



WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
College of Arts and Sciences
Department of Comparative Religion

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COMPARATIVE RELIGION Newsletter

Comparative Religion Plans for the Future and Honors the Past

An interview with Stephen Covell, Department Chair

Stephen Covell was appointed as chair of the Department of Comparative Religion in the fall of 2010. In addition to his role as department chair, Dr. Covell is the Mary Meader (associate) professor of Comparative Religion and the director of the Soga Japan Center.

Q. What does the future look like for the undergraduate program in Comparative Religion?

A. The department will have in place an all-new undergraduate curriculum in fall 2012. The new curriculum increases the number of lower-division classes, which we hope will bring students into the study of religion at an earlier stage in their program at WMU. It also introduces a number of new courses such as "Islam in America," "Theologies and Cosmologies," "Death and Dying," and "State and Religion." This new curriculum goes hand-in-hand with other efforts to enhance undergraduate education such as our faculty-led, team-taught "Religions of the World" class and the introduction of a fully online minor.

Q. What changes will incoming graduate students see?

A. Now that the undergraduate curriculum has been reshaped for the future, we are focusing our efforts on the graduate program. We hope to increase our strength in teacher training and even better prepare our graduates to go on to top Ph.D. programs and find success in their careers. One example of this effort is the Workshop Lecture Series, which is highlighted in this issue of the newsletter. We also are working on an online graduate certificate program which we hope to see in place in the near future. Altogether, it is an exciting time here at the department and we are energized and looking to the future.

Q. How can alumni get involved in supporting the department?

A. Many former students will remember Dr. David Ede, who passed away unexpectedly in 2008. It was a heartbreaking event for the entire department. At the time, he was serving as chair and one of the projects he began that was near and dear to him was the Comparative Religion Digitalization Project. Dr. Ede purchased computers, a server, a scanner and other equipment necessary to digitalize photos, films and audio clips for use in the classroom and research. In the intervening years the department has worked hard to carry out Dr. Ede's vision and has expanded the project to include a database of PowerPoint slides, syllabi and other resources for graduate students and instructors. We are seeking to update the main computer, and to enhance the server capacity to allow all of our faculty to use the server to stream video for class assignments. Supporting this project would be a great way to honor our past and prepare our students for the future. **For more information on this fund see www.wmich.edu/religion/giving/**

Introducing Blain Auer, Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies



The Department of Comparative Religion welcomed Blain Auer as a new faculty member in 2009. In addition to teaching courses such as “Islam in America” and “Medieval Islamic Mysticism,” Auer is working on a book titled “Symbols of Authority in Medieval Islam: History, Religion and Muslim Legitimacy in the Delhi Sultanate,” which will be published by I. B. Tauris in 2011.

Utilizing multi-disciplinary methods from history, archeology, literary criticism, sociology and the history of religions, this book is particularly situated to answer a central question in the study of Islam: What is the relationship between religious and political authority in Islam, particularly in the pre-modern era? As a freshly conceived project, “Symbols of Authority” looks to make an original and invigorating contribution to current scholarship on religion, history and Islamic legitimacy.

Auer’s forthcoming work also includes “Persian Historiography in India,” which will be included in the “History of Persian Literature” series, published by Macmillan press, the most widely recognized and authoritative source on Persian literature. His article “The Intersection between Sufism and Power: Historiography and Sacred Biography of the Delhi Sultans and the Shaykhs of Northern India, 1200-1400” will be published as a chapter in “Sufism and Society: Arrangements of the Mystical in the Muslim World, 1200-1800 C.E.,” edited by J. Curry and E. Ohlander for Routledge Press.

Auer has taken the lead in presenting the Religion and Film Series, which began March 10 and concluded April 21. Auer describes the series as “a way to reach out to the WMU community and collaborate with graduate students in professional and leadership activities.” The film series was sponsored by the Department of Comparative Religion, Graduate Students of Comparative Religion (GSCR), the Haenicke Institute, the Timothy Light Center for Chinese Studies, the University Center for the Humanities, and is SAF-funded.

Religion and Film Series

EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION
BETWEEN RELIGION AND CULTURE



Religion and Film Series Spring 2011

March 10—“Cabeza de Vaca”
(Mexico, 1991)
Discussion led by
Professor Brian Wilson

March 17—“The Wicker Man”
(UK, 1973)
Discussion led by
Professor Kevin Wanner

March 24—“My Son the Fanatic”
(UK/France, 1997)
Discussion led by
Professor Blain Auer

March 31—“The Namesake”
(India/USA, 2006)
Discussion led by
Heather Dubbeld, M.A. student

April 7—“The Last Train Home”
(China, 2009)
Discussion led by
Professor Jue Guo

April 14—“Into the Wild”
(USA, 2007)
Discussion led by
Sean Butler, M.A. student

Graduate Advising Update

Jue Guo

As the oldest comparative religion program in the state of Michigan, and the only department in Michigan with a graduate program in comparative religion, we are one of the few M.A. programs nationwide to provide graduate students with rigorous pedagogical training and opportunities to instruct their own classes.

At the same time, we are trying to adjust to the ever-changing world to make our program suitable for and attractive to contemporary students and their 21st-century needs. Therefore, we are in the process of revising the M.A. program in Comparative Religion, including newly streamlined admission requirements, a new curriculum (a work in progress, expected to be implemented in the fall of 2012), and standardized reading lists for M.A. examinations.

Our graduate students have become ever more diverse in their backgrounds and research interests. Our department continues to attract students from around the U.S. and our international reputation is growing. Applications received for the fall of 2011 have included prospective students from Kenya, Senegal, Indonesia, and Taiwan. Our study abroad opportunities in Japan, China and India are growing as well. Graduate students are also ever more active in participating in and organizing the academic events of the department, including attending and presenting in the Workshop Lecture Series and leading discussions in the Religion and Film Series along with our faculty members. For more information, contact Dr. Jue Guo, professor of Chinese Religions at jue.guo@wmich.edu.



Brittany Tovar named 2011 Presidential Scholar

The Presidential Scholar award is the highest honor that WMU presents to seniors. The award winners are recommended by faculty members and selected for their academic excellence and promise. Brittany will graduate this spring with a double major in Comparative Religion and Anthropology. In addition to her Presidential Scholar award, Brittany has been selected for membership in Phi Beta Kappa.



Brittany became interested in studying religion early in her undergraduate studies and transferred to WMU in order to participate in a comparative religion department that had undergraduate and graduate programs. Brittany explained, "Once I realized how interested I was in studying religion, I wanted to make sure I had access to faculty members who were involved in research. I found that being able to attend courses that were open to graduates and undergraduates sparked my ability to develop as a scholar and helped me think about graduate studies in the future."

Brittany pointed out two experiences in the Department of Comparative Religion that cemented her decision to pursue graduate studies in the field.

"The course on divination and the opportunity to study Japanese religions in Japan were definite highlights for me. I did not expect to have such a great opportunity, and would recommend the class and the trip for any religion student."

In addition to maintaining an exemplary academic record, Brittany has been tutoring other WMU students through the STEM program. This experience has been the catalyst for her application to the Teach for America program, where she hopes to spend the next two years teaching junior high or high school students and exploring graduate programs in religion.

Brian C. Wilson receives Faculty Fellow Award from Lee Honors College

During the Lee Honors College graduation ceremony in December 2010, Professor Wilson was awarded the Faculty Fellow Award, the highest honor that the College bestows on a member of the WMU faculty. This award was initiated four years ago and recognizes WMU faculty members who have made significant contributions to the College. Nicholas Andreadis, M.D., dean of the Lee Honors College, noted that "this award recognizes his many years of dedicated teaching and mentoring of honor students."

Wilson also recently participated as a guest lecturer at the University of Michigan's lecture series "Celebrating 400 Years of the King James Bible: Its Origins in Manuscript and Print." His lecture "KJV in the USA: The Social and Cultural Impact of the King James Bible in America," was held in the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library on March 13, 2011.



Faculty Publications and Presentations



Kevin Wanner, Associate Professor of Medieval Christianity, follows in the footsteps of the department's earlier celebrated medievalists, Otto Gründler and Guntram Bischoff, with the publication of his new book, "Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia," from the University of Toronto Press.

Snorri Sturluson (c. 1179 -1241), the most powerful and rapacious Icelander of his generation, dedicated a great deal of effort to producing the "Edda," a text that is widely recognized as the most significant medieval source for pre-Christian Norse myths and poetics. Professor Wanner brings a new understanding to the political and cultural interests that motivated the production of this text.

According to Christopher Abram, a scholar of Scandinavian Studies at the University College, London, "'Snorri Sturluson and the Edda' is a significant publication in the field because it offers a provocative challenge to established models of literary culture in medieval Scandinavia, and it is the most up-to-date and probably the most comprehensive scholarly treatment of Snorri Sturluson's life and works yet to have been written" (adapted from the University of Toronto Press Website: www.utppublishing.com).



2011 Lecture Workshop Series

Dr. Kevin Wanner and Comparative Religion graduate students established the Lecture Workshop Series this year in order to share research, reach out to the WMU community, and provide a forum for professional development for graduate students. Wanner described the series as "successful beyond our expectations. The room was filled to capacity for several of the workshops."

April 2011 - Dr. Kevin Wanner presented "Skapan í skáldskap ok skáldskaparskapan: Creation in and Creation of Norse Poetry."

March 2011 - Dana Usndek presented "Drinking in the Poison: Charisma and Death in Jonestown." Her presentation was followed by Dr. Kevin Wanner's lecture titled "Poets, Priests, and Princes: Charismatic Legitimation in Medieval Scandinavia." The second lecture in March was given by Dr. Blain Auer, who presented "Religious Community and Political Power in Medieval Islam."

February 2011 - Dr. Brian Wilson presented "The Battle for Battle Creek: Religious Conflict in the Yankee Diaspora." The second lecture session for February included Sean Butler, who presented "On the Identity of the Liberated Jiva in Jainism." Butler was joined by Jason Aiello, who presented "David Koresh: Charisma Without Routinization."

January 2011 - Lydia Walker presented "A Fourteenth-Century Augustinian Approach to the Jews in Riccoldo da Monte Croce's 'Ad Nationes Orientales.'" Walker was joined by Judith Krane-Calvert, who presented "The Roman Catholic Mass in America: Post-Vatican II and Post-post-Vatican II."

Professor Jue Guo contributed a book chapter titled "Concepts of Death and the Afterlife Reflected in Newly Discovered Tomb Objects and Texts from Han China" to "Mortality in Traditional Chinese Thought," edited by Amy L. Olberding and Philip J. Ivanhoe, published by SUNY in 2011. Her article, "Divination," is under review for the "Blackwell Companion to Chinese Religions," edited by Randall L. Nadeau, which will be published by Blackwell.

Guo is currently working on a book project tentatively titled "Displaying Life through Death: A Chu Man's Worlds in Early China." In this book she reconstructs an individual man's life through his burial, excavated in 1987 in China, in the 4th century B.C.E., including his religious practices such as divination, sacrifice, and healing. She is also in the process of writing an article treating classifications of tomb texts and a particular genre of tomb text from Han China (ca. 2nd century B.C.E.-1st century B.C.E.) that was only made available through archeology in the past three decades.

Professor Emeritus H. Byron Earhart is working on two book projects. "Mount Fuji: Icon of Japan" is scheduled for publication with University of South Carolina Press later this year. His work in progress is tentatively titled "The Story of Amulets," which will integrate and expand on several graduate seminars on amulets in the department.

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In a time when state funding is increasingly restricted, the support we receive from friends and alumni is vitally important. Such funds are used to take advantage of new or unbudgeted opportunities in order to enhance the teaching or the research of the department, or to assist students in achieving their educational and professional goals.

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