

CONNECTIONS

A Newsletter of the Department of Religion at the University of Florida Summer 2008

FROM THE CHAIR Keeping Religion Relevant

by David Hackett

Recent comments in the *Chronicle for Higher Education* have underscored the need for humanities faculty to engage in collaborative, cross-disciplinary work that reaches out across the college, nation, and beyond. Religion departments, as part of the humanities, need to make clear their central importance to higher education and the larger society by making our work part of the conversation. This is the direction of our department.

During the past academic year we have made a commitment to making general education courses in religion available to many more undergraduates. Large, introductory courses in Religion, World Religions, Judaism, Hebrew Scriptures, New Testament, Islam, Religions of Asia, Buddhism, Hinduism, American Religious History, and Religion and the Environment are now offered nearly every semester. As our inaugural Alumni Lecturer, Boston University Professor Stephen Prothero, proclaimed to over 200 undergraduates in University Auditorium this last November, not knowing about religion threatens our ability to understand and participate in civil society (see page 7).

In this issue of *Connections*, are recent examples of our faculty and graduate students collaborating with faculty on this and other campuses, and internationally to address such

hot button issues as environmental values (page 5), creationism (page 6), and the transformation of Hinduism (page 5). At different times during the year, symposia devoted to water disputes, gender, and the environment (page 4) as well as sustained inquiry into the role of historical memory in the transmission of Chinese Buddhism (page 4) held center stage.

Our most public moment came in the late fall when Manuel Vasquez appeared on *Bill Moyers' Journal* to discuss his path-breaking work on religion and Latin American immigration (page 4). Internationally, Bron Taylor participated in a presentation at the United Nations on sustainable development as part of his work as a core member of the Oslo Sustainability Initiative. Bron's efforts to engage public conversation on religion and nature can best be explored through www.religionandnature.com (page 2).

This issue marks several passages. Soon we will be embarking on a search for an endowed professorship in Islam as the result of a gift that honors the memory and legacy of Izzat Hasan Sheikh (page 2). This gift will strengthen our efforts to understand and explain the contemporary



challenges and opportunities of the Islamic world. This spring marks the retirement of our beloved elder professors, Gene Thursby and Shaya Isenberg, each of whom has taught for more than thirty-five years in the department (page 3). Finally, this August I pass the baton of chairmanship on to our Distinguished Professor Vasudha Narayanan. It has been a pleasure to take my turn in chairing the department. I look forward to Vasu's able leadership.

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Izzat Hasan Sheikh Endowed Professorship

We are pleased to announce the creation of this new professorship in the Department of Religion that honors the memory and legacy of Izzat Hasan Sheikh. Funded by a gift from her family, the professorship seeks to promote the study of the Islamic world, its religious beliefs, social and moral values, cultural traditions, and contemporary challenges and opportunities.

Izzat Hasan Sheikh was born in rural India. In her youth, she faced tremendous hardships and adversity, including the loss of both of her parents at an early age, the lack of a formal education, and enduring migration from India to Pakistan amidst the turmoil of the 1947 religious partition of both countries. She approached these hardships with a resolve to succeed by teaching herself English, acquiring a position as a single woman working for the customs and immigration service in the newly formed Pakistani government, and continuing to work while raising her two children after emigrating with her husband to the United States in 1960. Mrs. Sheikh and her family settled in Gainesville in 1971, where she resided until her death in 2006. She was committed to raising her family in the United States knowing that this country presented the best opportunities for education, advancement and success. She worked to maintain her cultural identity, yet knew that assimilation into western culture was necessary to be successful.

During her 35 years of residence in Gainesville, Mrs. Sheikh had strong ties to the University of Florida and the greater Gainesville community. Her husband received his PhD in Environmental Engineering from UF. Her son obtained his undergraduate and medical degree from UF. Her daughter obtained her law degree from UF. In 2007, her granddaughter became the third generation enrolled at UF when she entered the freshman class.

Dr. and Mrs. Sheikh, upon their arrival in 1971, constituted only a handful of Muslim families living in Gainesville. With no center in which to meet, worship and interact, she opened her home to all in the Islamic community. She helped to organize on-campus Islamic gatherings and celebrations at the Reitz Union, which eventually led to the establishment of two off-campus Islamic centers of worship and cultural exchange. She dedicated countless hours and dollars to educating children and adults alike in Islam, as well as in the importance of their assimilation and interaction with their greater community. She firmly believed that her faith obligated her to enhance the quality



of her community, and she worked tirelessly to achieve this goal. In her later years, she came to be recognized as the matriarch of the local Islamic community

Mrs. Sheikh was deeply troubled by the rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism that adulterated the peaceful and loving way of life she recognized to be at the core of her Islamic faith and life. She also believed that only through commitment to a life of peace, harmony and devotion to the will of God as the basic foundations of Islam could both Muslims and non-Muslims come to see that Islam and Western society had more similarities than differences. It is the belief of the donors in establishing this professorship that understanding, tolerance and cooperation spearheaded by scholarly inquiries are essential conditions for breaking down barriers of misconception and discrimination, and advancing the welfare of *all* peoples.

Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, & Culture

Bron Taylor edits the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* with the able assistance of several faculty and graduate students. The second issue focuses on astrology, religion, and nature, including both historical articles and an examination of how astrological nature religion is changing in the environmental age. Another religion faculty member, Robin Wright, is developing a future issue exploring plants, religion, and nature, which he will guest edit.

Taylor also leads the *International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* (the ISSRNC), which is the journal's academic sponsor. The Society held its second international meeting in Morelia, Mexico, in January 2008. It again drew over 150 scholars from around the world and included presentations from Professors Taylor and Whitney Sanford and UF graduate students Gavin Van Horn, Luke Johnston, Robin Globus, Joe Witt, Todd Levasseur, Amanda Holmes, and Reyda Taylor. The next meeting will be in July 2009, in the Netherlands.

In addition to these initiatives, this year, faculty members Taylor, Wright, and Sanford with significant contributions from graduate students Samuel Snyder, Luke Johnston, and other UF faculty and programs, received a grant from the Metanexus Institute's Global Network Initiative Continuation Program, for "Religion, Science, & Nature: A Proposal for a Multi-Year Forum and Research Initiative." Metanexus will contribute \$45,000 and, with matching from a host of co-sponsors including the department, the pledged funds are \$116,000. A first fruit of this effort was a workshop this spring entitled "Next Steps in Empirical Religion & Nature Research," directed by Professor Jim. Proctor, Director of the Environmental Studies Program at Lewis & Clark College.



Information about these initiatives and related publications can be found at www.religionandnature.com.

Gene Thursby & Shaya Isenberg Retire

This year Gene Thursby and Shaya Isenberg are retiring from the department, each after more than thirty-five years of service.

Gene arrived in the summer of 1970, fresh from two years in India where a Fulbright Fellowship enabled him to complete the archival and field research for his doctorate at Duke University. While overseas, Gene had the unusual distinction of being the department's only faculty member to be hired sight unseen from halfway around the world. Shaya Isenberg came to us in 1973, after completing his doctorate at Harvard University and teaching at Duke and Princeton. UF hired him to teach Humanities in the (no longer existing) University College as well as in the department.

The UF to which Gene and Shaya came was far different from today's University. The academic calendar was on the quarter system. The Department of Religion served undergraduate general education, recruited few majors, and had no graduate program. On the other hand, the University was smaller, less rule-bound, and encouraged innovative teaching. Shaya was part of an interdisciplinary team of teachers who created the *Integrative Studies Program*. A fine example of this program's curriculum was the "Worlds of Consciousness" course that Shaya co-taught with psychiatrist Gilbert Milner from the College of Medicine and physicist Joseph Rosenshein. Shaya went on to expand his teaching contributions beyond the classroom. He joined Sid Homan of English in convincing then President Robert Marston to launch a *President's Scholars* program in which faculty became teachers to their colleagues, students, and community members across many areas of interest. Gene served as one of the first faculty participants in the *Minority Mentoring* program, and both he and Shaya were involved for many years in teaching gifted undergraduates through the *Honors College*. Completing the circle of innovative activities, Shaya and Gene co-taught an updated version of "Worlds of Consciousness" in their final years as faculty members.

Shaya helped to develop several other programs at UF. He served as the founding associate director of *Jewish Studies*, and in its early days was active in fund-raising along with colleague Barry Mesch. The two succeeded in bringing a major Judaica Library to UF. Later, during Shaya's tenure as chair, the department grew considerably and created its innovative doctoral program. Across disciplinary fields within the college, Shaya worked with others to create the *Humanities Center*. Across the boundaries of several colleges, he actively enlisted colleagues to develop what is now the University's *Center for Spirituality and Health*.

Among their other outreach activities, Shaya and Gene taught in summer institutes for high school teachers that were sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Equally important, they participated as students in the National Endowment's summer seminars for college and university faculty—the two of them in a seminar directed by Huston Smith in Berkeley and Gene in one under the direction of James Dittes at Yale. Gene also was an "early adopter" of computer-networked techniques for teaching, and the college acknowledged his innovative use of email lists and the Internet with a teaching award. Beyond the university, he has maintained the World Wide Web Virtual Library site.

At the American Academy of Religion, the major professional society for religion scholars, Gene and Shaya have presented papers individually and together and helped to create program units for the Academy on topics such as Perennial Philosophy, Mysticism, and New Religious Movements. Papers they presented there and elsewhere at various international scholarly conferences have resulted in several individual and co-authored journal articles as well as the book



that Shaya co-edited with Robert Carter on *The Ideal in the World's Religions*. One of the international conferences took Shaya to India, where Gene has returned several times over the years. These visits allowed him to turn his doctoral thesis on Hindu-Muslim relations into a book, to prepare a monograph on the Sikh tradition, and to make contributions to encyclopedias and chapters in edited books. Gene's collaboration with Sushil Mittal, a former member of the department and now the director of the *Mahatma Gandhi Center for Global Non-violence* at James Madison University, has produced three co-edited books on India's religions.

Now reaching mature ages themselves, both Shaya and Gene have written about the perspectives on aging found in the world's major religions, some of which they published in the *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*. Shaya also serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*. His work with Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi has included intensive study and teaching on the possibility that aging can become a wisdom-generating process, and Shaya's apprenticeship to Reb Zalman as a wise elder in the Jewish Renewal Movement continues to be multi-dimensional. It involves not only aging but the translation of mystical texts, meditation, and exploration of new forms of religious and spiritual practice. Gene does not plan to publish more about aging, at any rate not until he has absorbed lessons taught him over the years by his recently deceased eldest friend, the British architect and mystic Douglas Harding (1909–2007).

How will they be spending their time after retirement? Shaya and his wife and partner Bahira will be active, as they have been for many years, in leading workshops and teaching about the conscious aging movement across the country. Shaya will also continue as a faculty member for the rabbinic program that serves Jewish Renewal. Gene will be corresponding with scholars and editing their articles for the Indian Traditions section of the online journal *Religion Compass*. He will continue to review books for the American Library Association publication *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries*, and along with his partner Pam Hunt, he will be learning more about environmentally sensitive methods of landscape gardening.

Of course, neither Shaya nor Gene expects to stop working. They will keep on learning and sharing their knowledge as lifelong educators.

Manuel Vasquez Appears on Bill Moyers' Journal

Manuel Vasquez was invited to appear on the popular PBS program *Bill Moyers Journal* this last fall to discuss his research on transnational immigration among immigrant populations. "Today's immigrants are able to have dual loyalties," he explained to Bill Moyers. "One can have roots in the country of settlement, but also one can still have ties with your home country."

Dr. Vasquez's current project, a three-year-long Ford Foundation study entitled, "Latino Immigrants in the New South,"

examines the migration experiences and religious lives of Guatemalans, Mexicans and Brazilians in and around the Atlanta metropolitan area. He calls this form of study, the "politics of encounter" or "what happens when you have immigrants coming in, changing the racial dynamics of a particular place."

Among the many issues discussed by Dr. Vasquez in this wide-ranging program was the need for Americans to acknowledge that not only have we always been an

immigrant nation but that our "strength is this diversity." Indeed, much of "the rhetoric on illegal immigration is really going at the heart of this narrative that we tell ourselves about America. We need to resolve that tension."

For more information about the broadcast, visit the Moyers Website at www.pbs.org.



Symposium on Chinese Buddhism

This spring, Mario Poceski organized a symposium entitled "Remembering the Past & Reshaping the Future: Roles of Historical Memory & Narration in Chinese Buddhism." Sponsored by the University of Florida's Center for the Humanities and the Public Sphere, the conference brought together four scholars of Chinese Buddhism to explore the construction of historical narratives. Buddhist writers constitute historical narratives by selectively remembering or re-imagining their tradition's past in response

to specific institutional developments or changing socio-religious predicaments. The traditions of Buddhist historiography—which played important roles in the demarcation of orthodoxy and the reshaping of religious identities—were thereby as concerned with legitimizing the present and reshaping the future of as they were with formulating accurate accounts of past events. Addressing this issue at four different historical junctures and with a focus on the Chan (or Zen) school were Mario Poceski, Albert

Welter (University of Winnipeg), Miriam Levering (University of Tennessee), and Jiang Wu (University of Arizona). The lectures and closing reception were well attended by a cross-section of undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty.



Water, Gender and Equity in India

During this academic year, Whitney Sanford (Religion), Vasudha Narayanan (Religion), and Anita Anantharam (Women's Studies), coordinated symposia and lectures on the critical problem of gender, water, and equity in India. Funded by the University of Florida's Water Institute, the series brought together scholars from various disciplines to participate in discussions on water and society and how these issues emerge on the Indian sub-continent. Lectures and symposia included the following:

River Goddesses, River Linking: From Sacred to Transferable Waters

Kelley Alley, Anthropology, Auburn University

Dr. Alley outlined the Hindu reverence for key river Goddesses in India and connected faith, ritual, social organization and political movements to illustrate the centrality of sacred water to everyday life.

Symposium on Religion, Culture and Water Conflicts

Aaron Wolf, Department of Geosciences,

Oregon State University

Dr. Wolf examined the process of environmental conflict resolution, particularly as related to shared water resources. Why do countries resolve water disputes, even when "rationality" dictates that they should not?

Dr. Wolf's research centers on the process of transformation in negotiations – the specific moment in time at which parties move from thinking of themselves as representing countries to perceiving more broadly the needs of all stakeholders within a basin.

Symposium on Gender, Water and Development

Sara Ahmed, Institute for Social and Environmental Transition (ISET-USA)

Dr. Ahmed focused on women's participation in water user committees with as part of a larger program on decentralization and gender rights in South Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Peter Gleick, President, Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment, and Security

Dr. Gleick addressed the critical connections between water and human health, sustainable

water use, privatization and globalization, and international conflicts over water resources.

Dams, Development and Equity

Amita Baviskar, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, India

Dr. Baviskar focused on environmental politics, with a particular interest in social inequality and natural resources conflicts, environmental and indigenous social movements, and urban environmental politics in South Asia.

Water in the Karakorum

Hermann Kreutzmann, Geography, Free University, Berlin

Dr. Kreutzmann spoke on relationships between the distribution of water and religion, languages, politics, globalization, and development issues in the high mountain environments of Pakistan. By introducing an holistic approach to irrigation and water management, Dr. Kreutzmann illustrated the impact of hydraulic resources for survival strategies in the Karakoram.

Rethinking Environmental Values, Consumption and Desire

This year Anna Peterson brought to campus three leading scholars to discuss environmental values. Funded by the University of Florida's Center for the Humanities and the Public Sphere, the series is part of a larger project on environmental values and practice, coordinated by Peterson and Les Thiele (Political Science).

In November, Wes Jackson, President of the Land Institute, gave a talk entitled "What Will the Ecosphere Require of Us?" A plant geneticist by training, Jackson helped establish and chaired one of the first envi-

ronmental studies programs in the U.S. (at California State University-Sacramento). In 1976, he returned to his native Kansas, where he founded the Land Institute, whose mission entails research in natural systems agriculture as well as environmental education.

In January, Michael Maniates of Allegheny College, spoke on "Environmentalism, Sacrifice, and Desire." Maniates is co-editor of the award-winning volume "Rethinking Consumption," and is presently working on the environmental politics of sacrifice.

Finally in February, Rebecca Gould of

Middlebury College, addressed "Environmentalism, Consumption, and Simplicity." Gould is the author of *Living With Nature*, on homesteading as spiritual practice.

All three speakers met with students and interested faculty in a variety of settings in addition to their lectures



CHiTra Turns Three

The Center for the Study of Hindu Traditions (CHiTra) turned three years of age this March. The Center was created to encourage the research, teaching, and public understanding of Hindu culture and traditions (see *Connections* Fall 2005). CHiTra emphasizes the interdisciplinary study of Hindu traditions in many parts of the world. In the last three years CHiTra has focused on many facets of Hindu culture—music, dance, architecture, environment, texts, and rituals. In 2007–2008, CHiTra co-sponsored a series of lectures with the Water Institute to explore the connections between culture, water disputes and problems, and the environment (see page 4).

In March 2008, CHiTra hosted two major symposia "An Ocean of Devotion" (coordinated by Professors Amy Bard, Jason Neelis, and Travis Smith) and "Eating Cultures" (convened by Professors Anita Anantharam and Whitney Sanford). These symposia were co-sponsored by the Center for the Humanities, the Center for Women's Studies and Gender Research, and the Harn Museum of Art.

Professor John Stratton Hawley (Barnard/ Columbia) gave the keynote address for "An Ocean of Devotion." Scholars who presented papers included Professors Jim Lochtefeld (Carthage College), Tim Lubin (Washington and Lee University), Travis Smith (University of Florida), Davesh Soneji (McGill University), Kelly Pemberton (George Washington University) and Gurinder Singh Mann (University of California, Santa Barbara).

Professors Mark Juergensmeyer (University of California, Santa Barbara), Whitney

Sanford (University of Florida), and Laurie Patton (Emory) addressed issues of gender, social justice, and food connected with the Hindu Traditions in the symposium on "Eating Cultures."

In addition to these symposia, this year CHiTra hosted several other scholars and performers. Nathan McGovern (University of California, Santa Barbara) gave a lecture on "Brahma in Thailand: Buddhists worshipping a Hindu God?" Cynthia Snodgrass (University of Stirling, Scotland) spoke on "Gandhi's Weapons of Truth and Non-Violence: The Power of Sung-Prayers and Ritual" and gave a musical lecture demonstration. Professor Linda Barnes (Boston University School of Medicine) gave a lecture on "Integrative Medicine in America: Hindu and Chinese Healing Traditions."

Madhu Purnima Kishwar, noted writer and activist on women's rights gave a powerful lecture on "The Potential and Limitations of Law as an Instrument of Social Reform." Faculty and students from the Levin College of Law and many other parts of the university attended the lecture.

Many of the speakers spoke in undergraduate and graduate classes, and met students informally over meals. CHiTra talks have attracted people from all over the campus and from the community.

A fundraiser in December 2007 was made possible by three very generous artists. Mrs. Vijayanthi Gopinath, a well-known



singer of the Hindustani style of classical Indian music, gave a scintillating performance. Professor Tanmay Lele accompanied her on tabla and Venkatesh Srinivasan on the harmonium. This performance and the exemplary generosity of many community members enabled CHiTra to start a modest endowment fund for Classical Indian Music. We will soon be collaborating with the ethnomusicologists in our School of Music for future programs.

A major activity of CHiTra this year has been the co-sponsorship of an exhibit with the Harn Museum of Art. Also called "An Ocean of Devotion," it showcased beautiful icons and paintings from the 3rd Century CE (Mathura period Vishnu) to 20th century Jamini Roy paintings. Jason Steuber (Cofrin Curator of Asian Art) and Vasudha Narayanan curated this exhibit, which will be on display till mid-October.

Finally, Professors Travis Smith (Religion) and Anita Anantharam (Women's Studies) this summer have started the first ever UF study abroad program in India!

Pasta Monster Receives Academic Attention

Religion graduate students Sam Snyder, Lucas Johnston, and Gavin Van Horn garnered media attention at last fall's annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion with their forum on a satirical pseudo-deity called the Flying Spaghetti Monster, whose growing pop culture fame gets laughs but also raises serious questions about the essence of religion.

Supporters of intelligent design hold that the order and complexity of the universe is so great that science alone cannot explain it. The concept's critics see it as faith masquerading as science.

An Oregon State physics graduate named Bobby Henderson stepped into the debate by sending a letter to the Kansas School Board. With tongue in cheek, he purported to speak for 10 million followers of a being called the Flying Spaghetti Monster—and demanded equal time for their views.

Between the lines, the point of the letter was that there is no more scientific basis for intelligent design than there is for the idea an omniscient creature made of pasta created the universe. So, if intelligent design supporters could demand equal time in a science class, why not anyone else?

While recognizing that their forum was a little light by the standards of the American Academy of Religion, our three graduate students also insisted that it was more than a joke.

Indeed, the tale of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and its followers cuts to the heart of one of the thorniest questions in religious studies: What defines a religion? Does it require "genuine" theological beliefs? Is it simply a set of rituals joining together a community? Further, what is the role of religion in popular culture? Each of our graduate students' papers addressed these critical issues.

Graduate Students Shine at Academic Conferences

This year many of our graduate students presented papers at local, national and international conferences. Here is a partial listing of these conference papers.

Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Diego, California

Eleanor Finnegan, "Representin' Women: Islamic Hip Hop's Accounts of Women's Bodies," Islam Section.

Lucas F. Johnston, "Pirates Can Predict the Weather: The Flying Spaghetti Monster and the Nature of Truthiness," Religion and Popular Culture Group.

Gayle Lassater, "Nineteenth Century North American Brethren in Latin America and the Caribbean: Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses," New Religious Movements Group.

Sam Snyder, "Holy Pasta and Authentic Sauce: The Flying Spaghetti Monster's Messy Implications for Theorizing Religion," Religion and Popular Culture Group.

Gavin Van Horn, "Noodling Around with Religion: Carnival Play, Monstrous Humor, and the Noodly Master," Religion and Popular Culture Group.

Annual Meeting of the Latin American Studies Association in Montreal, Canada

Rose Caraway, "Protestant Identity and Worship in Contemporary Cuba." Panel on "Protestants and Political Struggle."

Sean O'Neil, "Latin America's Via Media? Convergent Christianity and a Global Network of Similarities." Panel on "New Evangelicalisms in Latin America."

Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture in Morelia, Mexico

Robin Globus, "'There's Hope, But Not For Us':

Theorizing Environmental Apocalypticism."

Lucas F. Johnston, "We Are All Related: The Function of Myth in the Sustainability Movement."

Todd Levasseur, "The Cosmivision of Pramod Parajuli: Theoretical Reflections."

Gavin Van Horn, "The Value of a Wilderness Icon: Re-enchanting Nature by Re-imagining Wolves."

Joseph Witt, "'The Earth is God's Body': Evangelical Christianity and Resistance to Mountaintop Removal in Appalachia."

Additional National Conferences and Invited Papers

Eleanor Finnegan, "Islam and the Inner-City: Understanding Five Percenter Hip-Hop's Accounts of the Environment," Middle Eastern Studies Club, Hunter College.

Phillip Green, "Perfect Wives Make the Best Nuns," South Asian Studies Association Conference on The East and West Entwined, Claremont, California.

Lucas F. Johnston, "Refining Definitions of Religion for a Global Community" American Anthropological Association, Washington, DC.

— "'We're All Related' (for Better or for Worse): Image Events, Interconnection and 'Intertwining' in Sustainability Movements," Media, Spiritualities and Social Change Conference, Boulder, CO.

Todd Levasseur, "Is Trash Hybrid?" Global Studies Conference, Chicago.

— "We Are What We Don't Eat: Worms, Bacteria, and the Soil Around Us" at The Wormy Corpus: Worms, Parasites and the Body in Religion, Medicine, and History Conference, Boston University.

Bridgett O'Brien, "Going Green: Reflections on Religious and Ecological Literacy in Secondary School Curriculums," Conference on Teaching

the World's Religions: Texts and Traditions, San Anselmo, CA.

Sam Snyder, "New Watersheds of Religion and Nature: Rethinking the Field through Values and Practice." Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas.

Chungwhan Sung, "Knowledge and the Buddha's authority in Dharmakirti's theory of knowledge," 6th Buddhist Studies Graduate Student Conference. Los Angeles, CA.

Hilit Surowitz, "La Naçion: Recreating Jewish Identity, and Community in the Atlantic World," Biennial Conference on the History of Religion, Boston College.

Local Conferences

Eleanor Finnegan, "The Role of the Islamic Tradition in Water Issues: Focus on America and Beyond," Water Institute Symposium, University of Florida.

— "Growing Identity: An Overview of Muslim Agricultural Communities in America," Seventh Annual Graduate Student Symposium in Religious Studies, Florida State University.

Sean O'Neil, "Borders of the Cross: Christian Hybridity in a Pan-Latino Congregation," 3rd Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Hispanic/Latin American Literatures, Linguistics and Cultures: El arte de (con)vivir/The art of (co)existence, Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, University of Florida.

Sam Snyder, "Dammed Debate: Religion, Values, and Environmental Conflict on the Ocklawaha River," Water Institute Symposium, University of Florida.

Hilit Surowitz, "The Symbolic Power of Blood-Letting: Picart's La Circoncision des Juifs Portugais, 'For the Life of the Flesh Is in the Blood,'" conference on The Significance of Blood in Jewish History & Culture, University of Florida.

Russell Lowell Jaberg Award

Since, 2001, the Department of Religion has chosen annual recipients of the Russell Lowell Jaberg Award for Academic Excellence. Dr. Russell Lowell Jaberg, a retired University of Florida humanities professor, devoted his life to his love of religion and theology. This memorial award was created in his honor.

The winner of this year's award is Meredith Butler. Meredith will

be entering an M.A. program at Brandeis University in the fall. In addition, there were three runners-up: Amol Purandare is going on to medical school at Florida State; Aaron Wessling is entering the M.A. program in Religions of Western Antiquity also at Florida State University; and Brigitte Silver will be attending the University of Virginia School of Law. Congratulations to these four outstanding students!

Ralph Nicosia Ethics Award

This year the department inaugurated the Ralph Nicosia Ethics Award. Ralph Nicosia is a UF graduate and member of our department's Advisory Board, who has a particular interest in religious ethics. Undergraduate candidates for this award were asked to submit an original essay on one of the following topics: environmental sustainability, social justice and human dignity, political agency and faith based initiative, violence, gender in/equality, interfaith relations, or conversion.

We were happy to receive several submissions, all of which were quite impressive (well-written, articulate, clearly wrestling with the issues). Although we liked all the essays, our consensus winner was the

paper written by Hilary D'Angelo, who wrote on gender inequality in Islam and (Orthodox) Judaism.

Hilary D'Angelo is a fourth year student majoring in Religion and English. She is an Anderson Scholar with High Distinction, a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and has been named to the Dean's and President's Lists. She was recently granted a University Scholars Program award to research the ways conceptions and constructions of femininity and masculinity are applied to Jews in 19th century German literature to discredit Jewish national, civic, political, and social aspirations. That research will become part of her Senior Honors Thesis in Religion. Congratulations to Hilary!

Alumni Lecture: What Every American Needs to Know About Religion

In November, Boston University Religion Professor Steve Prothero delivered the annual Alumni Lecture to over 200 students, faculty, and community members in the University Auditorium.

College students might remember Prothero from his appearance on "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," while religion scholars know him best for his contributions to academia, including the New York Times best seller *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*.

In his talk, Prothero discussed how not knowing about religion threatens our ability to understand and participate in civil society. Whether or not we ourselves are religious, Prothero told his attentive audience, the more we learn about religion, the less likely we will be to surrender our voices—through our lack of religious knowledge—to political leaders who frequently understand their actions in a religious context.

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

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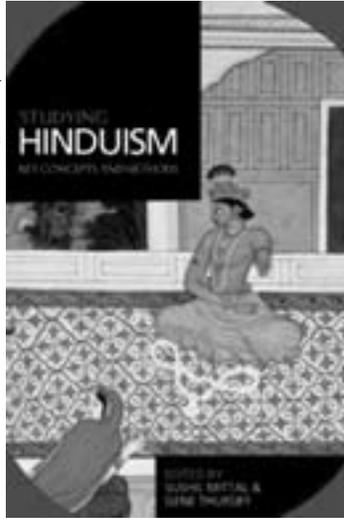
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Faculty Books

Studying Hinduism: Key Concepts and Methods, edited by Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (London and New York: Routledge, 2007). This is the third in a series of books from Routledge that are edited by Sushil Mittal, who was a member of the department in 1998–1999 and is now at James Madison University, and Gene Thursby who retired recently after teaching for 37 years in the department (see page 3). The first of these books is a large reference work titled *The Hindu World* (2004). The second is a textbook, *Religions of South Asia* (2006), that introduces traditions that have made a home in India whatever their place of origin. *Studying Hinduism* is a more compact reference work that uses a prismatic approach to identify twenty-eight potentially helpful ways to enter into the study of Hindu traditions, practices, and institutions. Taken together, the three books have brought together chapters specially written for them by sixty-two highly qualified authors from around the globe as part of an effort to provide clearly formulated and currently relevant perspectives on the rich and complex culture of the Indian subcontinent.



Singing Krishna: Sound Becomes Sight in Paramanand's Poetry, A. Whitney Sanford (State University of New York Press). *Singing Krishna* introduces Paramanand, one of north India's greatest medieval poet-saints, whose poetry has been sung from the sixteenth century to the present in ritual service to the Hindu deity Krishna. Whitney Sanford examines how hearing Paramanand's poetry in ritual context serves as a threshold for devotees between this world and Krishna's divine world. To "see Krishna" is a primary goal of the devotee, and Paramanand deftly constructs a vision through words. Sanford employs the dual strategies of interpreting Paramanand's poems—which sing the cycles of Krishna's activities—and illustrating the importance of their ritual contexts. This approach offers insight into the nature of the devotional experience that is not accessible by simply studying the poetry or rituals in isolation. Sanford shows that the significance of Paramanand's poetry lies not only in its beauty and historical importance but finally in its capacity to permit the devotee to see through the ephemeral world into Krishna's world.



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UF Department of Religion

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

107 Anderson Hall
P.O. Box 117410
Gainesville, FL 32611-7410
Telephone: 352-392-1625
Fax: 352-392-7395
www.religion.ufl.edu

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