

A PUBLICATION OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
DIVINITY SCHOOL

SPRING/SUMMER 2024

Criterion



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
DIVINITY SCHOOL



FROM THE DEAN



This academic year has brought many new things to the Divinity School, growth and change which will continue to unfurl during these green months of summer.

A few weeks back, on a perfect late-Spring day, we celebrated our diploma and hooding ceremony, awarding degrees upon our newest AMRS, MA, MDiv, and PhD graduates.

They join us now as alumni of an institution known for a commitment to curiosity, to the how of things, and to an ongoing journey of seeking new knowledge, new pathways, and new approaches to knowledge in all spheres, from religion to quantum physics and whatever lies in between.

On our journey to seeking new knowledge this past year, the Divinity School has been involved in growing our curricular and programmatic offerings, our faculty, and the way we approach our work.

New faces will appear in Swift Hall this autumn—of course our new students but also new faculty members. These new faculty members' work lies at various interdisciplinary intersections—Islam and religious ethics (Raissa von Doetichem de Rande); Jewish ethnographic and literary discourse (Sheila Jelen); early modern Christian religious, cultural, and intellectual history (Kirsten Macfarlane)—and so they will build upon our historic strengths but also help us continue to push the envelope of teaching on religion.

New faces, new classes, and new modalities of teaching: not only in the physical classroom but out in the world, on field trips and at events in the community like our recent Colver Panel Conversation, *The Black Church in Chicago: Past, Present, and Future*, featuring three generations of iconic Chicago pastors and held at the DuSable Black History Museum and Educational Center, or in the corridors of Swift Hall, which we have recently repurposed as a three-story art gallery. We continue to grow our undergraduate offerings, and have now developed two dual-degree programs which offer new pathways to the academic study of religion for our natural audience of College students.

The current issue of *The University of Chicago Magazine*—the University's alumni magazine—includes a feature article about The Divinity School, in which two new courses serve as a means of illustrating how we continue to broaden our scope—not only in what we teach but how we teach it.

The article, "Sacred Scholarship," is available online (mag.uchicago.edu/university-news/sacred-scholarship) but the print version (which you, alumni, should receive) includes some wonderful photography and an enhanced layout. I hope you enjoy reading it, and I hope you enjoy reading this issue of *Criterion*.

Warmly,

JAMES THEODORE ROBINSON
DEAN OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL; NATHAN CUMMINGS PROFESSOR OF JEWISH STUDIES;
PROFESSOR OF THE HISTORY OF JUDAISM, ISLAMIC STUDIES, AND THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS
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YOUR ALUMNI COUNCIL

The Alumni Council is a group of alumni who advise the Dean on alumni matters, help select the Alum of the Year every year, and provide other support to the School through their engagement and commitment. If you would like to serve on this council, or know of someone who would be a good fit for the role, please let Madison McClendon (mmcclendon@uchicago.edu) know!

ALUMNI AWARDS

Want to nominate a peer for our Alum of the Year award? Nominations are now accepted on a rolling basis, and can be made by going to bitly.com/AotYNominations



ARISTOTLE PAPANIKOLAOU, 2024 ALUM OF THE YEAR

Upon recommendation from the Divinity School's Alumni Council, the Board of Trustees of the Baptist Theological Union has named Aristotle "Telly" Papanikolaou, PhD'98, the Divinity School Alum of the Year for 2024.



PAPANIKOLAOU IS PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY AT FORDHAM UNIVERSITY, WHERE HE HOLDS THE INAUGURAL ARCHBISHOP DEMETRIOS CHAIR IN ORTHODOX THEOLOGY AND CULTURE. HE IS ALSO THE CO-FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN STUDIES CENTER, LOCATED AT FORDHAM.

A leading scholar in the field of contemporary (nineteenth and twentieth centuries) Orthodox theology, Professor Papanikolaou's work situates him uniquely at the intersection of Western theology and the Orthodox Christian traditions.

He is the author of two important monographs: *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame University Press, 2006; 2012) and *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical*

Orthodoxy (Notre Dame University Press, 2012). Among his numerous and far-ranging scholarly publications, some of which have been translated into multiple languages, he is co-editor of ten volumes, including *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine* (Fordham University Press, 2017), which was awarded the Alpha Sigma Nu Book Award in Theology.

A dedicated teacher and mentor, Professor Papanikolaou has long been active in both undergraduate and graduate training. He annually chooses to teach his institution's first-year introductory course in theology, and has been the recipient of Fordham's Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching in the Humanities.

Professor Papanikolaou is also the co-founder of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University. Founded in 2007, it is the only university center in the United States devoted exclusively to Orthodox Christianity. Under his direction, the Center has cultivated innovative ways of approaching the study of Orthodox Christianity. Its many initiatives—both scholarly and outreach-oriented—have created and facilitated new avenues of support and expression for the study of Orthodox Christianity globally.

"Professor Papanikolaou's remarkable achievements have extended far beyond his formidable scholarship," James Robinson, Dean of the Divinity School, said of the award. "Through his work, including the founding and growing of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center into a major venue for learning, Professor Papanikolaou has been instrumental in creating pathways of scholarship that will extend far into the future."

Professor Papanikolaou delivered his Alum of the Year address, entitled "Incarnational Pluralism: Ecclesial and Political Manifestations" on May 24, 2024, at 4:30pm, in Swift Lecture Hall.

To see Professor Papanikolaou's lecture, please visit our YouTube channel at bit.ly/DivinityVideo.



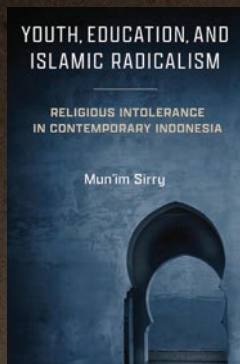
Alumni Books

Do you have a recent book? Let us know using our web form at bit.ly/DivinityAlumNews



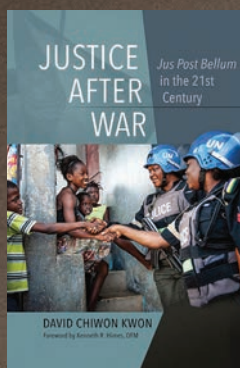
MICHAEL KINNAMON (PHD'80, 2013 ALUMNUS OF THE YEAR)

Inspired by the author's own story, *The Nominee* (Chalice Press, 2024) shows that places we think are refuges can be the most dangerous.



MUN'IM SIRRY (PHD'12)

Youth, Education, and Islamic Radicalism: Religious Intolerance in Contemporary Indonesia (University of Notre Dame Press, 2024) offers groundbreaking analysis of religious intolerance and radicalization among high school and university students in modern-day Indonesia.



DAVID KWON (MDIV/MSW'10)

Justice After War: Jus Post Bellum in the 21st Century (Catholic University Press of America, 2023) examines the increasing attention given to the category of jus post bellum (postwar justice and peace). This work proposes an innovative methodology for linking theology, ethics, and social science so that the ideal and the real can inform each other in the ethics of war and peacebuilding.

TO CARE FOR THE SICK, START WITH IMPROV

Read this web exclusive from the *University of Chicago Magazine* on training for future pastors and chaplains: mag.uchicago.edu/lindner

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Sunil Kumar Yadav graduated our MDiv program in 2016. A board-certified spiritual care provider through the Association of Professional Chaplains, he works as a hospital chaplain in a Level 1 trauma hospital. Mr. Yadav returned to Swift Hall this past spring to teach our Advanced Seminar in Spiritual Care: *Is Multireligious Caregiving Possible?*



How did your time at the Divinity School influence your work and chosen profession?

The Divinity School provided me with a solid theological and philosophical foundation of knowledge through the academic study of religion, spirituality, and psychology. This knowledge was a great source of practical wisdom when I integrated it into my practice of spiritual care in the healthcare system. Particularly, the learnings around ritual performance, spiritual counseling, public leadership, and community building at the Divinity School were influential in keeping me informed, grounded, and engaged as I attended to the needs of patients and their families. Additionally, the pluralistic learning model at the Divinity School uniquely prepared me to draw from various religious, spiritual, and

wisdom traditions and their understanding of human suffering while responding to the diverse needs of patients and their families.

How do you think about religion and religious experience in your work?

In the broadest sense, religion and religious experiences allow for people experiencing major illnesses, losses, and traumas to live into the unknowns of the human condition, particularly our suffering. Amid immense human suffering, people I work with wrestle with this inner sense of liminality or ambiguity or disorienting agony — who am I (now I am ill)? Why is this (illness) happening to me? What do I do now (that I can't work anymore)? How do I keep on living (after the death of a loved one)? Why God? Just Why? and so on. I think, religion and religious experiences, when facilitated with care,

can provide a ground for one to engage these big questions in an intimate, personal way without necessarily having to come up with a concrete answer (although some do) but developing the ability to withstand the force of these questions. It allows people to live in ambiguity or liminality.

In your chaplaincy course, what are some of the main ideas and takeaways that you hope to convey to your students?

The spring quarter course will explore the potential and the challenges of entering and engaging in care relationships across religious, spiritual, and wisdom traditions keeping in mind the context of our increasingly plural, multiply-formed relational systems of care. Leaning into a collective, contextual wisdom-based approach to spiritual care, the course will invite

students to critically explore care interactions in various settings such as healthcare, academia, religious congregations, social justice movements, etc. to deepen the understanding of what their religious/spiritual traditions (including non-religious) have to say about attending to human suffering across differences (systemic and inter-relational) in values and beliefs. I hope that students will not only grow in their awareness of their self and community but also form robust, compassionate ways to show up for their neighbors, engage/lead with compassion, and attend to human suffering with conviction and kindness.

THIS COURSE WILL BE OFFERED AGAIN NEXT SPRING.



What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Religion?

INDEED, WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

We are in error if we imagine that there is some “what” corresponding to the word “religion.” There is no such thing and to speak as if there were is to speak idly about nothing at all, while indulging the illusion that there is or should be. Like other broad terms with which we slice up the cake of human activity—art, literature, philosophy, science, sport—“religion” is a verbal convenience, useful for sorting things into bundles that we may find good, for whatever reason, to think on together. But besides such utility, to borrow a famous phrase from Gertrude Stein, there is no there there. “Religion,” like “art” and the other terms mentioned, is often used magically, as if by its mere utterance a special status and dignity were conferred on the diverse objects to which it is applied. It is this phenomenon that leads some to take to the yellow brick road, hoping to find at its end just “what” it was that we were talking about.

My recent work on Tibetan manuscripts and printed books may help to clarify what I wish to say here. At issue there are precise, concrete manifestations of human productive activity: papers, inks, pigments, pens and the written artifacts crafted with them. These artifacts are, for the most part, related to the Buddhist and Bön religions of Tibet, whether directly, as in the case of canonical scriptures, or more distantly, as are veterinary manuals that begin with invocations of deities to aid the healer’s task. Some are works created at great expense and of considerable beauty, reflecting the sacrality attributed to their contents and the abundant resources commanded by their sponsors, but most issued from more modest circumstances. Although *Tibetan Manuscripts and Early Printed*

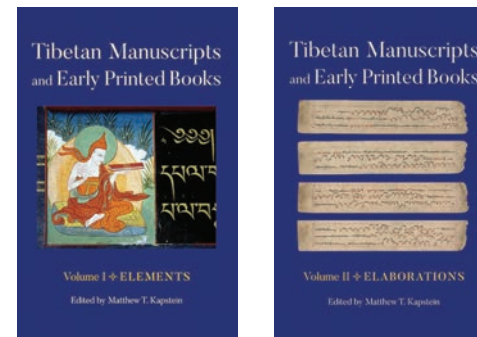
Books focuses specifically on Tibet, it also touches on the book cultures of India and China, which were related in many respects. But the questions raised throughout the work may apply in other settings as well, for issues of orality vs. writing, manuscript vs. print, uses of calligraphy and ornamentation, etc., are equally pertinent to the study of Jewish, Islamic, Christian, or Hindu book cultures, among others. What may be of interest to the scholar of “religion” in this context is to delve into how and

“Religion,” like “art” and the other terms mentioned, is often used magically, as if by its mere utterance a special status and dignity were conferred on the diverse objects to which it is applied.” MATTHEW KAPSTEIN

why such issues map out so differently as they do in the varied religious cultures concerned, examining, for example, the Vedic Hindu resistance to writing, or the complexities of Jewish and Islamic attitudes towards print. To undertake a wide-reaching, comparative inquiry along these lines into the book in diverse religious spheres will have to be someone else’s future task; for now, I am content to have made a small contribution, together with a stellar group of collaborators, to our understanding of the book in the Buddhist milieu of Tibet.

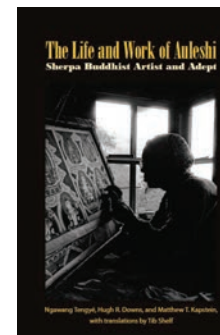
Matthew Kapstein retired from the University of Chicago faculty in 2018. The Numata Visiting Professor of Buddhist Studies, Kapstein is a specialist in the history of Buddhist philosophy in India and Tibet, as well as the cultural history of Tibetan Buddhism. Kapstein is additionally Professor Emeritus of Tibetan Studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris.

RECENT FACULTY BOOKS



TIBETAN MANUSCRIPTS AND EARLY PRINTED BOOKS, VOLUME I & VOLUME II

In *Tibetan Manuscripts and Early Printed Books*, Volume I & Volume II, Matthew T. Kapstein (Numata Professor Emeritus of Buddhist Studies) and an international team of specialists provide a comprehensive introduction to the material and aesthetic features of the wide range of Tibetan books, described in detail and illustrated with copious full-color photographs, and explore the major categories of traditional Tibetan books, introducing their specific features and the main approaches to their study.



THE LIFE AND WORK OF AULESHI: SHERPA BUDDHIST ARTIST AND ADEPT

The Sherpa Buddhist monk Ngawang Leksh (1913–1983), familiarly known as Auleshi—a name that might be approximated as “Uncle Benedict” in English—occupies a unique place in the history of

Buddhism in twentieth century Nepal. *The Life and Work of Auleshi: Sherpa Buddhist Artist and Adept* by Ngawang Tenzgye, Hugh R. Downs, and Matthew T. Kapstein, with translations by Tib. Shelf, makes available what may be recalled of the monk’s life and work on the occasion of the hundred-and-tenth anniversary of his birth and the fortieth since his death. At once an accomplished artist and a yogi living always in retreat, Auleshi eschewed the trappings of a “Buddhist master” but taught instead through his art and, above all, his personal example. In this, he embodied the ideal of transmitting the Dharma without teaching a word.





Interpretation and Self-interpretation in Life and Work: Three Narratives

Richard B. Miller

2023-2024 WELCOMING DAY ADDRESS

A newer tradition of the Divinity School, the Welcome Ceremony, held at the beginning of the academic year, brings us together in community.

I. EDUCARE AND EDUCERE

Welcome! It's good to see everyone today. I look forward to meeting you and to the many conversations that I know we'll have this year.

Over the past few days you've been thinking a lot about how to navigate the University of Chicago—how to take advantage of the resources here, what your program requirements are, what's distinctive about Hyde Park, and about the riches of the city of Chicago. All of the emphasis has been on strategies and procedures. I'm going to talk not about *how* to navigate our world this morning, but about *what* you're doing and *why* you're here, thinking about the aims or goals of education. I'll do that in two registers.

I'll start by talking in somewhat abstract and linguistic terms. One thing we do at the University of Chicago is make sure that we're clear about our words, about their multiple meanings, and about what we mean when we use them. So, first I'll be speaking in the abstract and impersonally. Then I'm going to change gears and depart from that tradition. I'm going to speak personally about formative experiences that have shaped how I've come to understand and develop my work over my career, speaking more concretely and first-personally.

So, let's start with the word *education*. It has two root senses in Latin.

One meaning comes from the word *educare* that emphasizes how we are formed by our learning, how pedagogy helps to mold our outlook, our ways of doing things, our character. Think of education in this sense as taking a rough stone or block of wood and shaping it into something more definite by chipping away, sanding it, smoothing it, and thus transforming something indeterminate into something more refined with lines, contours, and depth. Education here has us think about how others act upon us by imparting their gifts, talents, and expertise to help form us as future scholars and leaders. Of course, a sculptor's or woodworker's materials don't always yield to their



efforts. There is often the need to adjust one's work along the way. Sculpting is hardly a one-way process. It is rather a kind of working conversation between the artist and her materials. My main point here is to emphasize the *formative* nature of education, its power to shape and give definition, detail, and character.

Another meaning of education derives from *educere*. Education in this sense combines two roots: "ex" (as in exit) and "cere" (from within). Here, the emphasis falls on extracting knowledge or *making explicit* what is latent. Our focus here is on how pedagogy enables a student to experience self-discovery, to learn more about herself. Education now has us think about bringing to conscious awareness that which lies hidden or obscure. We're not thinking about forming various skills and a base of knowledge. We're rather thinking about *self-interpretation*, of gaining a new knowledge of one's self.

I don't want to suggest that there's a radical difference between these two senses. Let's consider them heuristically, as types. They respectively point to the *formative* and *transformative* aspects of education. They indicate that education has the power to change us. The first has us think about the *interpersonal* processes of learning on which each of us relies. It has us think about developing powers of analysis and interpretation. The second has us think about the *intrapersonal* processes of learning—not about the *we*, but about the *I*. This latter sense is radically first-personal, and it has us think not about analyzing and interpreting others, but about making sense of ourselves to ourselves. Of course, neither of these experiences stands alone. They exist in a kind of equilibrium, a dialectic that is both intersubjective as well as intrasubjective.

Now, with this dialectic in mind, I want to talk about the aims of education as I've come to know and appreciate them. I'm not going to gloss my comments with wisdom from the Buddha, the Torah, the Gospels, St. Paul, rabbinic thought, or the Daodejing. Nor will I reference the Upanishads, Confucius, Achebe, Obama, or even a brief adage from Derrida about the genealogy of Nietzsche's early grocery lists. Instead, I want to share three stories from my own experience.

II. ON THE TASTE AND SCENT OF FRESH CONCRETE

For the first, let me speculate that no one here thinks that being able to smell and taste fresh concrete is the sign of a refined palate. But I developed that palate during the summer after my first year of college, when I left the East Coast to live, travel and work in Northern California. I had two jobs in fact, the first of which was a laborer at the very bottom of the pecking order at two construction sites, one at South Lake Tahoe and the other across the border in Nevada.

I began this work without knowing a thing about construction. I was just lucky to get a job—people needed people to dig ditches. “College boy,” as I was called, didn’t know the difference between a square point shovel and a round point shovel. My fellow workers took pleasure in playing tricks on me. I’d be working with a square point shovel, and they’d come up and say, “Hey, you need a square point shovel, and they’d take what I had and gave me a round point shovel. The foreman would walk by and say, “I thought I gave you a square point shovel.” So he’d give me one of those, and soon another co-worker would come by to offer me another round point shovel in exchange of what I was using. And so it went. I thought that a mortarboard was what you wore at graduation. I thought that shooting the corners might be a dart game. I thought that a good footing was what you wanted to have in life. And I had no idea what people meant when they called me a hod carrier.

I began my work as a ditch digger. Work there—and in graduate school—was (and is) a matter of being able to dig ditches: delving into one spot, one area, one line of argument or a piece of foreign terminology for hours a day before moving on to another equally difficult area. In some places the work might be easy; you might move along quite smoothly together with your fellow co-workers. In other places you might be entirely alone, with everybody else on the other side of the job site. You might be making what seems like minuscule progress when you hit a vein of rock or an old tree root. The work was (and is) unglamorous, tedious, and *necessary*. After eight hours of ditch digging on my first day, a large, intimidating, noisy, concrete mixer arrived. Then I experienced concrete’s fresh aroma while trying to

move a full wheelbarrow across narrow planks before dumping it into a ditch. Spilling, or tipping over, was simply out of the question, especially so after two of my fellow hod carriers were fired on the spot as the mixer arrived.

One thing I discovered was that doing such work was epistemically myopic, although I didn’t call it that at the age of 18. I focused narrowly on doing one thing and doing it right. Over time, I began to see how my work fit into a larger collaborative project, enlisting different people with different skills. Before too long, I was able to end my close relationship with my shovels and take on other tasks. My knowledge of what we were doing expanded. I acquired greater court vision, as basketball players call it, and was able to anticipate steps along the way in the construction process.

My imagination of what was possible slowly, incrementally began to grow, and all of the stereotypes that I had about construction workers were blown away. With that expanded outlook, things changed. I was promoted from ditch digging to arranging block to making mortar to making colored mortar to shooting the corners with a survey scope—corners being crucially important when building a foundation. I became increasingly knowledgeable and increasingly trusted. Among other things, I found that I could do this. I learned what it means to learn on the job through ongoing, disciplined practice. That was important because at first, I never thought I stood a chance at succeeding. I discovered that, contrary to everything I expected, I enjoyed what I was doing. In fact, I continued to work in construction for the next seven summers.

In all instances, it was hard work with clear expectations, rules, and protocols. If you showed up late to the job site, guess what? You don’t get paid until you start working. If you show up at the wrong job site, guess what? That’s not funny. You don’t chuckle that off as “college boy” being absent-minded. You don’t get paid. If you show up a little sore, take some aspirin. If you’re hungover because you’ve been out to the casinos where they served free martinis, that’s no one else’s problem. If you had romance issues and were up until four in the morning, we don’t want to hear about it. If you slip off at noon and blow a little reefer because you’ve got a sunburn or your joints ache, you’re fired. And you’re not fired discreetly and politely in



the trailer with the foreman who says, “Hey, Mike, you know, the leadership is saying, ‘We’re taking the organization in another direction; we’re in the process of restructuring.’ You know, you’ve done some valuable work here, and I’ve learned a lot from having you on the team for the last three weeks.” No, you’re fired right in front of everybody else. “Pick up your paycheck on Friday.”

Now when anybody else asks me what was formative in becoming a scholar, I always think first to this experience of intense labor, unglamorous discipline, growth in expertise and confidence, and very demanding accountability. Those very same experiences, I think, translate very well into what we expect of ourselves here in Swift Hall.

III. IN THE YEAR 529 (X3)

Now to my second narrative. It has to do with the year 529 C.E. This year was very important in the history of Western Christendom. And it has to do with an experience I had as an undergraduate in my second year of college.

I should preface this narrative by saying that when I went to college, I had no idea of what I was going to do. When my parents dropped me off at my dorm room, they asked me if I had any goals. I said that I had one, that I would never get a haircut for the rest of my life. I realize that that goal strains the imagination as I speak this morning. But I pursued that goal for another five and a half years. Soon, I developed another goal, which was not to wear shoes when the temperature was over 45 degrees. The idea

was that you should be able to *really feel* the ground under your feet, to experience the mist rise when your toes touch that soft Virginia grass first thing in the morning.

I was course shopping around in my second year, and I had heard about a professor in the Department of Religious Studies who was especially good. I had already taken a couple of religious studies classes, so I wandered into his class to check it out—The History of Christian Thought II. The professor, David Harned, began his lecture by saying that he would begin this course in the year 529 C.E. “I’ll argue that it’s the hinge on which Western Christian thought turned,” he announced. I said to myself, “History turning on a *hinge*?” I had never thought of that, or about history in metaphorical terms. I just thought history was facts and stories, not like doors that I had just been working on during the summer.

History turned on the hinge of year 529, Professor Harned argued, for three reasons. One, it’s the year of the Second Council of Orange, which stepped into debates about free will and grace. The Council affirmed the necessity of prevenient grace for salvation but rejected the doctrine of predestination, thereby affirming and denying two ideas from Augustine. The point was that the Council’s decrees were emblematic of the towering influence of Augustine in Christian thought, so much so that even affirming some his ideas included denying others.

Second, 529 is the year in which the Platonic Academy in Athens closed, or so he said, thereby bringing to an end centuries of Greek rationalism and its influence on Christian thought. We now know that’s not exactly true. It was the Neo-platonic academy; its instructors took two years to leave; and it was more mystical and esoteric than rationalist at that time. But the idea stuck that the fate of an academic institution was historically and culturally significant.

Third, 529 was the year in which the Benedictine monastery, Monte Cassino, opened, thereby auguring centuries of monastic practice and discipline. Saint Benedict wrote the famous rule, which became the basic principle for Western monasticism. The Rule laid the foundation of monastic life, of prayer, study, and assistance of the sick.

Professor Harned didn't just present information on this first day of class. He had a thesis. He had an argument. He mobilized data to support it. And he wrapped it all up in 50 minutes with a very memorable image. I stood up and turned to the person next to me and I said, "I want to do that someday." I promptly walked over to the Department of Religious Studies and signed up to major. I found the department to be a college within the college, much like the Divinity School is. Studying religion typically included a conjunctive: Religion and history; religion and philosophy; religion and politics; religion and aesthetics; religion and ethics; religion and culture; religion and theory. All of these discourses were brought together in serious and lively conversations among truly interesting and frankly eccentric people—students and faculty alike.

Several weeks into The History of Christian Thought II, I took the midterm, on which I did fairly well. Soon thereafter I submitted my first term paper. When I got it back, naturally I was eager to see what Professor Harned thought. On the first page there was a long red line running diagonally through the first paragraph, and on top of the page was one word: *rubbish*.

I thought, he's so good with words, why did he choose *rubbish*? So, I took a deep breath and looked through the other comments. I started to gain some traction after page one, which was something of a relief. I took the paper to a close friend, who said, "He's taking you seriously." And so I did what I suspect you all do, or may have done. I went into his office to talk to him, not to relitigate the grade, but to learn how to make my work better.

In that conversation, Professor Harned gave me a memorable line, one that a few of you have heard me say very often: "You need a *thesis*, not a theme. A theme is a concept or a metaphor. It helps you distill what you want to describe or name a central idea. It organizes an exhibition." About a theme, he added, "I always say, 'So what?'" A thesis, on the other hand, stakes a claim on ideas that you're going to put to scrutiny. It offers a premise or a hypothesis, the exploration of which launches an argument. *That*



kind of project requires supporting evidence, logical organization, and a justificatory defense. "It tells me something about what *you* want *me* to think, or rethink, and why." Some of you have heard me say that to you, and now you're hearing its origin story.

I didn't know it at the time, but I was also making it plain to Professor Harned that I was a self-reflective learner. Education is both a process word and an achievement word, as Gilbert Ryle would put it. *I share this point to make it plain that I did not emerge from my mother's womb as a fully formed academic.*

Certainly, after my "a-ha" moment in David Harned's classroom, learning was an uneven process with more than a few ups and downs. But Harned saw some potential in me and he worked to bring that out—education as *educere* in the best sense of that term.

Several years later, I found myself here in the Divinity School as a doctoral student. I had broader goals, clearer direction, and a base of knowledge on which to build. I found myself immediately thrown into many conversations, friendships, romances, fascinating courses, and the like. I was intensely social, eager to meet new people and find out what brought them to this unusual place devoted as it is to studying religion. Those of you who've read Peter Brown's magisterial work, *Augustine of Hippo*, know that at conclusion of his chapter on *Confessions*, Brown describes the number of people that Augustine had with him all the time, saying "this extremely inward man... to our surprise, has hardly ever been alone." And while I make no pretense to be Augustine, what Brown says was true of me: I was hardly ever alone. The coffee shop, the Woodlawn Tap, the Co-op, the Medici, reading groups, the Checkerboard Lounge, and more: you will discover these many parts of the world here. And I venture to say that you'll learn as much about the study of religion in those contexts as you will formally, in the classroom.

It is also the case that such gregariousness and socializing can be a mask. It can hide the fact of gnawing uncertainty, doubt, some dark nights of the soul. You'll hear a lot of people tell you that what you're doing is valuable, what you're doing is

"My imagination of what was possible slowly, incrementally began to grow, and all of the stereotypes that I had about construction workers were blown away. With that expanded outlook, things changed. I was promoted from ditch digging to arranging block to making mortar to making colored mortar to shooting the corners with a survey scope—corners being crucially important when building a foundation."

RICHARD B. MILLER

worthwhile—that there are these reasons and those reasons to take pride in what you're doing. That's all great. But there's only one person who can fully grasp that, and that's *you*.

It's a great privilege to be in graduate school, to devote several years of your lives pursuing ideas, interests, questions, and unexpected opportunities, surrounded by smart people and being supported by a first-class research institution that's also devoted to teaching and leadership. Michael Walzer describes education as offering a moratorium on many of the worries that take up our everyday lives, and there's a measure of truth to that. Please never take this privilege for granted. It's quite precious. It comes with a set of responsibilities, some of which become greater as you move into one or another context beyond Swift Hall. You're developing your talents so that you can eventually serve others as leaders, thoughtful professionals, and/or members of the academy. So do develop your expertise as an I, but you're doing so, I hope, in order to create, and serve, a much larger and inclusive *we*.

Now there are some important comparisons between these first two stories—my work in construction and my movement into graduate school. Both were collaborative, disciplined, patient, focused, detailed, and expansive. They both required something under-emphasized in life and study: self-care, both of body and of soul. And they both involved learning on the job incrementally, painfully, often with a nagging sense of uncertainty and self-doubt.

But there are instructive differences between these two stories as well. The first was that the construction world was exacting: you *never, ever* do something twice. That's a clear taboo. You may measure twice. You may think about how to prepare to do x, and you should do that more than once. But once you cut that board, once you put things together, placed the brick or the block on the row, you do that perfectly. You're to conserve materials, conserve time, conserve equipment, conserve energy, protect your body. There was a perfectionism and a commitment to efficiency in all the construction sites where I worked—an unspoken code of performance. I thought that in college I'd arrived in a world of excellence and achievement. I had no idea how well such norms were instantiated outside of the elitist walls of the university.

Let's call that code of performance "anti-revisionist." In the academic world, in contrast, the code is revise, revise, revise. It's clearly a perfectionist world, but it's also acutely revisionist. Your training, your research, your writing is *work*, and it is hard work. I always say editing will take at least twice as long as initially drafting a paper. It's not unlike finishing work on the construction site: those workers come and provide the final touches in what seems like forever. So, allot yourself ample time as part of your "time management." Check your sources. Think about your readers. Listen to feedback. Think about conscientious engagement with your ideas. Write with clarity and care. Hemingway once said, "The first draft of anything is shit." Perhaps he meant *rubbish*. So, take cognizance of that adage, and keep at it.



IV. IMPROV COMEDY TRAINING AND “YES, AND”

My third story is very recent. I should preface this by saying that when Wayne Booth, a scholar of literature and criticism here, turned 60, he took up learning to play the cello. I did something similar this past year. I’m a little older than Wayne was then, and I’ve pursued a different art form. So, let me begin by asking, Does the phrase “yes, and” resonate with anybody?

This past September, I enrolled in an improv comedy class at The Second City. “Yes, and” is the first skill I was taught to develop. In fact, I’ve taken four class sessions there, starting in October and continuing through June of this year. As some of you know, The Second City is the alma mater of a long list of iconic comedians. If you walk into the UChicago Booth School at the Gleacher Center, you see portraits of many Nobel laureates. If you walk into the classroom areas of Second City, you see Gilda Radner, John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, Tina Fey, Steve Carell, Stephen Colbert, Amy Poehler, Chris Farley, and

more. And this June, my Improv IV class performed on stage to an standing-room only audience. It was an experience of self-loss, risk taking, spontaneity, and frictionless harmony. Being a student again has been a valuable experience; you see various teaching styles and how different people respond to different kinds of instruction.

“Yes, and” is an improv tool premised on the idea that your partner is offering you a *gift*, something that you should receive in a welcoming way, and work with as you develop your character, scene, and relationship. You are to discern what you can affirm in a partner’s statement, word, gesture, emotion, tone, and movement to then build on as you proceed to construct a scene with your ensemble partners. They are then to affirm what you’ve given on the way toward further building your scene in an incremental and unpredictable way.

I think “Yes, and” is a valuable skill to develop in a classroom or seminar. It doesn’t mean that you can’t disagree with your colleagues. But it does require a receptive, charitable, and collaborative spirit,

making plain that you’re not out to play “gotcha.” It asks that you see your classmates and your instructor as making good faith efforts to contribute to your knowledge, and that you join the discussion in that very same spirit. You may disagree, you may be contrarian, you may want to shift the direction of the conversation, but you should also be constructive. The idea is to contribute to a collaborative, incremental exercise, not unlike construction. Too often the habit in academic conversations is to say, “Yes, but.” I’ve found it much more productive to replace that habit with “Yes, *and*.”

Unlike what I think we often feel in the academy, in improv comedy you can make mistakes. If you are risk-averse, like too many of us are in the university, you’re not going to succeed. When I first started thinking about taking improv, I went on YouTube and watched Tina Fey with Amy Poehler in their early years, and they were simply awful. Their timing, dialogue, scene construction, and object-work were all physically and conceptually off. When Fey was interviewed many years later, she said, “You have to take chances and if you don’t, if you can’t live with failure, you’re not going to succeed. You learn from those mistakes, from hitting rock bottom.” I’m not encouraging you to fail, but there is an ethic of risk-aversion in the academy that I want you to be cognizant of. Consider stepping out of your comfort zones to take some chances. In improv you must listen intently and actively to your partners. You must find that nugget in what they say, and work with that. Equally important, you can’t over-act. You must trust, assess, and discern what’s materializing. Those who over-act usually bluster their way into a scene with a preordained character or script or thought, which they impose on the dynamic. They’re taking a shortcut, which dooms the free-flowing and dialogical nature of the sketch.

The final thing I’d say is there is a lot of pleasure in what we do in improv. Through all your work here, your relationships, your struggles, and your discoveries, I hope that you find pleasure. There are many satisfactions to academic work, and they await you.

V. CONCLUSION

What can we extract from these three accounts? First, I hope they illustrate the dialectic between the interpretative and self-interpretive dimensions of learning and, with that, the dynamic between the We and the I in educational contexts. Put differently: I hope these stories illustrate the challenges of acquiring expertise while also remaining vulnerable and available to new ideas, surprises, innovation, and constructive critique.

Second, I think they point to the diverse range of experiences that we bring to our work. Graduate school is not only a matter of scholastic learning, although it is surely that. You learn to think and discover at a number of levels, and across a long arc of time. If you’re returning to graduate study after being away from the academy for a few (or several) years, you may well encounter ideas that you might have otherwise overlooked. Bringing those experiences to your work helps to inform your *questions* more than your answers. Please understand that what you want to learn from those questions is part of a process in which other perspectives are those you should benefit from as well. Your perspective is but one perspective that will be enriched, troubled, and deepened by those of your friends and colleagues.

And finally: learning is lifelong. Your academic degrees here are the equivalent of a green card, enabling you to continue along one or another path of leadership and scholarship, opportunity and discovery. However much a degree seems like a destination (and surely it is), it is only a moment within a much longer narrative of life and study.

So, together with these comments let me say, again, welcome and the best of luck.

Richard B. Miller is an alum of the Divinity School (PhD’85) and the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor Emeritus of Religion, Politics, and Ethics; also in the College. Professor Miller retired at the end of this academic year; a conference in his honor will be held in November of 2024.

He is the author of several monographs including the award-winning Interpretations of Conflict: Ethics, Pacifism, and the Just-War Tradition, Friends and Other Strangers: Studies in Religion, Ethics, and Culture, and Why Study Religion?



On April 8, 2024, a total solar eclipse moved across North America, passing over Mexico, the United States, and Canada. While Chicago was not quite in the path of totality, hundreds of people gathered across campus to witness it together. As the light dimmed and the eclipse reached its peak (shortly after 2pm), a cheer went up in front of Swift Hall from the large crowd in the Quad.

Gabriel Torretta's (PhD'24) dissertation title also references a celestial body: "Beautiful as the Moon: Discourses of Beauty in the Carolingian Era."

ORDINARY END-OF-DAYS

In the Islamic tradition, a solar eclipse is both ordinary and extraordinary. It is extraordinary in the sense that it disrupts our everyday expectation of night and day and their regularity; in this sense, it is another sign of God's power. It is ordinary in the sense that it is part of a divine plan and has no significance beyond its attestation of divine omnipotence.

There is a famous story about a solar eclipse that occurred right after the death of the prophet Muhammad's child Ibrahim. Some in the Muslim community took this to be an omen or a sign that the sun was grieving. But Muhammad insisted that an eclipse was merely a sign of God, and people should take the opportunity to pray. To this day, many Muslims pray the 'salat al-kusuf' (solar eclipse prayer) or 'salat al-ayat' (prayer of signs) when a solar eclipse occurs in their vicinity.

While eclipses are ordinary in the sense I have described, Islamic descriptions of the end times and Judgment Day often include phenomena that resemble a lunar or solar eclipse (or both at the same time). For example, Chapter 75 of the Qur'an reads, in part: 'So when vision is dazzled, and the moon darkens, and the sun and the moon are joined, man will say on that Day, 'Where is the escape?' No! There is no refuge. To your Lord, that Day, is the place of permanence.'

With these end-times accounts in mind, we can see a solar eclipse as yet another kind of sign: A reminder that the end of our world may have something to do with the death of our sun, and that ultimately, even something as seemingly permanent as the sun will one day cease to be.

Alireza Doostdar is Associate Professor of Islamic Studies and the Anthropology of Religion.

Updated from an article by UChicago News, originally published on August 15, 2017.



"Eclipse" comes from a Greek word *ekleipsis* meaning "abandonment, failure, extinction," in this case of the functions of the sun or the moon. Taken as divine omens, eclipses could stop battles or provoke military disasters: in the sixth century BCE, a solar eclipse made the armies of Greeks and Medes cease bring the fight to a halt and make a truce. Herodotos tells that this astronomical event had been predicted by Thales of Miletus (Herodotos' Histories 1.74.2-3). While a century later, scared by a lunar eclipse, the Athenian general Nicias stopped a favorable retreat and was then crushed by his enemies in Sicily."

CAROLINA LÓPEZ-RUIZ

López-Ruiz is Professor of Ancient Mediterranean Religions and Mythologies in the Divinity School and the Department of Classics.



IN THE CLASSROOM

At the end of every academic year, our 3rd year Master of Divinity students present on their senior theses. The Senior MDiv Thesis and Project is an in-depth exploration of a question or issue in religious leadership, an opportunity to wrestle with contemporary problems or possibilities in religious life, and make meaningful contributions to the practice of theological conversations. While thesis presentations take place across the city, we were able to capture some photographs from two in Swift Hall.

Shasank Rao (top) presented on “Dislocation, Diaspora, and Devotion: A Hindu Theology of Recognition for Troubled Times” and **Buki Ogunseitan** (bottom) presented on “Women’s Religious Leadership: Re-imagining the Religious Leadership of Women in Southwest Nigeria.”



Ranana Dine, a PhD Candidate in Religious Ethics, has been selected as the 2024 recipient of the Mark and Ruth Luckens Essay Competition in Jewish Thought and Culture for her paper, “Capturing Corpses: The Advent of Photography and Depicting Jewish Death.”

The Jewish Studies Program at the University of Kentucky’s awards the Mark and Ruth Luckens Prize for the best unpublished original essay in Jewish thought and culture that is also suitable for oral presentation to a general audience. Made possible by a generous gift from the late Dr. Mark Luckens, the winner gives a public lecture in connection with the University of Kentucky Jewish Studies program.

Her winning paper addresses the significant relation between photography and death since the invention of that technology, and how photography of the dead, within Jewish history, has mostly meant to signify Jewish suffering.

The video of Ranana’s lecture can be viewed online at bit.ly/Lukens2024.

NEW FACULTY WILL OFFER:

Professor de Rande will begin offering courses in Spring of 2025: “Islamic Ethics I: Foundations” will set the Islamic tradition in conversation with issues ranging from individual flourishing and the organization of society to conceptions of law and prophecy. “Islamic Supersessionism(s)” will explore Islamic engagements with the question of the relation of Islam to previous revelations.

Professor Jelen will teach a number of courses next year, including American Jewish Literature, Salvage Poetics: Literature as Ethnography, Testimonial Montage: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Holocaust Testimony, and Jewish Civilization II: Early Modern Period to 21st Century

Professor Macfarlane will offer a number of new courses next year, including “Themes in the European Reformation(s)”, “The Reformation in Britain, 1450-1660”, and “Christianity and Judaism in Early Modern Europe.”

Faculty News

We welcome new faculty members.



RAISSA DE RANDE

Raissa von Doetinchem de Rande will be joining the faculty as an Assistant Professor of Religious Ethics. Professor de Rande comes to us from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, where she was an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies with an appointment in the program in Jewish, Islamic and Middle East Studies. She received her PhD from Princeton University (Department of Religion) in 2021; she also holds a BA from the University of Oxford (2012) and an MAR from Yale Divinity School (2014).

Professor de Rande's research interests lie at the intersection of the study of Islam and religious ethics. The author of numerous articles and book reviews, her first monograph, *The Politics of Islamic Ethics: Hierarchy and Human Nature in the Philosophical Tradition*, is forthcoming with Cambridge University Press in the New Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought series. The book focuses on the Qur'anic concept of a divinely created human nature and its reception in early Islamic philosophy.

The Divinity School will now offer two joint Bachelor's/Master's Programs with the University of Chicago College.

The 4-year BA/AMRS program will provide foundational knowledge in the study of religion and its adjacent fields to be applied in a variety of professional contexts requiring a graduate degree. The 5-year BA/MA is recommended for students who are aiming for a doctorate or an academic career or who want to improve their professional competitiveness through an extended course of study.



SHEILA E. JELEN

Sheila E. Jelen joins us from the University of Kentucky, Lexington where she was the Zantker Professor of Jewish Literature, Culture, and History and Director of the Program in Jewish Studies. She received her PhD from the University of California, Berkeley in 2001 and previously taught in the English Department and the Jewish Studies Program at the University of Maryland, College Park from 2001 through 2018.

Prof. Jelen's scholarship is in the field of modern Jewish literature and culture, with a particular emphasis on gender and Jewish literacy and the intersection between ethnographic, photographic and literary discourses in popular reconstructions of pre-Holocaust East European Jewish life in Israel and the United States. Her recent monograph, *Salvage Poetics: Post-Holocaust American Jewish Folk Ethnographies* (2020), explores the literary sources and visual images American Jews in the post-Holocaust period have used to formulate an understanding of pre-Holocaust East European Jewish life. *Israeli Salvage Poetics* (2023) extends that discourse with an investigation of how Hebrew writers for the last half century have grappled with their East European legacy. *Testimonial Montage: A Family of Israeli Holocaust Testimonies from the Cracow Ghetto Resistance* (2024) considers the delicate balance between collective and individual testimony from a literary perspective.



KIRSTEN MACFARLANE

Kirsten Macfarlane joins us as Associate Professor. A scholar of early modern Europe and North America, Prof. Macfarlane works at the intersection of religious, cultural, and intellectual history. She has a particular interest in the history of biblical scholarship, encompassing its production by Latin-speaking scholarly elites, its interactions with vernacular religious culture, and its relationship with theological controversy and confessional identity.

This interest unites much of her research, including her first book on the Elizabethan Hebraist Hugh Broughton (*Biblical Scholarship in an Age of Controversy: The Polemical World of Hugh Broughton (1549-1612)*), published with Oxford University Press in 2021); her co-edited volume with Joanna Weinberg and Piet van Boxel on the early modern reception of the Mishnah (*The Mishnaic Moment: Jewish Law among Jews and Christians in Early Modern Europe*, published in 2022 in the Oxford-Warburg Series); and her second monograph on the relationship between erudition and piety in an exceptional community of early immigrants to Massachusetts (forthcoming with Oxford University Press in 2025).

She is currently working on her third monograph, on the study of Hebrew in North America circa 1660-1800.

Macfarlane most recently served as an Associate Professor at the University of Oxford, where she also received her BA, MSt, and DPhil. Her research has been supported by fellowships from Trinity College, Cambridge; the Houghton Library; the Massachusetts Historical Society; the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies; the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study; and KU Leuven.



Laurie Zoloth is the recipient of the seventh annual Borsch-Rast Book Prize and Lectureship for her book *Second Texts & Second Opinions: Essays Toward a Jewish Bioethics* (Oxford University Press, 2022), which focuses on the intensely private discussions that arise when ordinary people confront life and death choices and struggle with decisions in a world of medical and scientific complexity.

Prof. Zoloth said "I am deeply honored by this prize, for it recognizes what has been a lifetime of thinking about bioethics and the deep moral gesture that is medicine, from the time I first trained, at 19, as a nurse, and until now, as a professor," she said. "I also believe that telling these stories is one small way to honor the families and caregivers that are the subject of this work—that is my hope in all my writing."

The prize is given annually to Graduate Theological Union alumni and faculty in recognition of innovative theological scholarship.

Zoloth is the Margaret E. Burton Professor of Religion and Ethics in the Divinity School, the College, the Program in Jewish Studies, and the MacLean Center for Biomedical Ethics at the Pritzker School of Medicine.



“Negotiating Identities, Constructing Territories: Pre-Roman Iberia (900-200 BCE)”

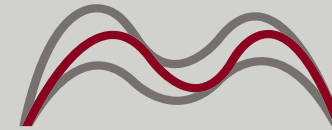
has been selected by the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society for 2024-2025. This project brings together Divinity School professor **Carolina López-Ruiz**, Anthropology professor Michael Dietler, and two scholars from outside UChicago: Álvarez Martí-Aguilar of the University of Málaga, Spain and Esther Rodríguez González of the Institute of Archaeology of Mérida and the National Research Council of Spain. They will advance recent research on pre-Roman Iberia by shifting the focus from colonial relations to the interactions that led to hybrid cultures, new territorial formations, and resilient environmental practices in the region.



The Divinity School and the Marty Center are pleased to announce the appointment of **Sarah Hammerschlag** as the Marty Center Faculty Co-Director. She succeeds **Alireza Doostdar**, Associate Professor of Islamic Studies and the Anthropology of Religion; also in the College, in the role.

Faculty Co-Directors are Divinity School faculty who advance the Marty Center’s engagement with the university community and broader public. During a three-year appointment, they collaborate with staff on the weekly publication of *Sightings*, a digital magazine about religion and current affairs, and oversee the sponsorship of faculty-led conferences and events. Co-directors also lead the annual Marty Seminar Junior Fellowship program for dissertation-stage Divinity School PhD students.

Hammerschlag is the John Nuveen Professor of Religion and Literature, Philosophy of Religions, and History of Judaism, also in the College. Her research thus far has focused on the position of Judaism in the post-World War II French intellectual scene, a field that puts her at the crossroads of numerous disciplines and scholar approaches, including philosophy, literary studies, and intellectual history.



MARTIN MARTY CENTER
FOR THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING
OF RELIGION

DIRECTOR’S MESSAGE

In *Gaming Islam*, an innovative, Marty Center-funded web series, Professors **Alireza Doostdar** and **Ghenwa Hayek** (Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations) welcome viewers into the complex ways that Islam and the Middle East are represented in video games.

Investigating some of the world’s most popular gaming franchises, including the multi-billion dollar “Call of Duty,” Doostdar and Hayek uncover and deconstruct the stereotypes of Islam’s supposed violence and barbarism that have long been found in other forms of art and entertainment. Part of the series’ argument hinges on idea that the stories we tell are central to how we think about others—and ourselves. “We think that the images and stories we all consume are just as powerful in shaping our worlds as political and economic events,” Doostdar and Hayek note.

This year, the Marty Center has directed much of its work to understanding precisely such stories about religion—how they shape our sense of what’s true, inform the ways we make meaning, and help us to build community (or hinder us from doing so). An exhibition of illuminated manuscripts of the book of Qohelet told a vibrant story about wisdom and the definition of an ethical life. A series of *Sightings* essays, presented in partnership with the Smart Museum of Art, examined narratives about religion in art (and vice versa). A documentary about Oak

Woods Cemetery made use of film and material culture to unearth forgotten stories about (and by) religious communities in Chicago. An event about quilting and African American religious practice gave participants the chance to tell their own stories through a medium that has preserved cultural and familial memory for generations.

It’s fitting that I framed this letter and the Marty Center’s year of research and programming with *Gaming Islam*. It’s one of the many contributions Alireza Doostdar has made to the Center in his three years as Faculty Co-Director, along with his guidance of PhD students in the Junior Fellows Dissertation Seminar and his participation in our series with the Seminary Co-op and our Science and Religion conference. As his tenure comes to an end, we offer him our profound gratitude for his courage, principled leadership, and good humor.

With Professor Doostdar’s departure, we welcome a new Faculty Co-Director, Professor Sarah Hammerschlag. Along with Professor Curtis Evans, Hammerschlag will help to lead the Center’s efforts to tell—and understand—stories about religion. She’s uniquely suited to do so, as a scholar of religion and literature and a shrewd analyst of even the most opaque narratives (some of her recent work addresses Philip Roth’s famously confounding *Operation Shylock*). I’m delighted to have her join us.

With thanks for your vital support of the Marty Center,

EMILY D. CREWS (PHD’21)
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE MARTIN MARTY
CENTER FOR THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING
OF RELIGION



DEMON SLAYER: POP RELIGION AND JAPANESE ANIME

BY BRUCE WINKELMAN | MAY 8, 2024



*“This does not mean that Demon Slayer
“is a religion,” rather it serves as a reminder
that people’s religious practices don’t occur
in a vacuum totally separated from their
consumption of fictional media.”*

BRUCE WINKELMAN

THE RECENT ANIME FILM BOTH DRAWS INSPIRATION FROM JAPANESE RELIGIONS AND FUNCTIONS AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION FOR RELIGIOUS PRACTICES.

Visitors to movie theaters across the United States recently had the opportunity to see one of the most popular Japanese anime sensations of the last decade. Not the Oscar-winning Hayao Miyazaki film *The Boy and the Heron*, but the film *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no yaiba — To the Hashira Training*, the third cinematic installment in the *Demon Slayer* franchise. Although not nearly as familiar on these shores as Miyazaki’s critically acclaimed masterpieces, the *Demon Slayer* franchise is more popular in Japan than virtually any other pop cultural brand. The first *Demon Slayer* film, 2020’s *Mugen Train*, is the highest grossing film of all time in Japan—with a revenue of over 40 billion yen, it beats not only Miyazaki’s *Spirited Away*, but also *Titanic* and *Frozen*.

Demon Slayer is famously inspired by a wide range of religious traditions and practices. Much of the franchise’s aesthetics and worldbuilding derive from forms of mountain asceticism, worship of local spirits called Kami, and demon lore. Yet while it is obvious to the trained eye how *Demon Slayer* draws inspiration from Japan’s various religious traditions, what is less obvious are the ways in which this pop culture phenomenon itself is spurring on innovative religious practices of its own—what we might call “pop religion.”

The *Demon Slayer* franchise revolves around the story of Tanjirō Kamado, a youth in 1910s Japan. When one day he comes home, he finds his family slaughtered by demons. The only survivor is his sister, Nezuko, who has been turned into a demon (not unlike how vampire bites turn victims into vampires). In an effort to restore his sister’s humanity, Tanjirō sets out into the world and finds himself amidst a centuries-long war between humans and the demons that feed on them. While this story began as a manga comic from the pen of graphic novelist Koyoharu Gotouge in 2016, it has since exploded into other media, including an award-winning animated series as well as the aforementioned films.

Demon Slayer’s depiction of demons, which also draws on global pop cultural tropes about vampires, is rooted in the demon lore of Japan’s religious traditions. For example, the prominent demon Hantengu in the show is a reference, in name and in image, to mythical creatures called *tengu* that are man-bird hybrids and have a millennia-long history in East Asian folklore. Tanjirō’s special technique for fighting demons, the *hinokami kagura*, is similarly inspired by Japanese religious practices. It is an adaptation of a real-life form of ceremonial dance also known as *kagura* that is frequently conducted at Shinto shrines across Japan. Finally, *Demon Slayer* draws inspiration from Japan’s traditions of mountain asceticism. Since ancient times, mountains have played a crucial role in various Japanese religious traditions as sites of power and arduous spiritual practices such as standing under waterfalls while chanting mantras. In order to learn to fight demons, Tanjirō goes through a similar training regimen in the mountains, including waterfall training.

However, the influence between *Demon Slayer* and Japanese religions is not a one-way street. The franchise has also inspired new popular religious practices. One of these is that of making visits to existing shrines and other spiritual sites associated with the franchise. Fans have identified a number of these sites, including the Kamado shrine in the city of Dazaifu, from which Tanjirō’s last name is said to derive and which is located on a mountain that in the past was an important center for ascetic practice. Fans now flock to this location in large numbers, which has begun to sell a new range of protective talismans directly inspired by *Demon Slayer*. Another shrine, the Shōhachiman shrine in the city of Kitakyūshū, is home to a cleft boulder that is held to have been the inspiration for a similar boulder in *Demon Slayer*. This shrine, too, has become a popular destination among fans. Oftentimes, fans visit both in a single trip. One could ask whether this is really “religious” or not, but the terminology that is used to talk about these visits places them among millennia old traditions of religious pilgrimage on the archipelago. They are referred to literally as “visits to the sacred sites” (*seichi junrei*).

The *Demon Slayer* phenomenon has also spurred new religious practices at these shrines. As part of traditional Japanese shrine visits, it is common practice to purchase a votive tablet called an *ema*, upon which one may write a wish or request to be granted. These wishes range from averting disaster in one’s personal life, to healing sickness, to passing important school exams. This tablet is then left at the shrine, in the hopes that the unseen powers will look favorably upon it and make it come true. At shrines that fans associate with *Demon Slayer*, one increasingly finds *ema* tablets that contain not just wishes but also include drawings of characters or elements from the series. This is not simply a case of fan art in a new location. In Japanese religions, diseases and pandemics have a long history of being associated with demons. Including a drawing of a demon slayer like Tanjirō alongside, for example, a request to “vanquish Covid-19” can thus be said constitute a new twist on centuries-old religious practices.

In sum, *Demon Slayer* does not simply draw inspiration from Japanese religions, but also functions as a source of inspiration for religious practices. This pop religion comprises a two-way process of influence between pop culture and religion. This does not mean that *Demon Slayer* “is a religion,” rather it serves as a reminder that people’s religious practices don’t occur in a vacuum totally separated from their consumption of fictional media. It is well-known that franchises like *Dune*, *The Avengers*, and *The Good Place* draw inspiration from real-world religions. Yet in focusing on this one-way influence, we may well have overlooked the traffic that runs in the other direction.

Bruce Winkelman is a historian of religions whose work spans theory and method in the study of religion, the history and historiography of Japanese religions, and the invention of Buddhist traditions across East Asia.



In February of 2024 students in Professor **Stephan Licha**'s course "The Globalization of Japanese Religions" were treated to a field trip to the Midwest Buddhist Temple.

You can read more about the field trip — and about how the Divinity School continues to broaden its scope regarding the world's religions in the current issue of *The University of Chicago Magazine*.

We hope you read "Sacred Scholarship" in print, but it's also available online (mag.uchicago.edu/university-news/sacred-scholarship). Not receiving the Magazine? Update your information here: mag.uchicago.edu/address-update





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It's the first Sunday of February, the temple's monthly memorial service. Stephan Licha, assistant professor in the Divinity School and affiliated faculty with the Center for East Asian Studies, sits near the front of the room, surrounded by his students. The visit to the temple is the first of three field trips for his course *The Globalization of Japanese Religions*.”

CARRIE GOLUS, AB'91, AM'93,
FROM THE SPRING 2024 ISSUE OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO MAGAZINE

SWIFT ONLINE

Make sure to visit our YouTube channel (bit.ly/DivinityVideo) throughout the year.



DIGITAL EXHIBIT

QOHELET: SEARCHING FOR A LIFE WORTH LIVING

martycenter.org/articles/qohelet-exhibition

In conjunction with the 2023–2024 Reflections on Judaism and Jewish Life Series, the Marty Center was pleased to host an art exhibition featuring illuminated texts by Debra Band, which are excerpted from *Qohelet: Searching for a Life Worth Living* by Debra Band and Menachem Fisch (Baylor University Press, August 2023). Artwork was displayed across Swift Hall during the Spring Quarter; select artworks and texts from this installation can be found online at our digital exhibition.

The Marty Center is grateful to Barbara Adelman (AB'70, MBA'76), John Schloerb (LAB'80), and Joe Price (AM'79, PhD'82) for the generous financial support of that made this exhibition possible.

Our YouTube channel is the place to look for video of major events from the past year, including Dean's Fora with our faculty. Visit us at (bit.ly/DivinityVideo) for recent video including:

[Sarah Hammerschlag](#) on "Judaism and the Politics of Minority Identity: The Case of Post-war France"

Dean's Fora from the 2023-2024 academic year, featuring works by faculty members [Karin Krause](#), [Kevin Hector](#), [Margaret M. Miller](#), [Laurie Zoloth](#), and Professor Emeritus [Bruce Lincoln](#)

Presentations from recent conferences in honor of our emeriti professors [Michael Fishbane](#) and [Jean-Luc Marion](#).





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