



**RUTGERS**  
School of Arts and Sciences

Department of

# Religion

Spring 2020

## Chair's Letter

This has been so far probably the quietest academic year I can remember for the past 17 years with as many as four colleagues on sabbatical during the Fall semester, and three in the Spring semester. We look forward to welcoming them all back in the coming semesters. You can read about Professor Lammerts' interesting activities while on sabbatical in Burma inside this issue of the newsletter.

The most significant development in the department has been Professor Charles Häberl joining through a 25% share of his line with the Department of African, Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Literatures, where he has been based for more than a decade, including as chair for six years. It was not difficult to see why Professor Häberl wished to join us in view of the fact that his research has been to a large extent focused on the Mandaeans. Häberl is a native New Jerseyan, who became interested in this particular community through his Mandaean neighbors around Deal, NJ. He went on to ivy league colleges, Brown and Harvard, obtaining his doctorate in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the latter. His main discipline is therefore philology, and he is particularly interested in religious minorities and endangered languages. Häberl's latest publication is an edition, translation and commentary on the Mandaean *Book of John* (De Gruyter, 2019), which was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. We are looking forward to offering courses in his areas of expertise to our students in the coming

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# Rutgers Religion Newsletter

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## Chair's Letter

years, once he, too, returns from a current sabbatical.

We are also in the process of exciting curricular developments, including the establishment of a graduate Certificate in the Philosophy of Religion, to be jointly offered with the Department of Philosophy, which is consistently ranked one of the top three in the world. In recent years, the Department of Philosophy has recruited experts in the Philosophy of Religion, such as Brian Leftow and Dean Zimmerman, so this will be an excellent opportunity for our students to take their courses. This organic development after years of overlap in terms of common faculty and student interest should be in place for the 2021-22 academic year at the latest.

We have been settling in fully at our home for the past year, at 64 College Ave, and now boast a fully functioning seminar room at last, with the latest wireless and high definition screen projection technology available to us. This is going to be invaluable for our graduate and senior seminars, especially. The main event of this academic year is the Annual Distinguished Lecture, which will be presented by Professor Randall Balmer of Dartmouth College on April 22. We hope to see many of you there.



Professor Jawid Mojaddedi

## Donald Trump and the Death of Evangelicalism

*2020 Distinguished Lecture by Randall Balmer*



image caption



The religion department is excited to announce that Randall Balmer will give the 2020 Distinguished Lecture in Religion, co-sponsored by the Center for Cultural Analysis. A prize-winning historian and Emmy Award nominee, Balmer holds the John Phillips Chair in Religion at Dartmouth College. He earned his Ph.D. from Princeton University in 1985 and taught as Professor of American Religious History at Columbia University for twenty-seven years before joining the Dartmouth faculty in 2012. He has been a visiting professor at Princeton, Yale, Northwestern, and Emory universities and in the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Balmer will discuss “Donald Trump and the Death of Evangelicalism”: The evangelical support for Donald Trump in 2016 represents the consummation of a decades-long dalliance between white evangelicals and the far-right fringes of the Republican Party. It also represents a departure from the distinguished tradition of evangelical social reform dating to the early decades of the nineteenth century. How did evangelicals, once associated with concern for those Jesus called “the least of these,” become Trump’s most reliable constituency?

*Given the uncertainty around COVID-19, this event had to be postponed and will be rescheduled once the university has resumed normal operations. Please check our website: [religion.rutgers.edu](http://religion.rutgers.edu), for updates!*

## Letter from Burma

*D. Christian Lammerts, Associate Professor*



Professor Lammerts

I was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to teach and conduct research in Burma (otherwise known as Myanmar) from December 2019 until December 2020. During this period, I am based in the Department of History at University of Yangon.

University of Yangon is the oldest and most prestigious university in Burma, and one of the oldest in Southeast Asia. In the 1930s, it had a reputation as among the best institutions of higher learning in all of Asia. However, following a military coup in 1962, the fortunes of the school rapidly deteriorated, such that today it is in critical condition. This was hardly the fault of its many excellent and committed faculty members, scholars, or students—decades of isolation from the international community, government neglect, student protests and crackdowns, and a lack of funding, combined to produce these circumstances. Capacity has lately increased on the heels of budding political reforms since 2011, and the condition of the university is gradually improving. In 2020 the university is celebrating its centenary, and I have helped organize various commemorative events in honor of this occasion.

My classes at University of Yangon focus mainly on aspects of Burmese and Southeast Asian history. In this sense my teaching deals with topics less overtly connected with religious studies, and differ from the courses I enjoy teaching so much at Rutgers, most of which are concerned either with the history of Buddhism, law and religion, or comparative Asian religions.

Part of the reason for this is that the critical, academic study of religion does not exist as a discrete discipline in Burma (or almost anywhere else in Southeast Asia). The study of religion tends to be situated, institutionally-speaking, in more theological or confessional contexts—in the monastery, church, mosque, or seminary. The obvious pitfall of this approach is that religion is studied and taught by the faithful, which, while hardly problematic in itself, can result in biased or uncritical approaches and analyses. Within universities in Burma, history departments occasionally offer courses that engage with aspects of religion. And there are departments of “oriental studies,” which teach classical Asian languages such as Sanskrit and Pali as well as, sometimes, Buddhist literature and thought. (The “oriental studies” label, incidentally, is a holdover from the British Empire, to which Burma belonged between 1826 and 1947.) But for several reasons these departments are hardly departments of religious studies in the true sense.

First, their curriculum usually focuses only on one religion: Buddhism. Second, classes are often taught from a confessional perspective, so that they do not differ much from the curriculum followed in a Buddhist university responsible for training monks. The Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Yangon, for example, defines its mission as follows: “For the next generation to know about the culture of Buddhism, to conserve Buddhism; To present a detailed history of Burma related to traditional Buddhist Philosophy; To teach the importance and benefits of Burma’s Buddhist Society.” Indeed, at University of Yangon—a nominally “secular” institution—there are numerous Buddhist ritual



A Buddhist tree altar with offerings, located in the parking lot in front of the Department of History, University of Yangon

events and Buddhism-focused lectures that take place each semester, both campus-wide and at the departmental level. Buddhist shrines are ubiquitous around campus, often affixed to the trunks of trees. Although there are also student groups and activities focused around other faiths—a famous old building on campus is a Baptist church named after the American missionary and lexicographer Adoniram Judson—the prominence given to Buddhism on campus serves to remind students and faculty of other faiths that they are in the minority. Third, classes that deal with Buddhism traffic in fairly circumscribed definitions concerning the scope of the category “religion” itself. Religion is simply defined as a matter of personal devotion, soteriology, ethics, and worship. Religions are hardly studied as complex, pervasive cultural and intellectual phenomena that have impacted a broad range of human endeavors—traversing social, economic, and political domains—far beyond private matters of faith.

When not teaching (or spending time with my preschool-aged daughter) I am usually to be found in the manuscript reading room at Universities’ Central Library, located on the University of Yangon campus, which holds one of the largest collections of premodern Burmese and Pali-language manuscripts in the country. Here I am reading manuscripts related to a couple of new research projects in progress. One of these deals with the relationship between Buddhist inheritance law and merit-making (*dāna*); the other focuses on the religious history of legal ritual (e.g., oaths, ordeals) and forms of evidence, testimony, and witnessing. I have also been spending a bit of time at my desk translating the work of Robert Lingat (1892–1972), a major mid-twentieth-century legal historian of Thai Buddhism, from French into English for publication. I look forward to incorporating some of this new research material into my lectures and seminars when I return to Rutgers in Spring 2021.

The Coronavirus pandemic has created quite a few disruptions locally—including the usual panic buying of toilet paper—but for the moment at least, the universities remain open (alas, not the preschools).

16 March 2020

## Department Profiles

### Eileen Goddard



Eileen Goddard joined our MA program almost two years ago. She came to us from a double career of yoga teaching and theatre staging, preceded by undergraduate degrees in philosophy and creative writing and poetry. At the time she was simply interested in expanding her knowledge of Yoga philosophy with no thought of pursuing her studies at the PhD level, let alone aspiring to a career in the study of religion. Her quest for knowledge for knowledge's sake impressed all the Department faculty, as has her sincerity, integrity, mental acuity, and intense work ethic. It is thus so rewarding not only for her, but for us her mentors, to share that she has been accepted, with full funding, into two PhD programs so far, both of which are among the best in the country in her field. As per the common Hindi phrase: 'Eileen ki jay ho' - all kudos to her!

Evidence of Eileen's exceptional work ethic and academic acumen can be found in her commitment to learning Sanskrit, which, when

she arrived at Rutgers, was no longer being taught in a formal sequence. Eileen nonetheless studied the entirety of the grammar independently over a year with lecturer Robert Lindsey, after which she began participation in an ongoing weekly reading course on the various Sanskrit commentaries of the Gītā with Paul Sherbow. She is presently engaged in a six-week immersion program in Vrindāvan, India, reading pre-modern Sanskrit commentaries related to the topic of her M.A thesis with one of the most preeminent scholars of the 16th century Vrindavan devotional traditions in the world, so this is a rare opportunity for Eileen, but one she so unequivocally deserves. All this was done through her own initiative.

In terms of her M.A. thesis, Eileen became intrigued by the 16th century theology of the Vrindāvan Krishna traditions, specifically in their postulation that the liberated state involves the attainment of a brahman (spiritual) body in post-mortem liberation. The specific nature of this body seems to be determined by the flavor of one's devotional desire prior to enlightenment to interact with Krishna in a particular mood and manner. The question that has intrigued Eileen is: how can desires, even devotional ones, which are in all instances the product of a mind that can only contemplate things from within the framework of its mundane experiences, affect the particulars of an eternal spiritual outcome?

This led her to excavate the historical intellectual background of such notions. Her research traces the relationship between the desire for liberation and the nature of the liberated state itself in some of the other soteriological traditions of India. This is a recondite area of Indian philosophy. Dr. Edwin Bryant, her advisor, is "enormously impressed as to how she has simply taken the bull by the horns on a level of depth and breadth that far surpasses the needs of an M.A. thesis." Eileen's quest has also taken her into a fairly extensive engagement with the history of dramaturgical and literary aesthetic theory, and the relationship here between desire-related experience with altered states of consciousness including the liberated state.

Eileen is extremely gifted intellectually, but those who have worked with her will attest to her delightful collegiality, her warmth in welcoming undergraduates to engage in academic exploration, and her thoroughgoing competence in every task she sets her hand to. Wherever she chooses to pursue her doctoral work, we know she will make an outstanding contribution to the field of Religious Studies and that she will be a powerful force in the study of Hinduism in the years to come. We wish her the absolute very best in her onward journey.

## Department Profiles (cont.)

### Dugan McGinley



One of our newest core faculty members may be a familiar face to anyone who took courses in Religion at Rutgers in the last decade: Dugan McGinley, who taught in the department as a Part-Time Lecturer from Fall 2007 through Spring 2015, has returned to the department as a full-time Teaching Instructor as of Fall 2018. After three years as Director of Music and Liturgy at Fairfield University, he is pleased to be back at Rutgers: "It felt like coming home. I've always liked the students here." Though he enjoyed his time at Fairfield and does still work some weekends as a liturgical musician, Dr. McGinley is delighted to be back in the classroom full-time and focusing on the academic study of religion, "helping students see the diversity within traditions and helping them ask critical questions."

Originally from Colorado, Dr. McGinley started his career as a high school music teacher and arts administrator before coming to the East Coast to pursue a doctorate in Religion at Temple University, where he earned his PhD in 2003. He was interested in exploring diversity within the Catholic tradition in a more critical and systematic fashion, and he sought to find new ways to analyze and center the experiential dimension of faith. Ultimately, he decided to analyze autobiography's potential to serve not just as a source of data for academic researchers, but also as an avenue that the Church might use to construct a sacramental theology more attuned to the life experiences of people of faith. His 2004 book, *Acts of Faith, Acts of Love: Gay Catholic Autobiographies as Sacred Texts*, which was based on his doctoral work, argued that in developing moral and ethical positions around sexuality, the Catholic Church needs to incorporate into its imaginary the experiences, distilled in autobiography, of Catholics who have

been marginalized for their sexual identities. Attending to the subjectivities of committed Catholics, McGinley argues, will allow the Church to reconcile its moral positions with the lived reality of faithful people seeking relationships with God. His current research explores contemporary Catholic theology to investigate whether it is tenable to put forth a Catholic position in support of end-of-life choices such as physician-assisted suicide. "With aid-in-dying laws passing in more and more states," McGinley says, "it's going to be something we have to deal with—is there a narrow set of circumstances in which, perhaps, the ethic of compassion might override other concerns?"

These questions of ethics and experience, of diversity within traditions, and of how identity categories (particularly those centered on sexuality or gender) affect and construct the experience of religion have been constant and continuing ones for Dr. McGinley, and they are reflected in the classes he is teaching at Rutgers. He has most recently taught "Women and Gender in Western Religions," "The Question of God in Modern Culture," "Death and Afterlife," "Contemporary Catholic Theology," and the 101 class, "Gods, Myths, and Religions in a Secular Age," and in each case highlights these sociological and experiential questions. He's looking forward to teaching even more courses, like "Sexuality in Western Traditions" and "Catholicism in the Modern World," that engage his research interests.

He is also looking forward to incorporating his music and arts expertise into the Rutgers classroom. Beginning next year, Dr. McGinley will be teaching a series of Core classes on Religion and the Arts. "Religion and the Arts" (offered Fall 2020) uses music, visual arts, dance, and theater as avenues into Religious Studies, while "Religion and Music" will look more specifically at music as a way of understanding Religion. For current students who would like to register for "Religion and the Arts," it is listed as a Special Topics course (840:293) while awaiting formal approval at an SAS Faculty meeting this spring. It is anticipated that the course will meet the AHp Core classification at the 100-level.

When asked what he loves most about Religious Studies and what he most wants students to understand about the field, Dr. McGinley is similarly ethics- and diversity-focused:

"I want them to understand that it is a great interdisciplinary field where you get to touch on so many different aspects of the humanities and your intellect that you can feel like a Renaissance person. It doesn't matter if you are religious or not religious at all, there is something in this field for you. It will sharpen your mind, and that's always good no matter what."

## Innovations in Pedagogy

### *Humanities Plus and the 991 Challenge*

The Religion Department has always taken pride in pedagogy. Now, with two new and exciting initiatives from the Dean's office, the Religion Department has even more opportunity to try new teaching techniques.

The first initiative, "Humanities Plus," offers grants to faculty who innovate not the content of their classes but their mode of instruction. Dr. Diane Fruchtman received a grant this past year to incorporate a technique called "Just-in-Time Teaching" into her Religions of the Western World course. This method asks students to respond to "warm-up" questions in the hours before class, which the instructor then uses to guide the lecture. "It's a great way of ensuring that you hear from all of your students and incorporate everyone's voices," she says. It also, Fruchtman notes, "helps the instructor see what students are really struggling with and where there are misconceptions that need to be cleared up." Dr. Debra Ballentine and Dr. Dugan McGinley have both been awarded grants for the coming year, McGinley to incorporate an "embodied-experiential" learning component into

his new "Religion and the Arts" class, and Ballentine to incorporate interactive lecture strategies, concept mapping, and student-generated quiz questions into her new "Sports and Religion" class.

The second initiative, the "991- Challenge," asks faculty to offer language engagement modules: 1-credit enhancements of an existing class to help students learn more about a language or how language operates in knowledge construction. One such grant allowed Dr. Fruchtman to add a "Translating Augustine" module to her "Augustine and Ethics" seminar this semester. "Students have been fascinated by the differences in how Augustine has been translated—it really shows how crucial translation is, and how many decisions go into producing a translation." Meanwhile, Dr. Hilit Surowitz-Israel is looking forward to proposing a palaeography class within the 991 framework. Religion faculty are well-suited to this type of venture: most of us use multiple languages in our research and would love to introduce students to the languages that help us in our scholarship.

## MA Announcements

We are proud to have several MA students finishing the following thesis and capstone projects this semester:

- Eileen Goddard, "Liberation and Desire"
- Bill Fennelly, "Blood Sacrifice and Martyrdom in the 1916 Easter Rising"
- Vineet Chander, "(Re-) Imagining the 'Hindu Bible': a Historical and Theological Inquiry into the Elevation of the Bhagavad-Gītā"

## We'd like to stay in touch...

Please correct us if we had the wrong mailing address for you. Please send us news and updates, especially any news you would like to see in this newsletter. Please let us know if you would like to be on an email list for announcements of Religion Department events by sending an email to [nr531@religion.rutgers.edu](mailto:nr531@religion.rutgers.edu) with subject line: alumni mailing list. And please check out our website regularly for announcements and updates: [religion.rutgers.edu](http://religion.rutgers.edu)