While reconnecting with so many alumni over the summer, I found myself looking at this Newsletter through a Buddhist kaleidoscope lens. Long ago in the 7th century, Buddhists in China developed a beautiful metaphor for cosmic interconnectedness with the “Jewel Net of Indra,” which is described as follows. Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wondrous net (symbolizing the totality of existence), which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each “knot” of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. If one were to take up one of these jewels for inspection and look at it closely, one will discover that in its polished multi-faceted surface there are reflections of every other jewel in the net, infinite in number. This mirroring metaphor becomes a means for Buddhists in China to reflect on the causal interdependence and interconnectedness that characterizes our world, where everything that exists, including every being in the world, is represented as a jewel in Indra’s net, reflecting all other jewels.

That we live in an interconnected world has become almost a cliché today, and scholars are especially fond of studying ecological systems, global economies, multi-national networks and even dynamic religious traditions as complex interdependent processes. But what I like about the Jewel Net of Indra is that it can help us to visualize the network of causal connections that link Religious Studies students, alumni, parents, and professors, each of whom has helped to produce the way we are today. In this light, our Newsletter this year includes internet links to people, places, images, and even YouTube clips, that bind us all together.

As can be seen when perusing the Alumni News, our graduates lead fascinating lives. There is a subterranean network of a few far-flung visionaries from Seoul to Senegal, from Prague to Argentina, who are poised to contribute something important to the world through their Peace Corps service or volunteer work. A significant number have gone on to graduate school in a variety of fields, while a fair share have studied holistic, Chinese or western medicine, or trained in yoga or massage therapy. Many others have pursued a career in social work, counseling, or community service and they have built their lives in communities located all over the United States. Others find a niche in fund raising for non-profits, and we even have some creative people with talent in the arts, crafts, and in music and dance performance who live in hip places like New Orleans, Santa Fe, and Seattle.

Back here in Charleston, 2012-13 was a year marked by major changes in the College’s administration. The Dean of School of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Cynthia Lowenthal, decided to step down from her administrative position and become a full-time faculty member in the English department. She was replaced by our new Dean, Jerold Hale, who comes to the College from serving as the dean of the College of Arts, Sciences, and Letters at...
From the Desk of the Chair

the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Dean Hale is a seasoned administrator, an accomplished scholar, and a professor of Communication who uses his expertise in persuasive communication to advocate for the value of a liberal arts education.

Another change announced this August was President George Benson’s decision to step down from his position as president and return to the classroom as a professor in the College’s School of Business, effective June 30, 2014. Benson’s advance notice will provide plenty of time for a national search to find the strongest possible candidate to lead the College as the next President.

While there have been big changes in higher administration, the faculty in Religious Studies were all reunited in 2012-13 after two consecutive years when four senior faculty enjoyed year-long research sabbaticals (Elijah Siegler and June McDaniel in 2010-11, and Margaret Cormack and Lee Irwin in 2011-12). Katie Hladky completed her second year in our department and her transition to teaching students at the College has been seamless. She developed exciting new special topics classes, such as “Islam in America,” “Religions in Charleston,” and an introductory course on “Religion and Sex,” all of which have been very popular with students. Todd LeVasseur earned his Ph.D. in Religion from the University of Florida in 2011, and he was promoted to Visiting Assistant Professor. He taught new courses on “Religion and Food,” “Religion and Ecology,” and “Religion and Science,” and his interdisciplinary courses contributed to Religious Studies, Environmental Studies, and the Honors College. Both Professor Hladky and LeVasseur infuse new energy and enthusiasm into our department and they have been very successful in recruiting new students as Religious Studies majors.

Our department continues to develop and expand its curriculum. June McDaniel designed a new advanced seminar on “Religion and Psychology,” and John Huddlestun created a new religious tradition course on “Religions of the Ancient Near East.” Lee Irwin and I collaborated on a new Capstone Colloquium for graduating seniors, which will encourage students to reflect on themselves as learners and relate their study of religion to both their broader collegiate experience and to their plans for the future. We hope that the Capstone Colloquium will benefit our majors by preparing them to apply the skills that they have learned in their religious studies training in the job market, and we intend to invite some alumni to speak with the graduating students about their post-baccalaureate lives and careers.

While a Religious Studies education confers many special powers, omniscience is unfortunately not among them; your classmates rely on you to tell us what’s going on. So share your news! Your lives and accomplishments are the lifeblood of this Newsletter. Tell us about births, deaths, weddings, professional rites of passage and life transformations, astonishing adventures, fellowship, discovery, and mischief. And don’t hesitate to share memories and stories, even if apocryphal, about your time at the College, and we will codify them as tradition in our next edition of this newsletter.

To those who we have lost touch with over the years, we hope that you will let us know what you have been up to. For the faithful who send us regular news updates, we thank you for staying in touch and we look forward to hearing the latest news and stories. To all of you, we hope that you will stop by the next time you are in Charleston and pay us a visit! We do like to see you and catch up in person.

Zeff Bjerken, Chair
Zeff Bjerken

After three years serving as chair, I can report that I’ve now gained fluency in the bureaucratic jargon of administrators, who love to delve into topics like the best practices for leveraging stakeholder engagement, or how the most impactful student-centric pedagogy uses data-driven methods for assessing learning outcomes. Thankfully, I can still clear my head from this buzz in time for class, when I get back to teaching what I love.

In the fall I taught my “Religion & Society in India and Tibet” class, which is an opportunity to introduce students to Gandhi and the Dalai Lama and really “Think Differently,” as the Apple advertising campaign put it. Each time I teach it I find myself also thinking differently about the topics in the course, and in the fall it was the tragic news of the self-immolation of so many Buddhist monks and nuns inside Tibet that captured our attention. We discussed how these dramatic acts of self-immolation are motivated both by an urgent desire for Tibet’s political autonomy and by religious support for the Dalai Lama’s return to Tibet; and yet these suicidal acts of selflessness also raise profound moral questions for the Dalai Lama, who preaches the preciousness of human life and nonviolence. The Dalai Lama’s dilemma illustrates how religion and politics interpenetrate and students debated whether these acts of self-sacrifice could spark any real change today, as Gandhi had once achieved in India.

The other course I taught in the fall was “Theories in the Study of Religion,” which initiates students into scholars’ critical discourse about religions. What I try to convey about theory is that it can make our most familiar beliefs seem strange, even funny, and foreign rituals seem more familiar, if not fun. For instance, after learning about the work of classical theorists like Frazer, Freud, and Durkheim, we applied some of their theories to Clyde the Cougar as our school “totem”; Otto’s claims about an ineffable numinous experience were compared to “truthiness,” a word invented by Charleston’s own Stephen Colbert; and Eliade’s nostalgia for the primordial past still inspires many New Age shamans to seek union with animal spirits, which was illustrated by the grisly plight of the Grizzly Man, who sought to “become One” with the wild brown bears of Alaska. Essays by former students Jay Laughlin and Micah Carpenter published in Chrestomathy prove quite popular in the class because they demonstrate the real value of theory in captivating ways.

In the spring I offered two sections of Buddhist Traditions, which I never tire of teaching, even if I did have to arise before dawn to make it to my 8 am class. I added new reading material at the end of the course about Buddhist Modernism, an ideology that promotes Buddhism as a “scientific” worldview, or a spiritual form of therapy based in meditation, or a philosophy that teaches individualism, egalitarianism, and ecological values. Not surprisingly, many students in the course recognized these ideas because that is what attracted them to the topic in the first place; but now they saw that this modern version of Buddhism was like the parable about the elephant described by blind men, who could only categorize the strange beast by relating it to what they already knew. Some students may have felt disillusioned, but most did not regret their loss because they had gained a new perspective on Buddhism as a complex and dynamic tradition.

The highlight of my summer was reconnecting with all the RELS alumni across the globe and traveling out of the Lowcountry for a few road trips. I spent a week in Asheville and the Blue Ridge Parkway in June, a week in August on the coast of Maine with my brother’s family, and a week in July in New Orleans. The trip to NOLA was for research on a new course that I will teach in the fall called “In Search of the Sacred and the Strange in the South: The Sounds and Substance of Faith,” and it will include a unit on African American religion (including “voodoo”), jazz funerals and parades, and Mardi Gras Indians, all of which was inspired by the HBO TV series Treme. The music and food in New Orleans won me over, and I can imagine making a return “pilgrimage” to the Crescent City next summer too!

Margaret Cormack

My sabbatical year in Iceland meant that I was closer to Europe, and thus able to participate in several conferences that would not otherwise have been possible, one in Sicily which entailed trips to churches full of beautiful mosaics, two others in England, where carved grey stone predominated. I collected lots of photos that will be useful in my text set of courses on Christianity. Post-sabbatical re-entry was a bit rocky, but I was lucky to be able to teach courses on Scandinavian mythology both fall term, in our department, and spring term, in the honors college. Great discussions of valkyries, ghosts, and shape-shifters – perfect preparation, in fact, for a conference on trolls and other such beings that will be held in Estonia in 2014! Back
The Faculty Forum

One student was very creative when pressed to explain how her bag of Pretzel M & Ms met that criteria. For the section on Voodoo, students read selections from Zora Neale Hurston's Tell My Horse to supplement their viewing of Jump at the Sun, a documentary film about Hurston's anthropological research on Vodou in Haiti.

Rev. Bill Jenkinson, an old friend and former Academic Dean at St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore, once told me that if I wanted to learn about anything new I should “put it on the syllabus.” My “Religion, Art and Culture” course is an example of this advice in action. Fall 2012 was the second time I’d taught the course but there was still so much more to learn about the “new” topics I had included in the syllabus namely, religion and food, and Voodoo. For the religion and food section I developed two PowerPoint presentations, To Eat and Not to Eat, an exploration of ritual food practices and fasting, and Ancient Greek Animal Sacrifice, a lecture that compares the components of sacrifice in the ancient Greek mystery religions and Christian Eucharistic ritual. At the request of the students we used one of the class meetings for a potluck luncheon. The student food contributions were supposed to be variations of the foods we studied as part of the section on ritual food practices.

I included a new section on perspectives on suffering (my favorite theme) in Christianity and Vodou as well. In the course we also read James Agee’s Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and although I have worked with this text three times, I always find new connections and themes. This time around I focused on religion and aesthetics. To accompany this section I showed two TED Talks that have beauty as subject; Richard Seymour’s How Beauty Feels and Denis Dutton’s A Darwinian Theory of Beauty.

In November, I will offer a paper at the National Women’s Studies Association conference in Cincinnati. Entitled “Sacred Space, Profane Bodies,” the paper presents the traditional arguments of the Catholic Church regarding their practice against the ordination of women and offers both theological and scriptural counter-arguments based in feminist theology and Biblical hermeneutics. The strategies of dissident groups as points of resistance and activism, which seek radical change for women’s ordination, will also be discussed.

My old friend Bill Jenkinson was a wise man and whenever I am reluctant to teach or research something outside of my academic comfort zone, I think of him and understand anew that the best teachers are those who take the risk to learn along with their students. With that in mind, I leave you with this quote by Zora Neale Hurston: “Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to ‘jump at the sun.’ We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.”
The Faculty Forum

Katie Hladky

After my second year at the College I have really enjoyed settling into the student community and mentoring seniors Paige Anderson (HIV and Suffering) and Meredith Porter (Sex Education in America) on their independent research projects. In addition to teaching my always fun “Approaches to Religion” course on “Religion and Sex,” this year brought the opportunity to explore more specific areas of my teaching interests in two special topics courses on “Islam in America” and “Exploring the Holy City: Religion in Charleston and the Lowcountry.”

“Islam in America” has been my favorite course at CofC thus far. I had an outstanding group of motivated and engaged students, including the majority of our graduating seniors. Students from the class were always excited to learn about Islam and many developed a passion for combating Islamophobia by sharing their new ideas and information with friends and family. The class took a field trip to Central Mosque of Charleston and organized an excellent campus-wide panel of Muslim women who shared their stories and answered our most burning questions.

“Exploring the Holy City” was a totally different kind of classroom experience, especially because we were so regularly not in our classroom! Using funds from an Innovative Teaching Grant and additional support from the Dean’s Fund I was able to arrange for the class to take a customized Gullah Geechee tour of the city as well as field trips to ten local churches, McLeod Plantation, Mepkin Abbey, Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, and the Hindu Temple and Cultural Center. The course also coincided with a visit from Peter Williams, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion and American Studies at Miami of Ohio. Dr. Williams led a group of students, faculty, and community members on a walking tour, illustrating his expertise in religious architecture. This visit was particularly exciting for me because Dr. Williams was my MA advisor and mentor. In fact, he taught a field trip based course on Sacred Space that inspired my own course! Our department graciously funded Dr. Williams’ visit and provided me with a wonderful “full circle” experience that I will never forget.

This summer I will focus on completing revisions on my book manuscript and getting ready for third-year review. I also look forward to volunteering with one of my favorite organizations, Camp Quest, as a volunteer Assistant Camp Director and a supervisor for the Camp Quest summer internship program. One of our recent graduates, Chrystal Dively, was recently chosen to participate in this summer internship program! Chrystal will use her expertise from her religious studies degree to design educational programming about world religions for youth ages 8-17.

John Huddlestun

Yet another year passes in the exciting life of a religious studies professor, a year full of educational wonder and enchantment for my dedicated students, and motivation and perseverance for their equally dedicated prof (or is that the other way around?). Once again, I introduced to the magical mystery that is the messiah, from the biblical David to Brooklyn’s own Hasidic Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and concluding with the most compassionate, endlessly self-sacrificing bodhisattava, Maitreya. No doubt students will never view the idea of messiah the same, nor should they. Speaking of messiah, my New Testament class, once again, challenged students to grapple with scholarly approaches to the biblical text and the never-ending quest for the historical Jesus. Maybe I can line up an interview with the fair and balanced folks at Fox News, given their renewed interest in how we heretical scholars do our job. (Reza Aslan, watch out!) As if the messiah theme were not enough already, I also taught yet another incarnation of our introduction to Jewish Tradition. This is always a challenging class, given one has to somehow
convey to students the historical, social, and identity-based complexities of a tradition in one semester – no small task. And last, but never least, I introduced students once again to the wonderful world of theories of religion in our ever popular Rel 210. This class (which I have taught more than anyone else in the department) is always “fun” and generates lots of interest and discussion. Here we can talk about the basic questions of how religion is defined and studied in religious studies classes, topics not dealt with as explicitly in other courses. This time around I introduced the engaging and entertaining documentary film (of sorts) titled Kumare, which deals with the creation of a fake religion (complete with its own eastern guru and made-up rituals) and its less than fake impact on the lives of those Arizonans who embraced this guru and his teachings.

Aside from teaching, which takes up the lion’s share of my time during the year (I suddenly transform into a research scholar-prince in late May, only to turn back into an ugly teaching frog in mid-August), I did manage to put the finishing touches on an article for a volume of essays dedicated to a former professor, scheduled to appear in September of this year. The article deals with the first biblical plague (the Nile turned to blood) and makes the novel argument that the plague need not reflect a uniquely Egyptian phenomenon, nor the usual naturalistic interpretation of biblical scholars and zealous amateurs. For those interested, I hope to have the final proofs posted on my web page on the departmental home page. In addition, I completed another piece on ancient Egypt and Israel, to appear in the Blackwell Companion series (Companion to Ancient Israel).

One of the highlights of the year was the visit of that renowned lover-of-religion, Richard Dawkins. I moderated the questions and answers for his talk, a totally packed event that felt more like a huge anti-religion pep rally, the perfect place for a scholar who makes a living teaching the Bible(!). Speaking of the Bible, Dawkins and I spent that morning discussing the good book, and he asked if I would do an interview on the subject, which we filmed that afternoon. This “conversation” is now available online (although I’ve not watched it, given I hate seeing or hearing myself in such venues). Regardless, I’m apparently world famous now, receiving emails from all over the globe (seriously) from viewers asking me questions about the Bible. There must be some way to turn this into financial gain with the administration.

Lee Irwin

This has been an interesting year, driven primarily by my research interests and a very engaging Senior Seminar, followed by an interactive, dynamic spring semester class on Western Esotericism. My research has been dedicated to writing a book on the history of reincarnation theories starting with the Orphic “ancient traditions,” then on to Plato and into the mountainous terrains of the Greco-Roman, Neoplatonic worlds and then into urban Medieval traditions like those of the Sufi, Bogomils, and Cathars. From there into the renaissance recovery of rebirth theory, infused with Jewish Kabbalah, up to the prophetic birth of Quakerism. Next a theory of multiple rebirths leaps across the ocean to America, carried by specific Quaker enthusiasts and takes root through Masonic and later Rosicrucian orders, supported by a large number of magical groups and idiosyncratic individuals, all playing jazz riffs on the theme of reincarnation. Quite a large project and I’m currently in the early 20th century, sorting through the American Rosicrucian materials, then comes the influence of Asia. I mention all this because it is the background against which teaching and administrative duties stand forth, a constant shifting between perspectives in and out of time.

In terms of teaching, I had a very good year with some great students. The Senior Seminar was on transpersonal theory, deep and dense, but everyone kept up and we had discussions in every class about the nature of “self” and the dynamics of transformation that are intrinsic to human development. In seminar discussions we constantly engaged theory and its relationship to a wide range of religious perspectives, practices, and goals. Students really embraced the overarching meta-theory on transpersonal encounter as a basis for the construction of meaning. I also taught a course on Death and Afterlife in seven traditions, including the last quarter of the course on contemporary research on the topic in parapsychology. Students had to interview others on beliefs in the afterlife, very fascinating ethnographic material! The most dynamic course for me this year was on Western Esotericism. Even though the enrollment was less than I expected—only twenty students—I have never had a more interactive class. I had to constantly bring us back to the primary topic as we would inevitably spin off into the esoteric relations across traditions and into various “rhetorical domains” (astrology, alchemy, magic and so on) that constitute the core content of esoteric studies. Students asked a series of probing questions as they developed familiarity with the field; several students told me independently that their “enthusiasm for religious studies” was renewed by the course. The lesson I take away from this is that while the historical approach is normative and necessary, there is great enthusiasm for more advanced courses that engage topics and areas of study with a rich theoretical approach. Overall, religion is not “all in the box” but in fact infused with rhetorical influences, practices, and social strategies that resonate with many areas of life—political, popular, psychological, feminist, artistic, imaginative, existential, confrontational, alternative. Clearly students find this kind of approach exciting, engaging and open-ended. The reconstruction of religion as cross-disciplinary dialogue rather than as a history of doctrine or practice fits the emerging inter-spiritual emphasis on religious identity of many younger people.

I also taught my Native American religious course and had much discussion there as well. Students are always amazed at how little they know about the First
Peoples of America and how native peoples still struggle for basic rights and religious freedom, for example, in prison where they are often denied the right to practice traditional rituals. Finally, but by no means last, I had the opportunity to work with a very disciplined and dedicated student, John Wise, on a tutorial that explored the esoteric influences on Joseph Smith and on the formative beliefs of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons). We read some in-depth works on early American esotericism that impacted the young prophet of Mormonism and discovered how the rhetorical force of those influences significantly impinged upon the many basic ideas that formed Mormon theology, some of which remain controversial to this day. A very interesting and excellent research project.

Our majors continue to impress me with their many interests, dedication, and enthusiasm for the rich feast of religious dishes served on our department table! Also it’s been a year of multiple presentations on many topics in the local Charleston area, including at the Charleston Jung Society, The Sophia Institute, and at the Holy Cow Yoga studio. I continue on in my role as a Guiding Voice for the Seven Pillars of Wisdom program. Overall, a very good, very creative and interactive year.

Todd LeVasseur

Backi up a bit, I successfully defended my dissertation and received my Ph.D. in Religion at the University of Florida, with an emphasis on the study of religion and nature/ecology, in December 2011. This gives me the dubious distinction of being the first alum of the department to earn a Ph.D., but given the quality of our recent graduates and the work many of them are undertaking in graduate programs, I can safely say that there will be quite a few more in the coming years. It’s a special treat to have been a student in this department (class of 1997), but now be a teacher in it, and witness the increasing caliber of our students. Not only are scholars asking better research questions than fifteen years ago, but our students are eager to jump into the literature and theories regarding religious studies, and are as competent as students at more prestigious schools like Harvard, Chicago, or Santa Barbara. We’ve come a long way, and I’m excited to see what happens for the majors who graduate over the next fifteen years.

Jumping to this past school year, I was offered a Visiting Assistant Professor position, which sure beats being an Adjunct! Part of the arrangement was that I teach introductory survey courses for the College’s Environmental Studies Program (ENVT). For both semesters I co-taught Introduction to Environmental Studies with colleagues in Biology, and I also oversaw interns who worked on projects in the Charleston community. It was a great privilege to introduce the methods and theories of the humanities, and especially religious studies, over to the old science building! While the natural sciences can tell us much about our interactions with the planet, they can’t tell us about human values and institutions, and how these influence our interactions with the more-than-human world.

As for RELS classes, in the fall I taught “Religion and Ecology” to Honors freshmen, and the same class as a special topics course to the larger campus community. Teaching the same subject to Honors freshmen, and then to classes mixed of sophomores, juniors, and seniors, was interesting. I found the brainpower of freshmen Honors students is very strong, but completing a first year at college really seems to add to the students’ maturity, especially when it comes to engaging new ideas that take them out of their comfort zone. I think our program requires an intellectual and emotional vulnerability from students, and I was glad to have the chance to teach this course in the fall.

In the spring I taught an ENVT seminar on “Food Security” and a 300-level Honors course on “Religion and Science.” This was a fun course to teach, covering naturalistic approaches to religion, the debate between Intelligent Design and evolution, and the interface of religion, science, and politics in contemporary American culture. Teaching upper level Honors students is a real treat, and I expect to see the names of many of my students in the news in about ten years, when they’ll be changing the world for the better!

My own professional development is an ongoing process. I finally feel comfortable teaching, since this is my third year creating syllabi and writing assignments. But since I’m only on annual contracts, every Fall I spend quite a bit of time writing cover letters for job applications and postgrad fellowships. Unfortunately, this is the reality in academia right now, and with so many applicants for these positions it’s a tough process (not to mention the strain it brings to a relationship, so I am eminently thankful for the patience of my wife and daughter!). I presented some research at two conferences, have two book chapters coming out in books, and had a journal article published (linked on my faculty page here). Another article that I wrote was accepted but still needs some changes, so editing that is my plan for this month before teaching a Summer I course on “Religion and Food.”

June McDaniel

The most interesting thing that I did during the summer of 2012 was travel to Indonesia. From late June to mid-July I went to the islands of Java and Bali for lectures, research and vacation. It ended up being more work than vacation. When I arrived in Jakarta after five airplane flights in a row and without much sleep, I found out that I was scheduled for a lecture to the National Commission on Violence Against Women in a matter of hours. The talk was on Religious Plural-
way to Bali. There I worked with a Balinese colleague to interview several pedandas, the high Hindu priests of Shiva who are rarely seen by outsiders. I observed their most important ritual, the Surya Sevana, when ordinary water is transformed into the holy water used for all temple worship, and visited the only remaining Buddhist village in Bali, where the Buddhism is fused with worship of the Hindu god Shiva. It took hours of driving over bumpy rural roads to find these people, who lived in house temples and did not travel or handle money.

The vacation part took place at the hotel that had private villas with swimming pools, outside stone showers and high arched roofs. It was filled with the sound of gamelans, chiming instruments heard throughout Indonesia. It was near Ubud, the religious and artistic center of Bali, where most streets have art galleries with images of idealized forests and deities.

In November, I went to the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Chicago and gave papers on Indian and Balinese Hinduism. Then in January, I travelled to the University of Wyoming at Laramie, to give a paper—my first time in Wyoming. I visited a convent in the Colorado mountains, and got to experience three snowstorms in a row.

Other than travel, I have been writing about Hinduism and mysticism generally. I taught classes on world religions, religion and psychology, and mysticism and religious experience, and gave a lecture for the Charleston Jung Society on yogic concepts of the mind and Jungian psychology. I had many bright and interesting students in my classes, especially the Mysticism and Religious Experience class, which had students with a wide range of ages and backgrounds. Most recently, I have been evaluating a PhD thesis for the University of Helsinki in Finland, and will go to Helsinki this summer to act as Opponent in their Ph.D. testing system. I shall also be going to England in May to give lectures at the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Kent, and will see colleagues in Bath and London.

Elijah Siegler

The Faculty Forum
In Spring 2012 I taught a new honors seminar on evangelicalism and American culture and in Fall 2012 I taught it as a freshman seminar, and in Spring 2013 I taught it yet again as an intro-level lecture class—finally getting it right! I also enjoyed teaching a sequence of classes examining the relationship between religion and popular culture. In Fall 2012, I taught an intro class whose main goal was to have students enjoy imbibing the “medicine” of various theories of religion (Durkheim, Marx, Eliade) with the “sugar” of pop culture (football, TV shows, music videos). After teaching this course on religion and popular culture, I followed that up with my “Religion and Film” night class, which allows deeper explorations into the Hero Myth and its problems, and into film theory and analysis. Finally, in Maymester I taught a new class on myth, morality and meaning in the films of the Coen Brothers, which raised religious and ethical questions like “what is America’s mythology? Where is morality to be found in an immoral world? And how can we make meaning in our lives?”

In terms of my research over the past two years, some good stuff was finally published that I wrote years ago, including Chinese Religious Life: Culture, Society and Politics which included my “Globalization and Chinese Religions,” and Daoism in the 20th century: Between Eternity and Modernity for which I wrote the conclusion “Daoism beyond modernity: The ‘Healing Tao’ as post-modern movement.” The December 2012 issue of Journal of the American Academy of Religion (the one journal all religion scholars at least glance at—because it arrives in our mailboxes whether we want it or not) published my essay on religious themes—or the lack thereof—in the films and public pronouncements of one of my favorite directors. It’s called “David Cronenberg: The Secular Auteur as Critic of Religion.” I also wrote a fun essay and a random title generator for a friend’s web project called “Frequencies: A Genealogy of Spirituality.” Finally, I am still plugging away on my two book projects, Dream Trippers: Global Daoism and Predicament of Modern Spirituality, co-written with David Palmer, and American Daoism: Its History And Practice From The Beginning To The 21st Century. Look for them one of these years.

Summer 2012 I finally got some funding to begin a research project I had been interested in since I moved to the South—investigating the alternative religious community of Asheville N.C. I was lucky enough to have a great research assistant in the just graduated Haley Hart. And Emily Jolley, an Ashevillian who graduated a few years back also helped out. I went back to the area in January 2013 and presented some preliminary findings at a religious studies conference in Greeneville in March. Several of our students and alumni also presented at the conference, and a whole lot of RELS majors came out for moral support! Most importantly, my kids, now 11 and 7 ½, are getting bigger and smarter and funnier.

Stay in touch, y’all!

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Keep Connected

Stay in Touch

Lost their address? Mail returned to sender? We can keep you connected. If you would like to reconnect with a fellow alumni, congratulate them on an accomplishment, marriage, birth of a child, or just say hello, you can do it through our new Facebook page “CofC GodSquad: RELS Alumni. Send your message to Tracie Mitchum, (mitchumt@cofc.edu) who will manage this new Facebook page.

We also invite all Alumni to join us at the Annual American Academy of Religion Conference which will take place November 23-26 in Baltimore.

Baltimore, site of AAR

Zoey Katherine Laughlin
Recommended Books On Religion

Former students often miss their classes in Religious Studies and ask us to recommend books that relate to the religions and topics that we teach. Here are some recently published books that you might enjoy when you read religiously....

**Zeff Bjerken**
For those of you interested in Hinduism or planning a trip to India, I highly recommend reading *The Indians: Portrait of a People* by Sudhir Kakar and Katharina Kakar. This book explores the caste system, the role and status of women, Indian sexuality, health and healing, and why there is tension between Hindus and Muslims. It’s an excellent read! Another beautifully written travelogue of Indian places and spirit is William Dalrymple’s *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India.*

**Lee Irwin**
Michael Daniel’s book, *Shadow, Self, Spirit: Essays on Transpersonal Psychology* is the best overview summary on transpersonal theory that I have ever read, very good, easy to read and complex. Another interesting and engaging introduction to this topic is by Jorge Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality.* Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysics: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* provides a historical introduction to metaphysical” spirituality, which is informed by Esotericism. If you want to read something more novelistic on Esotericism, try John Crowley’s Aegypt Series, which starts with the novel *The Solitudes,* pretty astonishing! A good book I discovered recently on Lakota reservation life is *Neither Wolf nor Dog: On Forgotten Roads with An American Indian Elder* by Kent Nerburn. Tell it like it is!

**Louise Doire**
I never tire of sharing James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and highly recommend it. Perhaps, if you are interested, we could all read the book and I could create a Facebook CoC RELS Alumni Book Club page to discuss it!

**Elijah Siegler**
Recommends *Rapture Ready! Adventures in the Parallel Universe of Christian Pop Culture* by Daniel Radosh. I’ve taught this book three times in a row and students love it. As funny as you’d expect from a former Daily Show writer, but even-handed and insightful as well. *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* by Kathryn Lofton. High-octane “cultural studies”-style prose from a brilliant young religious studies scholar/Oprah fan, with digressions into American religious history and theory. Finally, take a look at *The Marriage Plot* by Jeffrey Eugenides. The most interesting and sympathetic of its three main characters is a religious studies major. It’s a good fictional account of why a college student would major in religious studies and what it brings to their life.
Graduation Honors & Awards

Our graduating class in 2013 was one of our smallest in terms of numbers, with only eleven students earning their BA degree, but it was an exceptionally strong graduating class. Our “Outstanding Student Award” went to four students, the largest number ever awarded: Paige Anderson, Hannah Booth, Rachel Davis and Hannah Wathen. Paige Anderson had a GPA in RELS of 3.954 and graduated summa cum laude. In addition to her BA in RELS she had two minors in Asian Studies and Women & Gender Studies. Hannah Booth earned a RELS GPA of 3.83 and she completed the RELS degree requirements in only two years, earning a minor in Psychology too. Rachel Davis was a triple major in RELS, English and Secondary Education; she had a perfect 4.0 GPA in her RELS classes, while completing the requirements for the Honors College. Rachel served as peer facilitator for Dr. Siegler's First Year Seminar on "Evangelicals in America," she published an essay on the alleged “War on Christmas” in *Chrestomathy* and she received a SURF grant for her research on farming and faith in the South Carolina upstate region. Hannah Wathen earned a RELS GPA of 3.569 with two minors in Music and Women & Gender Studies. Hannah also completed an internship at the Sophia Institute, a center of learning in Charleston that cultivates wisdom and the conscious feminine and masculine.

Two students earned the Humanities & Social Sciences Scholar Award in Religious Studies: Paige Anderson and Tyler Ray. Paige served as president of the Religious Studies Club, she led fieldtrips and fostered discussion and debate among students about religious studies and she was also active in the LGBTQ community on campus. Paige also completed a research tutorial on “AIDS and Suffering: The Religious Construction of AIDS in America,” which explored how language has been used to shape the perception of HIV/AIDS in both religious and secular communities. Tyler was a Ronald McNair Fellow who participated actively in a number of extra-curricular activities: he organized the “Meditation Club,” taught about religions and social justice for the Unitarian Universalist High School Group, and he traveled to China with Siegler in summer 2011, returning again in 2012 to study Chinese through Columbia University’s intensive Mandarin language program. He also completed a McNair Summer research project and a tutorial with Bjerken on the role of conceptual metaphors in the Daoist philosophy of Zhuangzzi, which was accepted for publication in *Chrestomathy*.

Congratulations to our Award winners and to all our graduates in 2012-13, and continued success as they transition to the "Real World" after Religious Studies.
Events Sponsored by Religious Studies

The Department of Religious Studies is pleased to host a series of lectures and colloquia to serve the needs and interests of our students, the College and the Charleston community.

October 31, 2012
Dr. Margaret Cormack gave her sabbatical lecture on *Through a Glass Darkly: Transformation of the Otherworld in Medieval and Lutheran Iceland*. The lecture addressed this question: what do you do when, as a result of an administrative decision, a whole series of beings on whom you had relied for aid against the forces of evil (trolls, demons, and magicians) are no longer accessible—in fact, no longer exist? This was the situation that faced Icelanders in particular at the time of the Protestant Reformation, and Cormack examined different historical sources and how 19th century folklore provided practical ways of dealing with hostile beings.

November 28, 2012
The Great Debate: *God or Atheism: Where does the Evidence Point?* This debate was moderated by Dr. Elijah Siegler, organized by Dr. Katie Hladky, and featured Dr. Alex Kasman arguing for Atheism and Dr. Wallace Marshall arguing for God. This much anticipated debate packed Physician’s Auditorium with students, faculty and community members.

November 29, 2012
Dr. Tobin Hart, from the Department of Psychology at the University of West Georgia, spoke on *Opening the Integrative Mind*. Hart’s research explores human consciousness at the nexus of spirituality, psychology and education, and he discussed the human capacities that are central to psycho-spiritual development: presence, resonance, wisdom and creativity.

February 14, 2013
Dr. Lee Irwin gave his sabbatical lecture on *Reincarnation in Western Esotericism*. He surveyed the theory of reincarnation or metempsychosis in western religious history from the time of Plato and Greco-Roman times to esoteric movements in America. Dr. Irwin’s lecture in Arnold Hall was very well attended by students, faculty, and members of the community.

February 21, 2013
Rachel Davis presented her Bachelor Essay topic on *Hallowed Ground: The Share Space of Religion and Agriculture in South Carolina*. Her presentation addressed how religion and farming meet and diverge in the everyday working lives of Southern Christian farmers, whose voices have yet to be heard in the academic discourse of religion and nature.

March 9, 2013
Richard Dawkins, world-famous evolutionary biologist and atheist, spoke to Herb Silverman, president emeritus of Secular Coalition for America, in *A Conversation with Richard Dawkins*. The event was co-sponsored by the Department of Religious Studies and moderated by Dr. John Huddlestun. Before the main event Dawkins interviewed Huddlestun as a Biblical scholar with expertise on a range of topics, mostly focusing on the historicity of events and individuals featured in the *Bible*.

March 19, 2013
Dr. Peter Williams, distinguished professor emeritus of American religious history at Miami University of Ohio and one of the leading experts on the landscape of religion in America, led a tour of select churches in the Holy City. The tour included Grace Episcopal Church, St Michael’s Church (the oldest in Charleston), the French Huguenot Church, and the Circular Congregational Church.

April 23, 2013
Dr. Charles Lippy, professor emeritus from the University of Tennessee and former Leroy A. Martin Distinguished Professorship of Religious Studies, spoke on *From Anglicans to Zen: The Tangled Tale of Religious Diversity in South Carolina*. Although many see South Carolina religious life as dominated by evangelical Protestantism, beneath the surface there has always been a vibrant diversity. That diversity has taken different twists and turns since the days of colonial settlement. Lippy’s presentation suggested ways to understand religious diversity in South Carolina on its circuitous journey from the 17th century to the present.
Class of 1999
Ali O’Brien is working toward a Master Certificate in Software testing and ISTQB certification, which relates to her work on software quality assurance. She has adopted yet another homeless cat and luckily he has a dynamic, quirky personality. That brings the current cat count up to three, which Ali realizes brings her “dangerously close to crazy cat ladydom.” She has discovered the joys of mandala coloring books and one-off art classes--so much so, it looks as if the ghost of Bob Ross has set up camp in her office! While on a business trip to D.C., she made it through the Natural History and East Art Gallery, a few gardens, snacked while people watching on the Mall facing the Capitol, passed the White House, the Federal Reserve, the Washington monument, took a sit-down, contemplative break at the Lincoln memorial, and from there went to the Vietnam and Korean memorials, wept at the MLK, and Metro-ed back and forth to Arlington in 3.5 hours, if you count stopping for an hour to work while people watching and snacking. Ali says that this high-speed patriotic pilgrimage is her biggest accomplishment yet, so she high-fived herself when it was all over.

2001
After nearly seven years of service, Dorrell Addison resigned from his position as Assistant Pastor in Macon Georgia, and he started a new career in Hospice. This summer he begins a new job in North Carolina as a Hospice Chaplain and Bereavement Coordinator, which is a better fit for his unique brand of non-traditional ministry and service to others. Dorrell and his wife Trinika are excited to move to Morrisville, adjacent to Durham where his new job is located.

After teaching part time for two years as an adjunct instructor in the RELS department, Roddy Knowles is now making a lot more money as the Senior Delivery Manager and Mobile Research Expert at Research Now, a company based in Plano Texas that allows him to work at home in Charleston. He focuses on methodology, design, and analytics for quantitative and qualitative data collected with mobile devices.

Class of 2000
Chris Sanders earned a Master of Forest Resources and a Graduate Certificate in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) from the University of Georgia some ten years ago, and his GIS expertise has proved invaluable. He now works as a Solution Architect for Schneider Electric, which designs mapping systems for Gas and Electric Utilities that enable the utilities to distribute electricity more efficiently. Since Chris can work at home, he and his wife decided to move from Decatur GA back to Charleston, and he’s just built a house downtown. It’s good to be back in the city that he loves.

2002
After Lucy Barna had her songwriting featured in the College of Charleston Magazine decided to leave her job as manager at Trader Joe’s in Santa Fe in order to pursue a more creative direction. She formed an all-female appalachian-country-bluegrass band called Hot Honey, and the band recently took three first place awards in the Santa Fe music community, so they are now working on their first album. Lucy also dove into metalsmithing and discovered that she had another love aside from playing music. In January she opened her own small business, Votive Designs, and she has been more successful than she ever imagined. But her greatest joy and challenge has been raising her twin boys, Sage and Sequoia, who are now six years old.

Niki Fisk moved to New Orleans 10 years ago, where she began training in the aerial arts and took metalsmithing classes at a local community college. After hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans her metalsmithing hobby became her job, and she began an apprenticeship with two different artists. She then ventured out on her own and now makes hand-wrought sterling silver shadowbox jewelry that is inspired by myths and sacred symbols, science fiction and fantasy. She has shown her work at many arts and crafts shows around the country, including the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage festival, where she was selected as the best new artist this year! She’s also built a performance career as an aerial artist, doing trapeze, silks, and hooping. This past April she performed with Preservation Hall at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C, which was an incredible experience.

Class of 2001
Here are some things we know about what some of your former classmates are doing these days. If we haven’t heard from you lately, write to us and let us know what you’re doing too!
Carissa Stephens (Lentz) lives in Austin where she works as a charge nurse and ECMO specialist (for children with a condition that prevents the lungs or heart from working properly) at an Intensive Care Unit at a freestanding children’s hospital. Working in ICU and ECMO especially can be very trying, so she uses her training in religious studies and philosophy to navigate some very complex ethical situations. Carissa has three beautiful children (ages 6, 4 and 2) and her husband (another CofC grad) is completing his Ph.D. in geophysics at the University of Texas, Austin.

Bobby Ticknor finished his Ph.D. exams in Medieval History at Tulane but decided not to write a dissertation. He now works in New Orleans as a reference assistant in the reading room of a research center/archive called the Historic New Orleans Collection. He loves working in a job where everyday he can use his training in history and religious studies to help graduate students and professors on their research projects.

2003

Jay and Jenni Laughlin live in Bellevue Washington, just across the bay from Seattle. Jenni just got hired for a new job at the University of Washington, where she will be leading a multi-year initiative to modernize business and system processes related to content management, across the entire university. For example, one of her first focus areas is the Admissions Office, where she will help them transition from a paper-based application review process to a paperless one. Jenni writes that “it is going to be super interesting to get to work with so many different departments, and the tuition exemption should definitely keep me busy too!” Jay loves being a stay-at-home dad for their daughter Zoey, who is about to turn 3 years old and is excited to start ballet in September. Jay started his own hat making business as a milliner, called Hats by Jay, and his work is seen here.

Jenni Laughlin modeling one of Jay’s amazing hats

Kerri DeYoung Phillips is still an attorney in Boston and works for the state. Her legal work involves the regulation of phone and cable, with a bulk of her focus on Universal Service and intercarrier compensation. She writes that her RELS training really helped to hone her analytical and writing abilities, which are very useful for the legal profession. On the personal side, she and her husband welcomed their first child, Samuel Jones Phillips, on October 29, 2012, which coincided with Superstorm Sandy.

Jenna Jones earned her M.A. from the Religious Studies program at UNC-Charlotte and currently teaches an introduction to religion course at Trident Tech here in Charleston. She is in Hawaii this summer at the East-West Center for a program designed to infuse Chinese and Japanese art, religion, and literature into the undergraduate curriculum. In the fall she will also begin teaching at Queens University in Charlotte, where she will help them develop a distance learning online program for Religious Studies.

Andi Perullo de Ledesma has had her Chinese Medicine Clinic for five years and it’s doing really well. Somewhat unexpectedly she has become a specialist in treating infertility, and she reports that she’s helped nearly 50 women conceive babies with her treatment. Andi has a second career as a travel photographer. Her website My Beautiful Adventures is one of the top travel blogs in the industry. Over the last couple of years she has worked with magazines, brands, and companies all over the world and visited over 60 countries. She is also currently the Travel Editor of Queen City Exclusive magazine. In the upcoming months she is going to Las Vegas, England, Scotland, and Tanzania; she will also be going back to Argentina for the holidays with her husband of two years.

2004

Lauren Trexler graduated in May 2012 from Hebrew Union College with a degree in Jewish Nonprofit Management. She then became the program director at Hillel at the University of California, Davis, which has been challenging and fun. She enjoys living on the West Coast and being so close to San Francisco, where she has lots of friends.

Mary Clune worked at the Council of American Overseas Resource Centers, which fosters international scholarly exchange for pre-doctoral and senior scholars with the goal of increasing knowledge of foreign cultures. After the Council lost its State Department Grant she was laid off and she then accepted a temp position in a startup company, which relocated to a Seattle based firm. Mary stayed in Washington and now works for E.L. Haynes Public Charter School, an award-winning and innovative school in D.C. that she describes as “so “me” of a job, it is kinda’ scary.” She plans to pursue a Masters in Education at a local satellite of the University of Virginia’s Curry School, which is an amazing opportunity to work hands on in an environment that is earning all kinds of attention for its innovative programs and best practices.
Rebecca Rathburn has left the world of real estate and returned to CofC to complete some science classes and study for the MCAT, after which she will apply to medical schools. She wants to pursue a Doctor of Osteopathy rather than a typical MD, and she has been working at MUSC in the emergency room for the last several years. Of her work in the ER Becca writes that “the blood and guts seem to suit me.”

Jess Toan writes from Asheville, where she works at home as the Healing Arts Director of the Lake Eden Arts Festival (LEAF) and does massage therapy too. Jess plans to start a Health Coach Certification in the next few months so that she can put her master’s degree in Health Arts & Sciences into practice. But her most exciting news is that she is now a stay-at-home mother of a sweet baby girl named Eden, who is super active, happy and a fun little lady!

Rachel Epps (Garrett) serves on staff at Charleston Atlantic Presbytery as the Associate for Youth Ministry, coordinating the Presbytery Youth Council and three Presbytery-wide youth retreats a year. She also just published her first children’s book, called Ballerina’s Abroad: An Introduction to the History of Ballet. Rachel has two daughters: Millie (23 months) and Mollie (3 months), both of whom are the most awesome girls ever.

Jason Purvis has completed his coursework in religions in the Americas at the University of Florida and is now preparing for his comprehensive Ph.D. exams. His current research examines a Native Christian group called Wiconi International based in Portland Oregon. The movement’s founder believed that indigenous peoples were part of a prophetic movement that would witness the global rise of native Christians around the world and become co-equals with Western theologians. This project integrates Jason’s interest in Native and subaltern Christianities, globalization and religion, and sociology of religion.

Stacey Rickard continues to work as a Contracting Officer for the National Park Service in Atlanta. She was deployed last December to the Gateway National Recreation Area on Staten Island to help out with Hurricane Sandy recovery efforts. She has returned twice since then and was happy to see how much the situation has improved. Her son serves in the Air Force and is currently stationed in Korea, but his first choice for his base when he returns is Charleston, which would allow Stacey to return for a family reunion/pilgrimage to our Holy City.

Brynn White was ordained this past December in the United Church of Christ. Brynn received her Masters of Divinity in 2011 from Vanderbilt Divinity School and is currently completing her second year of Clinical Pastoral Education as a chaplain resident. She lives in Charlotte, NC with her partner Leah, an ordained minister in the Alliance of Baptist tradition, and their two dogs, Gabby and Mr. Alfie.

Mike and Emily Altman have now relocated from Atlanta to Tuscaloosa, where Mike landed a one-year teaching position in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. They are now the proud parents of three boys: Stein, Ollie, and baby Gideon, who was born on March 3, 2013, just before Mike graduated from Emory with his Ph.D. Mike is the second of our RELS alumni to earn a Ph.D in Religious Studies, and we are so proud that he has already found a teaching position at a prestigious Religious Studies program, where he will work with Russell McCutcheon. Mike maintains an excellent blog on American Religion, Culture and History here:

Chelsea Diffendal has been “flying by the seat of her pants” in Seattle and pursuing her passion for roller derby, a time consuming sport. But she’s decided to take a break from playing this season in order to apply to graduate programs in marine archaeology, which bridges the gap between her need for adventure and her academic inclinations. In the meantime, she plans to enjoy the glorious summer in Seattle, with weekend camping trips, days off spent by Lake Washington with a good book, and getting her SCUBA certification…an idyllic summer.
Adam Floyd now lives with his girlfriend Corrin in Las Vegas, where he works as a climbing guide for the American Alpine Institute and Jackson Hole Mountain Guides. He’s also working on a trail crew at the City of Rocks National Reserve, where he reads Gary Snyder’s poetry and the Cold Mountain poems of Han Shan during his time off, and daydreams of landing his ideal job as a BLM wilderness climbing ranger position at Red Rocks. Adam makes good use of his expertise in ritual by serving as a Reverend in the Universal Life Church and he has officiated at weddings for friends.

2007

Andrew Aghapour completed his comprehensive Ph.D. exams in Religious Studies at the UNC-Chapel Hill and he now begins work on his dissertation research. It will focus on religion and the brain and explore debates in the cognitive science of religion, with case studies into neuro-Buddhism and “God Helmets” in California. Andrew suspects that these “God Helmets,” which promise religious experiences through Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation, might be an example of Spiritualism 2.0, where the copper wires and silken threads of séances in the past are now replaced with electromagnets and algorithms. To read some of Andrew’s recent writing on religion and the brain, check out this essay on Religion Dispatches.

Amanda Roper (Pearce) begins her third year of residency in Psychiatry and was accepted to the MUSC Drug and Alcohol Research Track, also known as the D.A.R.T. Fellowship. Her final research project will be a placebo controlled study of an investigational medication in young adults that bite their fingernails. Once her residency is completed she might pursue further training in Brain Stimulation (Electroconvulsive therapy, transcranial magnetic stimulation, etc.) or Addictions, both of which would be yearlong fellowships.

2007

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Mary Louisa Cleveland still lives in Boston, where she serves as Operations Manager for the Avon Walk for Breast Cancer in three cities: Boston, Washington D.C. and Charlotte. This position now allows her to work strategically with staff and campaigns in all three markets, and she still really enjoys the work that they do. Mary is also getting married on September 21 in Cedar Mountain, North Carolina to Jimmy Wiencek, who she met while teaching with Teach for America in Phoenix. He’s a fellow English/Religious Studies scholar, who is now working as a lawyer here in Boston. Congratulations to Mary Louisa for finding another RELS soul traveler!

Irreverent Reverend Adam Floyd, director at a wedding

Artie Flouras completed her Master’s degree in psychology and her Ed.S. in school psychology at the Citadel, and she now works in Developmental Pediatrics at MUSC in Charleston. She was also married over a year ago and Professor Doire performed the wedding ceremony—Artie reports that Doire did an amazing job and was quite a hit with all the guests.

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2007

Lilli Merit (Arader) just graduated from the Master’s in Social Work program at the University of California, Berkeley. She now works in Oakland as a counselor for people with chronic mental illness and trauma and she helps them to transition back into the community after their hospitalization. It’s hard work but she gets a lot out of it. She and her husband Alex are pregnant and they are expecting their first child in October—and Lilli just learned it’s a girl!

Phillip (P.J.) Schwartz is a newly ordained rabbi from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where he also earned a Masters in Hebrew Letters and a Masters of Educational Administration with a specialization in Jewish education. He has served congregations in Marion, Indiana, in Ishpeming, Michigan, in Marion and Cincinnati Ohio, but he now lives and works in Westport Connecticut, where he serves as assistant rabbi for Temple Israel.
Alumni News

Priscilla Thomas completed her M.A. coursework at Ohio University’s graduate program for Visual Communication with a concentration in photojournalism. She now resides in Charleston as a documentary photographer and commercial videographer. Her M.A. project will focus on the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity.

2008

After graduating, Annie Butler attended massage school, became licensed, and has practiced bodywork in Raleigh since June 2011. She now begins graduate study in the MA in Human Science program at Saybrook University, where she plans to specialize in Consciousness, Spirituality and Integrative Health. This focus will allow her to study widely as her curiosity ventures into the inner worlds of others. Since this program is offered through distance education, she will be able to stay connected to the wellness community that she has been building in Raleigh.

Katie Browne recently returned from three and a half years with the Peace Corps in Madagascar. During her third-year extension there, she worked with Wildlife Conservation Society on various environmental education and environmental health projects in coastal rainforest communities. Now with her Evangelicals and the Church-State Complex in Peru, 1890-1945,” which might become part of his dissertation. Matt just received a two-year collaborative research grant from the UC Humanities Research Institute with two of his former professors from UC-Riverside to pursue a project on immigrant religions in California.

Jen McGlothin (Montini) lives in Pittsburgh and for the past year she has served as the Director of Religious Education at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the South Hills. She has really enjoyed getting back into conversations about religions, and in November her congregation will host the “Jesus Seminar on the Road,” which she looks forward to. She also is expecting her second son in October and hopes to buy her first home soon.

2009

Natasha Akery (Rorrer) worked for Southwest Airlines in 2012 as a customer service agent and Corporate Culture Committee Secretary. It was a great experience to work for such a large company and enjoy the benefits of free flights. She and her husband Matt found out they were pregnant on New Year’s Eve, so it was a great way to enter 2013. Since then, she has assumed the role of a housewife and mother-to-be, focusing on a healthy pregnancy as well as working on her first book. The baby is due the first week of September, the first grandchild of the family, and the first Akery girl in several generations. Her name is Eleanor Eisley Akery—yay!

Matt Casey completed his Ph.D. coursework in the History program at the University of California-Davis, where he specializes in Latin American religious history and works as a Teaching Assistant. Last summer he made his first archival trip to Lima and wrote an essay on “The Liberty that We Need: Aisha Vanderhorst writes from Prague in the Czech Republic, where she came for a certification course to Teach English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). When she’s not studying she has taken time to explore the surrounding region, absorbing the history and the unbelievable architecture: just touching and being in the presence of the buildings is very powerful. After earning her TEFL certificate she plans to relocate to South Korea and teach in an English Program in Korea, where she plans to spend at least a year…the adventure continues!
Alumni News

2010

Michael Broderick lives in northern Japan and is beginning his third year teaching English in the Japanese Exchange and Teaching Programme. When he’s not teaching he participates in local festivals, volunteers along Tohoku’s tsunami-affected coast, studies Japanese kanji, and relaxes in Japanese hot springs.

Micah Blaise Carpenter has been working as a special education instructor in Charlotte, but she has returned to Charleston this summer to organize Girls Rock! Charleston, a non-profit camp that empowers girls and transgender youth through DIY media and creative collaboration. She loves working with this organization because it was borne out of her beloved community here and it is doing some of the most transgressive work that she has seen in South Carolina.

Beverly Foster moved from Boulder Colorado to Asheville in order to work as a groundskeeper, farm hand and herbalist apprentice at Swan Creek Farm and Ageless Herbs, a Chinese Medicinal Herb Farm. But she yearned to be back out west, so she then moved from Asheville to Ashland Oregon, where she makes Ayurvedic Rasayanas and traditional Indian medicines, work that draws upon her RELS training in Ayurvedic texts. Whenever she can find time off work she travels around Northern California and Southern Oregon to camp and hike: “there is so much diversity on Mother Earth to explore and appreciate!”

Jordon Jackson didn’t believe it was possible to be busier (or poorer) than she was while a student at the College, but now that she’s a graduate student at Clemson she has realized otherwise. She is pursuing a Masters in Education, specializing in School Counseling, and she has found some truly passionate mentors who have provided her with many valuable experiences to help her become a Guidance Counselor. When she’s not studying, writing papers, going to class, and fulfilling internship hours, she is training for her second half marathon.

Elizabeth Nolin (Atkinson) graduated from the Charleston School of Law in December 2012, and she moved to New Hampshire with her husband right after Christmas. She completed the New Hampshire Bar exams and she was recently sworn in as an attorney in New Hampshire. It’s been a busy but rewarding year!

Lily Winter’s life has been a whirlwind working for political campaigns in different states ever since she graduated. In 2011 she moved back home to Colorado to work on Michael Hancock’s race for mayor of Denver, then after he was elected she relocated to Charlotte for over a year to work on the fund-raising team for the Democratic National Convention. Following the election she moved to Connecticut to work on the fund-raising team for Chris Murphy’s senate race, who also won. Next she worked in D.C. for President Obama’s second Inauguration, and now she’s living in New York, working at the Harry Walker Agency, a political speakers firm. Looking ahead she might pursue graduate work in Public Policy, but that is still up in the air.

2011

Rachel Cechak works at the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Charleston. She earned the Urban and Regional Planning Graduate Certificate through the College’s Masters in Public Administration program. This fall she will begin classes (part time) at Charleston School of Law while continuing to work for the U.S. Attorney’s office.

Christie Kremcheck finished her M.A. in the “Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness” program at the California Institute of Integral Studies last year. Christie now lives with her boyfriend Matt Casey (2009) in Davis, California, which is perhaps the karmic fruit of taking Buddhism with Dr. Bjerken in 2008, when Christie and Matt first met.

Michael Broderick at the Matsuri Festival in Japan
Alex Chiola is enrolled in the Master’s of Divinity program at the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, which requires 96 credit hours—a lot of work, but Alex reasons that a Master’s degree in God should be one of the longest degrees. In March he became engaged to Emily Olender, a wonderful woman who is enrolled in the undergraduate program at SEBTS, and their wedding is planned for August 3, 2013. After completing his M.Div. Alex plans to plant a church in an urban area, perhaps in Canada.

Dan Hanf recently began work as a junior software developer in Mt. Pleasant and he’s in his third year as the video board and camera operator for the Charleston RiverDogs baseball team. He also auditioned and was accepted into the company at Theater 99, and he enjoys performing improv comedy.

Kathryn Harrawood has been serving in the Peace Corps in Senegal as a Health Education volunteer since May 2013, where she now works in a remote village of 800 people. She’s been learning the local language of Wolof and living like her Muslim neighbors. To learn more of her adventures and read about her experience with fasting during Ramadan, Senegalese weddings, baptisms, and funerals, check out her blog My So-Called Senegalese Life.

Adam Hubschman lives in Atlanta and is having a wonderful time there. He just finished his first year in Commercial Real Estate and he loves it. While in Atlanta he has taken advantage of the opportunity to visit Emory University and listen to guest speakers and the faculty there deliver public talks on religion.

Jessy Krall writes from South Korea, where he has spent the last two years steadily improving his Korean language skills while he teaches English and science. During his free time he backpacks across Asia and pursues independent research on how Korean Shamanism adapts in the face of rapid social change and economic industrialization. Soon he will be leaving Korea to move to Australia on a Working Holiday visa for one year, after which he will apply to Public Health graduate programs.

Lexie Marenakos is pursuing a Masters of Education at Chaminade University in Hawaii, which provides special training in Montessori. She has one year of student teaching to complete the degree, and she will work at the Montessori School of Mt. Pleasant this coming year. She plans to present her American Montessori Society (AMS) portfolio in May 2014 and if it is approved then she will have earned her AMS credential. After a year of relative isolation living in Hawaii she’s happy to return home to Charleston.

Alex Melligon now lives near Newark in New Jersey. After becoming certified as a yoga teacher she now works with the Newark Yoga Movement, an organization that teaches yoga to students in public schools, which she finds incredibly rewarding. She continues to look for ESL jobs in South America (Buenos Aires? Cartagena?) and she wants to work in the area of human rights, environmental education, and community building.

Ilya Merlin just completed his M.A. from the Religious Studies department at UNC-Charlotte, where he wrote his thesis on hip-hop and religion, specifically on Tupac Shakur’s legacy: “Revolution in Thug Life: Anti-Matricide and the Sacred.” Ilya has relocated to London, Ontario, where he will begin his Ph.D. at the University of Western Ontario. Ilya published an essay that reflected on his mother’s death and the support he received from his intellectual community called “Friendship is an Openness to Death.”

Jessica Mitsch works in Raleigh for an Open Source software company called Red Hat as a “Global Mobility Associate.” She handles immigration issues by securing H-1B visas and green cards for associates and new hires for Red Hat who come to the US. She notes that most of the people she works with are Indians so “it’s great that I had the experience of studying abroad in India.” She hopes to save enough money while working in Raleigh to go to graduate school, and she still keeps up with the College by serving as Raleigh/Durham Alumni Chapter president and organizes small alumni events about once a month in the area.

After a year of Matchcorps, a one-year urban education fellowship in Boston, Samantha Sammis returned to Charleston where she has used applied the prin-
Alumni News

Principles of asset-based community development to the Eastside neighborhood (on America Street), to strengthen the neighborhood. She notes that she is “fascinated by the power of culture, religion, and society and how these social norms can influence our daily lives, actions, and decision making skills.”

She was recently hired for the WINGS after school program, which is designed to help develop children’s social and emotional skills. She is considering an application to Duke University’s dual master’s program in Divinity and Social Work.

Amberjade Mwekali Taylor participated in a summer intensive Tibetan language program at the University of Virginia and then made her way to Dharamsala India, home of the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan government in exile, and many Tibetan activists. She works as Secretariat Assistant for International Tibet Network, a coalition of more than 190 Tibet organizations dedicated to campaigning to end human rights violations in Tibet; she also works for Global Leadership Adventures in India, a high school study abroad and service program based in Dharamsala.

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Chrystal Dively has been working as a secretary at a law firm Trask & Howell, LLC in Mt Pleasant. When not dealing with a slew of legal and financial paperwork at this job, she interned this summer with the atheist-humanist organization, Camp Quest in order to create religious studies summer programs for children ages 8-17. These programs stimulate critical thinking about world religions while promoting qualities such as empathy, open-mindedness, and appreciation for cultural and religious diversity. In June she joined the CoC Study Abroad trip to China. Originally she planned to serve as a mere teaching assistant, but she unexpectedly received “battlefield promotion” barely a week into the trip and took over the instruction of the fifteen CoC students. While bonding with the students over strange Chinese toilets and the near-death experiences on public transportation, she sought to share her passion for the fascinating world of Chinese religion and culture. In the end, their adventures together became just as much a learning experience for Chrystal as it was for the students.

Haley Hart writes that this past year has been full of fun adventures. Post graduation, she spent time in Asheville conducting research on New Religious Movements with Dr. Siegler. Last summer she also had a great time with her fellowship through the City of Charleston’s cultural affairs department when she worked for the Piccolo Spoleto Festival. This last year she worked as an Environmental Educator in the Blue Ridge Mountains at the Blue Ridge Outdoor Education Center in Toccoa, GA. It was a fulfilling year of teaching ages 8-18 as well as occasional college groups about the ecosystem and the ecology of the Blue Ridge area. She was able to use her RELS training when she developed a new course on Cherokee Culture.

Heather Meyer works for the Applied Physics Lab at Johns Hopkins University. Her research with Goddard Space Flight Center was featured in a clip on Undergraduate Research at the College of Charleston. She was recently accepted into the Ph.D. program in Geological Sciences, where she will focus on Planetary Geology, at Arizona Statue University. She has received full funding for five years as a research assistant to the Principal Investigator for the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter Camera, but after she completes her required coursework she plans to audit RELS courses at ASU.

Kimberly Renton completed her first year in the AmeriCorps*VISTA at the United Way of the Midlands in Columbia SC and renewed her contract for a second year. She works as a liaison for the Midlands Reading Consortium, which is a volunteer literacy initiative with students K-2nd, and she has felt an immense amount of personal and professional growth. Her plans for the future are to apply for Teach for America and also for various grad programs in Non-Profit Management and/or a Masters of Social Work.

Beck Schillizzi again participated in the Girls Rock! Charleston summer camp as a volunteer coordinator, workshop coordinator, an as the documentation team leader. Beck works at Starbucks and Fast & French but is now planning to apply to graduate school—specifically to Ph.D. track programs in Gender Studies, but also to Masters programs in Social Work.

Kelsey Treuil was accepted into Law School at the University of Kansas, where she plans to study legal issues that affect Native Americans.
OPPORTUNITIES

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