



A PUBLICATION OF  
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
DIVINITY SCHOOL

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VOLUME 54, ISSUE 1

# Criterion



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
CHICAGO

| Divinity School





## FROM THE DEAN

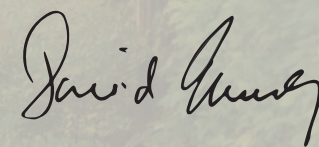
Swift Hall's arched and ivied façade may project an air of timelessness, but inside, the year has felt packed with change and discovery. Along its course we celebrated our colleagues Wendy Doniger, Paul Mendes-Flohr, and Susan Schreiner, even while lamenting their retirements from the teaching faculty. We invited three new scholars to join us, including our first scholar of Jainism. We launched an initiative in the study of Theravada Buddhism, and welcomed a number of learned monks. We accomplished significant changes in the funding structures of our degree programs—just one outcome of comprehensive evaluation we have undertaken this year. We created the Divinity School Postdoctoral Teaching Fellowships, expanded our undergraduate program, and began important work on diversity and inclusion.

All of these activities, and more, are designed to ensure that current and future students continue to receive the best possible experience in Swift Hall, the best possible preparation as scholars of religion, and fruitful careers within and beyond the academy.

As you can see, we have also redesigned *Criterion*. And, very soon, when you visit us online, you will see our redesigned website as well. We hope these changes help us to stay in better touch with you, alumni and friends of the Divinity School, the scholars, professionals, practitioners, and explorers of religion who make up our community.

I look forward to the year ahead: may it be another generative, exciting year in our communal exploration.

With warm regards,



**DAVID NIRENBERG**  
DEAN OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL  
DEBORAH R. AND EDGAR D. JANNOTTA  
DISTINGUISHED SERVICE PROFESSOR



# Criterion

VOLUME 54, ISSUE 1

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*Criterion* is published for alumni and friends of The University of Chicago Divinity School. We welcome your feedback. Please email [terren@uchicago.edu](mailto:terren@uchicago.edu).

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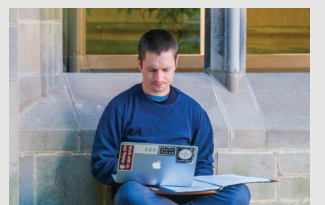


**“As a place for both breadth and depth in the academic study of religion, the Divinity School takes students beyond the facile and the comfortable toward the challenging and the emergent. Here one finds religion...what that phrase means will be up to you.”**

HECTOR VARELA-RIOS (ABOVE, SECOND FROM LEFT),  
PHD CANDIDATE, THEOLOGY

## EVERY GIFT MATTERS

Philanthropy is a key part of supporting the stories in *Criterion*. Your gifts provide aid to students in need of fellowship support, enable scholarly work at critical hubs of research and academic exploration, and maintain the classrooms and facilities in which professors and students work together to expand knowledge of the world and its religious traditions. Your gifts matter. Help us continue to flourish as a community where big questions are pursued with tenacity and care.



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“During the medieval period in Baghdad, intellectuals attended majālis, inter-religious “salons” in which theologians and philosophers came together to discuss the burning questions of the time. This is such a place ... an intellectual home that not only supports its students in the development of knowledge and expertise, but encourages them to pursue daringly creative research projects and experience new learning styles.”

ADI SHIRAN, PHD CANDIDATE,  
HISTORY OF JUDAISM



## NEW COURSES

Some of the courses being offered for the first time in the Divinity School during the upcoming academic year:

Writing Religion

The Animal, The Other?  
The Question of Animality

Art & the World Religions:  
First Millennium from India to Ireland

Augustine, Kierkegaard,  
and the Problem of Love

Coherence in Chinese  
Philosophy: Confucius to Tiantai

Collective Agency  
and Responsibility

Religion and Empire

Contemporary Jewish Theology:  
Types of Theological Writing in America

Death, Time, Perception:  
Against Being Here Now

God and Morality

Hindu Goddesses and the  
Deification of Women

Justice in an Unjust World:  
Theories of Justice

## KEEP IN TOUCH

Do you know an alumnus/a accomplishing something big? Have you accomplished something special recently? Let us know by e-mailing Madison McClendon at [mmclendon@uchicago.edu](mailto:mmclendon@uchicago.edu). Alumni accomplishments may be featured in our annual AAR/SBL slideshow.



STAY IN TOUCH with our quarterly e-newsletter, *Swift Matters*. Sign up online at [bit.ly/swiftmatters](https://bit.ly/swiftmatters).

## ALUMNI ARE OUR BEST AMBASSADORS

Do you have friends or colleagues who want to study religion with rigor and sophistication? Our Masters programs welcome students of all ages and backgrounds, and we have deadlines throughout the year. And now our flexible, one-year Master of Arts in Religious Studies (AMRS) degree program no longer requires applicants to take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). “Our goal is to make the academic study of religion accessible to as many people as possible,” said Dean of Students Joshua Feigelson about the change. “The AMRS is ideal for professionals who want to study religion critically, seriously, and rigorously. And as much as they are enriched by the experience, these students, who are accomplished in other professional fields and often bring significant life experience, enrich the culture of the Divinity School even more. We hope this move will encourage even more students to join the AMRS program.”



## IN THE CLASSROOM



The Divinity School's Program in Religious Studies allows College students to graduate with a major or a minor in the field—or to take elective courses. This Spring, our four Wilson Teaching Fellows—advanced doctoral students—offered four very different courses: American Hinduism, The Problems with God-Talk, “Virgins, Victims, and Vixens,” and *Star Wars and Religion*.

**CLASS:**  
*Star Wars and Religion*

**INSTRUCTOR:**  
Russell Johnson  
(PhD'19), Philosophy  
of Religions

**What's the class about?**

This course is an introduction to comparative religious ethics, using the familiar *Star Wars* film franchise as a point of reference to compare different conceptions of heroism. When asked about the religious elements in *Star Wars*, creator George Lucas said he tried to “distill the essence of all religions” and incorporate them in the *Star Wars* mythology. We're going to find out how well he succeeded. We'll also discuss the significance of myth, and learn about the unique power of stories to bestow meaning on

human life and express that which transcends ordinary existence.

**What was your inspiration for this class?**

After *The Last Jedi* was released in 2017, a massive argument erupted online about the film's portrayal of Luke Skywalker. Some people loved it, some people hated it. Sifting through the arguments, I realized Luke's character arc echoes stories from the Christian, Buddhist, and atheist traditions. Religious studies, I figured, might help us understand and appreciate the films more, or at least help us understand why millions

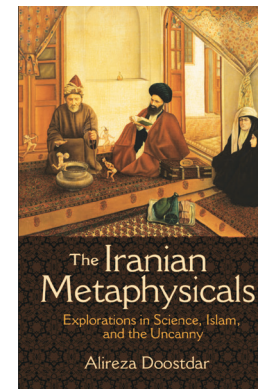
of people care about them. Also, if you can understand why people love *Star Wars*, you might be able to understand why so many people are invested in religious traditions.

**What are you reading in the class?**

One book we'll be reading is Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell argued that the world's religions and mythologies all share stories with a similar structure: a person gets drawn out of their boring life into a grand adventure, they face a climactic struggle against evil, and they gain wisdom and power they can use to make things better. George Lucas used Campbell's theory to write *Star Wars*, and the same story structure can be found everywhere (*The Matrix*, etc.) In the class, we'll talk about why this story structure works and what this says about “the good life.”

## IN CONVERSATION

**Alireza Doostdar**, Assistant Professor of the Anthropology and Sociology of Religion, plunges into the world of Iranian occult sciences in his ethnographic research. His book, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny* (Princeton University Press), which received the 2018 Albert Hourani Book Award from the Middle East Studies Association, provides an anthropological analysis of contemporary Iranian metaphysical pursuits and their relationship with science, state orthodoxy, and politics.



“You can't always tell what people believe and don't believe.”

**Prof. Doostdar was recently interviewed by Divinity School PhD student Rachel Carbonara for the “Ventures” podcast series from the University of Chicago Center for Middle Eastern Studies. Visit [bit.ly/doostdarpodcast](http://bit.ly/doostdarpodcast) to listen; we've excerpted a snippet here.**

**RC:** You talk about having this stance of distancing—“cautious distancing”—with the things that you're engaging with and you talk about the fact that a lot of the metaphysical practitioners are doing this as well, so they're doing some of the same things that you're doing...Can you say more about the role that belief plays for Iranian metaphysicals? Are they approaching the unseen with some sort of devotional or religious faith, or are they approaching the unseen

or the metaphysical with more of a scientific skepticism? And what's the significance of analyzing that?

**AD:** I should say the concept of belief within anthropology, and beyond anthropology too, is an extremely difficult one. One of the problems is you can't really tell what people believe or don't believe. I mean, it also partly depends on what you mean by belief. But I'm not particularly concerned with whether people believe in the occult or not in the sense

of, do they think that occult forces are real or not? Which is why I stay away from that most of the time—even though I quote all the time contexts where people are saying “I do believe this” or “I don't believe this”, I hear them saying that—but what I'm more interested in what's going on when they say “I believe something.” I know that they're saying something, I don't know if they actually believe what they say they believe.





**“People here are so much more willing to experiment. That’s what I love about it.”**

**V**IRAJ PATEL has always been fascinated with—and frustrated by—the challenge of expressing a Hindu identity as an Indian-American.

Even as a child growing up in the 1990s in a small town near Allentown, Pennsylvania, the first generation Indian-American recalls struggling when trying to describe his identity and religious practices to non-Hindu friends.

“There was always this conflict in my life between being able to assert a Hindu-American identity and an Indian identity, but also assimilating,” Patel says.

His childhood was typically American in many ways. He played baseball and was on the track team and marching band. At the same time, he inevitably found himself having to explain to friends why he did not eat onions or garlic or why he and his family made the three-hour round trip every weekend to attend the nearest Hindu temple.

The same challenges followed him when he left home to study pre-med at Pennsylvania State University. Whenever he tried explaining his faith to non-Hindus, Patel says, he struggled to articulate the full scope of his heritage. “The message didn’t always get across as well as it could,” he says. “I’m not sure I had the vocabulary [or] the intellectual tools to articulate that identity.”

## Whenever he tried explaining his faith to non-Hindus, he struggled to articulate the full scope of his heritage.

His quest to find a way to express that identity eventually led Patel to change his course of study from medicine to theology.

Patel earned a BS in Health Policy and Administration (and pre-med) in 2010 and went on to earn a Master of Public Health from Thomas Jefferson University. He was about to enter medical school when a friend who understood Patel’s fascination with Hindu studies and identity raised the possibility of pursuing the study of religion as a career.

Patel was drawn to the University of Chicago Divinity School and its multifaith programs, and, more specifically, to the opportunity to study under just-retired professor Wendy Doniger, world-renowned Hinduism scholar. He earned an MA in 2015 and an MDiv last year and is now pursuing a PhD. “People here are so much more willing to experiment. That’s what I love about it,” Patel says. “All the faculty have a unique way of looking at the study of religion that doesn’t box itself in.”

Under the supervision of his PhD adviser, Christian Wedemeyer, Associate Professor of the History of Religions, Patel is crafting a dissertation subject, which will likely address in some way the history of how Western academic institutions study Hinduism and how that contrasts with the way they study Abrahamic religions.

Patel wants to explore why Hindu studies in the West generally are confined to a historical-critical approach, whereas studies of Abrahamic religions include a more robust approach, encompassing both historical-critical and constructive examinations.

“There’s no sense of ‘what are the big questions in the field’” Patel says. “I’m trying to figure out why that is and how that might be changed.”

**T**he Rev. **KIRSTIN BOSWELL-FORD** (MDiv ’06) has lived on several continents, worked in the corporate world, and is currently chaplain at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and director of MIT’s Office of Religious, Spiritual, and Ethical Life—but often finds herself looking back on her time at the Divinity School.

“It was just an amazing time for me, and amazing doesn’t always mean positive,” she says. “It was difficult, it was challenging, it was gut-wrenching, it was supportive. It was all of those things combined, and I think that’s why it was so formative for me.”



Her decision to enter divinity school came during a period of soul-searching, when Boswell-Ford was in Iowa working as an executive in the corporate world. “It was an intense and personal period of discernment, of really trying to figure out where I felt that I was called vocationally,” she says.

Boswell-Ford embraced the university’s emphasis on rigorous academic studies, along with her ministry preparation in the MDiv program. She studied anthropology and sociology of religion and is working on her dissertation—on identity and identity formation among African-American clergywomen and their relationship with the traditional black church.

“I felt like I had the space and the support to really delve into developing myself, not just academically, but really figuring out who I was and what I felt called to do,” says Boswell-Ford, who was ordained in the American Baptist Churches, USA and has served congregations in that denomination and also in the United Church of Christ.

**“My goal here is to push this notion of wholeness, that we are our minds, and we are also our spirits and our hearts and our bodies...and we’re all interconnected in that work that we do.”**

At the Divinity School, Boswell-Ford met Dwight Hopkins, the Alexander Campbell Professor of Theology, a mentor with whom she collaborated on the International Association of Black Religions and Spiritualities, or IABRS. For several years, Boswell-Ford was director of operations for IABRS, during which she developed educational platforms and conferences on and for indigenous religious groups, including aboriginal Australians, the Burakumin community of Japan, and indigenous Hawaiians.

“It was just so wonderful to be able to once again have my outlook and my vision expanded to include people from all over the world,” Boswell-Ford says.

Her global worldview and inquisitive nature have served her career since leaving Chicago. As chaplain at MIT, Boswell-Ford provides care and support to the campus, including to students without religious affiliations. And as director of the Office of Religious, Spiritual, and Ethical Life, she says, she hopes to use the talents and the devotion of the staff to build the office into a world-class operation that supports the research and initiatives of MIT students and faculty.

“My goal here is to push this notion of wholeness, that we are our minds, and we are also our spirits and our hearts and our bodies,” Boswell-Ford says, “and we’re all interconnected in the work that we do.”

**“I had the space and the support to really delve into developing myself, not just academically, but really figuring out who I was and what I felt called to do.”**



The Divinity School held its first ‘Welcoming Day’ ceremony to bring the community together at the opening of the 2018-2019 academic year. Remarks are published here; the entire ceremony, which included readings from students and faculty, can be viewed at [bit.ly/divwelcome18](http://bit.ly/divwelcome18).



**JOSHUA FEIGELSON**  
DEAN OF STUDENTS

**A**s I imagine all of us have heard, and many of us have expressed, this is a unique community of people. Gathered in this room are:

- experts on a panoply of religious traditions, an array of methodologies and disciplines;
- people who are collectively fluent in dozens of different languages ancient and modern;
- people who study communities and individuals of time periods and geographies as seemingly distinct as ancient Mesopotamia and the South Side of Chicago;
- people who collectively have generated hundreds of books, thousands of articles;
- people who have contributed, and who will contribute, an incalculable amount of knowledge and understanding to the world;
- people who have served and will serve congregations and communities and individuals and to bring comfort, healing, and justice to the world;
- people who have done no more and no less than the profound act of giving our attention to the voices of others and helping one another as friends, colleagues, and professionals.

And that’s just the people in the room with us right now. Who has been in this room, and who will be in the future?

This has been the birthplace of ideas that have changed the way we understand what it means to be human.

In this place teachers and ministers and scholars have honed their skills, found their voices, and acquired the knowledge to be intelligent and effective leaders.

In this place friendships have been formed, scholarly relationships have been built, and yes, even families have been born. The people who have walked these halls and taught and learned in these classrooms are with us, as are those who will come in the years and decades hence.

As scholars of religion, we know the unique centrality of ritual and ceremony to the life of a community. The Divinity School is full of rituals, from Convocation to Wednesday Lunches to Qualifying Exams to going down to Grounds of Being every morning for a cup of coffee. Today’s ritual is to welcome the incoming cohort of 2018: seventy-nine new students who bring with them an inspiring array of experiences, interests, backgrounds, and stories, who will enrich our community and be enriched by it. We are so grateful that you have joined us, and so delighted that you are here.

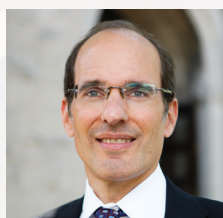
The second purpose is, in a larger sense, to enact and perhaps renew the sense of the Divinity School as a community. Perhaps uniquely, this is a ceremony without a transaction: no degrees are being conferred, no awards being presented. The school year would start whether or not we were here today.

But we are here, and in the readings and remarks that follow this morning, I hope that we might all connect or reconnect with the richness and diversity of this special community, be reminded of who we are and why we are here, and be inspired to consider what we might become.

Thank you, best wishes for a year that is fruitful, productive, challenging, and that brings you and all of us insight.

And welcome to the Divinity School.





**DAVID NIRENBERG**  
DEAN

**F**or hundreds of years communities of scholars have gathered to celebrate the beginning of the new year of study with discourses and benedictions. So today we celebrate the beginning of the 163rd year in the collective life of the Divinity School.\* And I begin with a benediction: may every instant of your coming year in this extraordinary space of research and learning, this space dedicated to ideas even at their most difficult, bring you a renewed sense of the possibilities for your own thought and discovery.

This gathering is an innovation. The Divinity School has not traditionally celebrated its annual regeneration, perhaps because, as critical scholars of ritual, myth, and religion, we find it difficult to revel un-self-consciously in pomp, rhetoric, and the accreted symbols of our culture. We know only too well that ceremony is often enough a performance of tradition and hierarchy rather than a stimulus to the critical thought to which we are committed as a community dedicated to the academic study of religion. So whereas other schools gather every fall in solemn ceremony with gowns and regalia to ask the gods of the academic calendar for a propitious year, we have traditionally just gotten to work.

We are right to be suspicious of unreflective celebration. Certainly we must constantly interrogate our values lest they ossify into ideology. But we should also celebrate those values, insofar as we find them good. And our return each year to Swift Hall is indeed precious. So today let us engage joyfully in something that as scholars of religion we rarely get to do: create a new ritual, rather than simply studying an existing one.

We are celebrating our entry, or our return, to a peculiar space of life and thought: the space of the University, and within it the especially distinctive space of our Divinity School.

Universities have ever been institutions committed to values and ideals that are in some ways distinctive from those of their broader societies. In universities, as one of the founders of the university of Paris, Peter Abelard, put it in the 12th century, what should count is not power, dogma, or authority, but the quality of argument. And we judge that quality by the critical tools of the disciplines we come here to cultivate. To quote Abelard, we set aside the weapons of war, and take up the sword of dialectic and reason. As that military metaphor suggests, those arguments can be competitive, even combative. But they are rooted in the ideal that universities exist as institutions, and we exist as scholars, in order to test ideas; that knowledge is better than ignorance; and that in pursuit of knowledge what counts is not the popularity of an argument, nor the seniority, wealth, or relative social power of the person who articulates it, but its excellence as a critical approach to truth.

Institutions always fall short of their ideals (at least, if their ideals are worth having). Certainly the medieval university of Paris did—within decades of its birth it was condemning scholars and theses some of its members found unacceptable. In every institution as in every individual, hierarchy and power can assert themselves over excellence of argument, habit and dogma can dull critical commitments, and the many failings of human life in the world can become manifest.

Alas, this is true even in universities, the institutions of society that are most explicitly dedicated to critical ideals. Which is simply to say that, however good our intentions and our efforts, all of us, both as individuals and as a community of learning, will undoubtedly fall short of our critical ideals over the coming year. When we do it is our urgent obligation, both as individuals

and as a community, to recall ourselves to those ideals. It is only because universities have been uniquely dedicated to criticism that they have been so important to

humanity. The more those ideals are embattled within our broader society, the more humanity needs you to cultivate and defend them, even when, especially when, it is ourselves we need to criticize. So never hesitate to point out whenever you find us or yourselves falling short of this ideal.

Welcome to the unique space of a great university, a space where critical thought is celebrated. Welcome to another year of the unique temporality of a great university: a temporality in which the relentless tick-tock of the world quiets down just enough for us to be able to ask the kinds of questions that take years rather than minutes to answer, or that may turn out not to be answerable at all.

Our community brings together different values and forms of commitment that are less and less often found together in the world, and that are, I submit, even more rarely found anywhere else in the University. Commitments of faith, commitments to the critical engagement with a religious tradition (or more than one), commitments to academic distance from or passionate engagement with the problems of the world around us: each of us brings a different combination of these into our common intellectual life. Here we are forced to confront those differences, to question and justify them, to engage in a common life despite and because of them. This is an extraordinarily difficult task. It is more challenging than that found in many seminaries or departments of religious studies, where it is all too easy to find a space in which one can obtain a Master of Divinity without having to engage critically with the texts and history of one's chosen tradition, or pursue the

**"Our community brings together different values and forms of commitment that are less and less often found together in the world, and that are, I submit, even more rarely found anywhere else in the University."**

academic criticism of religion without ever being exposed to colleagues who take its constructive possibilities seriously.

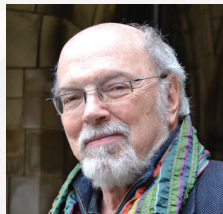
And it is more challenging than that pursued in any other academic discipline of the modern university, for in those disciplines one is rarely asked to imagine how the questions of one's chosen discipline might relate to questions about how life should be lived. That separation was one of the great achievements of modernity, and it created space for all kinds of inquiry, but it also opened an abyss between our academic inquiry and much that is most vital to us as beings. In the rest of the academy, that abyss is fenced off and posted by disciplinary prohibitions. But precisely because of the diversity of commitments and engagements we cultivate in Swift Hall, the temptation of the terrifying attempt to over-leap that abyss remains.



That temptation—that potential for an unexpected, even explosive, intersection between the questions of our chosen discipline and those that have the power to move our own sense of being—is what makes our common intellectual life exhilarating, fruitful, and sometimes also dangerous and personal. And it is why our common life in the Divinity School, perhaps more than any other space in the university, requires not only criticism, but also charity. So if there is a value and an ideal that I hope our ritual performs today, it is that of charitable criticism, and critical charity.

\*(Morgan Park Seminary of the Baptist Theological Union founded in 1856, brought to University of Chicago at its founding in 1890)





**PAUL MENDES-FLOHR**  
**DOROTHY GRANT MACLEAR PROFESSOR EMERITUS**  
**OF MODERN JEWISH HISTORY AND THOUGHT**

I began my graduate studies under the tutelage of German refugee scholars. I was intimidated by their Teutonic inflected English. I was even more terrified by the aura of their prodigious learning. It was thus with fear and trembling that I submitted my first seminar paper as a fledgling, diffident graduate student to my professor of medieval philosophy. As I entered his office to hand in my essay, I was consumed by premonitions of doom and fleeting thoughts of suicide; but he began quickly to thumb through it, and in a sonorous Prussian voice, joyously exclaimed: “Wunderbare Fußnoten, Wunderbar!” He didn’t bother to read the paper. His approval determined the course of my studies, indeed, my professional life. That I now wear the mantle of a professor is thanks to those footnotes; in some respects, my nigh-five decades as a member of the professorial guild is but a footnote to those glorious footnotes.

Inspired by my Herr Professor’s enthusiastic approbation, I soon learned to share his reverence—and that of my other German trained mentors—for *Fußnoten* as the heartbeat of scholarship. In a culture which implores us to prize time as money, I would in utter defiance of that dictum bury myself in libraries and archives—and for hours upon hours, often weeks and months on end, trace and document arcane historical details, etiologies of concepts and etymologies, only to have the record of my labors relegated to small print at the bottom of a page. But the significance of *Fußnoten* is not to be measured any pragmatic criteria, for they are born of a quasi-religious duty. And thus Spake Friedrich Nietzsche: In an age which was ever increasingly ruled by the frenetic cadence of urban life—to extrapolate to our own era, fast food,

high speed internet connections, FedEx and super fast bullet trains—scholarship is “that venerable art which exacts from its followers to one thing above all—to step to one side, to leave themselves spare moments, to grow silent, to become slow—the leisurely art of the goldsmith applied to language: an art which must be carried out slowly, fine work, and attains nothing if not in *lento*.” Philologically attentive scholarship “is now more desirable than ever before; thus it is the highest attraction and incitement in an age of ‘work’: that is, of haste, of unseemly and immoderate hurry-scurry, which is so eager to ‘get things done’ at once, even every book, whether old or new. Philology itself, perhaps, will not so hurriedly ‘get things done.’ It teaches how to read well, that is, slowly, profoundly, attentively, prudently, with inner thoughts, with the mental doors ajar, with delicate fingers and eyes!” So spake Nietzsche: True to its pristine calling, scholarship assumes the posture of a quasi-theological dialectic, a meta-critique of the pragmatic grammar that governs quotidian, mundane realities.

It is said of the founder of modern Jewish studies (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*), Leopold Zunz, that he “possessed the piety and sacrificial attitude to research that is indispensable to strict scientific investigation. He combined with it a steadfastness in conviction (*Gesinnung*) which resists all temptations of supposed popularity and the bowing before regnant systems.” As heir to the mandate of his biblical forebears, he was prepared to smash all idols. A century later, Max Weber made similar claims in his essay “Scholarship as a Calling” (*Wissenschaft als Beruf*). One of the architects of the modern university, the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte in a lecture of 1805 on the scholar’s vocation, “Die Bestimmung des Gelehrten,” celebrated scholarship as “a priestly craft.” [1]

As custodians of the noblest and refined expressions of the human spirit, Fichte held, scholars are to regard themselves as but a link in the great chain of tradition, as “dwarfs on the shoulders of giants.” This injunction is said to have been first

formulated by a twelfth-century French savant; its most familiar articulation in English is by Isaac Newton, who in 1675 explained: “If I have seen further [than others] it is by [virtue of] standing on the shoulders of Giants.” Though beholden to the cumulative wisdom and learning of their predecessors, scholars are also beckoned to push the horizons of knowledge further, even should it entail a critical assessment and attendant revisions of inherited views and opinion. This critical reverence for a given intellectual tradition that scholars are to assume may be illustrated by the self-effacing ruminations of a twelfth-century Italian rabbi, Isaiah di Tarni:

Should Joshua the son of Nun endorse a mistaken position, I would reject it out of hand; I do not hesitate to express my opinion, regarding such matters in accordance with the modicum of intelligence allotted to me. I was never given to arrogant claims that “My Wisdom served me well.” Instead, I applied to myself the parable of the philosophers. For I heard the following from the philosophers, The wisest of the philosophers was asked: ‘We admit that our predecessors were wiser than we. At the same time, we criticize their comments, often rejecting them and claiming that the truth rests with us. How is this possible?’ The wise philosopher responded: ‘Who sees further a dwarf or a giant? Surely a giant for his eyes is situated at a higher level than those of the dwarf. But if the dwarf is placed on the shoulders of the giant who sees further? ... So too we are dwarfs astride the shoulders of giants. We master their wisdom and move beyond it. Due to their wisdom we grow wise and can say all that we say, but not because we are greater than they.

Accordingly, in the Jewish tradition a scholar, no matter how eminent, is known as a *talmid chakham*, a student of a wise sage, indeed, a link in the chain of the ever on-going asymptotic human endeavor to gain infinite, absolute wisdom. For academic scholars, the footnote is the quintessential expression of the priestly ethos and the homage we duly owe to our ancestors and colleagues.

There has been in the last decades a marked retreat from the footnote. Increasingly scorned as a gratuitous, affectatious display of pedantry, the footnote is now most often denigrated, truncated and dispatched to an endnote following a chapter or at the end of a book. [2] Indicative of this contemptuous denigration of the footnote is the remark by British playwright Sir Noël Peirce Coward (d.1973) that having to read a footnote resembles having to go downstairs to answer the door while in the midst of making love.

**“Our conversation at the Divinity School is interminably open-ended and subject to continuous revision. If scholarship is a pious craft, it is emphatically — or, if you will, religiously — undogmatic.”**

The tarnished prestige of the footnote is due—if my colleagues will allow a hyperbolic claim—to the secularization of scholarship. Indicative of this process is the insinuation into the axiological landscape of the scholar’s “calling” such terms as “career,” “job,” and “success”—value-concepts that are not only alien to the pristine ideal of scholarship as a priestly craft but also downright antithetical to its spiritual universe.

Alas, the imperious dictates of a market-economy have increasingly left their insidious mark on the ethos of a university education. One now most often speaks of a “career” as opposed to a “calling,” a “job,” which duly entails negotiating one’s salary. Before I joined the faculty of the University of Chicago, I taught for some thirty years at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which with perhaps unwarranted hubris claims to be the last great German university (and German as the second most important Semitic language). What legitimates this claim is that the Hebrew University still adheres to the ideal of an egalitarian salary structure. Within each rank, the faculty gets the same salary and benefits, and from one rank to another there is but a minimal

*continued*



difference. In this respect, the Hebrew University may, indeed, be the last great German university, for in Germany there is a move to adopt the U.S. model of competitive salaries, which presumably guarantees “excellence.”

All is not lost, however. At least not at the Divinity School. And not only because we address the perennial and ultimately imponderable existential and metaphysical questions that have characterized religious discourse since humanity’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the loss of innocence. The structure of the curriculum and the composition of the faculty at the Divinity School are primed by a genuinely pluralistic and interdisciplinary ethos; in effect, they affirm the *Bildungsideal* which lays at the foundation of the modern university.

At the Divinity School, you will be drawn into a vibrant and self-consciously inconclusive, self-critical conversation in which anthropologists, historians, feminists, and representatives of theistic and non-theistic religions participate, passionately participate. You may thus be surprised that we don’t even agree on how to define religion—as we shouldn’t. For there is no one religion; indeed, as there is no one Christianity, nor one Judaism, nor one Islam, nor one Buddhism, nor one Hinduism—or for that matter, one single species of atheism. Our conversation at the Divinity School is interminably open-ended and subject to continuous revision. If scholarship is a pious craft, it is emphatically—or, if you will, religiously—undogmatic.

Hence, “our intuitions as well as our analytical results, our subjective as well as our allegedly more objective insights [are] constantly checked and re-checked against the intuitions, analytical results and insights of [our colleagues and, I dare say, students], whose cultural biases and individual blind spots may help to neutralize and cancel out our own.” [4] The study of religion at the Divinity School is, therefore, preeminently a corporate undertaking, a conversation animated by dialogical humility and pious respect for the voice of our colleagues past and present. It is a conversation in which the footnote thus retains its overarching emblematic significance.

[1] *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten* (1794). *Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar’s Vocation*, trans. Breazeale, in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988, 2nd ed., 1993.)

[2] Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A curious history* (1997; published in German as *Die Tragischen Ursprünge der deutschen Fußnote*).

[3] “Die allgemeine Abkehr vom traditionellen Bildungsideal des Lernens fürs Leben zugunsten eines karriereorientierten Studiums,” FAZ 18.08.2018.

[4] R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Beyond Tradition and Modernity* (London: The Athlone Press, 1970), p. 2.



**CYNTHIA GANO LINDNER**  
DIRECTOR OF MINISTRY STUDIES

(SILENCE.)

It is a delicious and yet unsettling moment, isn’t it. This pause between what just happened: *what was*—and what is yet to come: *what will be*.

Old preachers like me know to cherish this moment, the silence between one’s opening of the text and one’s beginning to speak. Inherited homiletical wisdom observes that it is in this silence, *and only now*, that one’s entire audience is actually *paying attention*. As soon as the speaker opens her mouth, one hearer disagrees, another becomes disenchanted, several more are distracted by incoming texts on their phones, and still others simply lose this connection, due to disinterest or to defensiveness—but *in the silence, those losses are not quite yet*, because in the space that opens up on the brink of speech, we don’t yet know what will happen.

For now, we are all here together in our *wondering-what-will-be*.

Many of you have spent hours, already, in this room this week, preparing for the weeks to come and orienting yourselves to your new community. You are some steps ahead of the rest of us, whose bodies have indeed arrived here this morning but whose minds may still be clinging to the unfinished summer writing project, the afterglow of travel, the exhilaration of an internship, or the promise of one last weekend of summer warmth. But whoever we are, wherever we’ve come from, whether we’ve only this week entered this hall or we have returned here, year after year (...after year)—in *this* moment, in *this* pause, in *this* silence we stand together in the very near presence of the unknown and the unknowable,

In the presence of possibility expanding,  
In the presence of minds stirring and stretching,  
In the presence of curiosity awakening,  
In the presence of knowledge growing,

And perhaps even in the presence of newness—  
change that is already breaking in.

I want to invite us to savor one more helping of that silence, in just a second. It’s a rare commodity, in a place like this one—the absence of speech and sound and assertion—and yet human language is unintelligible without silence. There is no meaning in our words without the spaces in between them, and so perhaps, no real wisdom without the space to orient ourselves to our surroundings, to our colleagues in this room, to the community around us which both hosts us and demands more of us, to the palpable waves of pain and anger and deep yearning that permeate the times and places in which we live. Generations ago, an ancient scribe observed that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”—a phrase overflowing with interpretations, but meaning at the very least, that the wisdom we must seek to cultivate, for which knowledge lays the foundation and truth is the midwife, that wisdom requires us to know who and where we are—how and when we begin and end—to for whom and for what we are given. This discernment, this wisdom, is the real goal of human learning, our true vocation, and life’s great and ongoing orientation, and it begins anew, with every silence.

And so let’s begin this way, let’s begin with a moment of silence, an invitation to return to that space of anticipation, that place of not knowing, that opening in which to savor all that lies ahead, alongside all that will journey with you. Acknowledge those whose efforts and example preceded you, brought you to be, brought you here. Hold the aspirations of those who will accompany you in these classrooms and hallways. Join forces with the yearning, the questions, the restlessness that led you to this moment, and hold these fast.

(Silence)

Let us begin!



# News & Notes

The launch of a multiyear initiative in **Theravada Buddhism** aims at building a vibrant community of study.

A major gift from Mr. Jun Zhou, chairman of Zhongtong Logistics Company Ltd. and the Jefferson Education Group, will enable the Divinity School to bring visiting professors and scholars to campus, offer a lecture series, enrich library collections in the area, and more. The study of Buddhism enjoys a long tradition at the University of Chicago, where work in the history, religions, and literatures of South and East Asia engages students from the Divinity School, the Humanities and Social Sciences Divisions, and in interdisciplinary scholarship.

We will welcome several visiting professors in Theravada Buddhist Studies over the next few years, teaching from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Our first visiting professor will be John Holt (PhD’77 and our 2007 Alumnus of the Year), the William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor Emeritus of the Humanities in Religion and Asian Studies at Bowdoin College.

Starting in the Autumn Quarter of 2019, The Jun Zhou Lectures on Theravada Buddhism will promote a broader understanding of the wide historical range of traditions that make up Buddhism. We will also host monks who are master practitioners and teachers of meditation; they will offer meditation workshops and dhamma teachings and work on translations of Pali texts into Chinese.

The gift also facilitates bringing scholars of the Theravada Buddhist tradition to the Divinity School for training in the academic study of religion through the newly founded Masters of Arts in Religious Studies (AMRS) - Program for Theravada Buddhism Scholars. Students can study with any of the Divinity School’s faculty as well as other relevant faculty throughout the University, including in the departments of South Asian and East Asian Languages and Civilizations.

“This gift from Jun Zhou has great significance to the University of Chicago Divinity School,” said Dean David Nirenberg. “We are grateful to Mr. Zhou for his generous gift, which will allow us to build upon our existing strengths in the academic study of Asian religions generally, and Theravada Buddhism specifically.”



## SELECT NEW CLASSES IN BUDDHIST STUDIES

Towards Ecumenical Buddhism

Ethnographies of Buddhism in Southeast Asia

Readings in the Madhyamaka

Buddhist Poetry in India

Buddhist/Muslim Conflicts in Southeast Asia

The Foundation of Buddhist Thoughts

The Philosophies of the Yijing (Book of Changes)

Comparative Reading Pali and Chinese Buddhist Texts

Buddhist Scholasticism and its Practical Path Structures

Three additions to our faculty represent a wide range of expertise in the study of religion. Erin Galgay Walsh, Anand Venkatkrishnan, and Sarah Pierce Taylor join us as Assistant Professors.



**SARAH PIERCE TAYLOR**’s research focuses on gender and emotion in premodern religion in South India. In particular, her current book project, *Embodying Souls: Emotion, Gender, and Animality in Premodern South Asian Religion*, considers the soteriological tension in Jainism between experiencing and escaping the pleasures of the body. Her work is informed by theoretical developments in the study of gender, affect, embodiment, and animality. Additionally, Dr. Taylor is a scholar of classical (“Old”) and modern Kannada, the principal language of the modern Indian state of Karnataka and a language of great literary significance. Dr. Taylor’s work in Kannada has focused particularly on India’s Jain tradition, which figures centrally in the emergence of Kannada’s rich literary history.



**ANAND VENKATKRISHNAN**’s book in progress, *Love in the Time of Scholarship: The Bhāgavata Purāna in Indian Intellectual History*, examines the relationship of bhakti (“religion as lived affect”) with philosophy as intellectual practice. His research at large

concerns the social history of intellectual life, not only in early modern India, but also in the modern scholarly study of Hinduism. Dr. Venkatkrishnan’s work shows how the devotional religious practices of the Bhāgavata Purāna may not only have figured in the lives of specific families of elite Sanskrit intellectuals, but also fed back into their own contributions to the centuries-old traditions of scholarship with which they were famously associated.

His work raises questions relevant to basic historiographic frameworks of religious studies, insofar as religious studies emerged from Western historiographic practices. Dr. Venkatkrishnan also brings with him expertise in Sanskrit, Tamil, Spanish, Hindi, Latin, Greek, German, Persian, Urdu, and the Indic scripts of Nagari, Sharada, Newari, and Grantha.



**ERIN GALGAY WALSH**’s research examines the reception of female New Testament figures in Syriac and Greek liturgical poetry. Her interpretive commitments range

from an interest in the subject positions available to women in the 5th and 6th century Syriac-speaking Christian communities, to the hermeneutic possibilities female biblical figures offer to male poets, granting them a diction through which new theological claims can be made. More broadly, her research interests include the history of Biblical interpretation, asceticism, religion and literature,

and women and gender within the ancient world. A 2018-2019 Junior Fellow in Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection of Harvard University, Dr. Walsh also brings us expertise in languages of early Christianity: Armenian, Greek, and Syriac.



## News & Notes

The Divinity School is making **significant new investments in funding for the MA, MDiv, and PhD programs**. “Our programs attract exceptional students. These new funding initiatives represent a further step in the School’s commitment to provide the best possible support for their endeavors,” said Dean Nirenberg.

**O**ver 90% of Divinity School students receive tuition aid.

The new funding committed to the MA program includes a reduction in the tuition rate as well as significant scholarship and stipend support. Tuition for the Divinity School’s Master of Divinity program in public religious leadership has remained frozen for two years already; for the MA and AMRS programs, tuition has been reduced by nearly 5%.

New funding this year represents a 25% increase in stipended scholarships for the incoming class.

“Investing in students helps the Divinity School remain one of the world’s top institutions for the academic study of religion,” said Josh Feigelson, Dean of Students. “We seek the best applicants for our programs across the board, and to that end we have increased the amount of aid we are giving to students by roughly a third.” In 2019-20, the number of incoming Masters students receiving stipended fellowships will increase threefold from the previous year.

For doctoral students, the new funding will add a sixth year of fellowship funding—including full tuition, living stipend, and individual health insurance—as well as up to 30 dissertation completion fellowships over the next three years and increased funding for summer research grants. The increased investment represents over \$3 million in new funds over the next three years.

This increase in funding follows on several recent initiatives made by the Divinity School to meet evolving student needs. These initiatives include ongoing evaluation of our master’s programs, the convening of a faculty PhD Program Working Group tasked with identifying ways to improve the doctoral program and doctoral students’ experience, and the creation of the Divinity School Postdoctoral Teaching Fellowships.



# 10

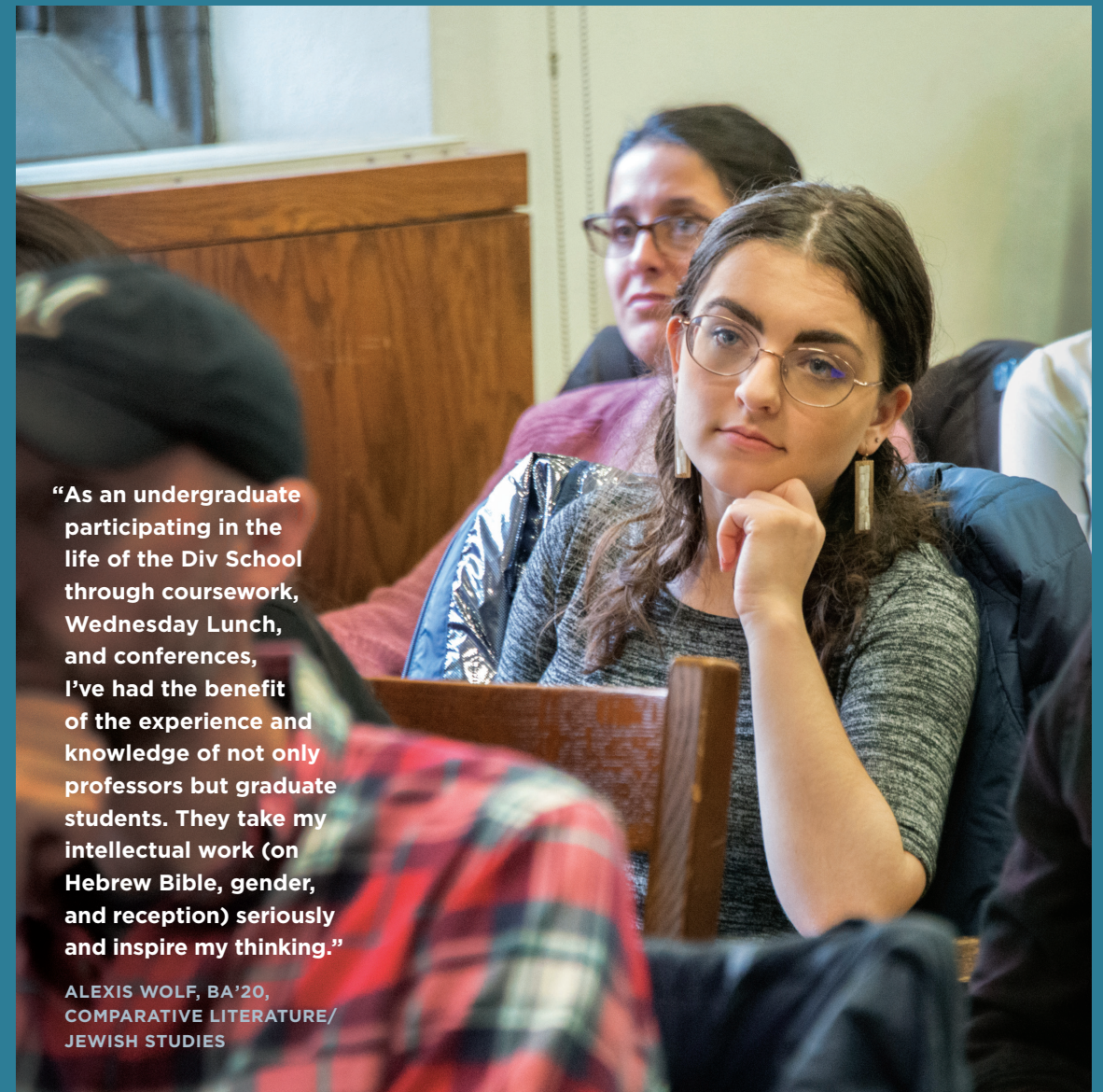
**FOREIGN COUNTRIES OUR STUDENTS CALL HOME INCLUDING:**  
YEMEN, CHINA, NETHERLANDS, NEPAL, PAKISTAN, VIETNAM AND MORE

# 85

**INCOMING STUDENTS FOR THE 2019-2020 ACADEMIC YEAR INCLUDE:**  
10 AMRS  
49 MA  
13 MDiv  
13 PhD

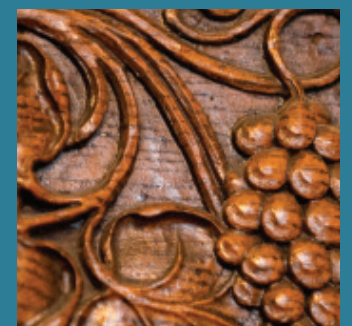
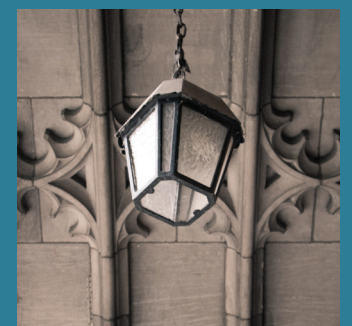
# 78

**SPRING 2019 GRADUATES INCLUDE:**  
8 AMRS  
37 MA  
13 MDiv  
20 PhD



**“As an undergraduate participating in the life of the Div School through coursework, Wednesday Lunch, and conferences, I’ve had the benefit of the experience and knowledge of not only professors but graduate students. They take my intellectual work (on Hebrew Bible, gender, and reception) seriously and inspire my thinking.”**

ALEXIS WOLF, BA’20,  
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE/  
JEWISH STUDIES







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