Bridging Cultures: From Minneapolis to Cordoba

Philip Sellew receives the “Red” Motley Teaching Award

Text and Orality with Wendy Doniger
Religion is a fundamental part of human experience and meaning. It informs all aspects of human society, from individual and collective identity to personal relationships to political sympathies to scientific investigation to artistic creativity. The study of religion, as a result, ranges widely across human experience and the various academic disciplines.
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The Program in Religious Studies at the University of Minnesota 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 importance of studying religion is brought home to me every time I open a newspaper. From the short-lived but red-hot dispute over the construction of an Islamic center near the Twin Towers site in lower Manhattan that erupted in August, to the disparaging of Haitian Vodou by Christian fundamentalists after the January 2010 earthquake, to the decision to have President Obama refrain from visiting the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar, India, during the fall, religion is in the news as never before.

Here at the Program in Religious Studies, our undergraduate majors and minors and our graduate minors are exploring these situations and developing the knowledge sets and analytical skills necessary to fruitfully contribute to these important national and international conversations about religion. Courses such as Professor Kirsten Fisher’s “Religion and the U.S. Founding: Contests Then and Now over the Place of Religion in Politics,” Professor Iraj Bashiri’s “Islam and the West,” and Professor Penny Edgell’s “Religion and Public Life in the United States” are only a few of the many courses we offer that encourage students to engage with contemporary issues of religion in society.

Given the prominence of Islam in the news, we are also committed to presenting accurate information about Islamic religious traditions. To that end, we are delighted to have been awarded a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to participate in their Bridging Cultures initiative. Our contribution will be a three-day conference titled “Shared Cultural Spaces: Islam and the West in the Arts and Sciences,” organized by religious studies core faculty members Nabil Mater (English) and Bill Beeman (Anthropology) and myself. This conference will bring together scholars from across the United States to examine the historical interplay between Islamic and Western philosophy, science, art, architecture, and media, from the twelfth-century to the present.

The centerpiece of the conference will be a dramatization of the twelfth-century philosophical novel, Hayy Ibn Yaqzan, by Ibn Tufayl. The story is of an orphaned boy, raised by a gazelle, who, as he grows into an adult, teaches himself about science, philosophy, morality, and ultimately God through careful examination of nature and without the usual mediating influence of society. Translated over the centuries into many languages, the book became the inspiration behind Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe in the early eighteenth century. The story continues to fascinate us, with the most recent iteration appearing in the film Castaway, with Tom Hanks. Our play, titled Journey, is written and directed by New York-based Iranian-American director Mohammad B. Ghaffari and will feature local performer Eddie B. Oroyan in the lead role.

This exciting event will be followed by a workshop of religious studies faculty and community partners aimed at developing a program designed to share the information imparted at the conference with a national audience.

Through their coursework and events such as this, our students are immersed in the religious thought and practices of a variety of traditions, deepening their understanding of how religions function and their ability to think through issues across traditions. It is precisely these knowledge sets and skills that are increasingly required of professionals in fields from education to public policy, from business and law to health and medicine. As religious studies graduates hit the job market, their knowledge about religion provides a significant value added with employers who realize that negotiating the challenges of contemporary religious diversity is now a necessity for success. It is the goal and privilege of the Program in Religious Studies to assist the next generation of participants in this public conversation by preparing them to shoulder the responsibilities of leadership in a religiously diverse world.
Bridging Cultures:
From Minneapolis to Cordoba

By Nabil Matar, Professor of English

Professor Nabil Matar previews the “Shared Cultural Spaces: Islam and the West in the Arts and Sciences” conference in 2011, part of the National Endowment for the Humanities Bridging Cultures initiative and sponsored by the Program in Religious Studies.

With a grant from the Bridging Cultures rubric of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Program in Religious Studies at the University of Minnesota will be hosting a conference on “Shared Cultural Spaces: Islam and the West in Arts and Sciences.” The event will include two keynote speakers, individual panels on architecture, science, philosophy, and technology, and the theatrical premiere of the famous twelfth-century story of Hayy ibn Yaqzan. Participants and guests will also visit the Minneapolis Institute of Arts for a special exhibit, meet with Twin Cities cultural groups, and, it is hoped, enjoy stomping in the snow.

The conference celebrates the Humanities in Islamic civilization, beginning with the work of an Andalusian Muslim of Cordoba who captured in his life and single remaining work the multi-faceted quest for the divine. Student to Avicenna, Ibn Tufayl was a jurist and a physician, a philosopher and an astronomer. His philosophical tale about an abandoned child on a solitary island described the ascent of the mind through knowledge of the physical toward the metaphysical. It defined the empirical-cum-intellectual road that leads to fulfillment in God.

The keynote speaker is Wadad Qadi, the Avalon Foundation Distinguished Service Professor Emerita in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago and former editor of the Journal of Near Eastern Studies, whose work on early Islamic history, philology, and theology has blazed new directions in scholarship, as witnessed by the Ph.D. students who still seek her guidance—even in her retirement. In the course of the journey, Hayy employed the forms of learning that had reached their zenith in the World of Islam, from the Atlantic to the Indian Oceans. The conference will concentrate on some of those forms, showing not only their indebtedness to Greek, Persian, and Indian sources, but also their impact on the medieval history of Spain and France, Italy and Germany. The story of Hayy drew on earlier narratives, going back to Sanskrit, but then it was translated into Latin in 1671 in England. It was reputed to have influenced Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, which, in turn, was translated back into Arabic in 1810 by John Lewis Burckhardt. While Arabic literature was making its way into the European imagination, the Arabic writings of Muslim astronomers were still being read, and annotated in Latin, in the sixteenth-century libraries of the “Renaissance” at the same time that mathematical theories, names, and words (from “admiral” to “zero”) and literary innovations were becoming part of the swirl that ultimately produced our modern world.

And it is toward the modern that the conference leads as the participants explore the intellectual and cultural diversity that emanated from the Qur’anic foundation. One of the most exquisite legacies of the civilization of Islam has been its architecture, which is why a number of papers will focus on both the artistic and the social character of Islamic buildings, past and present, in the capitals of the Islamic Empires as well as in the small mosques of urban America. In America, the Moorish style of architecture will also be examined, having entered popular culture in the 1880s and decorating theaters, universities, and hotels from Atlanta and Tampa to Chicago and San Diego.
When Hayy reached a certain stage in his mystical ascent, he danced—which is why dance will also be part of the conference investigation of Islam, especially in southeast Asia. One panel will focus on problems of history and aesthetics in that region, starting from the early modern Islamic Empires (Persian, Mughal, and Ottoman, in the order of their dissolution) to contemporary expressions of political and social reevaluation. Another panel will look at representations of Muslims and the role of the journalist in today’s exchange of information—and misinformation.

The keynote finale will be by Anouar Majid. And if I can venture to guess what his paper will be about, judging from his previous publications (some of which have been through the University of Minnesota Press), then it will be an indictment of the restrictions of orthodoxy; i.e., ALL orthodoxy.
Faculty News

Program in Religious Studies core and affiliate faculty members represent the University of Minnesota’s tripartite mission of academic excellence with accolades for extraordinary education, breakthrough research, and dynamic public engagement:

Iraj Bashiri
Iraj Bashiri’s *Turk and Tur in Ferdowsi’s Shahname* was published by the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, and his study of Jalal al-Din Rumi was published in Iran by Mitra Publishers in 2009. In 2010, Bashiri was interviewed by the BBC for a series called “Great Persians.” Bashiri also participated in the symposium dedicated to the 1310th anniversary of the birth of the Sublime Imam Abu Hanifa, held under the auspices of His Excellency President Emomali Rahmon, who commissioned Bashiri to write the history of Tajikistan’s gaining independence and the subsequent civil war.

Alex Jassen
Alex Jassen was named a McKnight Land-Grant Professor for 2010–12. This award is bestowed upon the most promising junior faculty at the University of Minnesota. Jassen also received a 2009 Summer Stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities for his work in progress on “Religion, Violence, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.”

Ruth Karras
Ruth Karras is the 2010 CLA Dean’s Medalist for excellence in scholarship. She also received a Graduate-Professional Education Award from the University of Minnesota and an American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship for 2010–11 to work on her book on “Quasi-Marital Unions in Medieval Europe.”

Jeanne Kilde
Jeanne Kilde’s new volume, *Nature and Revelation: A History of Macalester College,* was released by the University of Minnesota Press in 2010.

Bernard Levinson
Bernard Levinson was named Scholar of the College 2010–2013 and elected a Fellow of the American Academy for Jewish Research. Levinson has also been invited to serve as the Henry Luce Senior Fellow in Religious Studies at the National Humanities Center in Research Triangle, N.C., for the 2010–2011 academic year. His volume, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel,* was selected for panel review at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, and was recently released in paperback by Cambridge University Press.

Daniel Schroeter
Daniel Schroeter is an editor of and author of sixteen articles in the *Encyclopedia of the Jews in the Islamic World* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). Both online and print editions were published in 2010.

Ozayr Saloojee
Ozayr Saloojee recently had a chapter published in the *Nexus Network Journal* (12, no. 2 [2010]: 213–237). It was titled: “The Next Largest Thing: The Spatial Dimensions of Liturgy in Eliel and Eero Saarinen’s Christ Church Lutheran, Minneapolis.”

J. B. Shank
J. B. Shank has been awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities Enduring Questions course development award. Shank’s course, to be offered through religious studies, will ask, “What is the nature of the cosmos and how do we, as humans, find our place within it?” A description of the proposed course is available on the religious studies website.
Religious Studies

Philip Sellew, recipient of the Motley Exemplary Teaching Award, gently guides his students on a journey of discovery.

As a public university, Minnesota’s religious studies offerings focus not on indoctrinating any particular belief, but in understanding the historical, cultural, and societal significance of religion.

Jesus and the Gospels

So when a first-year student here takes Philip Sellew’s Jesus in History class, she might have her own faith or assumptions challenged—but in a good way. “Students in their first year of college are in a searching mode,” says Sellew, an associate professor in the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies. “It’s not my job to tell students what to think, but to get them to start noticing things and thinking about what they believe.”

Coptic and Early Christianity

He is also the U’s Coptic instructor. Coptic was the language of Egypt during early Christian times, and is still used today in Coptic Orthodox ritual, much like how Latin was used in the Roman Catholic mass. It’s an important language in the study of early Christianity, because many of the best preserved Gospel codices have been found in Egypt. Bury a book in Minnesota and in a few years you’ll have mulch. “But bury a book in the desert of Egypt, and 2,000 years later you’ll have a book with some dirt on it,” says Sellew.

His work in Coptic is rewarding, both personally and intellectually. Every time he teaches beginning Coptic he has students from the local Coptic Orthodox community (“They come to class and can sing hymns in Coptic, even though they don’t yet speak it.”). And Coptic, unlike other Biblical-era languages, still maintains some linguistic mysteries that challenge scholars. “It’s rich with possibility,” says Sellew. A future publication project of his will be an anthology of Coptic literature and hymns.

Death and the Ancients—and Us

It’s important to Sellew that his students make personal connections to the world of antiquity and early Christianity. This is perhaps best exemplified in his course Death and the Afterlife. College students are, in Sellew’s opinion, fascinated with questions surrounding death and what may come afterward. Through grounding the class in the ancient world—Gilgamesh, Augustine—and layering on films, music, and poetry from today, Sellew’s students examine their own beliefs about death and the afterlife. They consider why we care about this most mysterious of life’s mysteries, and what the ancients were facing as they created their own death and afterlife myths and practices.

It’s his gentle guidance, his respect for his students’ varied beliefs, that has made him such a beloved professor and a recipient of a 2010 Arthur “Red” Motley Exemplary Teaching Award. The nomination letters from his former students were littered with words like influential, concerned, caring, and respectful. “My role is not to convince them of what version or another of the Gospels is correct,” he says, as way of example. “Students should have an experience of self-discovery.” And whether his students are exploring the eighteen versions of the Gospels, learning the language and culture of Coptic Egypt, or exploring two millennia of death rituals, Professor Sellew will, in the words of a former student, “impart the inspiration and empowerment to pursue our own questions, in our own work.”
Harold A. Anderson Scholarship

Three outstanding religious studies undergraduate students received the Harold A. Anderson Scholarship in 2009–2010. Jacob Berres plans to study Islam, Judaism, and Christianity before pursuing a graduate degree in global studies, international affairs, or political science. Anthony Meyer is an avid writer and plans to study biblical criticism in preparation for graduate study in divinity school. Carl Moerschbacher is working on Greek and Hebrew language acquisition as well as text criticism and biblical exegesis. Congratulations to three motivated junior scholars!

Religion, Arts, and Diversity League

An outgoing group of religious studies majors worked tirelessly to form a brand new campus community student group in spring 2010. The Religion, Arts, and Diversity (RAD) League will hold monthly film screenings and organize a local lecture series. Work has already begun on an online religious studies undergraduate journal, providing a medium for students to publish their work. The RAD League is an interdisciplinary student group by design and encourages members affiliated with all religions, majors, and campus communities to join. Contact the program directly for more information and stay tuned for developments.

Religious Studies on Facebook

New in 2010, the Program in Religious Studies is on Facebook! Visit us for announcements, information about upcoming events, discussions, and a growing online community. Many alumni and affiliated members of the community have already become “friends” of the Program in Religious Studies at the University of Minnesota. “Like” us on Facebook at http://www.facebook.com/relsatumn

Undergraduate News

Strong student community ties and motivation for academic success define religious studies undergraduates at the University of Minnesota.

2009–2010 Religious Studies Graduating Seniors


Korla Masters Religious Studies B.A., American Indian Studies Minor Senior Project: “Proclaiming Liberation, Naming the Terms: ‘Peace’ and ‘Violence’ Redefined in Latin American Liberation Theology” Faculty Advisor: Patrick McNamara, History


Anna Ostendorf Religious Studies B.A., Anthropology Minor Senior Project: “Perception and Pluralism” Faculty Advisor: Penny Edgell, Sociology


Briana Picotte Political Science B.A., Religious Studies B.A.


Robyn Wohlfeil Religious Studies B.A., Theatre Arts Minor Senior Project: “Reshaping the Modern Day Evangelical and BattleCry: A Persecution Complex, Violent Rhetoric, and a Youth in Revolt against the Culture War” Faculty Advisor: Jeanne H. Kilde, Religious Studies
Graduating senior Ashley Talberg worked with faculty from across the College of Liberal Arts while researching the effect religious belief has on game theory. She learned that there is a connection between trust and religious belief, regardless of religious affiliation.

Where did you get the idea for your research project?

I took a course with Professor Oliver Nicholson on the beginning of the Christian movement (RELS 3541: The Age of St. Augustine of Hippo) and began to wonder what it was about religious belief that inspired martyrdom.

At the time I was working as an undergraduate research assistant in Professor Angus MacDonald III’s TRiCAM laboratory, which is a part of the psychology department’s Research Experience Program (REP). I was entering and analyzing data for the Minnesota Trust Game, previously developed by University of Minnesota economics professor Aldo Rustichini, Professor MacDonald, and Melissa Johnson, which analyses the initial task comprehension of patients with schizophrenia. I began to think about what would happen if subjects were given specific religious-based information about their anonymously paired partners.

How does your research differ from other projects that consider religion and game theory?

My initial research led me to an article by Tan and Vogel, “Religion and Trust: An Experimental Study,” which studied how a person’s score on a religiosity test predicted their level of trust toward others. Tan and Vogel found that religious players were more trusting of their partners if that partner also had a high religiosity score.

Our research differs in that (a) it considers all religious affiliations and (b) it proposes a specific aspect of religious belief as the cause of trusting behavior. First, we solicited participation from members of various religious traditions and then we gave them two pieces of information about their anonymous partner: (1) religious affiliation and (2) whether or not the partner believed in divine justice.

What is the most important information you learned from your research?

The most important information we learned is that belief in divine justice, or divine consequences based on present actions, does indeed inspire trusting behavior.

How did you learn about opportunities to work closely with faculty?

I learned about working with faculty from my psychology advisor, Therese DeVine. I enjoyed working with Professor MacDonald in the past and approached him about registering as a REP research assistant in his lab. I was able to earn class credit and work closely with other researchers, including Melissa Johnson, a graduate student colleague, who encouraged me to ask Professor MacDonald to support a project that combined religion and the Minnesota Trust Game. He agreed to sponsor the research but recommended that I find a second advisor to support the religious aspect of the project.

Jeanne Kilde recommended sociology Professor Penny Edgell, whose own research demonstrated that atheists are the least trusted religious group in America. By the end of the project I had more help than I ever anticipated, including support from Social Behavioral Sciences Laboratory technicians and psychology faculty who allowed me to visit their classrooms and solicit volunteers.

Does your research have potential application outside of academia?

I do feel that my research has the potential to make an impact on the public sphere because it demonstrates trusting behavior on an economic level. Determination of the factors that elicit trusting behavior is important because it occurs all the time in social settings.

What experiences influenced your decision to minor in religious studies?

I chose to minor in religious studies because of my experience on this project. Religion is very important to many people and, as a psychologist, I will be a more productive researcher with an understanding of religious diversity.

How will you use what you’ve learned from your research in the future?

In the future I hope to run additional studies on trust and religious belief and perhaps one day publish my work. In the meantime, I plan to build on the knowledge and experience I’ve gained from this project in graduate school.

Ashley Talberg

Student Spotlight
By Derk Renwick

Graduating senior Ashley Talberg worked with faculty from across the College of Liberal Arts while researching the effect religious belief has on game theory. She learned that there is a connection between trust and religious belief, regardless of religious affiliation.
Graduate Studies News

By Ann B. Waltner, Director of Graduate Studies for Religious Studies, Professor of History, and Director of the Institute for Advanced Study

Why should you think about doing a graduate minor in Religious Studies?

The graduate minor in the Program in Religious Studies provides a structured way for students who are interested in religion, no matter what their disciplinary focus, to do systematic coursework in religion. Students are required to take RELS 5001, a methods course, and three other courses, subject to the approval of the DGS. A member of the Religious Studies graduate faculty must serve on your prelims committee. A minor in religious studies offers you the opportunity to interact with faculty and other graduate students who are interested in similar questions in very different contexts—disciplinary, temporal, geographic.

The Program in Religious Studies is structured in a deliberately interdisciplinary way. We are constantly engaged in conversations across disciplinary lines which help bring the subjects of our study into clearer view. My own training is as a historian of China in the Ming and Qing dynasties. My appreciation for interdisciplinary work has been intensified since I became director of the Institute for Advanced Study, a university-wide interdisciplinary research institute.

If you would like to come talk to me about declaring a graduate minor, please feel free to make an appointment. I can best be reached by e-mail at waltn001@umn.edu.

Graduate Student Reception

Each year, we hold a graduate student reception, which is a terrific opportunity to meet other graduate students with similar interests and to interact in informal ways with faculty.

Religious Studies Graduate Minors Study a Broad Range of Religion

Students minoring in religious studies are interested in a wide range of topics, from the process of religious conversion in contemporary America to religion in antiquity, and their home disciplines range from rhetoric to anthropology to sociology.
Don Burrows
Ph.D. Candidate in Classical and Near Eastern Studies with a Graduate Minor in Religious Studies

Graduate Spotlight
By Don Burrows

Don Burrows, a Ph.D. candidate in Classical and Near Eastern studies, has done work in biblical studies and American religious history in conjunction with his minor in religious studies. He has used this research to examine how American films in the postwar era depicted ancient Rome in light of the “Judeo-Christian tradition” and how those depictions have affected the popular perception of the ancient Romans.

Many probably remember scholars such as Paula Fredriksen finding themselves in the midst of a heated controversy over some of The Passion’s biggest problems—not only its questionable historicity but also those parts of it deemed anti-Semitic. And many probably remember the public martyrdom of Gibson prior to his truly anti-Semitic meltdown during a 2006 DUI arrest. But what struck me as most fascinating, having studied The Passion’s Roman-biblical precursors in postwar American film, was how awkward much of the discussion over The Passion’s perceived anti-Semitism proved to be for Gibson’s staunchest defenders, many of whom regularly invoke the “Judeo-Christian tradition” in America’s culture wars.

The reason is obvious—it highlighted a contention between the tradition’s Jewish and its Christian aspects, which the hyphen failed to elide. Yet in earlier film adaptations, especially those in the postwar period, filmmakers more or less successfully strove to reflect not the “Christian tradition” of the United States, as they did in movies from the 1920s and 30s, but the newly discovered “Judeo-Christian tradition” that emerged among Protestants, Christians, and Jews in World War II and the postwar period. Instead of the wholly Christian persecution narrative of 1932’s Sign of the Cross, the similar 1951 movie Quo Vadis explicitly identified Jesus and his followers as Jews. Instead of a penitent Pontius Pilate and the Jewish high priests mocking Jesus under the cross in 1927’s King of Kings, the 1961 remake of the same name identified the Romans as the executioners and also as oppressors of Israel. And rather than a message of Christian grace over Jewish law as in the original Ten Commandments in 1923, the 1956 remake focused on an antislavery narrative of men belonging “under God” rather than to “the state.” Indeed, postwar biblical movies have often been read as anticomunist scripts where Rome most often serves as a stand-in for the communist state (usually through references to slavery), while Christians and Jews actively resist it in much the same way the “fighting faiths of democracy” resisted Hitler and communism. Thus, in this period Rome becomes not only the executor of Christ, but also the persecutor of Christians and, finally, the oppressors of Jews, who in later films reflect the Zionism of the times by resisting Rome 2,000 years earlier. The best example of this is Ben-Hur, at the end of which the Hur family is miraculously healed following the crucifixion, but which gives no overt indication (unlike the book) of which faith group can lay claim to them. The movie conveniently ends at sunset after the crucifixion but before the resurrection—at that small window in time when Christians were not yet Christians and Jews like the Hurs had not yet had the chance to become Christians—that one Sabbath, in history when all Jews were potential Christians and all Christians still Jews.

Gibson’s reliance on the Gospel narratives, with little added historical context, left those defending his “positive movie about Christ” in an awkward position: they were forced to defend the movie’s divisive script while still invoking the “Judeo-Christian tradition” in culture-war debates. Ultimately, the discomfort that arose thanks to this incongruity of message revealed more about how much American religious identity had changed since the postwar period than anything about the historical attitudes of Romans, Christians, or Jews.
Study Abroad, Study Locally

Students brought the Program in Religious Studies to the far corners of the globe in 2009–2010 while U of M faculty developed a course that explores lived religion in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area.

Last fall, I studied abroad through the Minnesota Studies in International Development program in Jaipur, India. I took classes on international development, country analysis, and Hindi. The highlight of my stay in Jaipur was living with a host family. I enjoyed how different each day was—from the food to holidays to different visitors, and learning how to communicate with my host family.

The other part of my stay was spent in Udaipur, India. I interned and lived at an NGO named Astha, which did advocacy work for women, widows, tribal rights, self-governance education, and literacy training. I observed trainings, taught English, and went on field visits. During these visits, I stayed at two tribal girls’ education camps that Astha had created for young girls and teachers. The girls live at the camp for seven months—it was hard for me to imagine how the girls must have felt to be away from their families for so long. Still, it was incredible to see how they adapted and how willing they were to learn. I had never been so happy than while spending time at these camps. There was so much joy and life.

Yet there were also overwhelming moments of questioning, “Is this my life?” (accidentally ending up at a rat temple, literally filled with rats), or moments of not really knowing what was going on (“pack your bags, you are staying in a village where nobody speaks English”). What I took away from the experience was that, in a place so completely foreign to me, becoming familiar with different places and people gave me a confidence and incredible feeling of comfort as I had never known before.

Religion is significant in many aspects of Indian culture and society. The purpose of my religious studies major—to better understand the human experience—was profoundly illuminated by my stay in India.

Last fall, I travelled to Amman, Jordan, for a semester abroad. During my time there, I greatly enjoyed the Jordanian standard of hospitality, and I was also able to enjoy some great travel experiences both within and outside of Jordan.

When my plane touched down in Amman, I turned to the person sitting behind me and asked him to hand me my bag from the overhead rack. After talking with him, I learned that he was a student at the university where I studied, and he became a good friend—he welcomed a group of my friends to his house for a traditional meal and eagerly showed us around his city. Such an example didn’t seem to be unusual—Jordanians love to welcome foreigners and were truly great hosts and neighbors.

The people in Jordan were wonderful, and they had some great sites to showcase as well. My trip to Wadi Rum was breathtaking—it was a desert valley that was desolate, enormous, and beautiful. I also was able to visit Ajloun, a rare green park, and Karak, where a major Crusader castle still stands. These experiences, in addition to trips to Egypt and Jerusalem, left me with many fantastic memories.

I am still in contact with friends that I made abroad. More importantly, I have the experience of going somewhere completely new, meeting wonderful people, settling in to a different lifestyle, and seeing dazzling locations.
Daniel Amodeo

Daniel explored how the category of “religion” is understood in contemporary Chinese society. The question is one of significant concern, given recent critiques of “religion” as a normative category created by Christians and scholars in the Western world. From these perspectives, the term was used either to designate difference (from what was understood as “real” religion, i.e., Judaism and Christianity) or understood as a “universal” human behavior. Neither of these perspectives is legitimate in a global context, yet the term remains popular.

Daniel’s study uses ethnographic means—personal interviews and an email survey—to gather information on how Chinese people of a number of religious perspectives understand the term “religion.”

Discover Local Religions

The Twin Cities encompasses significant religious diversity. Joining the early established Native American, Christian, and Jewish groups, Muslims arrived in the mid-twentieth century, and changes in immigration laws in 1965 brought Hindus and Sikhs. Recent immigration has brought Hmong indigenous practices; Laotian, Cambodian, and Thai Buddhists; Russian (Orthodox) Jews; East African Muslims and Orthodox Ethiopians, among others.

Religious studies faculty members are developing a course that looks at the varieties of religious practice in the Twin Cities as a way of exploring world religions. It will look at Native American practice as well as the religious practices of immigrants, from Scandinavian Lutherans to Somali Muslims. The course will stress the ways in which global religions have become neighborhood practices in the Twin Cities. It will investigate not only the religions in and of themselves but the ways in which they interact (both positively and in tension) to form the Twin Cities religious landscape.
As the students left campus last May, a group of religious studies scholars from around the Twin Cities area descended on the Program in Religious Studies for a day-long workshop on “Text and Orality” within the study of religion. Noted scholar of Hinduism Dr. Wendy Doniger, from the University of Chicago, kicked off the day with an excellent lecture on the use and ramifications of these categories in the study of Hinduism.

Her enlightening paper pointed out that our general assumption that information conveyed in written form is more fixed and permanent than that conveyed orally is severely challenged, if not disproved, by two seminal Hindu works, the *Rig Veda* and the *Mahabharata*. The *Rig Veda*, for instance, transmitted orally for centuries, was carefully memorized and conveyed, word for word, even intonation for intonation. It was an extremely “fixed,” even frozen “text.” The *Mahabharata*, in contrast, was transmitted orally but also written down, and the extant written versions vary a great deal. This text was clearly understood to be quite fluid by those who wrote down versions of it. Doniger examined a number of related issues in her discussion of the social class and gender ramifications of many other works. Formal responses to Dr. Doniger’s paper were provided by Dr. Simona Sawhney of the Asian Language and Literatures Department (ALL) and Dr. James Laine of Macalester College and were followed by a lively discussion among all the workshop participants.

That afternoon, scholars from several CLA departments, including Classical and Near Eastern studies, ALL, history, and writing studies, presented papers on issues pertaining to text and orality in Buddhism, biblical studies, and Native American studies.
The Program in Religious Studies, with a grant from the National Endowment for Humanities, presents:

Journey

by
Mohammad B. Ghaffari

Presenting a dramatic performance and subsequent discussion of one of the spiritual and scientific masterpieces of the medieval Islamic world:

Ibn Tufayl’s Hayy ibn Yaqzan

Thursday, February 24, 2011
Friday, February 25, 2011
Saturday, February 26, 2011
All performances at 8:00 p.m.
Kilburn Arena Stage,
Rarig Center
West Bank campus, U of M

Executive Producer: William O. Beeman
Director and Playwright: Mohammad B. Ghaffari

All performances are free and open to the public.
Seating is limited, so reserve your seats today at:
http://z.umn.edu/hayyjourney

Calendar of Events 2010–2011

RS Winter Luncheon
9 February 11:30–1:00 pm
Nicholson Hall 135
Gathering the religious studies community for information and camaraderie mid-way through the academic year.

Sharing Cultural Spaces: Islam and the West in the Arts and Sciences
24–26 February, 2011
With a grant from the NEH, the Program in Religious Studies will be hosting a conference on “Shared Cultural Spaces: Islam and the West in Arts and Sciences.” The event will include two keynote speakers, individual panels on architecture, science, art, and technology, and the theater premiere of Journey, based on Ibn Tufayl’s Hayy ibn Yaqzan.

MN Religion and Society Workshop
16 April 12:30–4:00 pm
Nicholson Hall 135
Announcing the Minnesota Religion and Society Workshop (MRSW), open to local scholars and advanced graduate students who are engaged in the empirical study of religious communities or conceptual work on religion and society.

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

Program in Religious Studies 2011 Summer Workshop
TBA
125 Nolte Center
Each year the Program in Religious Studies offers a summer workshop facilitated by a renowned specialist in a particular subject in the field of religious studies. Stay tuned for more information about this year’s topic.
The Career and Legacy of Calvin J. Roetzel

On Wednesday, December 9, 2009, Professor Calvin Roetzel, Sundet Chair in New Testament and Christian Studies, gave his final classroom lecture as a University of Minnesota professor, culminating a long career as an internationally recognized New Testament and Pauline scholar. Students and colleagues, former and current, gathered alongside members of the community to honor Professor Roetzel as he shared how his thoughts on the figure of Paul have changed over the course of his forty-two-year teaching career.

Cameron Ferguson, current graduate student in Classical and Near Eastern Studies, Religions in Antiquity, and an advisee of Professor Roetzel, shares his appreciation for the lecture, Professor Roetzel’s career, and his impact as a teacher and mentor.

It is difficult to lay adequate value or meaning upon Professor Calvin Roetzel’s final classroom lecture as a University of Minnesota employee. Roetzel taught for over forty years and established himself as one of the top New Testament and Pauline scholars in the world. His introductory textbook on Paul—The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context—has become the definitive manual used by instructors throughout the country for introducing their students to the itinerant apostle.

Professor Roetzel’s final lecture focused on how his views on Paul have changed over the course of his distinguished career. For example, he discussed Paul as an organic intellectual. Paul’s perceptions on community, theology, teaching, and law—these are not static entities—are changed and adapted as Paul is confronted with new circumstances and challenges. Perhaps more importantly, Roetzel discussed at length Paul’s revolutionary rethinking of the crucifixion, an image intended to provoke fear and revulsion in the minds of the ancients. For Paul, the cross became a symbol of strength and suffering, a mark of discipleship.

Watch the full video of Roetzel’s final classroom lecture, including heartfelt questions from colleagues, at: http://z.umn.edu/sundetroetzel

Following the lecture students and colleagues gathered for a reception, sharing stories and experiences with old friends. Special acknowledgment was given to Ann Lewis for introducing Roetzel’s lecture, Professor Douglas Olson for his role in luring Roetzel to his position as the Sundet Chair in New Testament and Christian Studies, and Professor Bernard Levinson, Jeanne Kilde, and the religious studies staff for donating time and resources to the occasion.

Sundet Lecture in Honor of Calvin J. Roetzel


Co-sponsored by the Program in Religious Studies, the Sundet Chair in New Testament and Christian Studies, and the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies, Mitchell’s lecture focused on the relationship the New Testament and early Christian writings have to the wider Greco-Roman world and literary culture in which they were composed, as well as on the legacies of those texts as sacred scripture for Christian communities in later antiquity and beyond.

Watch the full video of Margaret Mitchell’s lecture at: http://z.umn.edu/sundetmitchell

The Roetzel Family Lecture in Religious Studies brings students and scholars together for engaging conversations about popular religious studies topics.
In May of 1936 when I was just four, I wandered into the kitchen to see my father and mother engaged in a most earnest conversation. I stood transfixed and stock still, eavesdropping. For the first time that I can recall, I saw my mother cry. This should have been a happy day. My oldest brother, Franklin, had just graduated from high school as the valedictorian of his class and he hoped to go to college to study physics and be active in one of the technical aspects of the then new and exciting area of radio transmission and reception.

But in the depths of the Great Depression, there were few extra dollars to be earned from the produce of a subsistence farm, and besides there were four younger children to be clothed, fed, and schooled, and the cost for college, though small, was still significant and out of reach for a poor farm family. I vividly recall my father soberly noting these realities and saying, “I just don’t see how we can do it,” and my mother weeping and replying, “as long as there is a will there is a way; we’ll find a way.”

When those pious and devoted parents died they left $2,700 in a bank account, a section (640 acres) of land, and a recorded income too small to be taxed. They also left a dog-eared Bible, and one priceless treasure for their children—a love of and devotion to education—even though formal education for them had ended after the third grade. It is from that rich legacy that this gift comes and is given to honor those parents, Frank E. and Myrtle D. Roetzel, to assist the Program in Religious Studies at the University of Minnesota and to expand the vision of University students.

And they did! Franklin ultimately completed a master’s degree with honors in history, and eventually became the principal of a high school just five miles away, where he served for twenty years. He became a respected and generous community leader. All four of us remaining later received the same encouragement from our parents, and all had some experience of higher education.

A hallmark of the Program in Religious Studies is its desire and ability to reach out to students and scholars outside of the University of Minnesota. The up-and-coming “Shared Cultural Spaces: Islam and the West in the Arts and Sciences” conference is a large-scale example of this, bringing in not only scholars from across the country to present papers, but including faculty members from area colleges who are able to take advantage of the lineup of researchers who are committed to the conference.

Another typical example is the recent workshop conducted by Wendy Doniger from the University of Chicago. Her event here on campus was attended by our faculty and students, and also by scholars from United Theological Seminary, Macalester College, Morningside College, Saint Cloud State University, Carleton College, and Hamline University.

Programming like this creates interaction and dialogue among scholars in the region, which can only enhance research coming out of the University and provide unique, high-level learning experiences for our students.

As the Program in Religious Studies continues to grow and further collaborate with community leaders and educational institutions, both regionally and nationally, support from alumni and friends is vital. You are invited to join those who have already made a gift to help sustain the Program in Religious Studies and grow the program’s reputation for excellence. An increase in giving sends a very strong message: alumni believe in their department, and they want to support the important work of the faculty and the recruitment and retention of the best and brightest students. A gift to the Program in Religious Studies is a vote of confidence in the direction and priorities of the program.