



COLLEGE of CHARLESTON

DEPARTMENT OF
RELIGIOUS STUDIES



WINTER 2022
NEWSLETTER



From the Desk of the Chair

Dear Students, Alumni, and Friends of the Department:

2021 was another tumultuous year. Last January we witnessed an insurrection at the Capitol, we're entering the third year of a devastating global pandemic, and every year we feel the effects of extreme weather due to climate change. Even with so many dark clouds overhead, RELS faculty and their students have found new ways to teach and learn and write about the role that religion plays in so many of the crises that we face today and in the past.

As the COVID virus continues to mutate, we see the ambivalent role that religion plays in how people respond to the pandemic in our country. One image that I've used in my classes is a painting of a Hindu goddess, Mother India, who offers protection in the pandemic. In her many gloved hands she carries sanitizer, a mask, and a vaccination needle, illustrating her protective powers; but she also carries weapons of violence while stomping on the coronavirus. The icon invokes the widespread Hindu tradition of mother goddesses, but also the local cult of goddesses of contagion, who can both heal and inflict disease on those who fail to observe her. It's a powerful symbol for the intersection of religion and science, nationalism, violence, and goddess veneration, or religion as both cure and poison. These features of religion have also been examined in different contexts by faculty, students, and alumni in their recent research projects.



Mother India

As you will see in these pages, Prof. Siegler received a grant that will train RELS students to become “vaccine ambassadors” into communities of faith where folks have resisted vaccination. Prof. Lowe wrote about how spiritual warfare informs the evangelical worldview of a doctor who promoted hydroxychloroquine as a cure for COVID. Todd LeVasseur published a book on the impact of climate change and COVID on religion and human bodies.

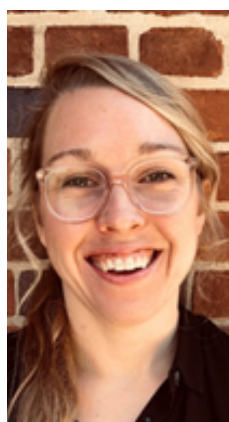
Over the past year, three senior students have completed outstanding Bachelor Essays on timely topics that examine the religious iconography and white supremacy in the Capitol insurrection, the role of religion in the Black Lives Matter movement, and the value of interreligious dialogue in promoting peace. Our students use the tools acquired in their courses to interpret and interrogate how religion works in the lives of people as they negotiate contemporary crises.

Perhaps you, too, have found your RELS education of value during these challenging times, whether it be the wisdom or practices from the religions that you studied, using skills like critical empathy, bracketing, or thinking cross-culturally, or feeling the “binding ties” of a supportive community. If this resonates with you and you would like to share your story or reconnect with us, we would love to hear from you!

Zeff Bjerken

Faculty News

- **Zeff Bjerken** now serves as Chair of the department, an administrative position that he knows well after serving previously for six years. One part of the job that he enjoys is acting as “chief cheerleader” and celebrating all that faculty, staff, students, and alumni have done to make the “God Squad” of RELS so awesome. Once the pandemic passes and travel to India is possible, he looks forward to planning the next RELS study abroad trip to Ladakh in the Indian Himalayas, where students will study the impact of globalization and spiritual tourism on the Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs who reside there.
- **Matthew Cressler** earned tenure and promotion to associate professor last spring 2021 and now is enjoying a well-deserved year-long sabbatical. His current book project questions the popular notion that “Catholicism” is an innocent, race-neutral category and investigates how race and white supremacy have shaped American Catholicism. He recently wrote an article for *The Atlantic* on the Netflix limited series *Midnight Mass*, which analyzes how this supernatural horror show provides a “morally urgent critique of how faith can fuel everyday cruelty and violence.” Check it out [here](#).



- **Brennan Keegan** received a Wabash Early Career Religion Faculty Teaching Fellowship and will join a cohort to explore socially responsive forms of pedagogy in religious studies. She organized a well-attended panel in November on “Rethinking Thanksgiving: The Forgotten Story of Indigenous South Carolina” that featured speakers and tribal leaders from local Natchez-Kusso and Wassamasaw tribes. In fall 2022 she looks forward to teaching the first “Religions of Charleston” class, which will be a field-trip based course that introduces students to ethnographic methods and the religions of Charleston, including Native American and African American religions.

- **Lenny Lowe** serves as Vice-President-Elect of the American Academy of Religion-Southeast Region, and he has been busy writing and publishing articles on the intersection of Haitian Pentecostalism and Vodou. He wrote an article for Religion Dispatches on the spiritual warfare beliefs that informed the statements of the Cameroonian-American doctor Stella Immanuel, who endorsed the effectiveness of hydroxychloroquine in the treatment of COVID-19. Check it out [here](#).



Faculty News

- **Todd LeVasseur** just accepted a Senior Instructor position in Environmental Humanities for the Program in Environmental and Sustainability Studies at CofC that will begin in August. If the pandemic subsides, he will participate in two summer study abroad programs in India and Israel, where he will teach classes on “Religion, Sustainability and Climate Change in India” and “Religion and the Environment in Israel.” He published a book on *Climate Change, Religion, and our Bodily Future*. There is also a podcast for his book here. He also wrote a “tough love letter” for RELS to “wake up” and take climate change more seriously, which you can read here.



CofC in Israel
Religion, Sustainability, and the Sacred in the 'Holy Land'

June 14 - July 8, 2022 | \$TBD*
*(Subject to change & does not include airfare or tuition)

Students take both courses:
RELS 276: Religion and the Environment
RELS 101: Approaches to Religion

Application Deadline: Feb 15th

Spend over 20 days studying and living in Israel. Earn CofC credit while you experience firsthand RELS courses in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The program will include guest lectures and site visits to sacred sites and an eco-kibbutz. Along with staying in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, you will also experience other parts of the region during program excursions. Don't miss out on this unique way to earn CofC RELS credits!



CofC in India
Science, Religion, and Sustainability

May 23 - June 14, 2022 | \$4,170*
*(Subject to change & does not include tuition)

Geology, climate, religion, and culture have shaped the Indian subcontinent. In this unique course, we travel the length of the Ganges River from the Himalayan glaciers to the Sundarbans mangrove forests of the Bay of Bengal, studying how science, economics, sustainability, religion, pilgrimage, and cultures converge. Grab your travel gear and join us for an adventure of a lifetime!

Application Deadline: Feb 15th

Students Choose 1 or 2 Courses from:
RELS 101: Approaches to Religion (3 credits)
GEOL 240: Water Resources and Pollution in the Developing World (4 credits)
GEOL 364: Water Resources and Pollution in the Developing World (4 credits)

Course Prerequisites on Back

- **Elijah Siegler** completed his service as Chair in June 2021 and now has more time for his research project on how Asheville became the heart of the New Age on the east coast. In response to the Covid pandemic and the rise of political conspiracy groups like QAnon, he plans to write an ethnography of “conspirituality” in Asheville, where there is a curious confluence of QAnon groups and New Age “wellness influencers” spreading anti-vax misinformation that grows out of their shared distrust of traditional religious and political institutions. He will co-lead a study abroad trip to Israel with Todd LeVasseur this summer. He also received a “Faith and Public Health Grant” from the Interfaith Youth Core to supervise current CofC students and recent alumni on outreach activities that strengthen understanding, build trust, and deliver shots in arms. Starting in early 2022, a few RELS majors and minors will become “Vaccine Ambassadors” and work alongside faith communities and nonprofit organizations to provide education and access about the COVID-19 vaccine for populations that need it most.

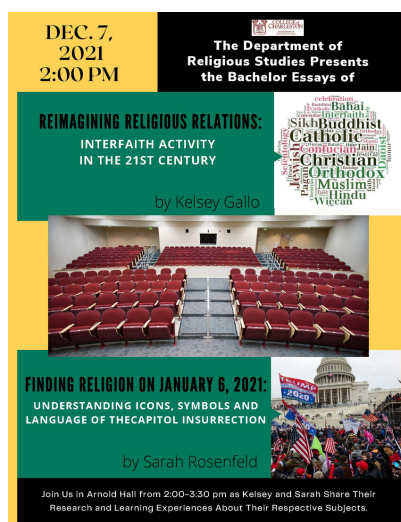


- **Madison Tarleton ('15)** is serving as an adjunct instructor in RELS and teaching online courses in 2021-22 on World Religions, Women & Religion, and Religion, Art, and Culture: What and Who Makes Art Jewish? She is also working on her PhD in the University of Denver-Iliff School of Theology Joint Doctoral Program in the Study of Religion. She hopes to complete and defend her dissertation in the spring on medieval anti-Judaic and anti-Semitic forms of visual representation, a project that she began first researching for her Bachelor Essay at CofC. This research informs her article for the wider public about the representation of Krampus as the “Other” of jolly St. Nick, called “The Devil is in the Details: The Krampus Conundrum.” Listen to her speak about it here.

Shining a Light on Bachelor Essays

Senior RELS student, Kelsey Gallo, in her essay “Reimagining Religious Relations: Interfaith Organizations in the 21st Century,” writes a comparative historical and contemporary analysis of four interreligious organizations: the Parliament of the World’s Religions, the Interfaith Youth Core, Interfaith Partners of South Carolina, and the Charleston Interreligious Council, for whom Kelsey had previously interned. While her analysis did not shy away from criticizing the normative claims and theological biases of interfaith activity, ultimately Kelsey concluded that at their best, these interreligious organizations can help teach us to “respect fellow human beings and peacefully live among each other, which requires removing one’s assumptions about the other and adopting an open mind.” **Prof Siegler, Advisor**

In her essay, “Finding Religion on January 6th: Understanding the Icons, Symbols and Language of the Capitol Insurrection,” **Senior RELS student, Sarah Rosenfeld** examines the diverse religious symbology that saturated scenes from the Capitol Insurrection on January 6, 2021. Linking these symbols to the entangled history of white supremacy, masculinist rhetoric, and “dominionist” theology, Sarah’s Bachelor’s essay argues that the insurrection was foremost a religious event and a moment of “collective iconoclasm,” and her research highlights the importance of religion for understanding American politics. Upon graduation, Sarah will begin working full-time for BBYO (B’nai B’rith Youth Organization) as the Hudson Valley Region’s Associate Director in Scarsdale, NY. BBYO is an organization committed to providing pluralistic and inclusive programming for Jewish youth. **Prof. Lowe, Advisor**



Inspired by the uprisings for racial justice in summer 2020, just before her senior year, **Kayla Sitton ('21)** decided to study the Movement for Black Lives for her Bachelor’s Essay. While the movement is often characterized as secular--even caricatured as anti-religious--Kayla discovered that activists actually represent a diverse array of religious and nonreligious perspectives. Moreover, Kayla argued that religious studies provide us with the tools to unpack the rituals, stories, and values that comprise Black Lives Matter as a movement and that Black Lives Matter, in turn, challenges us to think more broadly about what “religion” is in the first place. Upon graduation, Kayla is now applying to graduate programs in creative arts. **Prof. Cressler, Advisor**

The Religious Studies Foundation at Work



**RELS 450
Goes to
Myrtle Beach!**

Prof. Siegler taught the Senior Seminar on "Spirituality" in the fall. Funds from the RELS Foundation covered the expenses for a field trip that he describes below.

One beautiful October morning, the entire senior seminar class piled into two cars and drove up to the Meher Spiritual Center, a bucolic retreat on the last unspoiled bit of coastline in Myrtle Beach. This was a perfect field trip for a class that focused on critically analyzing "spirituality." The Center was "established by and dedicated to Meher Baba" (1894-1969) a non-denominational spiritual teacher from India.

The first part of the day featured a tour of the Center and an extended conversation with a senior "Baba lover" (as they term themselves), which gave our Religious Studies majors a chance to act as "ethnographers of the spiritual" and to practice critical empathy. In the afternoon, the RELS majors were on their own—some engaged with other "Baba lovers," others read more about Meher Baba or journaled in the peaceful library, others bonded on a rowboat in the lagoon. That evening, we drove back to Charleston, in a reflective mood. And of course, all students had to write up their experiences!

This formative day trip would not have been possible without the generosity of our alumni donors!



The Alumni Corner

RELIGIOUS STUDIES GRADUATING CLASS OF 2021



Morgan Herr

Morgan double majored in Religious Studies and Anthropology and minored in Spanish. She is also a HSS Scholar. Morgan says she will go to graduate school to continue her studies.



Bailey Huttig

Bailey double majored in Religious Studies and Psychology. Bailey was very involved with the RELS program, especially in restarting the Religious Studies Club. After graduation, she plans on obtaining her insurance license and working as an agent. She is considering attending graduate school in the future.



Jasmine Tindall

Jasmine graduated with a double major in Religious Studies and Women's and Gender Studies. After graduation, Jasmine hopes to gain networking opportunities with local NGOs who focus their missions around making a difference on issues related to pregnancy, childbirth and reproductive justice.



Kayla Sitton

Kayla double majored in Religious Studies and International Studies. She studied abroad in Asia. Kayla is an HSS Scholar, RELS Departmental Honors, Student, and RELS Outstanding Student. After graduation, she will take a gap, year, then pursue a graduate study in creative writing.

***Also graduating in the 2021: Foster Clark, Elizabeth DeLeon and Sarah Rosenfeld.**

ALUMNI NEWS

- **Andrew Aghapour ('07)** is a comedian and storyteller based in Durham, NC. He serves as a consulting scholar of Religion and Science for the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. He co-authored a forthcoming book published by the Smithsonian Press called **Discovery and Revelation: Religion, Science, and Making Sense of Things**. On February 15, he will participate in a panel discussion hosted by Religious Studies on "Religion and the Science of the Brain Observed" and speak with graduating seniors in the Capstone Colloquium. He has a podcast on the subject **here**.
- **Michael Altman ('05)** earned tenure and promotion at the University of Alabama and serves as Undergraduate Director in the Department of Religion. He organized a collaborative digital project called **Uncivil Religion: January 6, 2021**, between the University of Alabama and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History on the role that religion played on January 6.



Alumni Spotlight

Danielle Huger Lindstrom ('12) graduated ten years ago, and she has traveled quite a way from Charleston to Chicago, from Champaign IL to Lake Mary FL, before returning to Charleston to find her calling at St. Michael's Church. She took some time to share her story post-graduation and how her RELS education has proven invaluable.

What have you been up to since graduation?



After graduating in 2012 I first worked as a Kindergarten teacher in the Charleston County School District. Two years later I moved to Chicago with my then boyfriend and now husband to work as a special education preschool teacher at an international school. At this school, I spent time as a liaison and advocate for families with different cultural backgrounds and faiths. I found I was able to bridge cultural and religious differences more easily than others and connect with students and their families despite demographic differences.

Later I earned my Master's degree in Theological Studies in 2018 and then a Master of Divinity degree from Columbia International University in 2020. My first ministerial calling took me to St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Lake Mary, Florida. I then accepted the role of Director of Family Ministry here in Charleston at St. Michael's Church in 2020.

How has your RELS education helped you in your career?

My RELS education helped to enhance my critical thinking skills and truly empathize with people of different races, cultures, and religions. RELS classes gave me the confidence to speak out on injustices within the religious sector both private and public and to raise awareness in others who do not quite understand the injustices that people of color face or people of different socio-economic status experience within their own communities.

Being a black female in a predominantly white Christian denomination, I am constantly reminded of the privilege, knowledge, and expertise I can bring to my own diocese. As both a RELS student and a Christian believer, I feel honored that I was able to begin my studies at CofC. I am equally honored to have a career where I continue to study what I believe. RELS has helped me to approach my religion from an outsider's perspective and not feel biased against Christian beliefs and customs from the past that my parishioners once believed. I am able to blend both roles professionally and serve as an agent of change and diversity.

However, this dual role does come with many challenges. As a black woman with an MDiv, I do find myself in the minority. And there is far more work to do. But because of my training, I am heard, listened to, and can help bring about moments of reconciliation and healing for others.

What advice would you give to current RELS students and upcoming graduates?

Follow your passion and never doubt your abilities and skills of empathy and compassion. RELS majors have an education that can lead to a variety of career options. Do not limit yourself to one specific job or career trajectory. Befriend your professors and classmates and reach out to alumni who share the same RELS experience as you. Always be open to new challenges!

CofC Day 2021

On January 28, 2021, the College kicked off its second annual, college-wide, 24-hour giving campaign.

Religious Studies is very grateful and extremely proud of the alums and faculty (past and present) who donated over \$3000 to our Foundation Account. The amount raised for RELS was the third-highest of any department at CofC, and we had the second-highest participation rate of any department.

Those generous donations allowed RELS to provide stipends and awards to students that participated in a year-long research project, and a class field trip to a religious site in Myrtle Beach (page 6). In 2022 the Foundation will sponsor site visits for the new Religion in Charleston class, and we hope to assist some students with the study abroad trips to India and Israel this summer.

CofC Day 2022 is scheduled for **January 27, 2022**. Again we encourage all of our alumni, parents, faculty, staff, students, and friends to participate by making a gift to RELS through the CofC Day online portal, by phone (843-953-5113), and by sharing your CofC story on social media with the hashtag #CofCDAY.



Thank You to the Following Individuals for Their Generous Gifts for Our Students!

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Reverend Dorrell Addison

Andrew A. Aghapour

Natasha Akery

Parker Bednar

Dr. Zeff Bjerken

Michael J. Broderick

Katherine E. Browne

Eloise Bryson Capelle

Lauren DeFeo

Louise M. Doire

Allen Duggar

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Mahalia A. Hart

Tania N. Johnson-Hester

Michelle L. Kerwick

Danielle Huger-Lindstrom

Dr. Leonard Lowe

Dr. June McDaniel

Jennifer M. McGlothlin

Caleb Melton

Jessica Adele Mitsch

Tyler Justin Ray

Kimberly Richey

Estelle Rounsefell

Lauren Schmidt

Dr. Elijah T. Siegler

Amberjade Taylor

Priscilla R. Thomas

Ashley Thompson

Robert Ticknor

Caroline Elizabeth Turpin

Spring 2022 Course Offerings

THE DAOIST TRADITION RELS 247.01 SPRING 2022 TR - 1:40-2:55



How Do We Begin to Study Daoism?

THIS ANCIENT CHINESE TRADITION MAY BE THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD OF THE MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS BUT IT HAS STRUCK A NERVE WITH MANY WESTERNERS. WE WILL ALSO CONSIDER THE ROLE DAOISM PLAYS IN CHINESE SOCIETY TODAY, INCLUDING HOW IT IMPACTS SUCH ISSUES AS MEDICINE, MARTIAL ARTS, POPULAR CULTURE, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND POLITICS. WE ALSO EXAMINE ITS GLOBALIZATION.

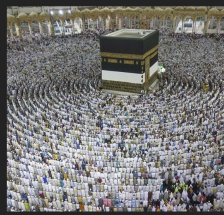
Dr. Elijah Siegler



RELS235.01

THE ISLAMIC TRADITION

SPRING 2022
MW - 200-315
Dr. Garrett Davidson



MUSLIMS MAKE UP APPROXIMATELY 1 OUT OF EVERY 4 PEOPLE ON THE PLANET. THIS COURSE INTRODUCES YOU TO SHARED ASPECTS OF MUSLIM THOUGHT AND PRACTICE AS WELL AS THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY OF MUSLIM EXPERIENCE.

Religion ART & CULTURE

RELS 120.01 What and Who Makes Art Jewish?

ONLINE - Express II
Spring 2022
Prof. Tarleton



Sunrise in Jerusalem by Gregory Kohlet

Approaches to Religion

RELIGION AND TRANSCENDENCE RELS 101.01/02

Spring 2022
Tuesdays and Thursdays
0925-1040 and 1050-1205
Prof. Siegler

From Christian heavy metal to Daoist sex manuals to psychedelic sacraments, this class will explore the connections between sex, drugs, and rock n' roll and religious traditions.

SEX 'N' DRUGS 'N' ROCK&ROLL

RELS 225.01 THE JEWISH TRADITION

SHALOM Y'ALL

Dr. Shanes
Spring 2022
TR
1215-130
Online

This course considers the history, institutions, rituals, and beliefs of Jewish tradition from its biblical foundations to the modern State of Israel.



A history of the religious beliefs, rituals, and institutions of those peoples of the Ancient Near Middle East (Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Canaanites, Israelites etc.), looking at the gods in their temples and temple rituals, mythological tales, magic and divination, concepts of death and afterlife (including the Egyptian Pyramid and Coffin texts), personal piety and religion, responses to evil and misfortune, holy war, and more.

ALL THE WAY with AMUN RE!

Premodern History of Religions

Mondays and Wednesdays
1400-1515 and 1600-1715
Dr. John Huddleston
Spring 2022

RELS 117.01 and 02

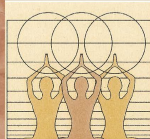
RELS 205.01 SACRED TEXTS OF THE EAST AND THEIR MODERN MEANINGS IN THE WEST

Tuesday/Thursday at 1215-130 pm with Prof. Bjerken

THE BHAGAVAD GITA
THE SONG OF GOD



The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali
A Biography
David Gordon White



This course will examine three religious classics in depth from India: the most famous Hindu text named The Bhagavad Gita; The Yoga Sutra that is today considered a perennial classic and guide to yoga practice; and the first biography and epic poem to tell the Buddha's story from his conception to his enlightenment known as the Buddhacarita. We will place these texts in their Hindu and Buddhist contexts and consider how they were understood differently in India before we examine how new meanings and values were discovered when these texts were translated in the West.



THE BUDDHACARITA
or The Life of Buddha



SPRING 2022

MODERN HISTORY OF RELIGION: RELIGIONS IN THE AMERICAS RELS118.01/02 MWF - 1000-1050 OR 1100-1150 DR. BRENNAN KEEGAN

What religions were in the Americas in 1491? How did Christianity and Islam shape slavery? Why are more and more Americans claiming no religion at all? Find out this fall and fulfill your general education in history in RELS 118: Modern History of Religion!

INTRODUCTION TO WORLD Religions

RELS 105 - SPRING 2022

Studying religions is not just about facts. Studying religions is an experience that can lead to understanding and empathizing with the beliefs, practices and values of others.

Dr. Lowe - Sec 01
MWF
1000-1050

Dr. Keegan - Sec 02
MW
1600-1715

Prof. Tarleton - Sec 03
MWF
1100-1150 - ONLINE

Prof. Greenwell - Sec 04
TR
1730-1845



Click on any photo for larger view.

Last, but Not Least . . .



Everyone can be a philanthropist to the College of Charleston. Gifts to the Religious Studies Foundation account are vital to supporting student study abroad, internship opportunities, travel to attend professional conferences and award students for outstanding research projects. Most importantly, your annual gift gives us the ultimate flexibility to seize opportunities that will advance the mission of the department and address unforeseen challenges faced by faculty and students as they arise.

Your investment is the ultimate vote of confidence in everything Religious Studies at the College of Charleston stands for and everything it can become.

To make an online donation please click on our department giving page, select "other" in the designation section, then indicate that you want to contribute to the Religious Studies Fund (R434) in the comments section.

We Would Love to Hear from You!

The Department of Religious Studies at the College of Charleston would love to hear what our alumni are up to now. Let us know about the exciting professional and personal milestones you've reached since leaving the College. Maybe you would like to be a mentor to a RELS student, or speak to our seniors about your career. You can email Dr. Bjerken or Ms. Butler-Byrd with the details at bjerken@cofc.edu or butlervc@cofc.edu.



College of Charleston

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COLLEGE of
CHARLESTON

DEPARTMENT OF
RELIGIOUS STUDIES

**STUDY,
RELIGIOUSLY.**

