Lauren Roach
Alison Sauter
Teja Vemuganti

Certificates
Paul Blazevich
JT Boelter Shannon
Cashin Elsa
Duranceau Olivia
Gahm
Josh Hicks
Michaela Holzhuter
Joe Hovel
Kara Murphy
LaBreea Walsh
Austin Wellens
Sierra Widule

RS Awards, May 2016

Our new Award for Citizenship celebrates majors who have served our RS community and others with dedication and enthusiasm and who have demonstrated special promise for future service in experiential learning and in coursework. This is a very difficult award to assign because RS majors--and certificate students--tend to be service-oriented and connect their classroom learning to real life. The award this year is shared by two majors, Morgan Haefner and Teja Vemuganti.

The new Award for Academic Excellence recognizes majors who have consistently surpassed faculty expectations in achievement of the learning goals of the RS Program and produced superb capstone projects. This award went to RS Major Joseph DeGuire.

To read the full award citations, click this link to go to the RS website.

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