

# CONNECTIONS

A Newsletter of the Department of Religion at the University of Florida

Fall 2005

## FROM THE CHAIR

## THE RELIGIONS OF ASIA PROGRAM

by David Hackett

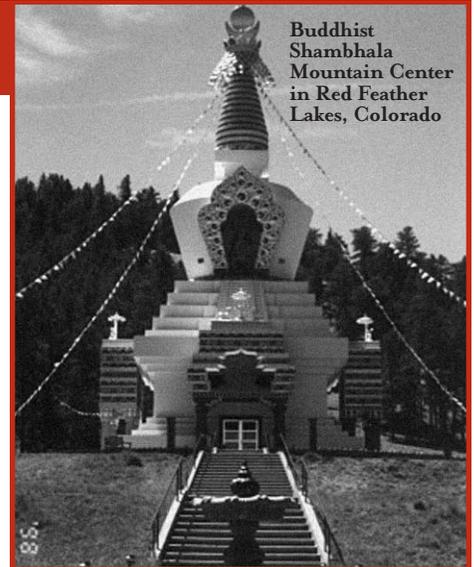
Three years ago the Religion Department inaugurated a doctoral program in three distinct areas: Religion and Nature, Religion in the Americas, and Religions of Asia. Each of these tracks pioneers specializations at the cutting edge of the religious studies discipline. As discussed in the Spring 2005 newsletter, the Religion and Nature program draws on faculty both within the department and across the university to create a new field of study at the intersection of religion, nature, and society. Religion in the Americas, to be spotlighted in our Spring 2006 newsletter, builds upon strengths of department faculty and the Center for Latin American Studies to envision a doctoral program that looks at the broad diversity of religious cultures in the Americas from an hemispheric perspective. In this issue,

we focus on the innovative approach of the Religions of Asia program where Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and other Asian religious traditions are studied in their transmission and interaction as they move across and beyond Asia.

Five full-time department faculty anchor this track. Vasudha Narayanan is a former President of the American Academy of Religion and a scholar of Hinduism in India and the Diaspora. Her recent work on the contemporary transmission of Hindu culture to America and the early movement of Hinduism into Cambodia offers a new approach to the study of Hindu traditions by paying attention to their transnational transformations. Last year, she founded the Center for the Study of Hindu Traditions (CHiTra),

which we believe to be the first center in this country dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of Hindu culture and traditions.

Like Vasudha Narayanan, our two Buddhism scholars, Mario Poceski and Jason Neelis, were trained in traditional Asian Languages and Literature programs (Mario at UCLA; Jason at the University of Washington). Working from this foundation, each is engaging the cultural transmission of the



Buddhist Shambhala Mountain Center in Red Feather Lakes, Colorado

Buddhist tradition. Recently Mario has taught "Buddhism in America" and soon will embark on a fellowship to study the globalization of Buddhism. Jason, in turn, is writing a book on long distance trade and the transmission of Buddhism during the first millennium of the Common Era.

Richard Foltz, Islam, has parlayed his History and Middle Eastern Studies training at Harvard into a book on *The Religions of the Silk Road*. This study engages the ways in which very early Hebraic and Iranian religions and later Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, and other traditions were fundamentally shaped and transformed through their movement and interactions along this road. Among his more recent books is a study of the religions of Iran where he argues for the influence of Iran in the shaping of the world's religions.

Finally, Gene Thursby has brought his graduate training at Duke in South Asian Studies to bear on the study of new religious movements in colonial and independent India and their extension to North America.

Building upon the interdisciplinary resources of the university's growing Asian Studies Program, students in the Religions of Asia track have the opportunity to study with leading scholars pioneering new ways of understanding and interpreting the religious traditions of Asia as they move through Asia and around the world.

Hindu Sri Venkateswara Temple in Atlanta, Georgia



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# The Center for the Study of Hindu Traditions

The University of Florida recently created the Center for the Study of Hindu Traditions (CHiTra; a Sanskrit word which means "excellence," "distinguished," or "a work of art") to encourage research, teaching, and public understanding of Hindu culture and traditions. Housed in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the new center will bring together faculty from across campus, collaborating extensively with the Center for Women's Studies and Gender Research, the Department of African and Asian Languages and Literatures, the Asian Studies Program, and the School of Theatre and Dance to focus on the globalizing, transnational aspects of the Hindu traditions and encourage their study through interdisciplinary perspectives. "By gathering faculty and students with diverse interests and limited resources from multiple units in the university, the center will get the synergy for organizing programs and developing curriculum," says the center's director, Professor Vasudha Narayanan.

The creation of CHiTra was the idea of Dr. Narayanan, the former president of the American Academy of Religion and a researcher of the Hindu traditions of India, Cambodia, and America. "She has extensive connections internationally because of her research, and in some ways her presence makes it possible for us to do this in ways we might not be able to were she not here," says College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Associate Dean for Centers, Institutes, and International Affairs Angel Kwolek-Folland.

Until now, the study of Hindu traditions and cultures has been done as part of area studies programs. As part of the colonial legacy, Hinduism has largely been identified with the Indian sub-continent, and its global presence is only now being studied. Textbooks, for instance, have ignored the presence of Hindu traditions in South-East Asia for over 1500 years. After the nineteenth century, millions of Hindus have settled down in various parts of the world (there are almost two million Hindus in the United States alone). Given the demographic changes, Dr. Narayanan has argued that it is time to rethink the area studies templates in a more innovative way. One result is the center's focus on the Hindu traditions in South and South-East Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and North America, and not just the Indian sub-continent.

Through CHiTra, components of Hindu culture will eventually be taught in courses in several colleges within the University of Florida. "We are particularly encouraging students from the Business school and the College of Journalism to take an introductory course in Hindu culture" states Narayanan. With the Indian economy burgeoning and a billion consumers strong, it seems very likely that many of these students will be doing business in the sub-continent, and they need little persuasion to take this course. "In our first years," continues Narayanan, "we are also planning courses on dance." In the last ten years, students of Indian origin have wanted to perform short pieces of classical or folk dance and theorize about it. The center is also planning lectures connecting the study of Hindu traditions with other fields such as Asian literature, environment, and health. "Teaching across disciplines," Narayanan believes, "carries the excitement of having students become aware of cultures, theoretical perspectives, and discourses to which they may not have been otherwise exposed."

Beyond the University, CHiTra is forging strong international relationships. Two post-doctoral students from Oxford University's Centre for Hindu Studies are teaching courses in the Department of Religion this year. Last December, CHiTra collaborated with the France-

Florida Research Institute at the University of Florida to bring to UF Dr. Thierry Zephir, a professor of South and South-East Asian Art at l' Ecole du Louvre in Paris. Dr. Zephir



gave a talk on iconography and bas-reliefs in Cambodia, connecting some of them with Sanskrit texts. The center is also working on a formal connection with the Women's Studies (Narivada) section of the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts, the premier Indian institute for classical studies, to pursue joint research projects in India and exchange visiting scholars.

The Gainesville community will benefit from CHiTra by attending sponsored art exhibits and dance and musical performances offered in conjunction with the Center for World Arts, the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, and the Phillips Center for the Performing Arts. CHiTra also aims to help expand the Hindu Studies collection at UF's Smathers Library.

The new center will not initially offer an undergraduate major or minor, but will work towards offering a certificate program. Its first three courses are being offered this fall—an honors course, *Introduction to Hindu Culture*, taught by Narayanan; *Beginning Sanskrit*, taught by graduate student Michael Gressett; and *Second-Year Sanskrit*, taught by Govinda Rangarajan, an adjunct professor who holds a PhD in Sanskrit from Madras University in India. In addition, this fall CHiTra has sponsored several lectures on Hindu music, literature, and the study of Hinduism in America. Next semester, two faculty members from Emory University will offer lectures and visit with UF faculty in the department of theater and dance to talk about how they teach a full-semester course on Hinduism and dance. In the spring, CHiTra will also co-sponsor a lecture with the Religion and Nature program.

Taken together, "the center promises to provide important intellectual and artistic leadership in the internationalization of the university," says Joan Frosch, professor and assistant director of UF's School of Theatre and Dance. "No US institution, as far as I know, has such a center in place. I would expect CHiTra to play an increasingly national, if not international, role in the understanding of Hindu culture, its traditions, and innovations."



# Asia Faculty Profiles

**Vasudha Narayanan** has been on our faculty since 1982. A former president of the American Academy of Religion and a leading voice in the study of Hindu traditions, Vasudha has recently turned her attention to the transmission of Hindu culture to America and, more recently, Cambodia. In Cambodia, Vasudha has been studying first millennium CE inscriptions on Hindu temples. Through this fieldwork, she is now documenting a process of cultural transmission that occurred first in Southeast Asia and anticipates the contemporary globalization of Hindu traditions. In Cambodia, relatively minor Hindu stories became central, particular deities took on multiple meanings, and many different deities inhabited the same temples.

**Gene Thursby** came to the University of Florida in 1970 following two years in India conducting research on a Fulbright Fellowship. In India, he studied a 19th century Hindu movement called Arya Samaj that has been a major influence on education and politics in northern India. His research interests are primarily new religious movements (NRMs) in colonial and independent India, and as an extension of India's influence elsewhere in the world.



Currently, Gene and Sushil Mittal (of James Madison University) are editing: *The Hindu World* (London: Routledge, 2004; New Delhi: Foundation Press, 2005); *Religions of South Asia* (scheduled for publication in 2006); and *A Handbook for Hindu Studies* (in the planning stage). Gene will retire from active service at the University of Florida at the end of 2007.

**Richard Foltz** came to the Department in 2000 after teaching at Columbia and Brown Universities and Gettysburg College and earning his PhD in History and Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard in 1996. His wide-ranging interests include religion and nature in Asia and the relation-



ship between religion and animals. Richard's first book, *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* looks behind the romantic notions of the colonial era and tells the story of how cultural traditions, especially in the form of religious ideas, accompanied merchants and their goods along the overland Asian trade routes in pre-modern times. The earliest eastward movement of Hebraic and Iranian religious ideas and practices along this road was followed centuries later by the great missionary traditions of Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism, and Islam. Richard argues that travel along this Silk Road was both a formative and transformative rite of passage for these religions with none of them emerging unchanged at the end of the journey. More recently, his *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the world's Religions* demonstrates the variety of ways the culture of Iran has influenced the world's spectrum of religions. In so doing, he traces the Iranian influence from the origin of Iran itself down to present day religious movements.

**Mario Poceski** joined our faculty in 2001 following completion of his graduate work at UCLA and a year of teaching at the University of Iowa. His area of interest is Buddhist studies and Chinese religions. At the age of 18, Mario left his native Macedonia to become a monk in a Buddhist monastery in Hong Kong. There his interest gravitated toward the late medieval "Golden Age" of Chinese Buddhism. At UCLA this interest led to his forthcoming book on "The Hongzhou School and the Development of Buddhism during the Mid-Tang Period." Mario's book refutes the widely held view of the Hongzhou school, and more broadly Chan Buddhism, as an iconoclastic tradition that represented a radically new departure from the beliefs and practices of earlier Chinese Buddhism. Last year, Mario held a Postdoctoral Fellowship at Stanford University's Center for East Asian Studies where he continued



his research on monasticism in medieval China, gave lectures and organized a colloquium on religious pluralism in China. During this time, he visited several monasteries in China and gave a lecture at Fudan University in Shanghai. In May through December of next year, he will be a Visiting Research Fellowship in the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore. There he will be pursuing his new interest in the globalization of contemporary Chinese Buddhism.

**Jason Neelis** specializes in South Asian Buddhist literature and epigraphy. He received his Ph.D. in Asian Languages and Literature from the University of Washington where he later became a post-doctoral researcher for the Early Buddhist Manuscripts project. Jason taught at Florida State University and for Antioch College's Buddhist Studies program in Bodhi Gaya, India, prior to coming to our department in 2003. His forthcoming book is on long-distance trade and the transmission of Buddhism during the first millennium of the Common Era.



Jason's research centers upon rock inscriptions written by travelers and inhabitants who lived on the routes which connected the frontiers of northwestern India (now Pakistan) and the Tarim Basin in western China (Xinjiang province). Merchants and Buddhist monks, missionaries, and pilgrims used the routes. The inscriptions give scholars an indication of where Buddhists were actually going and what they were really doing.

Currently, he is working on an edition of avadana narratives written on first century C.E. birch-bark scrolls from ancient Gandhara (northwestern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan). These texts belong to a collection of the oldest so-far discovered Buddhist manuscripts. The scrolls tell scholars what stories were being told and retold in Buddhist monasteries in the early centuries C.E. The aim of this research is to better

*continued on page 4*

# Hurricane Katrina Blows Professor Tim Cahill Our Way

The dispersal of the New Orleans population following Hurricane Katrina resulted in the appearance in our department of Professor Tim Cahill from that city's Loyola University. Dr. Cahill, a religion professor who specializes in Asian religions, evacuated to Vicksburg, Mississippi, but as it became apparent that an early return was unlikely, he made his way to family in the Tampa area. Since Loyola of New Orleans will not re-open until the spring semester at the earliest, we have had the privilege of Tim's presence in the department where he has given several lectures and made use of our libraries and offices.

To date, Dr. Cahill has delivered three lectures to different gatherings of students and faculty in the department. These include: "Stories from Telugu Friends on Being Hindu" (Hindu Culture course); "Throw Me Some Beads Krishna: Observations on evolving Hindu traditions in New Orleans" (Hinduism in America); and "Love, Logic and the twin concepts of positive and negative concordance" (Graduate Seminar).

Soon Dr. Cahill hopes to return to New Orleans for a day or two to retrieve his academic materials so that he may continue his research. Through satellite photos, he believes that his

home and office are still in decent condition.

Loyola University faculty have been communicating via an internet BLOG which has allowed them to check in on university matters, policies regarding students and faculty, and one another. Since most of the freshman have either lost their homes in and around New Orleans, or have since transferred to other schools, Loyola's faculty are unsure about spring's enrollment. Most of the student housing has been destroyed, and many of the 55% of the students who have commuter status may not return to the area. Dr. Cahill believes that enrollment could drop by one-third.

## Asia Graduate Student Profiles

**Bradley Ackroyd**, *M.A. student (from 2004)*. Brad holds a BA in Religious Studies from Oakland University. As an undergraduate, he was able to work firsthand with local Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Muslims, and Baha'i, as well as the diverse Christian and Jewish communities. From his time spent with the diasporic South Indian community, he developed his primary interest in contemporary Hindu practices, with a particular emphasis on devotional forms of Shaiva worship. His research interests include the historical developments of Tamil bhakti and tantric practice, the role of sacred geography and nature in devotional worship, the process of localization as devotional Hindu groups extend beyond South Asia, and Hindu communities in cyberspace.

**Shreena Gandhi**, *Ph.D. student (from 2003)*.

Though formally in the Religion in the Americas program, Shreena also has extensive interests in the Religions of Asia doctoral track. She received her BA in Religion from Swarthmore College, where her research centered on Buddhist religious narratives in Sri Lanka. In 2003, she

received her Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School. At Harvard Divinity, she worked on the religions of Iran while a research assistant for Dr. Lawrence Sullivan at the Center for Studies of World Religions. Currently, Shreena's interests include religions of the Americas, Hinduism in diaspora, and the study of material culture and religion.

**Phillip Green**, *M.A. student (from 2005)*. Phillip Green received his undergraduate degree in comparative religion from the University of Washington. His current academic focus concerns the early religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent. He also intends to explore the influence of eastern religious traditions on modern American culture and values.

**Michael J. Gressett**, *Ph.D. student (from 2003)*.

Michael graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in Religious Studies and took his master's degree from the University of Florida in South Asian religious traditions with an emphasis in Hinduism. His research interests

are Hindu traditions and new religious movements in America. He teaches Sanskrit for the department. He has presented papers on his research at two regional meetings of the Association for Asian Studies.

**Hye-Sook Kim**, *Ph.D. student (from 2005)*. Hye-Sook received an undergraduate degree in comparative religion from Dongguk University and a Master's Degree in Anthropology with a focus on Popular Buddhism at Seoul National University. She is currently interested in Buddhist social values.

**Sarah Spaid**, *M.A. student (from 2005)*. Sarah graduated magna cum laude from Wittenberg University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in East Asian Studies and a minor in Dance. She spent the past two years living in Japan observing religious activity while teaching English at public high schools. Besides foreign languages, her academic interests include environmental conservation and the interaction of different religious traditions in East and Southeast Asian cultures. She is currently interested in the Hindu performing arts in America.

## Asia Faculty Profiles, continued from page 3

understand how Buddhism moves beyond India and adapts itself to various cultural environments.

**Ravi Gupta** recently received his D.Phil. from Oxford University in Hindu Studies and Sanskrit. His research focuses on the Hindu devotional traditions and the philosophical systems of Vedanta. Ravi completed his B.A. in philosophy and his B.S. in

Mathematics at his hometown's Boise State University. From there, he pursued his interest in Hindu Studies through Oxford's Theology and Oriental Studies departments and the Centre for Hindu Studies. The Oxford Centre and The Center for the Study of Hindu Traditions (CHiTra) at the University of Florida are the first centers in the world dedicated to the academic study of Hinduism in all of its dimensions (i.e. art,

ritual, language, etc.). Ravi is our link between these two Centers. This year, he is teaching courses in the Religions of India, Religions of Asia, and Hindu Sacred Texts in Ritual Contexts.

**Dr. G. Rangarajan** is teaching "Advanced Sanskrit" in our department for a second year. He received his doctorate in Sanskrit from the University of Madras.

# The Religion Department Advisory Board

The Religion Department enjoys the active support of an Advisory Board of alumni and community leaders. One of only two CLAS departments with an Advisory Board—psychology is the other—and by far the longest standing, for more than two decades the board has provided financial support, community outreach, and a sounding board for the department as we have sought to meet our academic mission and involve ourselves with the broader UF and Florida community.

Created in the 1980s by then Department Chair Austin Creel, the Religion Department Advisory Board is led by Linda Wells. A graduate of UF, attorney, and active member of the UF Foundation, Linda has been instrumental in recruiting new board members, raising community awareness of the department's strengths, and has been the key supporter of our new graduate program.

Like Linda, a number of the board's members were involved and deeply influenced by the "Religion in Life" Week that was organized by the department's then leaders Delton Scudder and Austin Creel during the 1950s and early 1960s. During that week, important religious leaders, such as Victor Frankl and James Gustafson, came to campus to deliver major addresses on such salient topics as "Finding Purpose for Living" and "The *Real* Conflict Between Science and Religion" and joined with department faculty and students in leading discussions and seminars throughout the campus. Attorney Vernon Swartzel and Methodist ministers Dick Petry and Gene Zimmerman are some of the then UF students and now board members who trace their involvement with the department to those halcyon days. These too are board members who have supported the department's effort to revive elements of this fabled "Week" through the creation of an Alumni Lecture Series, which every year will bring to campus a major religious leader to speak to critical issues in contemporary religious life. Though still in the planning stages, it is hoped that Jim Wallis, best-selling author of *God's Politics*, will inaugurate this new series in the spring.

Ethics is another area of interest for the Advisory Board. Just over three years ago, UF alumnus, doctor and long-time board member Perry Foote made a pledge for an endowment in ethics that resulted in the hiring of Bron Taylor to the Samuel S. Hill Chair in Christian Ethics. Named after his good friend and now retired faculty member Sam Hill, Perry has long shared Sam's conviction that the teaching of ethics to undergraduates is critical to the formation of young men and women in their preparation for their life after college. UF alumnus and accountant Ralph Nicosia is similarly deeply concerned about the erosion of moral values in corporate America. He especially supports the department's efforts to teach ethics to undergraduates. With the advice and support of the board, the department is now taking steps to create an Ethics minor/certificate, which will be made available to undergraduates in majors across the university and will take advantage of course offerings in the Business School and Philosophy, as well as the department.

Outreach to our increasingly diverse Florida community is another area of board interest. UF alumnus Joan Levin has played a key role in supporting the new campus Hillel House and lectures in Jacksonville by faculty from the Center for Jewish Studies. Recent UF religion major and new board member Audra Berg is interested in the Department's outreach beyond Florida to New York City, where

she works for a Jewish philanthropic organization. Long-term board member Helen Godwin has supported Department led programs in the Jacksonville area. New Board member Dick Petry is especially interested in the board and department providing "bridges of understanding" between people from different ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds. Finally, Mumtaz Ladak has been a member of the board since the early 1990s. She is the mother of a recent UF graduate, an Orlando area businesswoman, and a leader of the rapidly growing mid-Florida Muslim community. Recently, Mumtaz has been exploring with the department the possibility of creating a "Center for the Study of Muslim Civilizations" here at UF.

In recent years, the board has increased its activity in response to these emerging interests and the dynamic growth and development of the department. Through Linda's leadership, board membership hopes to continue to grow and diversify. As we envision the future, the department will continue to look to the board to provide critical support, outreach, and advice as we together move forward in our efforts to become both a leading academic center for the study of religion and one that remains responsive to the needs of our students and the surrounding Florida and national community.

## Alumni Lecture Fund

The Department of Religion hopes to provide students with academic experiences that will offer perspectives on religion's role in our everyday lives. We hope that through an Alumni Lecture Series and other activities both students and alumni will gain insights from some of today's most brilliant minds. These occasions will also offer the opportunity for today's classes to connect with those who came before them.

Please consider a gift to the Department of Religion to support the department's critical educational activities for those following in your footsteps. Please complete the form and return to the address below. Thanks for your support!

David Hackett, Chair  
dhackett@religion.ufl.edu

### Yes! I would like to support the Alumni Lecture Series! (Fund #00767)

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# Department Hosts Visiting Lecturers

*So far this fall the Department has been privileged to host these visiting lecturers.*

## Kristina Tiedje

On Tuesday, September 6, the Florida Organization on Religion, Environmental Sciences and Technology (FOREST), part of our Religion and Nature graduate track, sponsored the visit of Dr. Kristina Tiedje, an anthropologist from the University of Lyon, France. Dr. Tiedje gave a lecture entitled “Cultural and Spiritual Values of Nature for Understanding Health and Healing: The *Teyomi* and Other Spirits in Nahua Etiology” and participated in a lunch conversation. A cultural anthropologist with a specialization in environmental anthropology, Dr. Tiedje’s research focuses on human–environmental interactions in Central Mexico. There she has examined how capitalism, development, Christianity, and tourism impact indigenous lifeways and their religious, social, and ecological knowledge and practices. Dr. Tiedje’s talk was also supported by the International Center, Anthropology, and the Religion Department.

## William Jordan

On Monday, September 12, FOREST, our own Society for Nature, Religion, and Ethics, and the UF Wetlands Club sponsored the visit of Dr. William Jordan. Called by writer Michael Pollan the “leading visionary” of the ecological restoration movement, Dr. Jordan has been developing and articulating ideas about the value of restoration and its importance as a conservation strategy for more than a quarter of a century. At the University of Wisconsin Arboretum in Madison, where he was public outreach manager from 1977 to 2000, Jordan was responsible for the re-visioning of the mission of the Arboretum and the re-direction of its research, education, and public outreach programs. In 1981, he founded “Ecological Restoration,” the first journal in this area, which he edited for 20 years. He was a founding member of the Society for Ecological Restoration International, and is

currently director of the New Academy for Nature and Culture and Co-director of the Institute for Nature and Culture at DePaul University in Chicago. His book, *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature*, was published by the University of California Press in 2003. Dr. Jordan’s talk was entitled “Getting Beyond Ethics: A discussion of the shame-and-performance model of value and value creation.”

## Heike Behrend

On Thursday, October 6, the Departments of Religion, Anthropology, and the Center for African Studies sponsored a lecture on “Spirit Mediumship and the (Technical) Media of Spirits” by Dr. Heike Behrend, professor of anthropology and director of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Cologne, Germany. Dr. Behrend’s lecture investigated the relationship between religious change and war in Uganda. She is the author of *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda, 1986–97* (1999) and co-editor of *Spirit Possession, Modernity, and Power in Africa* (1999).

## Bharat Gupta

On Thursday, October 11, the Department of Religion, the Center for the Study of Hindu Traditions (CHiTra), and the Asian Studies Program sponsored two presentations by Dr. Bharat Gupta, Associate Professor of English at Delhi University. Dr. Gupta has worked extensively on drama and theater in Ancient Greece and music and dance in Ancient India. He is the author of *Dramatic Concepts: Greek and Indian* (1994) and *Natyashastra, Chapter 28: Ancient Scales of Indian Music* (1996). Dr. Gupta’s lecture on “Indian Music” discussed similarities between the classical music of India and that of ancient Greece and Persia, while highlighting the ways that new technologies and new patronage now challenge the art of India music. His second lecture on “The Treatise of Dance

(Natyashastra) and the Erotic (Sringara) tradition in Hinduism” explores Sringara, the notion that all thought and feeling is rooted in desire, and its implications for the practice of Hinduism.

## Rev. Jianhu

On Thursday, October 27, the Department sponsored a lecture on “Trends in Contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism” by Rev. Jianhu, the abbot of Chung Tai Zen Center in Sunnyvale, California. Rev. Jianhu also gave a presentation in Dr. Poceski’s Buddhist Meditation class entitled “The Practice of Chan/Zen Meditation.” Rev. Jianhu came to the United States as a teenager and later received a doctorate in Computer Science from the University of California, San Diego. In pursuit of a more meaningful existence, he entered monastic life in Taiwan. He was previously a dean of the Buddhist Institute at Chung Tai Monastery, Taiwan, and the founding abbot of Buddha Gate Monastery in Lafayette, California.

## Dorothy C. Wong

On November 15, The Department of Religion and the Asian Studies Program sponsored a lecture, “Reassessing the Horyu-ji Wall Paintings in Their Contexts” by Dr. Dorothy Wong, Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Virginia. Dr. Wong is the author of *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form*. The lecture examined the wall paintings inside the Kondo or Main Hall of Horyu-ji, Japan (finished circa 690–710), and placed them into the broader contexts of an emerging international Tang Buddhist art. She argued that by the time the wall paintings at Horyu-ji were completed, Japan was on the cusp of fully participating in an international art idiom.

# Faculty News

**Leah Hochman** (Boston University, 2000) delivered a public lecture this October, "Reading Faces, Reading Souls: Jews, Lavater, and Physiognomy in Modern Europe," sponsored by the Center of Jewish Studies where she holds a joint appointment. The lecture grows out of her current work on the concepts of the ugly and ugliness in 18th and 19th century European thought and their relationship to social policy making in the late Enlightenment.

**Shaya Isenberg** (Harvard, 1968) has happily returned to full time teaching after his years as chair of the department. He continues as associate director of the UF Center for Spirituality and Health. He also continues his research on the comparative study of mystical consciousness and on 20th century Hasidic thought.

**James Mueller** (Duke, 1986) is continuing as an Associate Dean with primary responsibilities for space and facilities, affirmative action, enrollment management, conflict of interest, scheduling, and as the College's representative to the Historic Preservation Committee.

**Vasudha Narayanan's** (Bombay, 1978) latest book *A Hundred Autumns to Live: An Introduction to Hindu Traditions* is in press with Oxford, and *Hinduism* (Oxford 2004) recently came out in a French edition.

**Jason Neelis** (Washington, 2001) has given invited lectures at the University of Toronto and the University of Texas at Austin and delivered papers at the Conferences of the International Association of Buddhist Studies in London and the Annual South Asia Conference in Madison, Wisconsin.

**Anna Peterson's** (Chicago, 1991) most recent book, *Seeds of the Kingdom: Utopian*

*Communities in the Americas*, has just been published by Oxford University Press. In October, she gave an invited presentation, "Talking the Walk: A Practice-Based Environmental Ethic as Grounds for Hope," at Drew University School of Theology. Currently, she is working on a new project on consumption and environmental ethics.

**Mario Poceski** (UCLA, 2000) has recently given invited lectures at Stanford, Fudan University in Shanghai, and the University of North Florida and published two articles on the Chan School of Buddhism.

**Jalane Schmidt** (Harvard, 2005) defended her dissertation, "Cuba's Rival Rituals: 20th c. Festivals for the Virgin of Charity and the Contested Streets of the 'Nation'" in May and was awarded the M.A. and Ph.D. in the Study of Religion in November. She is currently on a two-year fellowship in the Carolina Postdoctoral Program for Faculty Diversity at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Jalane recently conducted two months of field research in Cuba and is now revising her dissertation for publication. She will deliver a paper on the interactions between tourism, field researchers, and local Cuban religions at the "Black Diaspora Performance" conference at Northwestern University in November.

**Leo Sandgren** (University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 1998) is working on a politico-religious history of Jewish and Christian self-definition as the People of God during the first six centuries of the Common Era.

**Zoharah Simmons** (Temple, 2002) continues work on her book project, "The Islamic Law of Personal Status and Its Contemporary Impact on Women in

Jordan." She has recently delivered invited lectures at Western College in Miami, Ohio, Furman University, and spoke on Christian-Muslim reconciliation at Trinity Church in New York City.

**Gene Thursby** (Duke, 1972) spoke on All-India Radio earlier this year in connection with the publication of a South Asian edition of the book, *The Hindu World*.

**Bron Taylor** (Southern California, 1988) has recently delivered invited lectures to the European Science Foundation in Germany, the Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education in Washington, D.C. at Stetson University, and to the Askew Institute on Politics and Society here at UF. This year, he is leading an initiative to create a Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture, with a corresponding journal. At AAR in November, he will present a paper, "Surfing into Spirituality," during a session organized by religion graduate student Samuel Snyder.

**Manuel Vasquez** (Temple, 1994) has been awarded a three-year University of Florida Research Foundation Professorship. He also received a new grant from the Ford Foundation (\$150,000) to initiate phase II of his collaborative project (with Philip Williams) on Latino religion and migration in the South. He is currently working on a book tentatively titled "Religion and Contemporary Social Theory," which is under contract with Oxford University Press.

**Robin Wright** (Stanford, 1981) has recently joined our faculty from Brazil's State University of Campinas. A world-renowned expert on indigenous religions, this spring he will be teaching a graduate seminar on "Indigenous Religions" and an undergraduate course on "Myth and Ritual."

## Society for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture

This September, nineteen scholars from diverse disciplines gathered in Cocoa Beach, Florida, to discuss the creation of a new Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture. Since the early 1990s, there has been a growing need among scholars for a society that would facilitate regular, interdisciplinary discussion and research on the relationships among human beings and their

diverse cultures, environments, and religious beliefs and practices. Led by Bron Taylor and assisted by the department's religion and nature graduate students, this planning meeting worked toward establishing such a society by reaching a consensus on its mission statement and purpose, establishing a tentative infrastructure including draft bylaws and administrative structure, and

establishing an interim leadership.

The University of Florida will act as the administrative hub of the Society and is looking forward to hosting the inaugural kickoff conference with the theme "Exploring Religion, Nature, and Culture," to be held April 6-9, 2005.

## ~ Sports ~

### The Bog Frogs Take the Field

"I say Bog, you say Frogs

Bog: \_\_\_\_\_?

Go Frogs!"

This fall, the department's graduate students, staff, and faculty have organized a coed softball team affectionately known as the "Bog Frogs." Pressed by the need to come up with a suitable totem to rally around, we turned to the Religion and Nature graduate students who then worked their way through a list of Florida's endangered species to come up with a suitable team symbol. Decked out in yellow shirts with green lettering and a happy, jumping frog on the front, the "Frogs" take the field every Thursday night in the "C" level coed league at the Diamond Sports Park. Now halfway through league play, the team appears to have effectively lulled opposing teams into a false sense of confidence. We have yet to win. Yet there is improvement every game and a light at the end of the season—where movement down to "D" league offers hope for the future.



## Two Ways to Stay in Touch

The next time you're surfing the web, visit the department web site at [www.religion.ufl.edu](http://www.religion.ufl.edu). It's a great way to keep in touch with what is happening in the department. Also, alumni are encouraged to participate in the department of religion alumni list service. Alumni on this list may post and receive e-mails to and from other alumni and the department. This service is free, and you may unsubscribe anytime you wish. Those of you who responded to our "getting in touch" letter we sent in July are already on this list. For others who wish to subscribe, either send an email to [anewman@religion.ufl.edu](mailto:anewman@religion.ufl.edu) or subscribe yourself directly by sending an email to [alumni-religion-request@clas.ufl.edu](mailto:alumni-religion-request@clas.ufl.edu). In the body of your message, type: subscribe end. We hope you will join us in conversation online!

*Thanks to graduate student Hilit Surowitz for gathering much of the information for this newsletter. Thanks too, to our new office manager Cecilia Rodriguez-Armas and our newly promoted senior secretary Anne Newman for their excellent work in support of the department.*



UNIVERSITY OF  
FLORIDA

### Department of Religion

107 Anderson Hall  
P. O. Box 117410  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, FL 32611-7410  
Telephone: 352-392-1625  
Fax: 352-392-7395  
<http://www.religion.ufl.edu/>

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GAINESVILLE, FL