Puzzles of Antiquity:
The Dead Sea Scrolls

Faculty Spotlight:
Penny Edgell

On the Cutting Edge:
Rethinking an Ancient Text
The Program in Religious Studies draws from a number of academic resources in its mission to offer an interdisciplinary degree. The Religious Studies major offers two tracks. Track I (Religion, Culture, and Society) offers opportunities to focus thematically on the social or cultural contexts and ramifications of religion. Track II (Text and traditions) allows an in-depth, text-based focus on a specific religious tradition. The minor in Religious Studies provides students in other majors the opportunity to acquire some expertise in the critical study of religion.
We’ve had a busy summer this year in religious studies. A faculty workshop with noted religious studies scholar Robert Orsi brought together 15 faculty and staff members from the U of M and another 15 faculty members from several nearby institutions, including Carleton, Hamline, Macalester, and United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. The day-long workshop provided an excellent opportunity to renew old acquaintances and to discuss several of the problems we share as we study religion.

We also bade a fond au revoir to six of our majors, who graduated in 2008–2009. Among them was Sara-Jo Kriedeman, who, as our student worker last year, provided much of the muscle to get this program on its feet. We were fortunate to get Sara-Jo to author three articles for this issue of Perspectives. We wish her all the best in her future activities.

This fall, the religious studies program hit the pavement at full throttle. First, we welcomed Derk Renwick, who holds both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in religious studies from the University of Minnesota, as our new executive administrative assistant. With knowledge of the program, the University, and religious studies, Derk has not only streamlined our administrative processes but has quickly become the “go-to guy” for our students and alumni. We also welcome Kaitlin Reiss onto our staff. A senior in the College of Design, Kaitlin is using her visual and graphic expertise to help promote the program. We also continue to be expertly served by the staff of the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies: Barbara Lehnhoff, Kate Gallagher, and Victoria Keller.

This semester we continue to grow our course offerings in religious studies, adding several new cross-listed courses including:

- Anthropologist John Soderberg’s Religion and Archaeology course
- Historian Kirsten Fischer’s courses, Sinners, Saints, and Savages: Religion in Early America and Religion and the Founding of the United States: Contests Then and Now
- Literary specialist Nabil Matar’s Muslims and Jews in Early Modern English Literature
- Historian Daniel Schroeter’s Muslims and Jews: Conflict and Coexistence in the Middle East and North Africa since 1700

These and many other courses, focusing on religion across traditions, time periods, and geographical regions, are available to students in the program.

The religious studies graduate minor is also up and running with new director of graduate studies Ann Waltner (Institute for Advanced Study, history, Asian languages and literatures). Designed to pair up with graduate study in a host of areas—including history, literature, American studies, Asian languages and literatures, journalism, anthropology, sociology, and many more—the graduate minor requires the Theory and Methods in the Study of Religion course, along with two more courses on the M.A. level and three on the Ph.D. level.

The success of this new graduate minor reflects the increasing importance of the study of religion within traditional disciplines, a growing trend in academia. The American Historical Society, for instance, recently announced that the specialty most frequently selected by their members (over 15,000) to describe their primary research interest is now history of religion. This category beat out the former favorite, cultural history, by just a hair, but its steep growth curve promises its continued dominance for some time. A link to more information on the AHA report is available on the Religious Studies Web site home page. From what I’ve seen, interest in religion is gaining ground in a number of other disciplines as well.

My best wishes for a great semester and lovely autumn season go out to everyone. If you happen to wander through this neck of the woods, do stop in and say hello!
Puzzles of Antiquity

By Kelly O’Brien

The Dead Sea Scrolls, both mysterious and revealing, continue to fascinate Professor Alex Jassen. In an exhibition at the Science Museum of Minnesota, the public can learn more about these ancient documents that connected the dots between the Old Testament and early rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.

This March the Science Museum of Minnesota will open the traveling exhibition “The Dead Sea Scrolls: Words that Changed the World.” Organized by the Israel Antiquities Authority, the exhibition will give visitors the rare opportunity to view a small selection of the more than 900 scrolls. Professor Alex P. Jassen of the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies has published widely on the Dead Sea Scrolls, including the 2007 book Mediating the Divine: Prophecy and Revelation in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Second Temple Judaism. He is serving as an academic adviser to the Science Museum. Here he shares some of his thoughts on the significance of the scrolls.

What are the Dead Sea Scrolls?

The Dead Sea Scrolls comprise a collection of about 930 texts discovered in 11 caves in the Judean Desert of Israel beginning in 1947. These Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek scrolls represent the library of a schismatic Jewish community that inhabited the nearby ancient settlement of Qumran from the end of the second century B.C.E. until 68 C.E.

The community’s own writings are represented by sectarian rule books, works of biblical interpretation, and poetical and liturgical texts. In addition, nearly 200 manuscripts of books that comprise the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) are preserved, representing the oldest copies of the Hebrew Bible. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain an additional several hundred texts composed by other Jews of that era; many of these texts were previously unknown or only available in later translations. These documents have rightly been regarded as revolutionizing scholarly understanding of the composition and transmission of the Hebrew Bible, Jewish history and belief in the late Second Temple period (third century B.C.E.–first century C.E.), and the background of later rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.

How did you become so interested in the Dead Sea Scrolls?

While I was in graduate school at NYU, I was very interested in both the study of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and rabbinic Judaism. For a long time researchers didn’t have substantial amounts of the scrolls. In addition, many of the texts were previously unknown or only available in later translations. These documents have rightly been regarded as revolutionizing scholarly understanding of the composition and transmission of the Hebrew Bible, Jewish history and belief in the late Second Temple period (third century B.C.E.–first century C.E.), and the background of later rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.

Dead Sea Scrolls Symposia

11 April 2010, 1:00–5:30 pm
15 August 2010, 1:00–5:30 pm
Science Museum of Minnesota
(651) 221-9444
http://www.smm.org/scrolls/
http://cnes.cla.umn.edu/news/

Two symposia on the Dead Sea Scrolls will be held in conjunction with the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit at the Science Museum of Minnesota. Students and the general public will have the opportunity to learn about the Dead Sea Scrolls from four specialists in the fields of Biblical Studies, Jewish Studies, and Archaeology. Following the presentations, members of the audience will have an opportunity to view The Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit at the Museum together with the presenters. Lawrence Schiffman of New York University and James VanderKam of the University of Notre Dame are featured keynote speakers for the symposia.
of data to chart the development of Judaism out of the Hebrew Bible and through rabbinic Judaism (as also for Christianity). In other words, we had two points on a chart and we had very few dots to connect them. In many ways, the Dead Sea Scrolls provide those dots. They provide a window to the transformation of Judaism from the world of the Bible and ancient Israel to the principle forms in which later Judaism develops, particularly rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. As such, the scrolls are such a fertile area for charting the changes and adaptations of the biblical world and understanding how these changes shape the developing forms of Judaism in the third century B.C.E. and onward. In many cases, I had never really even heard of these phases of Jewish history and I found it to be very eye-opening to see that there was a lot going on between the Bible and rabbinic Judaism. Not only was there this very vibrant world of Judaism, but it proved to be the key to understanding the bigger picture.

What else excites you about the scrolls?

The Dead Sea Scrolls are really a puzzle, both physically and conceptually. In reality, there are very few fully intact scrolls. Most of them are fragments, some as small as a fingernail. There were about 15,000 fragment pieces pulled out of the caves. These were not organized in any way. In many cases, these fragments were part of books from antiquity that modern scholars had never seen before. So, they essentially were trying to put together a bunch of jigsaw puzzles, for which they often did not have the cover picture and almost always were missing most of the pieces. In the end these 15,000 pieces were put together into about 930 distinct manuscripts (i.e., copies of books that were once fully intact in antiquity). Once you have pieced these things together, then you have to figure out what they even say—both reading the sometimes difficult script on poorly preserved leather or papyrus and understanding the ancient Hebrew or Aramaic (a few Greek texts also). Then comes thinking about when they may have been written and why they were written. After all that, we can start thinking big picture and how they function as the connecting dots. My own research on the scrolls has been involved with all these different stages.

After all that, I have to admit as well that there is a certain mystique to the scrolls that also attracted me. There is so much intrigue associated with the discovery, publication history, and more that it is hard not to want to learn more.

Genesis 4Q-6-273
This scroll fragment from the book of Genesis will appear in The Dead Sea Scrolls exhibition, which opens on March 12, 2010 at the Science Museum of Minnesota. This fragment depicts Genesis 48: 8-10, which describes the patriarch Jacob and his blessing of Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. This scroll was found in Cave 4. It is dated to the first century BCE.

2009–2010 Calendar of Events

Graduate Student Reception
17 November 4:00–6:00 pm
Nolte Lounge (First Floor)
Inviting all graduate students working in areas related to the academic study of religion to join us for an informal get-to-know one another. No matter what department you are working in, we invite you to help us build a network of students interested in the academic study of religion.

RS Winter Luncheon
5 February 11:30–1:00 pm
Nicholson Hall 135
Gathering the religious studies community for information and camaraderie mid-way through the academic year. Information provided to graduating seniors and introducing the religious studies student organization.

Calvin Roetzel Retirement Party
23 April 3:00 pm
Nicholson Hall 155
Celebrating Calvin Roetzel’s career and featuring a lecture by noted New Testament scholar Margaret Mitchell, followed by a reception in Nicholson Hall 135.

Year End Celebration
TBA
Nicholson Hall 135
Acknowledging the accomplishments of our graduating seniors and community members with food, friends, and cheer.

Summer Workshop
TBA
Location TBA
Our third annual summer workshop promises to build on previous topics of language and the relationships between religious researchers and subjects with this year’s focus on text and orality. Stay tuned for updated announcements.
This edition of the Student Spotlight features Nate Ramsayer, a senior enrolled in the religious studies major in Track II, Texts and Traditions. The tradition he is most interested in is early Christianity, but more recently he has become completely fascinated by the Hebrew Bible. Nate plans on graduating this spring (2010) and then going immediately to graduate school. He hopes to one day teach at the university level. Eager to start his teaching career, he recently signed up to teach a class at the Experimental College of the Twin Cities, titled Introduction to the Bible: Historical Context of Ancient Israelite Scripture. Nate was also a recipient of the Harold Anderson Scholarship last year.

When did you decide to enroll in the religious studies major?

“I first decided to enroll in the religious studies program during my last year at North Dakota State University. I took a class at NDSU on the history of Christianity and really became hooked. Unfortunately, NDSU did not offer a religious studies major, only a minor, so I looked into some other options. I already knew the University of Minnesota was a great school, but once I found out more about the religious studies major and the Classical and Near Eastern studies department, I was completely convinced that I wanted to come here.

Why become a religious studies major?

Once I started getting into this stuff, I wanted to spread the knowledge contained within academia about biblical texts and ancient traditions to the general public. I think it’s important to break down the barriers between academic religious studies and the general public. There are hundreds of years of great scholarship on the Bible and the ancient Near East that I believe would easily capture the attention of people from all walks of life.

I feel that in contemporary America, a large number of people are basing their lives around a belief system that has been taken out of context and molded to fit modern-day concerns, thus making it inconsistent with its original intention and tradition, and I really feel that these changes are worth bringing to light.

So much of our modern world is both directly and indirectly influenced by religion and it seems that it is only fitting that we take the time to investigate such a powerful phenomenon.

What has been the most challenging part about studying religion?

The intensive language study. I have taken two languages every semester since starting at the U. I am currently on my second year of ancient Greek, have completed two years of German, a year of Latin, and a semester of Italian. Next year I am starting Biblical Hebrew.

What has been the most exciting thing about studying religion?

The most exciting part has been engaging with primary texts and other sources. Reading documents using the historical-critical method (placing them in their own context and not viewing them through a religious viewpoint) brings to light exciting ideas about their nature and use—things you wouldn’t be taught in church.

You were recently awarded the Harold Anderson Scholarship; how will this award help you in your studies at the University?

I am so grateful for this opportunity. First and foremost, it will allow me to complete college. I was in dire need of financial aid. It gave me the best peace of mind because I was awarded the scholarship shortly after I found out that I wasn’t going to be receiving the aid I was expecting. I really want to thank the religious studies program for such an awesome opportunity.

In a few days you will begin teaching your own class at the experimental college. Tell us a little about this class.

The class is only four weeks long, and I am expecting about 20 students from all different walks of life; some are students, some are members of a church, some are parents.

How has your experience at the U helped you prepare for teaching this class?

I’ve learned many things from every religious studies faculty member I’ve had. Each individual contains a wealth of knowledge, and each has their own personal teaching style. It’s been great to observe their differences; it’s helped me to develop my own classroom demeanor. Many are top scholars in the field, and they lead by incredible example. Professors I have had have pushed me to expand beyond what I thought possible as
a student. And the U of M has provided me with great resources.

I followed up with Nate shortly after he finished teaching his class at the Experimental College of the Twin Cities. Here’s what he had to say about his experience:

Now that the course is over, tell me about your experience teaching a course on the Hebrew Bible at the Experimental College.

If I had to choose one word to describe my experience it would be validating. I’ve had the best time helping students and community members begin to understand the unique aspects of biblical texts within their original culture and conventions. I remember coming home one night after class and thinking, “Holy cow . . . someday a university’s gonna pay me to do this!” It was quite a moment, realizing that something I’ve been working so hard on has produced such amazing results. Everyone was completely engaged in the material, and it was neat to see the faces of those who have begun the journey of discovery; it very much reminded me of myself and the joy that I got when I first began exploring this material. The class was quite rewarding.

What has this experience taught you about the study of religion?

As the topic of the class deals with such an intensely personal subject, i.e. interpretation of the Bible, it’s not uncommon to have people show up to a class and, rather than engage in what the class is about, seek to advance their own theological agendas. I encountered one such individual at the Experimental College fair several weeks before the class started. It was a fortunate event for me, as it made it clear how important it would be to lay ground rules for my class that would foster critical thinking. Luckily, I encountered no problems in the class, but the experience taught me how important it was to be ready to handle such an event in a professional manner.

This teaching experience also validated my beliefs that there are a number of people in the world who are genuinely curious about religious studies but lack the venue with which to engage in the discipline. I hope to help others bridge the gap and encourage them to take the path toward discovery.

2008–2009 Religious Studies Graduates

Cameron Ferguson
Senior Project: “Voice in Ovid’s Echo and Narcissus”
Faculty Adviser: Nita Krevans, Classical and Near Eastern Studies

Nathaniel Smith
Senior Project: “What the Bema Silently Proclaims: The Role of the Bema Festival in Manichaeism”
Faculty Adviser: Phillip Sellew, Classical and Near Eastern Studies

Michael Brown
Senior Project: “Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa Von Nettesheim: Evil Magus, Confused Skeptic and Compiler, Or Pious, Christian Ass?”
Faculty Adviser: Alex Jassen, Classical and Near Eastern Studies

Jennifer Jaszewski
Senior Project: “Religion in the Living Room: Religious Epics and the Medium of Television”
Faculty Adviser: Bali Sahota, Asian Languages and Literatures

Sara-Jo Kriedeman
Senior Project: “The Ioudaioi According to John”
Faculty Adviser: Calvin Roetzel, Classical and Near Eastern Studies

Clynt Reddy
Senior Project: “Resistance, Revision, Revolution: The Emerging Church”
Faculty Adviser: Jeanne Kilde, Religious Studies
Faculty Spotlight
By Sara-Jo Kriedeman

In this issue, the faculty spotlight shines on Penny Edgell, professor of sociology, and a member of the Religious Studies Steering Committee. Edgell received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1995, and came to the University of Minnesota in 2002.

As a sociologist, Edgell’s research focuses on American religion and she is particularly interested in related topics such as gender roles, family, social change, and moral culture. Her publications on these issues are numerous, including a recent chapter for The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion and the books Religion and Family in a Changing Society and Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life.

The American Mosaic Project

Professor Edgell is currently wrapping up an exciting, three-year project that examined the views of race and religious diversity in America. Edgell and her team designed the American Mosaic Project hoping to discover more about the things that bring Americans together and what divides them, asking questions such as, Do Americans believe religious diversity is important for a “good” society? What do Americans believe are the consequences of religious and racial diversity? Edgell and her colleagues polled people across the nation to find out their attitudes about these issues.

Some of the results were quite surprising. Edgell found that a substantial portion of Americans maintain that in order to be a good citizen you must share in a Christian cultural heritage. “National identity is still culturally understood in the U.S. as being Christian in deeply rooted ways, and I think a lot of our scholarly talk about religious diversity and tolerance misses this,” she explains. “Much of that scholarship tends to dismiss Christian nation rhetoric and say, ‘Well that doesn’t really mean anything. Everyone knows we’re not really a Christian nation.’ I think what we have shown in our work is that it means a lot.”

Edgell and her team also discovered that Americans seem to have more concerns about religion as a potential source of division than previous scholarship has emphasized. “We’ve tended as a discipline to emphasize those pro-social implications of religious involvement,” says Edgell. “But I think what we found is that there are widespread concerns in the U.S. about the potential for religion to become a divisive or discriminatory thing in our society.”

Looking Forward

Professor Edgell hopes to begin a new project this year working with sociology colleague Kathleen Hull. Still in proposal stage, the project would explore the relationship between religious belief and the formation of scientific and legal consciousness.

“We are picking issues that are controversial, and those which experts have made claims about the way forward,” Edgell explains, regarding issues such as a parent’s right to refuse medical treatment for their child. “We want to present these issues to ordinary people and see how they evaluate these expert claims. This is a way to see how religion influences the legitimacy of legal experts, scientific experts, and religious leaders.” She continues, “There are authorities out there who make these decisions which affect us all. Is that legitimate with people? But the other part of it, to me the more interesting part, is do people, everyday people, even understand the issues that are going on in the same way that these experts do? We want to see how religious beliefs influence this.”

On the Study of Religion

As a scholar of sociology and religion, Professor Edgell stresses the importance of the study of religion. “I think it is important to have an academic voice describing religious practice and religious communities,” Edgell explains. “I think so much of the popular discourse today is either from an insider perspective, or it is hostile. Religion is very politicized, and to have a voice out there describing religion that is not politicized and is more neutral than objective is useful in terms of producing public knowledge about what religious people and communities are like.”

Furthermore, Edgell adds, “Religion is a powerful institution. It affects people’s behavior in their public life, but it also affects social capital in local communities, civic orientation, and it shapes our understanding of nationalism and American identity. I think it’s an institution that we all as citizens need to understand and I think that good academic research can help us understand that in a way that is different than, say, if Rick Warren or Richard Dawkins speak out on it. I have no committed position, which is useful.”
The day began with sunshine and ended with rain and thunder from the heavens, perhaps an all-too-fitting close to a workshop devoted to the study of religious experience and peoples’ relationships with sacred beings.

Sponsored by the religious studies program and the Institute for Advanced Study, a one-day workshop entitled Ethical, Methodological, and Pedagogical Challenges in the Empirical Study of Religion was held on Wednesday, July 22, 2009 at the Nolte Center. Dr. Robert A. Orsi, Grace Craddock Nagle Chair in Catholic Studies at Northwestern University, conducted the workshop. Thirty religion scholars from a variety of disciplines and several local institutions discussed issues central to Dr. Orsi’s work, including religious experience, empathy, ethics, and writing in religious studies.

That people have religious experiences is of little doubt, but the study of these experiences has generally been considered off-limits to academic scholars. The conversation centered on why this was the case, and what role empathy might play in understanding how people come to experience sacred figures like saints, spirits, and gods as significant forces in their lives. Participants also considered how peoples’ experiences of the holy might help us rethink key historical events such as the civil rights movement or, more recently, the religious-like devotion many Michael Jackson fans expressed after his death.

Conversation then turned to critical judgment in the study of religion. Asking tough questions about when it is acceptable to pass moral judgment on the religious individuals and groups we study, many in the group were critical of the tendency to make sharp contrasts between “good” and “bad” religion but also recognized the necessity of making ethical decisions in our studies. Scholars told personal stories about their own ethical quandaries, such as having to testify as an expert witness in a court case where an individual’s religious beliefs threatened to land him in prison or of being challenged by groups who were offended by a scholar’s interpretation of their religious practices.

In the third and final session of the day (and just before the storm rolled in), participants posed questions about writing in religious studies: how can we best represent peoples’ religious worlds? And how might the ways we write help evoke the experiential, lived, and often messy quality of religion as it is practiced by real people in specific times and places?

The thought-provoking workshop with Dr. Orsi was a great success. Covering topics central to the religious studies program’s mission to study religion creatively, critically, and ethically, participants came away with a new appreciation of the possibilities religious studies has to offer—for students, for the public, and for themselves.

Daniel Winchester is a Ph.D. student in the sociology department at the University of Minnesota. He studies culture and religion.

Generous support for this workshop came from the following sponsors: the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, The Office of the Vice-President for Research (RCR Continuing Education Grant), the Institute for Advanced Study, the Religious Studies Program, and the Sundet Chair in New Testament and Christian Studies.
In today’s world, the Bible is commonly looked at from two different perspectives. One is that it is a set of religious texts, or sacred scripture, providing a foundation for widespread religious beliefs. The other, from a more secular perspective, is that it is simply an ancient document filled with mythology—leaving us little or nothing to analyze. Both of these views bring challenges to the academic study of the Bible. University of Minnesota professor Bernard M. Levinson takes these challenges head on, showing his students and readers the power and importance of biblical studies.

Levinson, who conducts research in biblical and Near Eastern studies and law, admits that even he wasn’t always interested in the Bible. “I actually got pulled into it kicking and screaming,” he notes. But as an undergraduate at York University in Toronto, he found himself in a class called Classical and Biblical Backgrounds to Later Western Literature. He became fascinated with the impact of the Bible on literary works and Western intellectual history. Today, with groundbreaking publications focusing on biblical and cuneiform law and inner-biblical exegesis, Levinson has become a leading scholar of the Hebrew Bible.

Aware that many of his students have formed opinions of the Bible before they even enter his classroom, Levinson admits he has to get creative to inspire his students: “I have to try to make the Bible, in some ways, strange.” One of his larger lecture classes, Bible: Context and Interpretation, for example, was designed so that students not only learn a certain amount of essential content about the Bible, but that they also reflect upon their assumptions of it. “It’s only when students see what they are projecting onto the Bible, and how there is a gap between what a text actually says and what they take for granted from the beginning, that they can learn to think,” says Levinson. To promote this idea, Levinson helps students paint a picture of the cultural world from which the Bible comes, emphasizing the fact that the Bible didn’t just fall out of the sky. “The major paradigm that I try to get across is that the Bible is a literary canon, that it is the product of authors, of thought, and of labor.”

In fact, Levinson’s latest acclaimed research concentrates on the intellectual creativity of those responsible for the Bible. In his book Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel (Cambridge University Press, 2008), Levinson focuses on transgenerational punishment (the idea that God punishes later generations for the sins of prior generations) in Exodus 20:5-6. He uses it as a case study, tracing the way the authors of the Bible interpreted, challenged, and then reworked previous texts and traditions within the Bible.

Levinson’s careful research in Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel challenges modern perspectives on the Bible. It argues that the editors and redactors of the Bible were not trying to promote a single, univocal “truth” or ideology when conducting their work, but instead created a remarkable text that was unusually inclusive. “I think potentially, the editors of the Pentateuch consciously sought to create a text to serve as a compromise document to include different sociological groups within Israel without privileging one voice or one group or one ideology over another.” He believes the editors of the Bible chose to weave these texts together into something that valued inclusiveness and debate over one single set of interests. In this way, the limited set of Biblical texts—the canon—allows for critical reflection upon the textual tradition and “invites constant, continuing renewal.”

Still, some current religious traditions are opposed to the idea of there being critique and debate within the Bible. Levinson sees the irony in this. “Both the ancient synagogue and the ancient church were much more intellectually open than we now give them credit for.
The graduate minor in religious studies is available to masters and doctoral students in relevant fields such as English, classics, anthropology, philosophy, journalism, etc. Each student is under the general direction of members of the graduate faculty who represent a broad spectrum of disciplines.

Students study a range of religious phenomena by
• interpreting religious text
• tracing the development of institutions and practices
• examining the experiences and histories of specific communities
• exploring the intersections between religious belief and practice and their social and cultural contexts

Levinson has some concerns when it comes to academic study of the Bible. He believes there is as much lack of knowledge about the ancient Near East and about biblical scholarship as there is illiteracy about contemporary developments in science. “I think today people have a tendency within civil society to reject the Bible because of the way certain groups represent religion and associate it with particular political agendas. The public voice of religion in American society is usually not one informed by academic religious studies.” Levinson finds this unsatisfactory. He believes that studying the Bible can teach us not only about its authors’ values, but also about their creativity when it comes to a stronger model of social inclusion and respect for difference.

Levinson also thinks we can learn something from studying the biblical texts that matter in the American legal context. “I see an analogy with contemporary debates about the role of the Supreme Court relative to the constitution.” According to Levinson, issues such as how to understand the role of the Supreme Court in interpreting the American constitution are similar to, and can be illuminated by, the way authors in ancient Israel and early Judaism handled authoritative texts.

Levinson’s work is wide-ranging, with topics from neo-Assyrian vassal treaties to the Dead Sea Scrolls. His interests extend into the modern period. He is about to publish the first full English translation of an essay by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) on the Ten Commandments, placing that essay in its cultural context as it constructs a myth of German identity. Another project investigates the transformation of the discipline of theology in Germany under National Socialism during the period 1934–1945. A book on divine revelation examining the role of authors and of editors is underway. No matter what the topic, Levinson’s work demonstrates the complex and intellectual nature of the Bible. In the face of popular opinions, Bernard Levinson continues to challenge back, proving that the Bible is more than just an ancient text. In his opinion, if we would only look deeper, the Bible can be quite cutting edge.

Bernard M. Levinson holds the Berman Family Chair in Jewish Studies and Hebrew Bible at the University of Minnesota. His home department is Classical and Near Eastern Studies and he is also appointed to the Law School as an affiliate faculty member. He serves on the steering committee for religious studies and previously directed Jewish Studies. For a complete list of publications visit: http://cnes.cla.umn.edu/faculty/Levinson.html
Welcome back, Colleagues!

It is a pleasure and an honor to greet you in service of the new Program in Religious Studies. The program is all the friendly faces and great experiences you remember with added emphasis on interdisciplinary study and dual focuses on culture and text. We are expanding rapidly under the leadership of our director, Jeanne Kilde, and the Religious Studies Steering Committee—an experienced group of administrators and top scholars specializing in fields of religious studies from Islamic literature to Chinese religious culture, the ancient Near East to American religion. In fact, we have recently passed the 50 majors mark—the largest number of majors ever to participate in religious studies at the University of Minnesota. With the continued support of the College of Liberal Arts and the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies, we are poised to share our vision of religion on the national stage.

We would like to hear from you, our esteemed alumni, as the program continues to grow. Please visit our alumni Web site at www.religiousstudies.umn.edu/alumni and share your accomplishments, current interests, and past experiences. We would like to feature your stories in next year’s magazine! Contact me at renwick@umn.edu if you would like to submit a brief article highlighting your professional accomplishments.

We are building an extended community with roots in religious studies at the University of Minnesota. No matter your level of degree, interest, or participation, past or present, I look forward to catching up, introducing myself, and serving the RS community.

In Peace,

Derk Renwick
M.A. religions in antiquity (2007)