

# CONNECTIONS

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

Winter 2010

## Dr. Robin Wright helps Inaugurate the House of Shamanic Knowledge (Malikai Dapana) in Brazil



Above: Dr. Robin Wright showing the "Living Treasure" shamans' award at the inauguration.

Left: Baniwa women dancers greeting visitors at entrance of new Shamans' House.

On November 30 to December 1st, 2009, in the village of Uapui Cachoeira, on the Aiary River, Alto Rio Negro, a large assembly took place to inaugurate a new "shamans' school" co-founded by the son and daughter of the principal shaman of the Baniwa, Manuel da Silva, and the anthropologist Robin M. Wright, who has worked with communities of the Aiary, and especially with Manuel and his family, since 1976. According to Dr. Wright, the shamans' school was the fruit of years of searching for a foundation interested in supporting the art and practice of "traditional shamanism." This was different from

the "traditional medicine" projects implanted in communities of the Icana River, where indigenous "health agents" since the 1980s have sought to forge a middle ground between knowledge of medicinal plants and Western biomedicine. The shamans' school, supported by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, coordinated by the world-renowned anthropologist Michael Harner, emphasizes the transmission of the cosmology and metaphysics of the "true shamans" wisdom, which has for years suffered attrition and was in danger of disappearing altogether. Dr. Wright has worked on the organization of the House of

Shamanic Knowledge since its inception. At the founding ceremony, he gave the new Shamans' school an album of photos of all Baniwa shamans of the Northwest Amazon whom he had known or heard of and a photo of a dabukuri taken in 1959. He also gave to the village school an album of reproductions of ancient maps, drawings, early photos of Baniwa villages and families (from the 1920s to the present), and various individuals important to their history. The last was intended not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a way of "bringing the ancestors closer to us," as one Baniwa school teacher stated.

## Professor Simmons receives "Quiet Courage" Award

Dr. Zoharah Simmons receiving the "Quiet Courage" award.



In November, Dr. Zoharah Simmons received the "Quiet Courage" award from the Rosa Parks Quiet Courage Committee of Gainesville. According to a *Gainesville Sun* article on the award ceremony (Nov. 30, 2009), "The award goes to those who, through their actions, display the same courage as Rosa Parks, a black woman who in 1955 refused to give up her seat on an Alabama bus to make room for a white passenger. Her actions became a symbol of the civil rights movement and launched a boycott of the Montgomery bus system." Dr. Simmons was honored for her work, beginning in 1964, with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, known as the SNCC, in Mississippi. The *Sun* article quoted Dr. Simmons: "Little people can change things. Things that seem unchangeable can be changed. I lived it."

## Other Faculty News

**Vasudha Narayanan** published an article “Hindu Attitudes to Genetically Modified Food” in *Acceptable Genes: Religious and Cultural Perspectives*. She is also an Associate Editor of the *Brill Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (vol. 1, 832 pages), which has just been published. She also gave several papers at the annual meeting of the AAR and a talk at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, India in December 2009. She is also leading a group of UF faculty planning for a possible university-wide required humanities course. She is team-teaching a trial version of the course, titled “What is the Good Life,” this spring.

**Jason Neelis** is spending the 2009–2010 academic year in Bochum, Germany, where he is a research fellow at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum.

**Anna Peterson's** new book, *Everyday Ethics and Social Change*, was published by Columbia University Press in September 2009. The book argues that resources for an alternative social and environmental ethic are embedded in everyday life. The book was the subject of an interview published by *Religion Dispatches*. Professor Peterson is also involved in two new collaborative research projects, one on religious values in practice, with colleagues at UF, and another on “animal virtues,” with biologist Marc Bekoff and several others. She is presently team-teaching a course on “The Ethics of Sustainability” with colleagues from UF’s schools of Building Design and Construction. The course is part of a grant supported by the National Science Foundation, which will also lead to a textbook to be published next year.

**Mario Poceski** published a new book, *Introducing Chinese Religions* (Routledge, June 2009). The book serves as a comprehensive yet accessible historical survey of Chinese religions. It covers the whole spectrum of Chinese religious history, providing a thorough and balanced coverage of major developments, texts, traditions, beliefs, practices, and institutions. The book adopts a combination of diachronic and thematic approaches, starting with an exploration of the earliest forms of religious beliefs and practices in ancient China, and ending with a discussion of present-day trends and predicaments. A substantial part of the book focuses on the three main Chinese religious traditions—the so-called “three teachings,” namely Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism—each of which is allocated two chapters. However, other relevant traditions—such as popular religion, Christianity, and Islam—also receive adequate coverage. While separate chapters are dedicated to the main traditions, throughout the book there are also discussions of the mutual influences and

intersections among the diverse religions, and the models of religious pluralism that evolved in the course of Chinese history. The book also considers the ways in which religious traditions interact with other social forces and cultural phenomena, such as political authority, literary production, and artistic representation. In addition to the new book, in 2009 Professor Poceski also wrote a number of shorter publications, including two book chapters, three books reviews, and an encyclopedia entry.

**Whitney Sanford** gave a plenary talk “A Gandhian Approach to Food Democracy” at the Peace and Justice Studies Association Conference at Marquette University in Milwaukee in October 2009. She offered a keynote address, “Greening and Feeding the World: Interdisciplinary Dimensions,” at the Greening the Curriculum Conference, The Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education in Miami in January 2010, and this spring she will give a talk on “Gandhi, Food Democracy, and Sustainability” as the Thompson Lecture at Kalamazoo College in Michigan. She has been invited to participate in the 2010 U.S.-French Symposium on “Developing Partnerships for Sustainable Water Management and Agriculture in the context of Climate and Global Change” this May. Sanford is on the UF Committee on Sustainability and working on the Prairie Project, a workshop to be offered this August for integrating Sustainability into the UF curriculum. The Prairie Project is modeled on Emory University’s highly successful Piedmont Project and Northern Arizona’s Ponderosa Project.

**Zoharah Simmons** has given a number of lectures and presentations recently. She was the keynote speaker for the Florida Free Speech Forum in February, speaking on the subject “Islam: Myth vs. Reality.” Also in February, Dr. Simmons gave a keynote lecture at the Memorial Tribute to Rosa Parks, a lecture titled “Courage in the face of Fear.” Dr. Simmons was a major speaker in UF’s celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. in January, participating in a panel on “Deconstructing Race: Politics, History and Science.” She spoke on “The African American Struggle Against U.S. Racism.” Finally, in December, Dr. Simmons spoke on a panel discussion on “The 1960s Sit-Ins and its importance to the Civil Rights Movement.”

**Bron Taylor** recently published *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (University of California Press), and established a new website with supplementary materials related to it. His *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* was featured in a forum, to which he contributed, in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, and he contributed two articles to the quarterly

journal he edits, the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*. He also contributed a forward to a book entitled *Biodivinity and Biodiversity* and wrote an op-ed for the *St. Petersburg Times*, which was republished in the *Gainesville Sun* and other venues. Internationally, Taylor gave the Presidential address of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture in Amsterdam, and a presentation about his Summer 2009 research on grassroots environmentalism in Kenya, at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. In May 2010 he will give a keynote address at the conference “Tools of the Sacred” at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, and in April, the Daffodil lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Taylor also gave invited lectures at LeMoyne College (New York), the University of Colorado, and Concordia University in Montreal, and conference talks at the inaugural meeting of the Association of Environmental Studies and Sciences in Madison, and at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. Taylor was interviewed by Jean Feraca for her National Public Radio program “Here on Earth / Radio Without Borders” and for articles in *The Globe and Mail*, Canada’s largest national newspaper, as well as in *Miller-McCune Magazine* and the *Ventura County Star*. He is developing a research project, “Religion, Science and the Future,” which will bring a variety of scholars to UF to explore such themes, beginning in 2010. Links to these articles, publications, and initiatives are at [www.brontaylor.com](http://www.brontaylor.com).

**Manuel Vasquez** published two articles, one in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* assessing the recent work of Thomas Tweed and another in *African Studies* comparing Latin American and African Pentecostals. He also delivered keynote presentations on religion and immigration at Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs and Loyola University’s Jesuit Social Research Institute. In addition, Manuel is co-organizing with Philip Williams (UF, Political Science), Timothy Steigenga (Florida Atlantic University), and Marie Marquardt (Agnes Scott College) a major conference entitled “Latino Immigration to Atlanta: Connecting Faith Communities and Addressing Critical Issues,” which will report the preliminary results of their multi-year research project on Brazilians, Guatemalans, and Mexicans in the New South. The conference will take place at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology, March 19–20. For more information, see [www.latam.ufl.edu/NewFordProjectSite/conference.shtml](http://www.latam.ufl.edu/NewFordProjectSite/conference.shtml).

## 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 listserv. 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. If you wish to subscribe, send an e-mail to [annen1@ufl.edu](mailto:annen1@ufl.edu). We hope you will join us in conversation online!

## Student News

**Mallory Bolduc** traveled to Santiago, Chile in summer 2009 to conduct preliminary dissertation research on religion and politics in post-transition Chile.

**Rose Caraway** received a 2009–2010 Latin American Studies Doctoral Teaching Award, to teach the LAS 4935/REL 4936 seminar on “Religion, Culture, and Power in the Caribbean,” which she is teaching spring 2010 semester.

**Eleanor Finnegan** received a teaching award from UF’s Center for European Studies that enabled her

to teach a course on Muslim Stories and Histories in Europe during spring 2009 semester.

**Gayle Lasater** has moved to Philadelphia with her new husband. Congratulations, Gayle and Lou! She is teaching at Temple University and finishing up her dissertation on returned Mormon missionaries.

**Sean O’Neil** also traveled to Chile during summer 2009 to conduct dissertation research on “convergent Christianity,” and specifically Anglican congregations.

**Leah Sarat** gave a conference presentation in Mexico last summer, “El ‘sueño mexicano’ y el ‘Dios sin fronteras’: dos visiones del viaje indocumentado en El Alberto, Hidalgo,” at the 53rd Congreso Internacional de Americanistas which was held at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City in July 2009. She will also be part of the Featured Speaker Series sponsored by the UF Division of Student Affairs this spring, giving a talk titled “The God without Borders and the Mexican Dream: Two Visions of the Migration Journey” in February 2010.

## Alumni News

**Shreena Gandhi** defended her dissertation and received her Ph.D. in August 2009. Congratulations Dr. Gandhi! She is teaching at Kalamazoo College in Michigan.

**Michael Gressett** also defended his dissertation and received his Ph.D. in August 2009. Congratulations Dr. Gressett! He is teaching Religions of India for the department in spring 2010 semester.

**Luke Johnston** is another recent Ph.D. recipient. He defended his dissertation in spring 2009 and is now a post-doctoral fellow at Wake Forest University in North Carolina (his undergraduate alma mater). Congratulations Dr. Johnston!

**Charity Lanier** (B.A., 1998, Law 2001) was recently promoted and is now the Director of Education at Medvance Institute in Baton Rouge, La.

Gracie Maye Switalski was born on September 15, 2009 to **Paul Switalski** and **Katie Wasyluk**. Paul and Katie are living and working in their hometown of Tampa, Florida.

**Sam Snyder** (Ph.D. 2008) has moved to Anchorage, Alaska, where his wife Liz has a position at the University of Alaska. Sam is working on a number of volunteer and scholarly projects. In spring 2010 he will spend several months as a postdoctoral fellow at the National Sporting Library in Middleburg, Virginia, where

he will conduct research on conservation and fly fishing. In November 2009, Sam organized and moderated a very successful symposium titled “A River Never Sleeps: Conservation, History, and the Fly Fishing River.” More information on the symposium is available at [www.nsl.org/flyfishingsymposium.html](http://www.nsl.org/flyfishingsymposium.html).

**Randy D. Thornhill** (B.A. 1994) reports that his nine year old son started a non-profit organization here in Florida. Randy writes that “Between going to school, doing homework, playing tackle football, being involved with our church, he found time to start Rockwater Project: [www.rockwaterproject.org](http://www.rockwaterproject.org). He is trying to raise \$1.00 from as many people as he can.”

## Events

On February 9, Professor Ann Gold of Syracuse University gave a talk titled “Why sacred groves matter: Post-romantic claims.”

And on February 12, Professor Virginia Garrard-Burnett of the University of Texas gave a talk, also sponsored by the Center for Latin American Studies, titled “Terror in the Land of the Holy

Spirit: Guatemala under Gen. Efraim Ros Montt, 1982–1983.”

Robert Alter, renowned literary critic and author of a series of celebrated studies and translations of biblical literature, will offer an advanced workshop on translating the Hebrew Bible (for faculty and graduate students only), followed by a public

lecture on biblical literature (title TBA). This event is being organized by the Center for Jewish Studies and was made possible by a generous grant from the Posen Foundation. The lecture, which is free and open to the public, will take place on Sunday, March 14, 5:30 PM at Hillel: 2020 W University Ave. More information will be made available on the CJS website: [www.jst.ufl.edu](http://www.jst.ufl.edu).

## Religion and Nature Panel

In October 2009, Religion and Nature graduate students organized a well-attended panel discussion titled “A Sacred Responsibility,” addressing the ways different religions are responding to the environmental crisis and how religious values influence sustainable

behaviors. The panel was moderated by Ph.D. student Eleanor Finnegan. Participants included Rabbi David Kaiman of Congregation B’Nai Israel; Alysia Radder, a religion major and representative of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness; Professor Sarra Tlili of

the Department of Asian and African Languages and Literatures; and a student representative from Campus Crusade for Christ. The students are planning the second panel in the series, to be held in April at the Food Summit.

## Teaching Highlights: Religion and Animals

Students in Dr. Peterson’s “Animals and Religion” class in fall 2009 had a visit from Dodger, a therapy dog in training with the Paws on Parole program. Animal Services Education Coordinator Hilary Hynes and trainer Anne Pantall spoke

with the students about the human-animal bond and about Paws on Parole, which matches shelter dogs with inmates at the Florida Department of Correction’s Work Camp in Gainesville ([www.alachuapets.com/pop/index.html](http://www.alachuapets.com/pop/index.html)).



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## From the Chair

It has been a very busy Fall and Winter season with a lot of exciting news. We are celebrating several awards and recognitions. A list of new books by faculty is on our website, and I hope you take a few minutes to read about them.

As you will see in this newsletter, Professor Zoharah Simmons was honored with the 2009 Rosa Park Quiet Courage Award. Her lifetime commitment and interest in civil rights and women's issues resulted in her selection as one of four women to receive this award in Gainesville. Zoharah has also been featured in our UFL homepage "spotlight!"

You can also see Professor Robin Wright's work in a wonderful video which you can access from our website. He has been involved in a project on the preservation and transmission of Shamanic knowledge in Northwest Amazon. Just as the World Heritage Sites preserve the great monuments on behalf of all cultures, this too, is a preservation of our common human heritage. With funding from the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, the indigenous people of Uapui village of the Northwest Amazon inaugurated the first House of Shamanic Knowledge in the history of the Northwest Amazon, and Professor Wright attended the event. The purpose was to revitalize interest among youth in shamanic practice and stimulate the training of new shamans.

Several new initiatives are underway. Many of our faculty members are spearheading an initiative to engage scholars from around the university in a discussion about strengthening the connections between environmental

studies and the humanities. We will also be contributing towards a Sustainability major that is in the works in the university. On another front, along with Professors Mary Watt (chair, Languages, Literatures, and Cultures) and Sean Adams (History), I am teaching a pilot version of a new interdisciplinary Humanities course called "What is the Good Life?" Next Fall, we will be teaching several sections of this course to 600 students.

On the teaching front, some exciting news about Fall. We are so happy that three of our professors have been successful in a university-wide call for proposals by the Honors program. This means that we will have some innovative courses in 2010-11. David Hackett will be teaching *Sacred Journeys*, Whitney Sanford will be doing a new course called *Foodscapes* (in collaboration with Rosalie Koenig of Agronomy), and Robert Kawashima, in collaboration with Nina Caputo of History, will teach a course called *The Bible and Western Culture*.

We have started a new Friday Bulletin to give updates on our lectures, events, and news. Please let us know if you would like to receive this via email!



—Vasudha Narayanan

## 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!

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

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