

# DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

## NEWSLETTER

### A Note from the Chair

*Professor Kevin Trainor*



Greetings from 481 Main Street, and welcome to our annual newsletter. The biggest news of the year is the changes to the department curriculum that are now official. The changes reflect a commitment to streamlining and clarifying the structure of the requirements for the Religion major and minor. We grouped all of our courses under two general categories: "investigating traditions and cultures," and "analyzing

problems in religion." Other changes include a move toward diversifying our intro-level classes, resulting in a new entry-level course on Islam, and two new advanced seminars (the Research in Religion Practicum and the Senior Colloquium), which will take the place of our long-standing capstone course, Senior Seminar. You can get a sense of the exciting and diverse work of this year's Senior Seminar participants in the story on page eight.

These curricular changes are timely, as we begin a major review of the Religion Department program, part of a regular ten-year review cycle under the supervision of UVM's Faculty Senate. Next year two external academic advisors will be visiting the department in the fall to assist us, and we look forward to benefitting from their fresh perspectives. We are also pleased to be able to participate in a first-ever national survey of the alumni/ae of undergraduate religion programs, conducted by the American Academy of Religion. We were fortunate to receive an AAR seed grant to help us expand contact information for alums; no doubt many of you reading this were contacted as part of this outreach effort. The survey will help us understand the long-range impact of majoring in religion. While we will have to wait to get the results of the survey, it has already been a pleasure to communicate with so many of you in the process of expanding our list of e-mail addresses, and to hear about what you have come to value in your studies in the department.

The department continues to explore ways to improve our connections with current students and our graduates. We are in the process of revising our department website to include more links to news about religion-related events both on and off campus. We are also regularly updating our Facebook page, have set up a Twitter link, and are developing a new department blog which (see pg. 10 below). In the meantime, we're always happy to hear from our graduates, whether by e-mail, through Facebook, or in person, and we encourage any of you who are in the neighborhood of 481 Main to drop by and say hello.



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## Faculty News

### Erica Andrus

Professor Andrus presented a paper at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Baltimore last November called "The Case of the Disappearing 'Oriental Monk': *The Big Lebowski*, Fan Religion, and the Consumption of 'Asian Wisdom.'" She also completed revisions on her essay on *Battlestar Galatica* and the Laura Roslin memorial fan community. This essay will be published in the fall of 2014. In the spring of 2014 Professor Andrus participated in the Writing in the Disciplines Institute, where she made improvements to her course, "Religion in America." She also taught a course on "Religion, Film, and Television" during the spring 2014 semester.

### Thomas Borchert

Professor Borchert received two grants to support his new research on Buddhism in Thailand. The first was a Blakemore Refresher Grant from the Blakemore Foundation which funded two months of study of Thai at Chiang Mai University. He also was awarded a Fulbright Senior Scholar award for six months of study in Bangkok on the relationship between being a monk and being a citizen. As part of his Fulbright fellowship he is currently a Visiting Research Fellow in the International PhD Programme in Buddhist Studies at Mahidol University. In March, 2014 Professor Borchert also presented his research at two scholarly venues in Singapore. The first paper, entitled "Cooperation or Conflict? Thinking about the Implication of National and Religious Identity of Monks in Thailand," was delivered at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. The second talk on "Cosmopolitan Practices and Monastic Education in Contemporary Buddhism" was presented to the Asia Research Institute at the

National University of Singapore. He is currently living in Bangkok with his 13 year-old son, who is learning how to navigate buses and trains without being able to speak or read the language. Read more about Professor Borchert's research in Thailand on page 5 of this newsletter.

### Vicki Brennan

Professor Brennan is currently developing a new research project that examines the relationships between sound, urban space, and religious publics. The project was inspired by her participation in a faculty workshop on geo-spatial technologies during the summer of 2013. She intends to study how people experience the urban via sound, the central role that listening plays in the formation and organization of religious communities, as well as how knowledge about urban environments is produced via the senses and the body. She plans to integrate geo-spatial and sound recording technologies into the analysis and presentation of her data. She received a REACH grant from UVM in order to support this exciting new research direction. Professor Brennan is also completing work on two book-length projects on Christian music in Nigeria, the first examining musical performance and church worship, the second focused on the gospel music industry in Lagos. In November 2013 she presented a paper entitled "Sounding Surrender: Registers of Weakness and Strength in Nigerian Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity" at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Professor Brennan also taught two new courses this year. In the fall 2013 semester she revived the popular course on "Mysticism, Shamanism, Spirit Possession" and during the spring 2014 semester she offered a new seminar on "Religion and Media."

**Faculty Research  
(continued)****Anne Clark**

Professor Clark presented her current research as an invited speaker at the New England Medieval Conference in November. Her paper, "Channeling Religious Emotion: Using an Illustrated Prayerbook," examined the relationship between texts and images in stimulating emotional response for the user. The manuscript that is the basis of this research (now at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich), is particularly interesting for its unusual juxtaposition of texts and images, which raises complex questions about how a reader/viewer might have used the book. Also, because the manuscript is known to have been produced for a woman, it allows the exploration of gender expectations in medieval Christian religious life. She is continuing to work on a larger project on this manuscript. Hildegard of Bingen remains on her research agenda, and she completed an article on Hildegard for *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Arts*. Her article, "Teaching Dante as a Visionary Prophet," was published in the Winter 2013 volume of *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*. She also developed a new course for the Honors College, "Religion and Ways of Knowing." This course brought the study of religion into the first-year seminar experience for HCOL students. It was an exciting new departure for Professor Clark because of its comparative focus and because of the group projects that were a major focus of the course. For these projects, students did basic ethnographic work (ritual observation and interviews) in four local religious communities (First Baptist Church, Islamic Society of Vermont, Burlington Pentecostal Church, and the Shambhala Meditation Center) and developed fascinating poster presentations and research papers on the various ways in which

religious rituals advanced the formation of communal ties and the consolidation of belief. She looks forward to offering this course again next year.

**Cuong Mai**

Cuong Mai has been on sabbatical the past two semesters working on a book manuscript on death and paradise in early medieval Chinese Buddhism. He looks forward to returning to Burlington this fall to teach sections of REL 021, Intro to Religion: Asian Traditions and REL 107, Religious Perspectives on Death.

**Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst**

Professor Morgenstein Fuerst was elected to the American Academy of Religion's Study of Islam Section's Steering Committee in November 2013, and presented ongoing research at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Islamophobia Conference in Berkeley, CA in April 2014. She is looking forward to spending a majority of the summer in London to continue research on two projects. While in London, she will explore the India Office Records housed at the British Library. The first project centers on archival work, and addresses issues of Muslim subjecthood and belonging during British rule in India. The second is related to expanding her dissertation project, and examines a manuscript that is nothing short of a palimpsest of historical networks: it was written for the British East India Company in Persian and Sanskrit by a Brahmin who had once been an agent of the Mughal Empire. She is also finishing two article-length projects, one on the role of Indian religions in the history of the study of religion and another on Muslim translations of Hindu texts. Professor Morgenstein Fuerst welcomed a daughter in May 2013, and spent Fall 2013 on parental leave. In Spring 2014, she taught Introduction to Religion: Comparative as well as Interpretation of Religion. She has continued to use social media, especially Twitter, to engage students in and outside the classroom. Students



## Faculty News, (continued)

have responded well: REL100 enjoyed internet-meme style Valentines and created their own to summarize key theoretical points of our primary sources. Freud, Geertz, Durkheim, and Müller may never have been this funny – or (as Ilyse hopes) well-remembered by engaged students.

### Richard Sugarman

Professor Sugarman continues to teach courses and develop new research in his key fields of phenomenology, philosophy of religion, and Jewish philosophy. His book *The Promise of Phenomenology: Posthumous Papers of John Wild* edited with R.B. Duncan, was released as an e-book by Lexington Books in 2013. He is presently working on a new book entitled *A Transcending Humanism: Emanuel Levinas and The Bible*. Professor Sugarman serves as Director of the Integrated Humanities Program for first-year students. He has also served as a Senior Adviser to U.S. Senator of Vermont Bernie Sanders (I) and before that, as commissioner of reality appointed by then Mayor Sanders of Burlington.

### Todne Thomas

Professor Thomas's research on African diasporic Christian networks resulted in a number of publications and presentations. Her article, "Pastor, Mentor, or Father? The Contested Intimacies of the Eddie Long Sex Abuse Scandal" appeared in the *Journal of Africana Religions*. In July, 2013 she traveled to Accra, Ghana where she gave a talk entitled, "Problematizing Race, Silencing Ethnicity: Afro-Atlantic Evangelicals and Negotiations of Difference and Cohesion" at the Trans- Atlantic Roundtable on Religion and Race's Black Churches and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Captivities Conference. She also presented a paper entitled "Between the Borders of Blackness: The Alterity of Black Atlantic

Evangelical Communion" at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. In February, 2014 she was invited to give the keynote address at the Jefferson Fellowship Selection Weekend. Professor Thomas is currently collaborating with Dr. Rose Wellman, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in Iranian Studies at Princeton University and Dr. Asiya Malik, independent scholar, on an edited volume tentatively titled *The Sacred Social: Formations of Spiritual Kinship amongst the Abrahamic Faiths*. This edited volume grows out of the intensive academic contributions and discussions that were a part of *The Sacred Social* workshop conducted by Thomas, Malik, and Wellman in March 2014 at the University of Virginia. At that workshop she presented her lecture entitled "At the Crossroads of Spirits, Genealogy, and Institutions: The Fictions, Politics, and Secularisms Shaping Spiritual Kinship." In the spring 2014 semester Professor Thomas also taught a new course on "Religion and the Family."

### Kevin Trainor

Professor Trainor continued his work on the Buddha's Cave in Sri Lanka project. In 2013 an article on this topic entitled "The Buddha's 'Cave of the Midday Rest' and Buddhist Relic Practices in Sri Lanka" was featured in the journal *Material Religion* in a conversation on the contemporary study of relics. He also conducted research last summer in the UVM archives on the study of religion at UVM and presented on this in Sherwood Smith's graduate course, "Challenges of Multiculturalism for Educational & Social Institutions." Professor Trainor applied for and received a seed grant from the American Academy of Religion to support participation in a national survey on the long-range impacts of the Religion major. He also served on the university Incentive-Based Budget Subcommittee on Research & Indirect Cost Recovery.

## Report from Thailand

By Professor Borchert

Since the beginning of January, I have been interviewing monks around Bangkok about how they see themselves as Thai citizens. I have been asking them how they understand their vocation as both monk and citizen, whether these different facets of their identities work together or are ever in conflict. For example, do they have responsibilities, as monks, to society as a whole, or do they see themselves as fully outside it? What rights do they have as monks within Thai society? Perhaps unsurprisingly given that there are nearly two hundred thousand monks in Thailand, their answers are all over the place. Some are deeply engaged in questions of society and politics, and eager to tell me what they think about the current situation in Thailand. Others tell me they find politics boring, and they would rather talk about rituals or the value of meditation.

In Thailand, as well as mainland Southeast Asia more broadly, Theravāda Buddhism is firmly intertwined in the larger fabric of society. In Laos, Thailand and Cambodia, for at least several centuries it has been common practice for men or boys to ordain as novices or monks for as little as two weeks and as long as the rest of their lives. This ordination is often articulated as being part of a responsibility that men have within society, and historically, life in the temple was the place where young men were civilized (ie, “cooked,” *suk* in Thai) into being full members of society.

Temporary ordination has continued into the current moment, though it has changed somewhat. In Thailand, young men will ordain before entering into the military, in order to make merit for their parents (though sometimes they will do it afterwards to atone for any misdeeds they might have done as

soldiers). They often also ordain in order to receive an education that they might not otherwise have access to. More recently, and in response to a decline in ordination over the last decade, it has been common for boys to ordain during school breaks, and this March, temples around Bangkok had posters everywhere inviting boys to spend their break at the school temple. [See picture of a troop of novices in

*Bangkok – they have nametags because their monk teachers won't have had a chance to learn their names yet].*



The centrality of Buddhism to Thai society is the background to my research in Bangkok. In popular ideology, the *sangha*, the community of monks, is understood as being above and outside of society and in particular outside of politics. We can see this in two different moments: the national anthem and elections. Throughout Thailand, at 8 am and 6 pm, the national anthem is played in public. It can't be heard everywhere in a city as large as Bangkok, but it blares from loudspeakers in train stations, at schools, in businesses and in public squares. When this happens, everyone is supposed

to stop walking, stand if they have been sitting, take off their hat if they are wearing one, and listen respectfully (more so if a flag is going up and down). Monks however can ignore this. If they are sitting, they remain sitting; if they are walking they can keep walking. Most often though, monks will simply avoid being present when the anthem is broadcast. In a similar fashion, monks are a disenfranchised group within Thailand, a country where women were enfranchised several decades before the United States. They cannot vote, even though the monks of some other Theravada countries can. My research this spring has been focused on understanding the tension that Buddhist monks in Thailand are central to society



and yet placed outside it at the same time.

Most monks do not make a big deal out of their inability to vote in elections, and they understand that it is a bargain that they have made in exchange for their support they receive in society. As one monk practically put it, “we don’t pay taxes; if we got to vote, we would be responsible for paying taxes as well.” Some say that by voting one is causing divisions in society, and that is contrary to the role that monks should play. However, almost all of the monks I have interviewed have also said that if they *did* have the ability to vote they would be happy to vote. This is interesting in part because while I do not see monks engaging in protests over this disenfranchisement, it points out an implicit fault-line between being a monk and being Thai that could become part of a wider conflict in society.



One set of questions that almost always leads to interesting conversations with both monks and lay folk is about a monk who has become prominent in the last six months, Luang Pu Puttha Issara. Since the end of last year, there have been protests around Bangkok, which have been focused on removing the government from power. In the middle of January, the protesters tried to “Shut Down Bangkok,” setting up protest stages and campsites at key intersections around the city. While they failed to shut the city down, the protests have gone on, and in early May, Yingluck was forced to step down for an abuse of power charge that seemed to many to be suspect.

One of the protest stages was set up by the monk, Putthha Issara, and so instead of living in a *wat*, he has been living at the protest stage, and giving dhamma talks every night (see picture – this screen is in front of a bunker, and the stage is outside the Constitutional Court in northern Bangkok). He has also been involved in negotiations between protestors and the government, and he actively helped shut

down an election place in early February (which led to a gunfight and several deaths). These activities are deeply political, and walk right across the line that most people want to draw – in public – between Buddhism and politics. As a result, everyone – monks and lay people, men and women – has an opinion about Puttha Issara. So, when a monk doesn’t want to talk about politics, I will ask him what he thinks about the actions of this monk. Are his actions good, bad, or something else? Most say to me that they see Puttha Issara’s actions as inappropriate (*may somkhuan*), but they usually do not

want to say that he has committed an infraction against the Buddhist disciplinary codes. Others practically quiver with anger when I asked about what he has done, as they see it as damaging Buddhism. On the other hand, at least one person I talked to compared Puttha Issara to Gandhi

because of his non-violent protest.

To a certain extent, these different responses are reflective of divisions within Thai society that have divided the country for at least a decade, and in the six weeks of research time that I have left they won’t be resolved. There may or may not be another round of elections in July, Puttha Issara may or may not be forced to disrobe for his actions as a protest leader, and one monk I recently spoke to assured me that Thai monks will eventually have the right to vote, but it won’t be for another generation. This is part of what makes the research fascinating, though. What I am really interested in is how people understand the proper role of religion in their societies, and this is always an ongoing project. I will return to Vermont in July and write articles and hopefully a book about these relationships, and the next time I return to Thailand, in one or seven years, people will be continuing to have this conversation, though they will be probably be crystallized around the actions and ideas of a different set of monks.

## Lectures & Special Events

### Public Lectures

**Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst** presented on "Muslim Subjects and Citizens: Lingering Orientalism and Islamophobias"

**Frank Korom**, a Boston University scholar, gave a talk at the Fleming Museum entitled "The Challenges of Making Traditional Tibetan Art."

### Department Barbeque

Students and faculty mingled at the annual barbeque and discussed their plans for the new academic year!



## Marsh Visiting Professor J. Lorand Matory



*Prof. J. Lorand Matory, Iya Osun Doyin Faniyi and Prof. Trainor*

In 2013, Professor Thomas sponsored a winning application that awarded the prestigious UVM Marsh Professorship to J. Lorand Matory, Duke University's Lawrence Richardson Professor of Cultural Anthropology and Director for the Center of African and African American Research. Professor Matory's first visit to UVM took place in April 2014 with a two-week set of events around African and African Diaspora religions that included keynotes and class lectures given by Matory as well as visiting Vodou and Yoruba Priestesses Manbo Maude Evans and Iya Osun Doyin Faniyi. Together, their presentations

and conversations with students, faculty, and community across a variety of settings catalyzed a number of conversations about cultural stigmas against "traditional" African religious practices, race and racism, gender and sexuality, environmentalism, transnationalism and globalization, and healing. The priestesses' keynote discussion was profiled in the Burlington Free Press article "[A Taste of Vodou at UVM](http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/life/hometown/2014/04/08/a-taste-of-vodou-at-uvm/7469371/)" :

<http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/life/hometown/2014/04/08/a-taste-of-vodou-at-uvm/7469371/>.



## Student Research



Students in the Senior Seminar undertook intensive research projects on the following fascinating topics:

**Melissa Aurigemma**, "The New All-American: Professional Football and Christianity in Social Media."

**Mo McGraw Bentley**, "Trials and Tribulations: A Case Study of the Tibetan Diaspora in Darjeeling, India."

**Gina Blacutt**, "ISKCON – A Case Study in Globalization: A Discussion on American Hare Krishna Communities in the 21st Century."

**Colin Bradley**, "Cross-Cultural Examination of Healing by Ayahuasca."

**Grace Buckles**, "Looking at the Templeton Foundation's Place on the Spectrum of Relationships between Science and Religion."

**Maija Castro**, "Healing Touch: Learning Spirituality as a Credit-Bearing Course."

**Marissa Goodkin**, "'Is This Really Where I Belong?': Haredi Men Gaining a Personal Identity within the Close-Knit Haredi Community."

**Chase Manifeste**, "Demonology and Dialectical Imagery: Pentecostal Apocatastasis and the Magic of Interpretation."

**Dillon McConnell**, "Meaning of David Icke: How a Book's 'Moods and Motivations' Produce Religion Panoptically."

**Andrew McCue**, "A Humanity Loved by God: The Christian Humanism of François Mauriac during the Spanish Civil War."

**Daniel Neill**, "Religiosity and Trauma: An Investigation of Jewish Practice during the Holocaust."

**Makenzy Smith**, "Queering Virtual Religious Realities: Social Media as Sites of Identity Mediation."

**Zachary Warner**, "Thailand – Sangha and State: The Complex Relationship between Sacred and Secular."



## Outstanding Senior Major Award

This year the Department's Outstanding Senior Major Award was presented to two graduating students, Gina Blacutt and Andrew McCue. Congratulations to both of them for all of their hard work and dedication to their studies. We wish them the best of luck in the future!



**Gina:** "I'm thankful to UVM for not only welcoming me during some of my more formative years but also for the opportunity to graduate with a double major in Religion and Philosophy and a minor in Anthropology. I am perhaps more thankful to the Religion Department for being full of wonderful people – students and faculty alike. In the past couple of years I've enjoyed great company and conversation as a member of Religion Club, which provided me with a casual environment in which to explore a wide range of topics in the discipline. I've also taken courses with most of the department's current professors, each of whom has been influential in helping me navigate my broader concerns and addressing them more lucidly. Special thanks to Professors Mai, Borchert, and Trainor, for piquing my interest in religion, challenging me to grow as a writer and student, and encouraging my scholarly endeavors, respectively. My immediate plans

following graduation include restoring my abysmal Vitamin D. levels, shopping for books I now actually have time to read, and heading to the D.C. metropolitan area to explore my networking potential. I plan to continue engaging with the study of religion outside the classroom, specifically with regards to my interests in the sociology and globalization of South Asian religious traditions. Once I discover that I'm fully-funded and given a livable stipend I just might head to grad school, where I may develop my philosophical leanings and background in religion into a wealth of knowledge to be rewarded with tenure – I'm sure – in due time."

**Andrew:** "I am from Manchester, MA and my immediate future involves a relaxing summer before I head down to North Carolina to work on a small organic farm for 8 months. I'm hoping this will not only give me a chance to catch my breath from the world of academia, it will also hopefully teach me a thing or two about ethical food production. Afterwards, I hope to work on changing our food systems to make them more equitable, environmentally friendly, and healthy. As a religion major, I particularly enjoyed prof. Cuong Mai's Perspectives on "Death and Dying" and prof. Richard Sugarman's "Religious and Philosophical Perspectives on Time." I've loved learning about tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions in religious thought and practice as well as how they are interpreted or enacted to serve real human needs. I have recently been elected to Phi Beta Kappa and Pi Delta Phi, the French Honors Society. At UVM, I play for the club Squash and the club Ultimate Frisbee teams. In my free time I greatly enjoy biking, skiing, and sailing, as well as cooking and baking."



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## Stay up to Date!

Wondering about upcoming lectures and events? Interested in learning about new courses offered in the department? Want to learn about what your religion professors are researching at the moment? We are launching a new blog, [Religion@UVM](http://blog.uvm.edu/religion/), which will highlight work we do in our classrooms, our research, and our service, as well as highlight the accomplishments of students, visiting guests, and alumni. Check out the blog and if you are interested in contributing please let us know.

<http://blog.uvm.edu/religion/>

You can also learn more about the Religion Department, including a list of course offerings and full faculty biographies, at our official website:

<http://www.uvm.edu/~religion/>



## Keep in Touch!



We want to hear from you. Please get in touch and tell us about you and your family, and your latest successes, career changes, and travels. There are so many ways for you to communicate with the Religion Department:

Keep up with all of the news about the Religion Department through our Facebook page:

<http://www.facebook.com/uvmreligion>

We are now on Twitter: [@REL\\_UVM](https://twitter.com/REL_UVM)

You can also follow individual faculty on Twitter:

Professor Borchert: [@tom\\_borchert](https://twitter.com/tom_borchert)

Professor Brennan: [@vickibrennan](https://twitter.com/vickibrennan)

Professor Morgenstein Fuerst: [@ProfIRMF](https://twitter.com/ProfIRMF)

You can email us at [religion@uvm.edu](mailto:religion@uvm.edu) or write to us at 481 Main Street | Burlington, VT | 05405.

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## Support Undergraduate Research!

The Department invites donations in honor of William E. Paden in support of undergraduate research in Religion at the University of Vermont. Donations to this fund will be used to help students attend conferences and to defray costs associated with student presentations. If you are interested in making a contribution please write a check to the University of Vermont Department of Religion. Checks should be mailed to:

UVM Development Office  
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Burlington, VT 05405

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