

# FROM THE DEAN

he soft breath of Spring brings more than the usual hope this year, promising a loosening of COVID's icy grip upon our societies and our spirits. Even as many continue to suffer devastations of disease and disruption, attention is shifting from lockdown to a re-opening of the world. As that attention shifts, what lessons have we learned about religion in this pandemic that may have implications for the future? There are doubtless many, but I will focus here on two: freedom of religion, and theodicy.

Pandemics have often produced confrontations between public health and piety, between measures undertaken to minimize contagion, and the rights and privileges of religious institutions. Responding to the arrival of the bubonic plague in Italy in 1348, the town council of Pistoia ordered all borders closed, prohibited trade in goods believed to carry infection, and forbade gatherings of ten people or more. These were just a few of the measures listed in the ordinance, which ended with a coda: "Saving that anything in them which is contrary to the liberty of the church shall be null and void."

Responding to the same pandemic in the Islamic city of Granada, physician and prime minister Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb composed a treatise entitled *Convincing the Inquirer about the Terrible Disease*. Some frowned on theories of contagion, claiming they diminished the power of God by assigning agency to pathogens. Ibn al-Khaṭīb disagreed. "If the senses and observation oppose traditional evidence, the latter needs to be interpreted." Observed patterns of infection confirm the theory of contagion, making the need for quarantine evident, he insisted, quoting the Prophet Muhammad, "may God pray for Him and grant him peace: 'The sick should not be watered with the healthy.'" To allow attendance at mosques, he wrote, is tantamount to suicide, and violates the Qur'an admonition "not to contribute to your destruction with your own hands."

Ibn al-Khaṭīb's explanations for the plague's spread do not seem significantly different from those one might expect from a modern public health expert: "repeated contact with the infected at funerals, exposure to their clothing and items, living in close quarters, and

overcrowding" he wrote, adding as well "mismanagement, carelessness and lack of awareness due to widespread ignorance and the absence of knowledge about these matters among the masses."

Even his vocabulary of suicide echoes today. Last May the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in San Francisco upheld the Governor of California's restrictions on religious services as constitutional. "We're dealing here with a highly contagious and often fatal disease," the majority wrote, quoting a dissent by Justice Robert Jackson from 1949: "There is a danger that, if the Court does not temper its doctrinaire logic with a little practical wisdom, it will convert the constitutional Bill of Rights into a suicide pact." A week later a more divided Supreme Court upheld (5-4) the Ninth Circuit's ruling. Last November, after Amy Coney Barret replaced Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the Supreme Court adopted a different position, ruling 5-4 that New York's size restrictions on religious gatherings violated the First Amendment's protection for the free exercise of religion.

What is the proper balance between public health and freedom of religion? From the point of view of the legal historian, the cutting edge of that question may be sharper today than it has ever been in the history of the United States, and it is not likely to be put back into a drawer when the pandemic recedes.

Consider vaccination policies. Religious exemptions from vaccination mandates are required by most states, and frequently invoked. In a national survey Kraig Beyerlein, Kathryn Lofton, Geneviève Zubrzycki and I administered in collaboration with the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research just before the pandemic reached the United States, we offered respondents the following scenario: "A parent does not vaccinate their children because of religious beliefs against this practice, and the children are denied enrollment in public school because of its policy that all students must be vaccinated." Nearly three quarters replied that un-vaccinated children *should* be denied enrollment, and the same majority maintained that this denial *does not* constitute a violation of the child or parent's religious freedom.

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 29** 

# Criterion

### **SPRING 2021**

**VOLUME 56, ISSUE 1** 

### Dean

David Nirenberg

## **Director of Communications**

Terren Ilana Wein

### Design

Amy Charlson Design

### **Photography**

Simeon Chavel Irema Halilovic Jean Lachat Jason Smith Joe Sterbenc Antonia Willnow

Criterion is published for alumni and friends of The University of Chicago Divinity School. We welcome your feedback. Please email terren@uchicago.edu.

Prefer to receive *Criterion* by e-mail? You can share your contact preferences and update contact information by going to bit.ly/criterioncontact.

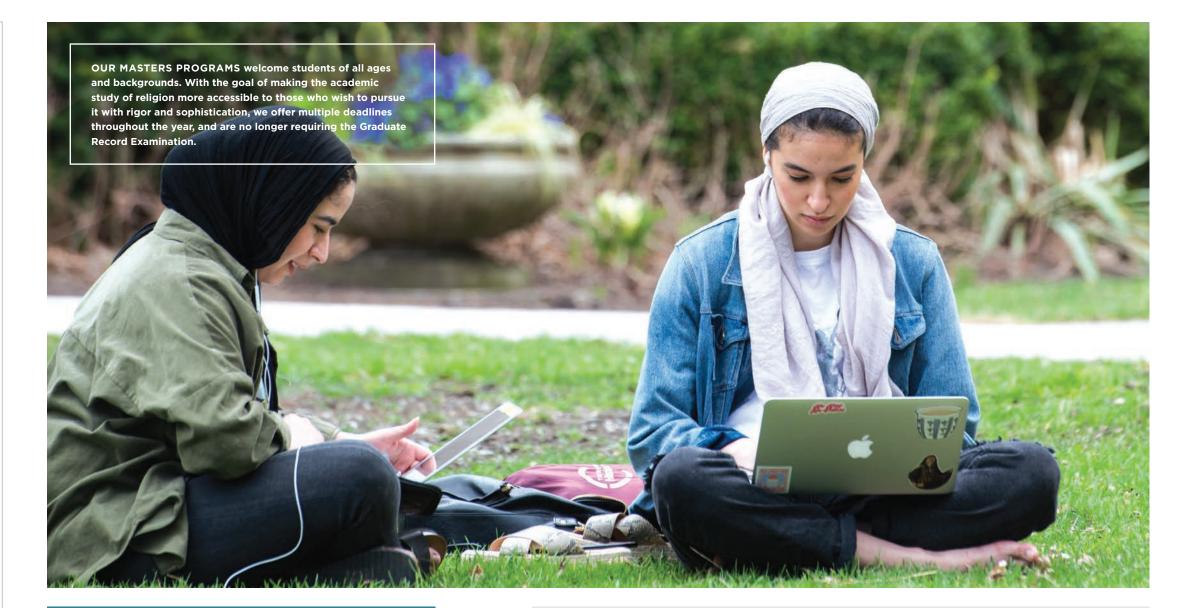
© 2021 The University of Chicago Divinity School

The University of Chicago Divinity School 1025 E. 58th Street Chicago, IL 60637 773.702.8200 divinity.uchicago.edu









STAY IN TOUCH with our quarterly e-newsletter for alumni and friends, *Swift Matters*. Email Madison McClendon at mmcclendon@uchicago.edu to subscribe.



# **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 important questions are pursued with tenacity and care.



# YOU MAY MAKE A GIFT IN SUPPORT OF OUR WORK

by calling 888.824.4224, or give online at bit.ly/givediv. If you would like information on planning an estate gift, giving securities, or making a major gift, please contact Madison McClendon at mmcclendon@uchicago.edu or 773.702.8248.

# JOSEPH EDELHEIT, DMIN'01, 2021 ALUMNUS OF THE YEAR

Upon recommendation from the Divinity School's Alumni Council, the Board of Trustees of the Baptist Theological Union has named Joseph A. Edelheit, DMin 2001, the Divinity School Alumnus of the Year for 2021.



Professor Emeritus of Religious and Jewish Studies at St. Cloud State University (St. Cloud, Minnesota), Dr. Edelheit's career spans and links work in congregations, academia, interfaith relations, contemporary philosophy, and service. With over 25 years of service to the academy in addition to over 45 years in the rabbinate, he is an educator known for bringing a passion for understanding and dialogue into the college classroom, the congregation, and community writ large.

Dr. Edelheit's career reflects a deep commitment to the values of equity and justice, and engages interreligious dialogue at every level, from scripture to service. Perhaps best known among his achievements is his work at St. Cloud State University. There he initiated and facilitated the transition of a Religious Studies program from a minor in the Philosophy Department to an independent college level program in the College of Liberal Arts, and worked in the surrounding communities on issues of anti-Semitism and interfaith dialogue. As a mentor, teacher, and community activist, his work has helped students and nonstudents alike develop critical and sympathetic skills needed to recognize and combat racism and anti-Semitism.

As a rabbi, Dr. Edelheit has served Reform Jewish congregations in Chicago (Emanual Congregation), Minneapolis (Temple Israel), and Michigan City (Sinai Temple); in his retirement he works with communities without rabbis.

A long-term HIV/AIDS activist, he served on the Clinton administration's Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (1995-2000) and also initiated and directed a non-governmental organization, Living India, for almost a decade, providing HIV/AIDS care to orphans in India.

In addition to his lifelong mission of *tikkun olam* (repair of the world), Dr. Edelheit has contributed chapters to or been the editor of over a dozen monographs; he is the author of numerous journal articles, lectures, and papers on topics including issues in Jewish practice and belief, the work of Paul Ricoeur, the Holocaust, and religion in public thought and memory.

His most recent work, What Am I Missing? Questions About Being Human (Wipf and Stock), was published in 2020 and Reading Scripture Again with Paul Ricoeur (coedited with James More), is forthcoming from Lexington University Press.

"Rabbi Edelheit's contributions to interfaith understanding, particularly in Jewish-Christian relations, are significant and moving," said David Nirenberg, Dean of the Divinity School, of the award. "His service to the interwoven communities of students and scholars, practitioners of religions, and those who seek a greater understanding of our religiously pluralistic society embodies the values of The Divinity School."

### **ALUMNI AWARDS**

Know an outstanding alumnus/a? Nominate them for an alumni award today. For more information, please go to bit.ly/ UChiDivAlumniAwards.

Dr. Edelheit currently lives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In lieu of a public lecture, a prerecorded interview between Rabbi Edelheit and Rob Wilson-Black, AM'92, PhD'02, the President of the Divinity School's Alumni Council, will be published later in the Spring.



# Wendy Doniger portrait

A PORTRAIT OF WENDY DONIGER, THE MIRCEA ELIADE DISTINGUISHED SERVICE PROFESSOR EMERITA OF THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS, IS NOW DISPLAYED IN OUR COMMON ROOM.

Professor Doniger, who retired in 2018, mentored over eighty PhD students through their dissertations during her 40 years of teaching and service at the Divinity School.

The artist, Mary Qian, grew up in Shanghai and writes of portraiture that "every new sitter is like opening a new window. The goal is to never select the pose but let the pose select itself."

Wendy, known to all as a dog lover extraordinaire, is pictured here with her Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Raja, who was a year old when this portrait was painted. They sat facing the southern exposure to the little park behind their dining room, the best-lit place in the house.

# ESSAY CONTEST ON RACE AND RELIGION

The Divinity School invites submissions for an international essay contest.

Questions about how religious practices and traditions interact with structures of power and categorizations of race demand increasing attention from scholars in the study of religion.

We welcome contributions from graduate students at the master's and doctoral levels in any field in the humanities, social sciences, or divinity, and graduates and early career scholars.

The winning essay will be awarded \$2,000 and an opportunity to deliver a lecture at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Essays in second and third-place will be awarded \$500 each. Up to six finalists will be invited to participate in a publishing workshop alongside senior colleagues to revise their entries for publication.

Full details can be found online: divinity.uchicago. edu/essay-contest

# SELECT NEW COURSES

Every year our faculty develop new courses across the range of our curriculum.

Intersectionality in American Medical Ethics

The Lord's Business: Evangelical Christianity and Corporate Capitalism in America

Sacred Mushrooms & Spirit Molecules: Uses and Abuses of Religion Under the Influence of Psychedelics

Race and Religion in Chicago

Contemporary Religion in Israel

Pilgrimage, Voyage, Journey

Being Buddhist in Southeast Asia

Drinking with God: An Introduction to Sufism

Meaning and the Body

Justice, Solidarity, and Global Health

The Gospel of John

Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible

Introduction to Byzantine Art

My Body, My Self: Asceticism and Subjectivity

Theologies from Africa, Asia, and Latin America

Shame



# What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Religion?

When we talk about religion, we talk about ways in which human beings negotiate gaps and fissures in their lives—often in response to fallibility, suffering, and peril—along with their efforts to secure a place in the world and their reasons for acting as individuals, in communities, and in the institutions that give structure to daily existence. We understand such reasons to include not only cognitive activity but also affective and somatic registers of personal and collective identity. And we understand such reasons to be connected in various ways to languages about god and the gods, supra-mundane states of affairs, and/or sacred authorities that are presumed to have special entitlements in relation to human beings' beliefs and actions. Because such languages are nested in practices and beliefs that are passed along intergenerationally, talking about religion also means talking about human history, power, and tradition. Moreover, because such practices and beliefs are shaped in dialogue with many other cultural traditions and social institutions, talking about religion is inescapably a comparative enterprise. As scholars of such matters, we talk interpretively, critically, and normatively about all of these topics (and more), drawing on tools from the humanities and social sciences to expand the moral imagination. We thereby seek to make sense of how others find meaning and make sense of their lives, and how we can make sense of such matters to ourselves, our students, and to the public at large.

RICHARD B. MILLER, LAURA SPELMAN ROCKEFELLER PROFESSOR OF RELIGION, POLITICS, AND ETHICS (PHD'85)



On November 13, 2020, Dean Nirenberg welcomed our 2020 Alumna of the Year, Audrey K. Gordon, to a unique socially distanced ceremony of recognition. In usual times, we gather together with students, faculty, and alumni to hear a speech given by the Alumnus or Alumna of the Year, to present the physical award, and to join in toasts and a festive reception. We were working on scheduling Dr. Gordon's lecture, "September Song: The evolution of hospice and end of life care," when it became apparent that 2020 was not "usual times." A video of Dr. Gordon's visit to campus is available at http://bit.ly/AotY2020Preview.

Antisemitism and Islamophobia, Historically and Today

The Subject and the Social

Polemic, Betrayal, and Dung Beetles in the Pure Land: Zhili, Renyue, and Miaozongchao Controversies

Modern Jewish Religious Thought

A Proto-History of Race? Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Spain and North Africa

The Sacred Gaze: Beholding as a Spiritual Exercise in the European Artistic Tradition

Introduction to Islam

Antisemitism and Islamophobia, Historically and Today

Narration and Law: Levinas' Talmudic Readings and the Imperative of Ethics

Buddha Then and Now: Transformations from Amaravati to Anuradhapura

Feeling Religious or Emotions as a Variety of Religious Experience

Religion, Reason, and the State

Philosophy and Literature in India

The Political Theologies of Zionism

Science/Fiction/Theory

Madhyamaka in India and China

# IN THE CLASSROOM



This past year, the typical "Chicago" student or alum may have found a silver lining in pandemic-related shutdowns, in that more reading time became available for many of us. In Professor Richard A. Rosengarten's "19th Century Novels" class, students from across our degree programs had the opportunity to delve into some substantial and satisfying reads: novels situated at one of the many intersections of religion and literature.

### **CLASS:**

Mythologies of America: 19th Century Novels

## **INSTRUCTOR:**

Richard A. Rosengarten Associate Professor of Religion and Literature (PhD'94)

### What's the class about?

It's about the idea of "the Great American Novel" and the cluster of candidates for that designation that appeared around the time of America's Civil War. Hawthorne, Melville, Stowe, and Alcott each offers a vision of America that tries to describe how the nation does and does not live up to the

idea that it is constituted by "we the people." Of course their descriptions, and the severities of the variances between the ideal and the reality, differ. So the class is also about how to think about those differences—how to compare them, and whether the choice of one as exemplary need not entirely exclude appreciation of the others.

# What was your inspiration for this class?

In a word, students. I've been privileged to work with quite a number who concentrated their study in American religious and literary history. In alpha order: Elizabeth Alvarez, Lucas Carmichael, Greg Chatterley, Brett Colasacco, Alison Tyner Davis, M. Cooper Harriss,

"One of my favorite things about this teaching experience is that its enrollment includes our MA and PhD and MDiv students—a kind of snapshot of the School." RICHARD A. ROSENGARTEN

Mary Cate Hickman, John Howell, Pippa Koch, Katherine Mershon, Seth Perry, Diane Picio, Kit Shields, RL Watson. They compelled me, and I learned a lot from working with them. John, Pippa, and Kit each did significant scholarly work in the nineteenth century that informs the course. John, who wrote a dissertation on GAN in this period, was a formative influence; he and I later co-taught the initial version of the course (which included cinematic works like Birth of a Nation).

And then there were the first-year master's students (both MA and MDiv) on whom I inflicted Paul Ricouer's *The Symbolism of Evil*, where I discovered an analytic frame for identifying and then comparing the myths that constitute a culture.

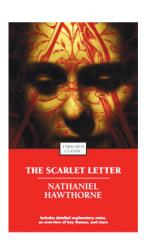
# Who should take this class?

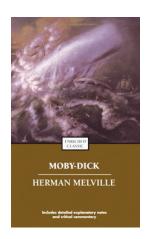
I wouldn't presume to say! One of my favorite things about this teaching experience is that its enrollment includes our MA and PhD and MDiv students—a kind of snapshot of the School. Students from the Social Sciences and the Humanities also find it, and add great value. This quarter's version also includes several excellent College students. Irrespective of program, they are interested in the idea that profound religious ideas are available in literary texts!

# Do you have a favorite from your reading list and if so what/why?

I'm most aware of what's *not* on it that I love (Whitman, Twain, e.g.) or find deeply troubling yet relevant (Thomas Dixon's *The Klansman*).

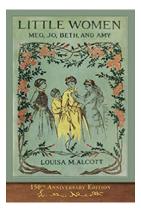
Each is a favorite, for a different reason. Hawthorne is endlessly acute on the psychology of shame. Melville grasps so well the attractions of positing a deity (Christian, pantheist, pagan) yet resolutely refuses to endow any deity with control over Nature. Stowe's prophetic fury about slavery marches hand in hand with her racialization of good and bad religion. Alcott is











confident that cultivating domestic values will result in proactive love of neighbor that can in fact overcome disparities of all sorts, including income. So each author melds her or his form to a distinctive position on religious thought and practice. The emergent conversation was as urgent and rich then as it is now.

## **READING LIST:**

Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter or A Romance

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* or *The Whale* 

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *Life Among the Lowly* 

Louisa May Alcott, Little Women or Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy

# **IN CONVERSATION**

The coronavirus pandemic has raised countless ethical questions: How do we balance restricting freedoms with protecting others, how do we ethically distribute vaccines, should we force people to get vaccinated—or should we ask healthy people to get infected with COVID-19 in the name of science?

The "Big Brains" podcast brings stories from the people behind the pioneering research and pivotal breakthroughs at the University of Chicago. A recent episode featured Laurie Zoloth, the Margaret E. Burton Professor of Religion and Ethics and Senior Advisor to the Provost for Programs on Social Ethics.

In the podcast, Professor Zoloth discusses a range of ethical questions related to the pandemic. We've provided an excerpt below. To listen to this or other episodes, or to subscribe, visit news.uchicago.edu/podcasts/big-brains



**Big Brains:** In the age of COVID-19, what does it mean to be ethical?

Laurie Zoloth: Everyone's saying, "Okay, how do you live within a system that's essentially unjust?" And the only way to do it and still maintain some sort

of moral worth and moral compass is over and over to point out the injustice, to fight against it as hard as you can, to demand change.

This is one of the few times in human history where everyone on the planet has actually been affected by the same set of circumstances and has had to face some of the same realities. And it's an extraordinary moment for humans to figure out, what do we do now? And when you speak to people all over the world, you'll see the same sorts of questions coming up over and over again.

Big Brains: How do you balance restricting freedoms with protecting others? How do we distribute a vaccine in an ethical way when there's so many competing needs? These are all questions that Zoloth has been grappling with.

Laurie Zoloth: The kind of emphasis that likes to live in the practical, tangible world, likes to apply these ideas. So I don't just present a menu of available options. I like to be the person that recommends, "Here's the option that I think is the best course."

Over and over as human beings, we're forced to make choices. And the choices are hopefully not just based on feelings or on an aesthetic sense. They're based on our sense of what it is to be a good human being, what it is to live in a good world. And so over and over again, we're confronted with this question, "What is the right thing to do? What is the right act?" And then we have to justify it because we're rational creatures and we have to give each other reasons for how we act.

And many, many people in science and in government and in policy with the capacity to enact decisions, do turn to ethics and do turn to us and say, "What are the ethical implications? Let's have someone in here who can think through those ideas." And that's how we end up, not just me, but all of my colleagues end up in places like the CDC and the NIH, thinking about how science is unfolding.

Big Brains: Before we can discuss something like the ethics of vaccine distribution, Zoloth says we first need to build an ethical framework, an argument to justify one action over another. And as a leading scholar on Jewish studies, one natural place for Zoloth to start is with religion.

Laurie Zoloth: Many, many religions have this notion that we are all fundamentally equal because we are children of a powerful God, of Allah, or of the God of the Torah, or the God of Christian Scriptures in which we are created beings that are essentially equal. And that essential equality, that essential human dignity and human worth means that we need to share what we have, the abundance of this world, equally and fairly. And with attention to vulnerability, and attention to the poor. So this notion that we have an essential duty comes



"In some sense, much of religion is about restraining that, those feelings and those desires, and understanding that your feelings, or maybe the wrong guide, may lead you astray in terrible ways."

strength, I think. So we

LAURIE ZOLOTH

out of our sense that, it's what we call bootlegged in from religion, into modern political science.

But you can turn to Greek philosophy. You can turn to American constitutional law. You can turn to other systems, other stories, other narratives and be a very good ethicist as well. And that cacophony of voices and arguments and sources and traditions is one of the things that gives my discipline its

talk about a basic decent minimum that societies should be organized to provide. And one of these basic decent minimums is education. Another one is healthcare. Societies should be organized to provide this basic decent minimum for each other, for one another, out of that sense of dignity, out of that sense of duty. And that reciprocity really does

annul many of our public

policies, and that's where

it comes from. To live outside of the sense of duty to another is sort of a horrifying prospect.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



Mark M. Lambert is a PhD candidate in Theology. His work draws upon historical theology, medical ethics, and medical history in an effort to understand and approach stigmatic illness. We spoke with Mark about his work and its relevance to the present day.

# How does a scholar of religion become interested in leprosy?

I started out interested in the history of the Crusades, an interest stimulated by a study abroad trip to the Middle East where the consequences of this moment in time remain vividly present. But I was drawn to the singular figure of Baldwin IV, the sixth crusader king, who despite suffering publicly from leprosy was still esteemed enough to be buried in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The occurrence was incompatible with everything I (thought) I knew about medieval leprosy. The more I discovered about leprosy during the Middle Ages, the more I became intoxicated with the intricacies of medieval Christianity and its shockingly nuanced attitudes towards a disease as complex as leprosy.

Most surprising, I increasingly detected uncanny continuities between historical responses to leprosy and more modern diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS. Thus, although I've left my fascination with the Crusades

behind, my interest in the recrudescence of historical paradigms continues. Still, I never could have imagined I would end up writing an entire dissertation on the topic of leprosy.

In my dissertation project, I argue that the historical theologizing of leprosy alongside sacraments such as the Eucharist provides key ethical insights for how religious communities today approach stigmatic illness, e.g., HIV/AIDS, mental illness, even COVID-19. My sources are as diverse as premodern Franciscan treatises, biblical commentaries of Protestant reformers, and personal letters of Father Damien de Veuster regarding his work at the leprosy colony on Molokai, Hawaii. Despite spanning from the 13th century to the 19th, my sources are unified by the universal experience of illness. They also reveal a persistent theological preoccupation with questions of perception or what the presence of disease reveals about divinity. And in one of my more surprising findings, I demonstrate that

medical knowledge was historically a vital part of the epistemological repertoires of theologians. Moreover, this engagement with medical theory could critically augment theological inquiry with consequences for the ethical constitution of communities and even the contours of public health policies.

# Students in Swift Hall also know you are passionate about promoting mental wellness and reducing stigma associated with mental illness.

Serving as a representative to the Student Health Advisory Board has allowed me to have a voice in the implementation of health policy on campus. More recently, I was able to translate some of this passion through a new position on the Divinity Students Association Board as the inaugural wellness chair. Honestly, it's hard for me to identify if my research interests inform my SHAB/DSA work or if it's actually the other way around.

# What might be leprosy's lessons for our COVID-present?

Working on the project while a global pandemic was unfolding has been quite jarring: leaving aside all of the shared anxieties-anger-struggles-etc. the pandemic has presented, there's been times when I have seen the affirmation of the relevance of my work. Other times, I have wanted a little less of my life to be consumed with thinking about disease and illness. But three things have really stood out. During the spring and summer, I was finishing a chapter on John Calvin, immersed in the Protestant reformer's writings about medicine. He and fellow reformer, Martin Luther, both harbored immense esteem for the medical arts and against the backdrop of recurrent plague outbreaks, harshly criticized the Christians who openly dismissed medical advice. While I was writing this chapter I was reading about churches in Chicago that brazenly flouted health measures—not to mention what was occurring on the national scale with the former president's support.

In a talk recently, I noted that owing to its prominent profile in the Bible, the medical community has never had an interpretive monopoly on leprosy: this disease has always possessed a public, easily manipulated profile. Because of this, leprosy has often become entangled with racial politics. This was certainly the case in Molokai, Hawaii where the policies of mandatory segregation overwhelmingly affected the indigenous Hawaiian population. But leprosy also became instrumentalized in early American, xenophobic rhetoric about Chinese immigrants (particularly in San Francisco), and more recently, in the political right's fearmongering about South

American migrant caravans. I was saddened and outraged to see this toxic pattern repeat with respect to COVID-19 and the recrudescence of blatant racism against Asian Americans.

There are obvious resonances between leprosy, where sufferers were historically separated and marginalized, and our contemporary experiences with COVID-19. To just reflect on the example of Father Damien, who worked at Molokai and was later admitted as a patient after he contracted leprosy himself, how he theologically conceived of community changed by necessity and (what I find especially fascinating) he was forced to adapt how he conceived of and performed certain sacraments owing to the realities presented by leprosy. In parallel fashion, we've observed how communities of faith have had to reimagine their conception of community and to adapt how they perform certain rituals. But Father Damien provides us with two further insights. The first: Damien's experience of leprosy—and especially how he's remembered—was quite different from the experience of his indigenous co-sufferers by virtue of racial status. That is something that has also been painfully true of COVID and a reality that deserves even greater vigilance on our part. Second: Damien, much to the chagrin of his religious superiors and the colonial Board of Health, become stubbornly passionate about advocating for improvements to Hawaiian health policies pertaining to leprosy. In fact, Damien was unafraid of appealing to his religious authority—and growing celebrity—if it meant securing better medical care for the residents of Molokai. This pandemic has exposed and been exacerbated by many of our societal ills, but now the notion that healthcare is a matter of personal, private responsibility is painfully foolish and unethical. Hopefully, more Americans have realized that public health affects, well, everyone. After the pandemic has passed, I hope in turn that academia, theologians, and communities of faith will recognize public health debates as deserving their attention.





# Craft of Teaching to Expand

he University of Chicago Divinity
School is pleased to announce a
generous bequest from the estate of
the late John C. Colman that will
enable a significant expansion of the
Craft of Teaching in the Academic
Study of Religion program,

the School's pedagogical training program for doctoral students. The expanded program will be named The John C. and Jane Colman Program in the Craft of Teaching, Leadership, and Service, and will support students in all of our degree programs as they seek to put their disciplinary formation to work in the world.

The establishment of the Craft of Teaching in 2011 under Dean Margaret M. Mitchell underscored the Divinity School's commitment to preparing outstanding educators in the field of religious studies. For over a decade, the program has sustained a vigorous conversation on pedagogy in the study of religions among doctoral students at the

University. This new gift will broaden the program's mission and scope. In addition to expanding opportunities for a broad array of pedagogical engagements, this extended program will offer career-building opportunities through internships, field experiences, and skill-building modules. It will create opportunities for MA, MDiy, and PhD

students in The Divinity School to gain skills relevant to their futures both inside and outside the academy.

The original program was made possible by the vision and support of John C. and Jane Colman, engaged Chicagoans whose generosity has touched many lives. Mr. Colman served as President of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, and in 1995 received the Julius Rosenwald award, the Federation's highest honor, in part for

his work with refugees from the former Soviet Union. He was also president of North Shore Congregation Israel, the first Reform synagogue in the North Shore. Deeply interested in the role of religion in public life, John C. and Jane Colman have long been engaged with the Divinity School. Before endowing the Craft of Teaching, the Colmans endowed the Marty Center Dissertation Seminar. Their new bequest doubles the resources of the Craft of Teaching, and represents a remarkable commitment to the future of all of our students and our School.

"John worked with six distinguished deans and felt strongly about the exciting and beneficial tasks of the scholars in Swift Hall specifically, and the vital role of religion in public in general," said Jane Colman. "He believed deeply that focusing attention on leadership and service in higher education was crucial to the formation of scholars and scholarship itself. Through John's bequest I am delighted to continue his lengthy dialogue with the Divinity School."

"John and Jane dedicated a great deal of their lives to the betterment of this nation and of the world," said Divinity School Dean David Nirenberg. "Whether working to solve problems with the international monetary system or to meet the needs of refugees from the USSR, John brought extraordinary intelligence and care to the needs of others. We are fortunate that over their decades of association with the School, he and Jane conveyed that same generous care to thinking about the needs of all of us who study and teach about religion in Swift Hall."

The expanded program will support students in all of our degree programs as they seek to put their disciplinary formation to work in the world.



Implications of the coronovirus pandemic concern scholars across disciplines, including scholars of religion and theology. Pandemic, Ecology, and Theology; Perspectives on COVID-19 (Routledge, 2020, edited by Alexander J.B. Hampton) brings together theological essays on social and political controversies enlivened by COVID-19.

Willemien Otten studies the history of Christianity and Christian thought with a focus on the medieval and the early Christian intellectual tradition. She analyzes early medieval thought and theology as an amalgam of biblical, classical, and patristic influences which, woven together, constitute their own intellectual matrix. Within this matrix the place and role of nature and humanity interest her most. We are pleased to reprint Professor Otten's chapter from this volume.

he coronavirus pandemic has thrown scholars of religion and theology for a difficult loop.

That is true both for more humanistic scholars of religion and theology and for more doctrinally oriented ones. 

If ever a virus went not just

global, turning from an

epidemic into a pandemic, but also viral, manifesting itself through bouts of governmental concern and individual panic on the internet, the coronavirus did. As scholars of religion and theology, we have found ourselves dumbfounded in result. While we serve as a sounding board for human responses to the pandemic, we also feel called upon to address the intellectual quandary with which the pandemic confronts us professionally, showing us powerful (having caused it in some way) and vulnerable (being victimized by it) at once. The question now is whether we should accept this catastrophe as having thrown us off the precipice into

a religion-less void or whether there is an appropriate

religious line of questioning that can take us from a situation of nature in disarray to one where we can see nature as meaningfully imbued with the divine.

# **BEYOND THEODICY**

In the past, humanistic religion scholars and more doctrinal theologians displayed different reactions to such crises. If theologians did not

or punishment for sinful conduct, they took it as the occasion for a theodicy,

a justification of divine goodness.

This was insightfully done by David Bentley Hart's *The Doors of the Sea. Where was God in the Tsunami?* after the 2004 tsunami in Thailand.<sup>2</sup> The parallel between the tsunami and God's frightening command of nature in the book of Job was not lost on Hart whose

book is riddled with biblical references. Whether Leibniz's Enlightenment view of a "best possible world" that lies behind Voltaire's scathing parody after the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755, or Hart's Christian one after the 2004 tsunami, theodicies tend to analyze a disaster by theologically framing

it. Yet in framing a catastrophe they ultimately subsume its upending of regular order under that same order, which then is called "natural." Natural as in "natural evil" thus carries the connotation not only of given, even if not manmade, but on a deeper level, of divinely permitted.<sup>3</sup>

It would seem that the Christian reaction to natural disasters as in the end more natural (that is, frameable according to the classical question of unde malum/ whence evil?) than radically disruptive goes back at least as far as Augustine (354-430 CE). In Confessions 7 Augustine ponders the meaning of natural evil, considering it integral to what he calls "a conflict of interest in the universe." 4 What humans lack is the ability to oversee the cosmic integration into which, from a higher vantage point, any apparent conflict of interest is resolved.<sup>5</sup> The near impossibility of ever achieving such a bird's eye perspective, which for Augustine did not yet display the philosophical triumphalism that so irritated Voltaire after Lisbon, leads us to call such conflicts of interest evil. As in history, vis-à-vis which Augustine takes an anti-apocalyptic stance, as he compares the ages of history to the six days of creation in a "world week" that take us from the first day/age of Adam to the sixth day/age of Christ but never pinpoints the Sabbath,6 so in nature he likewise shies away from calling out God's hidden plans. Our knowledge of the created order is provisional until it is revealed at the end of times. To aid the human mind, which fails to fathom how God according to Eccl. 18:1 created all things at once (omnia simul), the Bible categorizes nature's wonders according to the days of creation. Using scripture as the lens through which to read the natural order, Augustine pens many commentaries on Genesis, but no cosmological tract.

A more sacramental take on the pandemic is to find signs of hope and grace in the doctors and health workers who put their own lives on the line to help and assist patients. In embodying a preternatural goodness, their sacrificial attitude is the inverse of how Augustine defines moral evil in Confessions 7.8 After Adam's fall, humanity's divided will leads us to commit evil even though we know we should not. In the case of the health workers, they engage in the reverse, doing acts of preternatural goodness while it puts them at heightened risk. Insofar as their providing of care at their own peril benefits the community at

large, there is a Christological aspect to their sacrifice. But no vicarious atonement can stop the rage of the pandemic, as long as no vaccine has been found.

The above sketch shows that traditional religiotheological responses to natural evil are inadequate to deal with the current pandemic. Insofar as we cannot frame or isolate this pandemic, as we are instead forced to socially distance and isolate ourselves, the virus and the socio-economic crisis it has unleashed force us to redefine the work of theodicy. Because the pandemic results from both natural mutations and human actions, it defies the separation of evil as either natural or moral. What seems to be needed is a fundamental update of the religious take on nature that bridges these classical bifurcations (natural-moral, nature-culture) through a deeper discernment of nature as religiously meaningful. Insofar as Christianity equates

nature with biblical creation and defines the latter as the object of both God's creative act and humanity's stewardship, since

according to Gen. 1:26 humanity is created in God's image, Christians have tended to see nature as passive and non-agential, which makes it an empty canvas vis-à-vis the particular questions that the pandemic puts before us. For, does the pandemic not show us that nature's otherness is not reducible to the controllability of objecthood and humanity cannot simply replace God's role of omnipotent creator?

# NATURE'S OTHERNESS: AGENT AND ALLY

To sketch out an alternative approach to what I call nature's otherness, I will focus on nature's unique position as mediating between humanity and the divine. While this mediation does not make nature itself divine, insofar as its analysis involves the divine and places nature in the center, it makes dealing with nature at heart an issue of religious and theological interpretation, just as it involves at heart also an anthropological reading. Conversely, leaving God and humanity out of nature's analysis cannot but yield an irresponsibly impoverished sense of nature.

I will first focus on nature's agency. Both in the current pandemic and in the crisis of climate change, it is imperative that humanity become attuned to nature's agency to accommodate the fluctuations of its give and take rather than abolish responsibility or surrender to apocalyptic panic. For this section I draw on the late antique Christian thinkers Boethius

and Maximus the Confessor, who give us different takes on nature's role as a cosmic force and religious conduit. In the next section it is we who must be respecting nature's otherness by seeing her as ally. I draw on modern thinkers Emerson and William James to flesh out a sense of the universe as animated, as signaling things to us that we would do well to heed for our continued well-being. The idea of nature as our ally forces us to cultivate a chastened sense of human selfhood, a new askesis, not in a Weberian innerworldly sense of mastery but rooted in a wider religious world-awareness that I consider an indispensable step in trying to overcome not only the chasm between human nature and nature but also that between nature and culture that has done our world so much harm. I consider the idea of nature as ally particularly promising for the development of a richer theology of nature.

# PREMODERN NATURE IN BOETHIUS (477–526 CE) AND MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR (580–662 CE)

# **BOETHIUS**

The Christian Roman senator and philosopher Boethius and the Byzantine liturgist Maximus the Confessor offer us two different models of an agential nature with direct impact on human lives. Boethius is best known for his Consolation of Philosophy, written after he fell into disgrace with the Ostrogothic Emperor Theoderic and, his political fortunes upended, was imprisoned while awaiting death. While the Consolation is customarily read as a philosophical dialogue in which Boethius is interrogated by an allegorized Lady Philosophy,10 the Middle Ages treated it as a Christian, revelatory text, although Boethius never invokes the Bible. In their allegorizations of nature, medieval poets model Lady Nature on Boethius' Lady Philosophy. If we adopt this medieval reading, we see that Philosophy does not just teach Boethius the wisdom of ancient philosophical schools, but reconciles him to his impending death by showing him the providential pattern of the cosmos.

In a poignant exchange in Book II, Lady Philosophy engages in role-playing with Boethius. Posing as Lady Fortune, she provides Boethius with a teachable moment when, under questioning, he admits he entered this world without fame and riches. Just as he eagerly went up on Fortune's wheel, admitting that what he acquired was really on loan from her, so he must go down with her as well. Restored to her own identity, Philosophy summarizes, "Good fortune deceives, but bad fortune enlightens," as she has made

Boethius realize who his friends are.

Even as the world with steadfast trust

What follows is a poem that captures the dynamic reign of the universe, a providential bond that is cosmic as well as social:

takes its regular turns and warring potentials keep their perpetual truce, And Phoebus draws forth the rosy day with his golden chariot— Such that Moon-Phoebe rules the nights that Evening brings, Such that the avid sea constrains its surges at a firm limit Lest lands wandering strive for broader bounds— The Love that rules over the lands and sea and commands the sky binds that cycle of events. If that Love released its control, whatever now loves mutually will make war immediately, And the machine that all now in companionable trust impel with beautiful motions, they would vie to break. That Love likewise holds together peoples yoked in holy alliance, And it fastens marriage's mystery with chaste forms of love. It also dictates its justice to faithful companions. O happy humankind, if the love with which heaven is ruled would rule your hearts!1

In the middle line of the poem Boethius identifies Love as binding the cycle of natural events. The cosmic bond of love, reflective of Platonic *eros*, arranges the elements and fixes the tides, while it also unites the people in treaties and marriage. The poem ends with a plea for humanity to mirror the loving reign of nature in their hearts, later beloved by Dante, which bears out my point that Boethius' philosophical consolation amounts to a cosmic reconciliation. With nature distinguished from fortune as well as from fate, Boethius recognizes that its providential harmony manifests the ordered wisdom of a loving creator.

In Boethius' poem we have the bird's eye perspective that Augustine lacks, as for Augustine nature is accessible only serially, through the six days of biblical creation. Observing it entire, Boethius lets Philosophy depict nature here as an active, immanent force that exudes divine love. Encompassing the universe, love's cosmic reign stretches wide but also deep into social institutions. Nature's loving agency unfolds as a set of providential ramifications of God's single creative act.

### **MAXIMUS**

Born a few decades after the Justinian plague, Maximus the Confessor shows us an altogether different view of nature's agency, in which Platonic eros is replaced by the salvific impact of Christ's incarnation.<sup>12</sup> In bringing out the role of Christ, Maximus returns us also to the importance of scripture. Yet he does not foreground it at the expense of nature, but engages both simultaneously. In Ambigua 10.17, Maximus comments on the Transfiguration, a gospel episode which shows Jesus Christ radiant in glory on a mountain top with Moses and Elijah, while the disciples Peter and John look on.<sup>13</sup> In commenting on the effect on the disciples of this momentary anticipation of the eschaton, Maximus links nature and scripture both to Christ's radiant clothing:

They (Peter and John) were also taught that the garments, which became dazzling white, convey a symbol: first of the words of Holy Scripture, which at that moment became bright, clear, and transparent to them.... and, second, of creation itself.... snow appearing in the variety of the different forms that constitute it, all declaring the power of the Creator Word, in the same way that a garment makes known the dignity of the one who wears it.<sup>14</sup>

It follows from Maximus' intuitive image that nature and scripture must yield convergent truths, given "that the two laws—the natural law and the written—are of equal value and equal dignity, that both of them reciprocally teach the same things, and that neither is superior to the other." 15

The alignment with scripture gives nature an emancipated role in Maximus, allowing it to assume agency in helping humanity chart its way back to God. Appreciative of creation for its own worth without fear of a wanton, nonspiritual materialism, Maximus depicts a close bond between nature and Christ. For, Christ's incarnation is aimed at the salvation not only of humanity's existence but also of nature's. Rather than seeing the return to God as restoring a flawed creation, the development of

rational beings in Maximus unfolds as a threefold procession from creation to the eschaton, or from "being" to "well-being," and onto "eternal well-being." Here we detect another parallelism: Christology in Maximus has cosmic consequences, while cosmic life has a Christological core to it.

Maximus is the first Christian author to insist that nature, like scripture, not just receive and channel but, more actively, itself convey redemptive wholeness. With the cosmos serving as conduit of redemption, one could argue that nature's animate operations are ultimately propped up by their Christological thrust, just as the parallelism of nature and scripture is premised on the event of Christ's Transfiguration. While this may not undermine nature's agency, it reveals it as conditioned by Christ's cooperation, which is continued after his death and resurrection through the sacramental life of the church.

# MODERN NATURE IN R. W. EMERSON (1803-1882) AND WILLIAM JAMES (1842-1910)

When a millennium after Maximus modernity ushers in a more scientific era, nature's agency becomes increasingly divorced from the divine. The Among the many changes brought about by the scientific study of nature is its diminished religious legibility, which has led to what we may call the death of nature. Thus, Karl Barth, a Swiss neo-orthodox Protestant theologian battling the forces of Nazi Germany, emphatically opposed natural theology, embracing God's revelation in scripture as the exclusive route to salvation. Driven by the ecological crisis, secular thinker Bruno Latour has recently criticized nature's inherent instability, suggesting to replace it with "Gaia, a finally secular figure for nature."

Dissenting from both these positions as, respectively, too one-sidedly theological and too one-sidedly secular, and naming cosmos, world, creation, reality, and nature interchangeably, I consider it more important that the legibility of nature in modernity involves religion alongside science. Maintaining a focus on nature's role as liaison between God and humanity, and therefore holding on to its religious and its anthropological (rather than Christological) role, I want my interpretation to enhance rather than abrogate nature's legibility.

In oblique alignment with Lynn White's analysis of the historical roots of our ecological crisis, I agree that "modern Western science was cast in a matrix of Christian theology."<sup>20</sup> Insofar as that adds to Christianity's culpability for ecological exploitation,

# "I consider it more important that the legibility of nature in modernity involves religion alongside science." WILLEMIEN OTTEN

I understand why White is attracted to St. Francis' equality of all creatures, a path taken up further in Pope Francis' recent ecological encyclical letter *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home.*<sup>21</sup> As Pope Francis lauds St. Francis: "The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled."<sup>22</sup>

White's turn to St. Francis also alerts us to the deeper problem of mainstream theology, from which St. Francis' biographer Bonaventure would step away, as casting theological and scientific analysis into a scholastic, second-order language from which all religious affect is drained.<sup>23</sup> Boethius and Maximus are altogether freer and more imaginative in expressing themes related to the theology of nature, such as providence, love, and the garments of Jesus Christ as symbols for nature and scripture. Seeing nature as both religious and anthropological I want to read nature holistically, and abolish any unnecessary dichotomies.

It is by becoming attuned to nature that we open ourselves up to seeing it as our ally. But mainstream theology does not offer many resources for a theology of nature, let alone one that it considers nature as our ally. In my quest for more imaginative modern thinkers, I will therefore turn to American thinkers R. W. Emerson and William James. Long neglected, they have recently become rediscovered for their viable impetus to creative religious thought.<sup>24</sup> Taking them up in reverse historical order, I first turn to James as my modern counterpart to Boethius and next to Emerson as my modern counterpart to Maximus.

### **WILLIAM JAMES**

William James seems an atypical choice for a view of nature as ally, since he is known to define religion in terms of the religious subject in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.<sup>25</sup>

In some ways James gives us the solitude that Boethius might have felt, even if the language of experience and feeling is decidedly modern. But individualistic experience is not all there is to religion in James, who later on amends his earlier definition.

Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul.<sup>26</sup>

It is this latter statement that points us to nature as ally.

Building on the above two Jamesian ingredients of religion, namely individual solitude and the belief in an unseen order, a third step points out how James analyzes the cosmos not just as religious but also relational. In his earlier essay, "The Sentiment of Rationality," James argues that faith creates its own verification to the point that a cosmos with the thinker's reaction to it will always be different from without it, meaning that this reaction, let's call it one's faith, affects the whole in which it is embedded.<sup>27</sup> At the end of the essay James addresses the question whether we live in a moral or an unmoral universe. "But nature has put into our hands two keys, by which we may test the lock: if we try the moral key and it fits, it is a moral lock; if we try the unmoral key and it fits, it is an unmoral lock."28 While this answer seems to force an arbitrary moral distinction upon us, not unlike the arbitrary way in which James asks us to take religion in the opening of Varieties, it masks a deeper call for discernment. It is in alignment with that discernment that he says that "the ultimate philosophy must not be too strait-laced in form," but over and above the realm of propositions (read, the scholastic approach) there must be left "another realm into which the stifled soul may escape from pedantic scruples and indulge its own faith at its own risk...."29 While James accepts that not everyone is religious, it is clear that for those who are the universe is a storied one, with faith authenticating one story as a place of belonging.

### R. W. EMERSON

When advocating to read nature's role as religiously meaningful, even in the context of the pandemic, I realize that my plea, if received in Jamesian fashion, would only be valid for those who acknowledge religion as an effective personal choice. This choice does not present itself as such for the earlier Emerson, who left the ordained ministry but not religion, as he sounds a more capacious, universal message to us. The subjectivity of religion and the verification of faith, so carefully unpacked by James, are in Emerson encompassed by and folded into nature. Nature exudes a near-Maximian cosmic vibe in Emerson, even if it is impersonal more than Christological. Yet the impersonal in Emerson is also what can make him sound familiar and even intimate, meeting another condition for seeing nature as ally.

Being the more mysterious, but also more capacious mind, I consider Emerson the American thinker most attuned to the dynamics of seeing nature as ally. Hence, I deem his thought best suited to conveying to us what a "theology of nature" can entail. Aware of the urgency of his message, Emerson periodically resorts to poetry and prophecy, rather than propositional logic, to make his points. For, due to what he calls their overfaith, "the poet, the prophet, has a higher value for what he utters than any hearer, and therefore it gets spoken."30 A more religious way of putting this is to refer to Emerson's unusual appreciation for the institution of preaching, "the speech of man to men," which he treasures and considers one of the advantages of historical Christianity.<sup>31</sup> Clearly, something needs to be preached about nature, and Emerson heeds the call.

Three significant aspects of Emerson's thought qualify him to me as the most powerful resource available for a contemporary theology of nature. First, Emerson sees nature rather than history as our prime matrix for contact with the divine. This is clear from how he opens his first book *Nature*:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us and not the history of theirs? <sup>32</sup>

Lacking Augustine's and Maximus' patience to wait for the eschaton, Emerson demands an original relation to the universe right now. He does so not as a matter of personal choice but through a collective human embrace of nature as providing us with exclusive access to the divine. It seems fair to say that our acceptance that life is grounded in nature is what ultimately constitutes religion for Emerson.

Second, given the above it is no surprise that nature in Emerson displays a majestic surplus value, through which it utterly vanquishes the nature-culture divide. As Emerson states in his essay "Nature": "If we consider how much we are nature's, we need not be superstitious about towns, as if that terrific or benefic force did not find us there also, and fashion cities. Nature who made the mason, made the house." What Latour calls the instability of nature is in Emerson the avowal of its unbounded capaciousness, by virtue of which nature can harbor both the religious and the anthropological aspect in its fold. It

is relevant to point out that, notwithstanding

the demise of the parallelism of nature and scripture in secular modernity, nature in Emerson retains a lingering scriptural echo. This comes out in such interjections as "All things with which we deal, preach to us. What is a farm but a mute gospel?" <sup>34</sup> While such comments are few and far between, and do not betray a commitment to historical

Christianity, they make clear that the divine resonance of nature lies just beneath the surface. It is up to us to scratch that surface.

Third, Emerson is a deeply circular thinker, meaning that he avoids both nostalgic restoration and the linearity of progress. As he tells us in the essay "Circles,"

The natural world may be conceived of as a system of concentric circles, and we now and then detect in nature slight dislocations, which apprize us that this surface on which we now stand is not fixed. These manifold tenacious qualities, this chemistry and vegetation, these metals and animals, which seem to stand there for their own sake, are means and methods only—are words of God, and as fugitive as other words.<sup>35</sup>

What is significant about the Emersonian circle is that it is neither gyrating nor cyclical; it is never fully closed. Leading to ever greater openness, unfolding into ever greater generalizations, circular life marks Emersonian temporality or onwardness, thereby putting hope on our horizon.

### **CONCLUSION**

To recover nature's religious role in the context of the pandemic, my plea is not just to retrieve nature's religious agency but to treat and respect nature as our ally and listen to its otherness. Since nature mediates between humanity and the divine, it behooves us to take its role seriously. Rather than prejudge nature, either by lamenting the pandemic in apocalyptic terms or by striving for blind control over it, we should watch, observe, exercise caution, then strike with precision when opportune. The mark of a good preacher, says Emerson, is "to convert life into truth."36 As our truth-driven theodicies have failed to answer life's problems, potentially leading to a destructive cynicism that denies a role for religion altogether in thinking about nature, it may be more worthwhile to move on the Emersonian circle, knowing that "Whilst the eternal generation of circles proceeds, the eternal generator abides."37

Willemien Otten is Professor of Theology and the History of Christianity and the Director of the Martin Marty Center for the Public Understanding of Religion.

### NOTE

- 1 Note that I do not separate scholars of religion and those of theology per se but see more of a dividing line based on the degree to which scholars in either category are ideologically invested. My appeal is to those less ideologically inclined.
- 2 David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea. Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019).
- 3 For relevant background reading on theodicy, which Leibniz had used as a title in 1710, see Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 221–255 and Nicholas T. Wright, *History and Eschatology. Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology.* The 2018 Gifford Lectures (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019). 3-41.
- 4 Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.13.19, transl. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 125.
- 5 Idem: I no longer wished individual things to be better, because I considered the totality. Superior things are self-evidently better than inferior. Yet with a sounder judgement I held that all things taken together are better than superior things by themselves.
- 6 See City of God 22.30, transl. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1984), 1087-1091.
- 7 Augustine defines sacraments as "visible signs of invisible reality," see Emmanuel J. Cutrone, "Sacraments," in *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 744–745.
- 8 Conf. 7.16.22, transl. Henry Chadwick, 126: "I inquired what wickedness is; and I did not find a substance but a perversity of will away from the highest substance, you O God, towards inferior things..."
- 9 The anthropological aspect is what will lead us to bring up the natureculture divide later in the essay.
- 10 This is especially the case in Alan of Lille's allegorical poem *Plaint of Nature* (ca. 1160), which had some influence on Chaucer. See further George D. Economou, *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2002), 28–52

- 11 I am grateful to Michael I. Allen for this translation of Boethius *The Consolation of Philosophy* II m. 8.
- 12 The Justinian plague raged in the 540s and was recurring through the mid-700s, killing between 25 and 100 million people and precipitating the fall of the Roman Empire.
- 13 See Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36.
- 14 In his Ambigua ("Difficulties") Maximus explains contradictory passages from the Eastern theologians Gregory of Nazianzen (329–390 CE) and Dionysius the Areopagite (fl. 485–525 CE). For the parallelism of nature and scripture in ambiguum 10.17, see Maximos the Confessor, On Difficulties in the Church Fathers. The Ambigua, ed. Nicholas Constas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), vol. !: 193.
- 15 Idem 191
- 16 See ambiguum 7.10, ed. Nicholas Constas, vol. 1: 87.
- 17 But see the comment by Lynn White, Jr.: "From the 13th century onward, up to and including Leibniz and Newton, every scientist, in effect, explained his motivations in religious terms," in "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science*, New Series, Vol. 155, No. 3767 (March 10, 1967), 1206.
- 18 On Barth's famous debate about natural theology with Emil Brunner, see Alistair McGrath, *Emil Brunner. A Reappraisal* (Oxford Blackwell, 2014), 90-132.
- 19 Bruno Latour, Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 7-40; 75-110.
- 20 White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," 1206-1207
- 21 See http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\_20150524\_enciclica-laudato-si.html. Latour deems the move from St. Francis to Laudato Si' in accord with his own view of Gaia. see Facing Gaia. 287-288.
- 22 See Laudato Si', end of section 11.
- 23 On the limitations of scholasticism in terms of topic rather than mode of discourse, marginalizing woman, the heretic, and the Jew, see Clare Monagle, *The Scholastic Project* (Kalamazoo, MI: Arc Humanities Press, 2017).
- 24 See Willemien Otten, *Thinking Nature and the Nature of Thinking. From Eriugena to Emerson* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).
- 25 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 34 (James's italics).
- 26 James, Varieties, 51.
- 27 "The Sentiment of Rationality," in W. James, ed., *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 80-81.
- 28 Idem., 88
- 29 Idem., 89.
- 30 Ralph W. Emerson, "Nature," in *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), 109.
- 31 See "Divinity School Address," in Collected Works, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1971), 92.
- 32 See Nature, in CW 1, 7.
- 33 See "Nature." in CW 3, 106.
- 34 See *Nature*, in CW 1, 26.
- 35 See "Circles," in *Collected Works*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap
- Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 186
- 36 "Divinity School Address," in CW 1, 186.
- 37 "Circles," in CW 2, 188.
- "The recovery of nature's religious role in the context of the pandemic" by Willemien Otten is reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Group. It appears on pages 103-115 of Pandemic, Ecology and Theology: Perspectives on COVID-19, edited by Alexander J.B. Hampton. Copyright 2020 @ Routledge

DIVINITY.UCHICAGO.EDU 23

# Faculty News

We are pleased to welcome the following scholars to Swift Hall.



**YU XUE** will be joining us next year as Visiting Professor of Buddhism. Professor Xue is currently a Research Fellow at the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies, Director of the Center for the Study of Chan Buddhism and Human Civilization, and Director of the Center for the Study of Religious Ethics and Chinese Culture, Chinese University of Hong Kong. Professor Xue specializes in Buddhist studies as well as Buddhist-Christian dialogue in modern China. Professor Xue's publications include *Buddhism, War, and Nationalism: Chinese Monks in the Struggle Against Japanese Aggressions, 1931-1945*; New York and London: Routledge, 2005; *Socialist Transformation of Chinese Buddhism,* Hong Kong: The

Chinese University Press, 2014, as well as more than 100 research papers. Professor Xue is also the Chief Editor of the *International Journal for the Study of Chan Buddhism and Human Civilization*.



# WILLIAM SCHULTZ

will join the Divinity School faculty as an Assistant Professor. Professor Schultz is a historian of American religion with an interest in the intersection of religion,

politics, and capitalism. Schultz is currently finishing his first book, *Jesus Springs: How Colorado Springs Became the Capital of the Culture Wars* (under contract with the University of North Carolina Press), which explains how the confluence of evangelical Christianity and free-market capitalism transformed the city of Colorado Springs into the epicenter of a Christian movement that sought to reshape American politics in the late twentieth century.

His new project, *The Wages of Sin: Faith, Fraud, and Religious Freedom in Modern America*, uses cases of financial fraud between the 1920s and 1990s—ranging from spiritualist prospectors to Jesuit priests—to explore how Americans have struggled with thorny questions of religious authority and authenticity. Prior to joining the faculty, Schultz was a lecturer in the Department of History at Princeton University, where he taught courses on modern United States history. He received his PhD in History from Princeton and served as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy.



# KRIS TRUJILLO

joins us as an Associated Professor. Professor Trujillo's research is situated at the intersection of religious studies, literary studies, and the study of gender and sexuality.

An Assistant Professor in Comparative Literature, his work interrogates the affective, embodied, erotic, and communal aspects of the devotional practices that structure the production of theology, theory, and literature. His forthcoming work, "Jubilee of the Heart," combines readings of premodern theological texts with modern theories of practice, performativity, and ritualization in order to provide an account of the relationship between mystical poetry, the monastic practice of singing the Psalms, and the desire for God.

His next project, "Queer Theory against the Apophatic: Mysticism, Medieval History, and the Latinx Response to the AIDS Crisis," investigates how queer Latinx theorists, writers, and artists retooled medieval Christian mysticism in response to anti-gay religious rhetoric during the early decades of the AIDS pandemic.

# Divinity School scholars have been selected for the Neubauer Collegium.



# THE COLLEGIUM EXPLORES NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR HUMANISTIC RESEARCH by

fostering an environment in which new forms of thinking emerge and thrive. Research projects sponsored by the Collegium bring together scholars and practitioners whose collaboration is required to address and solve complex challenges.

The University of Chicago has long championed collaborative research as a promising strategy for addressing complex questions. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit last year, it was not clear how this form of inquiry might need to adapt. What new strategies would humanistic scholars adopt to share, develop, and test new ideas online? While challenges for research collaborations remain significant, this



year's projects show an ongoing commitment to collaborative inquiry across disciplines.

Projects at the Neubauer Collegium launching in July include "Entanglements of the Indian Past." The researchers for this project include, at the Divinity School, Assistant Professors Sarah Pierce Taylor and Anand Venkatkrishnan. The other two members of the team, Andrew Ollett and Whitney Cox, hail from South Asian Languages and Civilizations (SALC).

The research team will run a three-year series of interdisciplinary workshops to chart a future course for the study of the Indian past. The project will focus on three important issues—caste, materiality, and historicality—pairing each issue with a pivotal moment that shaped the course of Indian historiography.

Taylor and Venkatkrishnan both joined the faculty in 2019. Professor Taylor's research focuses on gender and emotion in premodern religion in South India; her work is informed by theoretical developments in the study of gender, affect, embodiment, and animality. Professor Venkatkrishnan's research concerns the social history of intellectual life, not only in early modern

India, but also in the modern scholarly study of Hinduism.

The next issue of *Criterion* will feature a conversation between Professors Taylor and Venkatkrishnan on South Asian studies at The Divinity School.

For more information on the Neubauer Collegium visit neubauercollegium. uchicago.edu





Professor Taylor showing MA student Brigid Boll the Kannada script over Zoom. Kannada is the principal language of the modern Indian state of Karnataka and a language of great literary significance.

The Divinity School is pleased to announce the second Anthony C. Yu Junior Faculty Fellowship recipient, Assistant Professor Erin Galgay Walsh.



he Fellowship was established through a gift from Barbara Kirchick Urbut, AM'75, and Michael Urbut, MBA'74, in honor of the legacy and memory of the late Anthony C. Yu, Carl Darling Buck Distinguished Service Professor in the Humanities and the Divinity School, who passed away in 2015. The two-year fellowship, which supports the development of junior faculty in the Divinity School who serve as both excellent researchers and exceptional mentors, is a tribute to Professor Yu.

It is designed to instill, encourage, and reward in early-career faculty the same traits that made Professor Yu a teacher and scholar of such distinction.

Professor Walsh, who joined the faculty in 2019, works on ancient and late antique Christianity, with a special focus on Syriac language and literature. She teaches and writes on a variety of topics in New Testament literature, religious poetry, the history of Biblical interpretation, and beyond. Outside of Swift Hall, she serves as the Executive Editor for Christianity at Ancient Jew Review, a non-profit web journal devoted to the interdisciplinary study of ancient Judaism.

"It is such a gift to have the opportunity to focus on my work and think about future projects, and I am so grateful to Barbara and Mike Urbut for their generosity," said Professor Walsh about receiving the fellowship. "I am honored to continue the legacy of Anthony C. Yu right here at The University of Chicago, which has provided me an intellectual home, wonderful colleagues, and students who inspire me."

Over his distinguished career, Professor Yu made wide-ranging contributions in work which engaged Chinese religions as well as classic texts of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. His scholarship created a dialogue between Eastern and Western traditions in religion and literature that defined his comparative approach in the field. His seminal achievement, a new English translation

of Journey to the West, appeared in 1983 to wide acclaim; Professor Yu continued to work on the text, and released an updated second edition in 2012.

In addition to his academic contributions, Professor Yu, with his wife, Priscilla, were well-known for their generosity and attentiveness to colleagues and students, regularly hosting gatherings and inviting students to cultural activities in the city, and maintaining warm relationships with advisees after they had left Swift Hall.

"Professor Yu's legacy of research and pedagogy continues to enrich the Divinity School community," said David Nirenberg, Dean of the Divinity School, of the appointment. "This fellowship continues to provide our early-career scholars with support and resources during a critical time in their career."

"It is such a gift to have the opportunity to focus on my work and think about future projects, and I am so grateful to Barbara and Mike Urbut for their generosity." ERIN GALGAY WALSH



URING THE PANDEMIC-RELATED SHUT-DOWNS, DIVINITY SCHOOL STUDENTS ORGANIZED MANY MUTUAL AID AND COMMUNITY-ORIENTED INITIATIVES, too numerous to list. At Swift Hall, a student-organized book drive collected over 200 books, most of which were distributed to book boxes in West Lawn and Oak Park. Those book boxes are administered by a nonprofit organization, Neighbor to Neighbor Literacy Project (learn more at neighborliteracy.org). The student in charge of the drive, Héctor M. Varela Rios (PhD Candidate, Theology), reported that some books were "too UChicago" for the neighborhood book boxes and will be donated to a library later this spring. And Grounds of Being, our student-run coffeeshop, found itself in possession of milk and other perishable goods which had to be distributed or tossed. Pictured here is College student and Grounds of Being worker Hana Eldessouky.



### **CYNTHIA GANO LINDNER**

DIRECTOR OF MINISTRY STUDIES AND CLINICAL FACULTY FOR PREACHING AND PASTORAL CARE IN THE DIVINITY SCHOOL (DMIN'99)

year ago, American religious practice pivoted dramatically, as congregations closed their doors and began to offer services like preaching, prayer and meditation—even hospital bedside visits—virtually. Since then, worshippers have mourned the loss of holy spaces and communal practices, especially during holy seasons like Passover, Easter and Ramadan, and on other occasions when the community normally assembles in solidarity, such as to bless a marriage or to mourn the death of a loved one.

Despite this, people of faith have also been rediscovering powerful truths about human existence and reliable resources for courage and compassion in ancient narratives and practices that were themselves forged in times of human suffering and exile. Without access to the buildings and programs that have identified and sometimes constrained them, many religious communities are redefining themselves and their purposes in

more expansive, active ways: cultivating networks that transcend time and space; fashioning portable ritual practices to sustain individuals and families in their homes; and reconfiguring inclusive and accessible worshipping communities in a variety of forms, from online small groups to outdoor sessions.

Most significantly, innovative faith communities are beginning to reclaim the work of caregiving that was essential to their spiritual practice before it was professionalized or relegated to the clergy: sharing the hard work of caring for one another through phone trees, small groups and prayer; supporting the elderly and the

vulnerable in their neighborhoods through networks of mutual aid; advocating not only for those in need, but for those essential workers who bear more than their share of the burden of an ever-expanding demand for care; and attending with renewed urgency to the integrity of human interdependence and the healing of our planet.

### FROM THE DEAN, CONTINUED

Respondents did value religious freedom: more than three-quarters said that religious freedom was extremely, very, or somewhat important to them personally. But they apparently did not see that freedom as in conflict with public health. If we were to administer the same survey today, after religious freedom and public health have been posed in sharper anti-thesis, we might get different answers—with ongoing implications for public health.

Pandemic theodicy came to my attention via another survey with the same collaborators. Again, there is nothing new about the linkage. Here is King Edward III of England, using theodicy to explain the plague in 1348, "Terrible is God towards the sons of men, and... those whom he loves he censures and chastises; that is, he punishes their shameful deeds in various ways during this mortal life so that they might not be condemned eternally." Older than the hills, but fresher than the grass. In March 2020, the month that the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, the share of internet searches for prayer surged across the globe, among adherents of every faith, to the highest level ever recorded in the (short) history of Google Trends. And in early May, with much of the United States in "lockdown," our survey on COVID and religion in collaboration with the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs found plenty of evidence for contemporary COVID-19 theodicy.

Or rather, we found evidence of multiple theodicies. When asked about the coronavirus, sixty-three percent of Americans agreed that through it "God is telling humanity to change the way we are living." And fifty-five percent thought that God would protect them from infection. Both these views are characteristic of theodicy. But there were important differences between the respondents. White evangelical Christians proved much more likely (sixty-seven percent) to think that God will protect them from infection, whereas black (seventy-eight percent) and Hispanic (sixty-five percent) Americans are much more likely to think God is demanding change. Perhaps we should speak of at least two pandemic theodicies in contemporary America, one more satisfied with the moral and social status quo, the other more critical.

COVID did not cause this divergence, any more than it caused the racial, economic, and political divisions that these distinct theodicies may reflect. Still, we have much to learn, both about our societies and our faiths, from reflecting on the many different religious reactions to the virus' suffocating weight. As the pandemic waters slowly recede, they will reveal a religious landscape both familiar and estranged. As students and scholars of religion we should not be in too much of a hurry to forget our reactions to the traumas of this terrible year, lest we fail to gain from them one of the few consolations they have to offer: the consolation of having learned something about ourselves and our societies.

DAVID NIRENBERG

DEAN OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL

Said June

AND DEBORAH R. AND EDGAR D. JANNOTTA

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE PROFESSOR

To read more about the surveys discussed in Dean Nirenberg's letter: https://divinity.uchicago.edu/apnorc

# CHICAGO Divinity School

divinity.uchicago.edu 1025 E. 58th Street Chicago, IL 60637 773.702.8200







