From the Department Head’s Desk

Changes

It’s hard to believe that I’m in the same department that I came to just a mere four years ago. Among the greatest transformations have been the many faculty changes. When we arrive for our first departmental faculty meeting in the fall, only four faculty members will be tenured. And another four will be in their first couple of weeks on the job!

The dramatic change in personnel in our department primarily has been a consequence of faculty members moving to transitional retirement. This process allows us to continue to benefit from their expertise in the classroom (even if only half-time) while bringing in new faculty members to fill their slots. In the end, our students benefit from the best of both worlds—the seasoned teaching of veterans and the new energy of rookies.

On the curriculum side, we have made important changes to our Religious Studies program and overhauled our Philosophy program. We have created and implemented the Asian Religions and Cultures major and will begin our new M.A. program in Religious Studies this fall.

Of course, one thing remains the same—our commitment to student learning here at the top of the Hill.

Eric Bain-Selbo, Department Head

Congratulations to the Class of 2011

The end of the academic year always means having to say goodbye (we hope only “see you later”) to the many students who enliven our department and our teaching. Congratulations to all of the following students.

Philosophy majors: David Asp, Scott Fremming, Jeffery Humphrey, Carmen Royal, Matthew Sheffield, and Adrianna Silver.


Philosophy minors: Endi Babi, Morgan Button, Bernard Dormoh, Brian Klein, and Michael Maier.


Many thanks to all of these students. Your participation in our classes and in our programs has added greatly to our work.
Leading in the Commonwealth
New M.A. in Religious Studies the First of its Kind in Kentucky

Perhaps no time in recent memory has seen such a public interest in religious matters and a general demand for religious literacy among United States citizens. Some of this fervor about religion is a consequence of the attacks of September 11, 2001, but that is only a small part of the story. The dramatic influx of non-Christian and non-Western religions to the U.S., the increasingly global environment in which U.S. citizens live, the rise of the Religious Right, and a general concern about the role of religion in American politics and law have contributed to putting religion on the front pages of our newspapers and at the forefront of public conversations. Add to this the deep religiosity of a good portion of the American population (particularly in Kentucky and the rest of the South) and it is clear why religion is such an important institution and issue in this society.

All of this makes the diligent, academic study of religion an important part of higher education. Understanding the function of religion and the diversity of religious beliefs and practices is critical to being a responsible citizen of the country and the world.

The Religious Studies program at WKU has been a leader in Kentucky in the study of religion. It offers the only undergraduate major in religious studies in the Commonwealth and is among the most successful of its kind in the country.

This fall we begin a new M.A. program in Religious Studies—drawing upon a strong and diverse faculty and a tradition of excellence. The program, as well as our new Graduate Certificate in Religious Studies, will prepare students to analyze and understand religious phenomena throughout history and in our world today. It also will begin their training for teaching future generations about religion and for contributing to the growing body of scholarship about it.

The Curriculum

The M.A. program in Religious Studies requires a minimum of 35 graduate credit hours. No more than 12 hours may be in 400G courses. Students may take up to six hours in graduate courses in other departments. Students must complete a thesis or a culminating project. Students considering further doctoral study in religious studies are encouraged to take the thesis option.

Required Courses: All students must complete RELS 500 (Theory and Method in the Study of Religion, four credit hours), two offerings of RELS 601 (Graduate Seminar in Religious Studies, four credit hours), RELS 602 (Thesis and Project Development Seminar, one credit hour), and RELS 603 (Thesis and Project Colloquium, one credit hour). These required courses total 14 credit hours.

Thesis: Students on the thesis track may take up to six credit hours of Thesis Writing (RELS 599). Students completing an alternative project will take additional coursework in lieu of RELS 599. Students completing an alternative project must provide a proposal by the end of the second semester.

Electives: The student’s remaining credit hours may be taken in further RELS 601 courses, other RELS graduate courses, RELS 400G courses, independent studies, or graduate courses in other departments (with consent of adviser).
The Department of Philosophy and Religion is pleased to announce the hiring of three new faculty members to tenure-track position—two in Philosophy and one in Religious Studies and Asian Religions and Cultures.

Joining us on the philosophy side are Ms. Audrey Anton and Dr. Ian Schnee.

Ms. Anton is completing her doctoral work this spring at Ohio State University, and specializes in ancient philosophy and ethics. She has an M.A. in philosophy from the State University of New York at Buffalo and a B.A. from Assumption College in Massachusetts.

Dr. Schnee recently completed his Ph.D. at the University of California (Berkeley). He did his undergraduate work at both Middlebury College in Vermont and at the University of Oxford in England. He specializes in epistemology and philosophy of mind.

Dr. Paul Fischer earned his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in East Asian Civilizations and will be teaching in religious studies and Asian Religions and Cultures. He currently is teaching at the American University in Cairo, and specializes in Chinese religion and intellectual history.

We are delighted to have these exceptional scholars and teachers join our ranks.

Leigh-Anne St. Charles, senior philosophy major, is off to the prestigious Columbia Law School in the fall. Congratulations Leigh-Anne!

David Degner, a 2007 graduate in philosophy and photojournalism, recently was on assignment in Cairo during the revolution. To check out his work, visit www.incendiaryimage.com.

Emily Gibson, a 2007 graduate in philosophy and history, is now teaching part-time for the WKU History Department.

Several religious studies students made their way to Louisville in April for the Southeast Commission for the Study of Religion (the regional association of the American Academy of Religion) meeting. The students were Keaton Brownstead, Sarah Howell, Rebecca Katz, Kai Leathers, and Jonathan Thompson. The trip was led by Dr. Ingrid Lilly, and made possible through funds donated to our WKU Foundation account by alumni and friends of the department.

Please send any student or alumni news to eric.bain-selbo@wku.edu.

This year the Department of Philosophy and Religion had the pleasure of hosting Dr. Longqian Lei from Shaanxi Normal University in China. Dr. Lei spent the year conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Michael Seidler.

In April, Dr. Lei gave a presentation at the department’s Faculty Colloquium. The title of the talk was “Philosophy as a Resource for Developing and Transforming China.”

We certainly enjoyed having Dr. Lei with us this year. We wish him well in his future endeavors and hope to continue our department’s relationship with Shaanxi Normal University.

Dr. Longqian Lei after his presentation, with (from left to right) Dr. Arvin Vos, Dr. Bella Mukonyora, Dr. Michael Seidler, Dr. Judy Russell, and Dr. Scott Girdner.
Dr. Scott Girdner, assistant professor of religion, is leading a study abroad trip this summer to Morocco and Turkey, in affiliation with the Kentucky Institute for International Studies. On campus and locally, he has spoken at a variety of forums in order to promote greater awareness of Islam, including events at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Bowling Green and the Presbyterian Church in Franklin.

Dr. Ingrid Lilly, assistant professor of religion, submitted a feminist essay on the book of Malachi for the Women's Bible Commentary, to appear with Westminster John Knox Press. On campus, Dr. Lilly led a seminar called “Gender and Spirituality” for residential life, and she delivered a talk entitled “From Roots to Slack/Dancehall to Conscious: Reggae Music as Prophetic Speech in Jamaica” for the “Thoughts on Pop” colloquium series. Her Hebrew students enjoyed reading and hearing the Hebrew language in a Jewish worship setting on a field trip to a Nashville Temple’s shabbat service. Finally, she led a group of students from Theta Alpha Kappa (the religious studies honors society) to Louisville in April to attend the annual meeting of the Southeast Commission for the Study of Religion.

Dr. Monique Moultrie, visiting assistant professor of religion, was the featured speaker for a Generations lunch sponsored by the Women’s Studies Program at WKU. She also was a panelist and faculty mentor during the Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion meeting held in Louisville, KY in April.

Dr. Isabel Mukonyora, associate professor of religion, will spend the fall semester on sabbatical. She will be working on her next book, as well as developing new upper-level seminar courses on Religion and Ecology and Post-Colonial Christian Religious Traditions.

Dr. Jeffrey Samuels, associate professor of religion, was invited to Whitman College in March to give a paper as part of a conference on “Buddhist Preachers: Past and Present.” The paper was titled “Preaching the Dharma to new Audiences: K. Sri Dhammananda and the Sinicization of Sri Lankan Buddhism in Malaysia.” In addition, he presented a paper titled “Overcoming Marginalization through Doing Good: Social Capital and the Making of a Malaysian Buddhist Identity” at the Southeast Commission for the Study of Religion as well as a paper titled “From Theravada Orthodoxy to Buddhist Ecumenism: The Sri Lankan Sangha in Malaysia and the Creation of Tradition” at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies. This summer, Dr. Samuels will present another paper related to his ongoing research on Malaysian Buddhism at the International Association of Buddhist Studies in Taiwan. He will then travel to Malaysia to conduct further fieldwork.

Dr. Joseph Trafton, professor of religion, is leading a study abroad trip this summer to Greece.

Dr. Tripp York, visiting assistant professor of religion, contributed the chapter “Early Church Martyrdom: Witnessing For or Against the Empire?” to the book Witness of the Body: The Past, Present, and Future of Christian Martyrdom. The book was just published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

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As you consider your contribution to the New Century of Spirit campaign for Western Kentucky University, please remember that you can designate your gift to the Philosophy and Religion Department. Your contributions are critical to the life of the department and its students.