



Religious (W)rites

EXPERIENCING THE UNFAMILIAR



Elizabeth Plant was awarded the Joan Nicoll Riedl Book Award this past year. A transfer student to UT originally from Cookeville, Tennessee, she did not expect to end up majoring in religious studies.

"I was surprised to find that all the classes that I had taken at my previous college for my electives had put me on track to graduate with a degree in religious studies," Plant said. "It was a pleasant surprise! I had always found religion to be incredibly intriguing and important."

During her first semester at UT, Plant met Tricia Redeker-Hepner, former director of the Disasters, Displacements, and Human Rights program in the Department of Anthropology. Plant assisted her in a research project on the burials of the displaced in the Acholi region of northern Uganda.

"I was also fortunate to meet Rosalind Hackett, who has conducted many student trips to Gulu, where my father was born," Plant said. "To me, these 'coincidences' felt like a sign that I should continue to pursue my studies in religion and anthropology."

As the child of a religious and political refugee, religion has always interested Plant, and she has always grasped at any opportunity to experience religious and cultural traditions with which she is unfamiliar.

"I always wanted to know more. Where did these traditions come from? Have they always been this way? How have they changed over time?"

Plant credits visiting her grandmother for the first time in Kiryandongo as intensifying her desire to understand more about her own culture.

"I know my father must have been dizzy after being peppered with so many questions," Plant said. "Why did I step on an egg to be welcomed into the village? Why did my grandmother bless me by touching my head, shoulders, and toes? Why did only the elderly women have those distinct piercings? A lot of the time his answer was: 'It's just been that way!'"

Plant credits the UT Department of Religious Studies for the opportunities it provided to connect with her professors and learn about the academic world. She plans to continue her studies and go on to earn a doctorate in anthropology.

"I hope that throughout my future studies I will be provided opportunities to do research with the Luo population in Uganda and South Sudan," Plant said.

"There is still, and probably always will be, so much I want to learn!"

Greetings from Knoxville

Christine Shepardson
Lindsay Young
Professor and Head



Welcome to the newsletter of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Tennessee! Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, this is a particularly exciting time for our department as we remain active in fostering excellence in our research and our teaching and work to make our campus and our community a more diverse and equitable place. It is my great pleasure to share with you some of the successes of the past year and some of our plans for the year ahead.

One of the most exciting changes is the series of new courses and programs that we are launching. Last year was the first for our new major and minor concentration in Religion and Nonprofit Leadership, and also saw the inauguration of a new course on Religion in the Workplace. The year ahead will be the first for another new major and minor concentration, this one in Religion, Race, and Ethnicity. In addition, although we do not have our own graduate program, this year we are debuting a Graduate Certificate in Religious Studies for graduate students in other UT programs. We also have a new online minor. As you can see, our faculty have been active in reshaping the curriculum to reach a diverse group of students and we look forward to watching our program continue to grow.

Our faculty are also thriving themselves despite the challenges of the past year. A year ago, we celebrated with **Mark Hulsether** as he began his retirement as professor emeritus, and with **Randal Hepner** as he moved to Arizona, and this year we wished **Rosalind Hackett** well as she started the next stage of her career as professor emerita after hosting a successful Religion and Nonprofit Symposium last spring. We have been fortunate to have several new colleagues join us in the process, including our new tenure-track colleague **Larry Perry** who

started last year in a joint position with the Department of Religious Studies and the Interdisciplinary Program in Africana Studies and look forward to welcoming **Diana Burnett** next year along with another new colleague in the field of religion and the environment – stay tuned!

As for our faculty, we are thrilled to celebrate that **Megan Bryson** received a UT Humanities Center Fellowship for the year ahead, and several other colleagues received impressive College and Chancellor's awards. **Erin Darby** and **Rachelle Scott** received College Teaching Awards; **Erin Darby** and **Helene Sinreich** received the inaugural Gilya Schmidt Faculty Award; and **Erin Darby** also received the College Advising Award as well as the UT Global Catalyst Teaching and Service Award. Erin has also been chosen as the first faculty director of the Office of Undergraduate Research and Fellowships at UT. **Rosalind Hackett** was named Extraordinary Professor through the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice at the University of the Western Cape (South Africa), and I (**Tina Shepardson**) was again named a Lindsay Young Professor.

As always, our students are at the heart of our department, and we were very happy to celebrate so many of them at our spring graduation and awards ceremony. In addition to many department awards for our seniors, we also celebrated that graduating seniors **Ashley Cornell** (Outstanding Graduate in Religious Studies), **Lucas Fiet**, **Reilly Moody**, and **Makenzie Wells** were honored with a Chancellor's Academic Achievement Award, while **Cody Hubbard** (Outstanding Graduate in Religious Studies: Religion and Nonprofit Leadership) and **Bryce McGeorge** received a Chancellor's Professional Promise Award. Major **Lucas Fiet** and minor **Lauren Farkas** were also named Top Collegiate Scholars, and **Lucas Fiet**,

Cody Hubbard, and **Lauren Farkas** presented their research at national conferences and campus venues. **Travis Cornell** won the Religious Studies Research Award; **Elizabeth Plant** and **Charles Evans** won the Joan Nicoll Riedl Book Award; **Carl Weinstein** was named Outstanding Graduate in Judaic Studies; and **Jennifer Ware** earned the Dr. Rubin P. Robinson Scholarship in Judaic Studies. The full list of 2020-2021 awards can be found on our website.

Amid all these success stories, with the rest of the country our focus this past year turned more urgently toward our work in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Last year we began to implement our new diversity action plan; we created the new concentration Religion, Race, and Ethnicity, and two of our faculty started podcast series on that topic; we further diversified our board of visitors, chaired by **Lillian Mashburn**, by welcoming **Michael Dann** and **Arléne Amarante**; and we helped produce a campus diversity calendar. Our faculty also helped plan and participated in the "Cost of Hate" discussion series on anti-racism, anti-sexism/heterosexism, and anti-fascism. We hosted artist **Shahzia Sikander** for our 2020 Siddiqi Lecture in Islamic Studies, thanks to an endowment through Siddiqi Holdings, and we hosted professor **Vasudha Narayanan** for our newly named **Anjali Lecture in Hindu Studies**, graciously endowed through the generosity of **Heetesh and Dimpal Patel**. Read on for more of our other wonderful public events of the year, including an array of Judaic Studies events made possible by generous supporters like you!

Starting Unconventionally

Ashley Cornell grew up in Washington state, finished an associate's degree while in high school through the state's Running Start program, and joined the US Navy.

"My story as a student begins a bit unconventionally," Cornell said. "I wanted travel experience, work experience, and to generally see what there was to see going on in the world beyond my home state."

She spent eight years working as an Information Systems Technician (IT) in various capacities before beginning her studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, majoring in biochemistry and cellular and molecular biology. During her first semester at UT, she took three courses for a connections package, one of which was a seminar in religious studies with Professor Tina Shepardson.

"A month and a half into the course, I changed my major!" Cornell said. "I was thrilled to find a course that went beyond dry dissection of only a few texts, or that only allowed for narrow discussion, or that felt 'preachy' or heavily theological. My experience with the religious studies department at UT has introduced me to a rich, ongoing discussion of the present and past through the lens of a dramatically diverse and interdisciplinary field."

The work in that course led Cornell to a research project she ultimately presented at the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature's Southeastern Conference on Religion (SECSOR).

Cornell continued taking more courses in religious studies. One of her favorite experiences with the department was going to Jordan with Professor Erin Darby, which was possible through a religious studies department student travel award.

"Going to Jordan as a student member of UT Dig Jordan in 2019 was an absolutely amazing experience," Cornell said. "Being a part of an actual, ongoing archaeological dig and being able to produce original undergraduate research was a once in a lifetime



experience! All of the hard work is definitely worth it when you learn so much in a short period of time, and actually get to see how the data is made – really, how history is made! I loved being able to see and understand how the material culture that we as people base our understandings of the past upon is found, documented, and preserved!"

Cornell has been recognized for her work in religious studies with several awards, including Outstanding Professional Promise and Outstanding Academic Achievement. She also received the Joan Nicoll Riedl Book Award.

"I am excited to continue pursuing my current career in information technology, as well as looking forward to continuing my studies and digging into the intersections between modern culture, data infrastructures, religion, and religious expressions."



Choosing a Path

Lucas Fiet graduated last year with a religious studies and mathematics double major. He serves as the Ministry Coordinator intern for the Tyson House Student Foundation, an on-campus ministry. He coordinates Tyson House events, arranges partnerships between the House and outside volunteer/educational opportunities, and mentors students.

“The biggest way my major in religious studies prepared me for working at a campus ministry is that I learned just how varied peoples’ religious experiences can be, and how varied the functions of religion in a person’s life can be, even within one religious tradition,” Fiet said. “It’s made me a lot more open to people experiencing or practicing religion differently than I do, even on a smaller scale like a campus ministry.”

Fiet is excited to work with the Tyson House and sees this year as a great opportunity to explore whether he wants to go to graduate school for religious studies or go into ministry.

“I feel like the department did a great job preparing me for both,” said Fiet, who received the university Top Collegiate Scholar Award and the religious studies department’s Professional Promise Award.



Hackett Receives Emerita Status

Rosalind I. J. Hackett, a longstanding faculty member who taught in the department from 1986-2021, was recently awarded Professor Emerita status. Hackett served as head of the department from 2009-2018. She taught courses on African religions, anthropology of religion, comparison of world religions, religion, conflict, and peace, sound, music, and the study of religion, and religion and nonprofit leadership. Hackett continues to teach our course on religion and nonprofit leadership and led a successful Religion and Nonprofit Leadership Symposium last spring.

Hackett’s emerita status was conferred in recognition of her many accomplishments. She published extensively in the areas of indigenous religion, new religious movements, gender, art, human rights, and conflict in Africa. Her most recent book is *Religious Sounds Beyond the Global North: Senses, Media, Presence* (Amsterdam UP, in press—co edited with Carola Lorea). She has worked actively throughout her career to promote the academic study of religion on an international scale. She was a founding member of the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR) in 1992; from 2005-2015, she served as president of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), and was elected an honorary life member in 2015. From 2014-20, she served as vice president of the International Council on Philosophy and Human Sciences (CIPSH), associated with UNESCO. She is a board member and program coordinator of the African Consortium on Law and Religion Studies (ACLARS).

In 2014-15, she was a visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School and research associate in the Women’s Studies in Religion program. For the fall semester 2018, Hackett was the Gerardus van der Leeuw Fellow at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen, in the Netherlands. In 2019, she was named as a Chancellor’s Professor and now enjoys the status of Chancellor’s Professor Emerita. She also holds a visiting appointment as extraordinary professor, at the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice, University of the Western Cape, South Africa.



Darby Joins Office of UG Research and Fellowships

We are thrilled to announce that **Erin Darby** was named the inaugural faculty director for the Office of Undergraduate Research and Fellowships (OURF). Darby has a long-standing commitment to undergraduate research. Many of her students, for example, have engaged in independent research projects as well as original research as part of UT’s Dig Joran program co-led by Darby.

Darby will maintain dual appointments as an associate professor in religious studies and faculty director in OURF. As faculty director, Darby is charged with developing UT’s undergraduate research infrastructure and more profoundly embedding research within the UT undergraduate experience. We are thrilled to have our faculty member filling such an important role. This position is a testament to her long-standing commitment to our undergraduate students.

As an instructor, Darby will continue to teach in the department. Her exceptional teaching was recently recognized with the College Teaching Award (Junior), Gilya Schmidt Faculty Award, and UT’s Global Catalyst Teaching and Service Award.



Scott Redesigns Advanced Seminar Course

This year, we decided to revamp our capstone course, REST 499: Advanced Seminar in the Study of Religion, which is required for all of our majors. **Rachelle Scott**, who was recognized with the Senior College Teaching Award last year, redesigned this core course for majors and offered the newly revamped seminar in spring 2021.

In that seminar, students explored the history of religious studies as an academic field and critically reflected on their experiences as religious studies majors and minors. Students surveyed some of the early theoretical and methodological contributions to the field and analyzed critiques of religious studies as a discipline and the idea of world religions. Scott led them through the process of thinking critically about the history of religious studies as a discipline; students then sought to reconstruct the field through an analysis of current scholarship (from lived religion, class, and materiality to religion, race, and globalization). The course ended with discussions about teaching religion in religious studies courses and reflections on students’ courses of study. This new course design, created by one of the College of Arts and Sciences best teachers, created a new and innovative way for religious studies majors to complete their coursework at UT.

Bryson Named Humanities Center Fellow

Megan Bryson, associate professor of East Asian religions, is a Humanities Center Fellow for 2021-2022. She was awarded a fellowship this year to work on her project, *Buddhism on the Southern Silk Road*, which uses Dali-kingdom (937-1253) Buddhist texts, art, and objects to argue that Buddhism circulated differently along the Southern Silk Road (from southern China to NE India) in comparison to the better known Northern and Maritime Silk Roads. Bryson's research has previously been supported by an ACLS fellowship and she received a Chancellor's Award for Professional Promise in Research and Creative Achievement in 2019. She regularly teaches courses on Asian religions, including Religions of Asia, Chinese Religions, Japanese Religions, and Mindfulness. Her work in the classroom was recognized with university- and college-level teaching awards in 2013 and 2019. Bryson also spearheaded the creation of the department's new major concentration and minor in Religion and Nonprofit Leadership.



Cabellos Receives Grant

Manuela Ceballos, assistant professor of Islam, is a part of an impressive international grant from the National Agency of Research, Spanish Ministry of Sciences, Innovation, and Universities for the project, "Among humans and non-humans: An anthropological study of interspecific relations in Morocco, Ceuta, and Melilla." In addition to this grant, Ceballos was invited to Duke University to speak this past year and published the article, "Ink, Blood, and Body: Transmission and Ritual Purity in the Early Modern Western Mediterranean," research that is related to her current book manuscript.



Sinnreich Named Co-Editor for Holocaust Memorial Museum Journal

Helene Sinnreich, associate professor and associate head of religious studies and director of the Fern and Manfred Steinfeld Program in Judaic Studies, has been named coeditor-in-chief of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum academic journal, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*. Sinnreich's co-editor will be Daniel H. Magilow, professor of German in the UT Department of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures. "We are honored to take on a leadership role in our field's most prestigious academic journal," said Sinnreich, who has extensive experience collaborating with Magilow on a scholarly journal. For 15 years, they worked together on the *Journal of Jewish Identities*. Sinnreich served as editor-in-chief. Magilow served as managing editor and book review editor. Sinnreich is the author of the forthcoming book *The Atrocity of Hunger: Starvation Ghettos in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (Cambridge University Press) and the recipient of a 2021 Dr. Gilya Schmidt Endowed Faculty Award in Judaic Studies.



Larry S. Perry, II Joins Department

We welcome **Larry S. Perry, II**, to the UT Department of Religious Studies and the Interdisciplinary Program in Africana Studies. Perry holds a joint appointment and teaches classes in both programs. Perry's hire was integral in the development and launch of our new concentration in Religion, Race, and Ethnicity, which focuses on the intersections of religion, race, and ethnicity in North America. Perry also spearheaded a major grant initiative on behalf of UT last year.

Before joining us, Perry served as visiting assistant professor of American religions in the Department of Religious Studies at Northwestern University and as post-doctoral fellow at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History's Center for the Study of African American Religious Life in Conjunction with Georgetown University's Department of African American Studies. Perry earned a BA in history from Fisk University, an MDiv in Theology from Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, and his PhD in American religious history from the University of Virginia.

His current book project, *A Black Spiritual Leftist: Howard Thurman and the Religious Left's Unfinished Business of Race Relations*, is an intellectual and political biography of the mid-twentieth century mystic and philosopher Howard Thurman. Professor Perry's research focuses on what he has called the Black Spiritual Left, African Americans who found, experienced, and created religious life largely outside of black churches. While these figures took on a spirituality that embraced modernity, they also pushed for racial justice—unlike most of their white spiritual leftist counterparts. Ultimately, his research project shines a historical spotlight upon Black Spiritual Leftists as early as the nineteenth century and as late as the twentieth-first century.



Everyone in the Department of Religious Studies is fortunate to work with an amazing cohort of talented staff whom we share with the Departments of Classics and Philosophy. This year we added a new staff member, **Jessica Black**, as our accounting specialist. She is replacing **Ashley Briggs** who we thank for her service these past few years. Black has worked for UT for nine years and brings a wealth of experience to the position. Black is stationed in our department office, which is wonderful for us.



"I greatly enjoy working with people and learning about their needs," said Black, who, when not on campus, is usually with her 10-year-old daughter and boyfriend. "As a family, we love hiking and exploring the outdoors."



Kelle Knight who had been a part of our staff as our grants and contracts manager has moved into the position of business manager. A graduate of the UT College of Arts and Sciences, Knight had been at MTSU for 10 years prior to her time at UT. Black and Knight join **Donna Bodenheimer** who coordinates our courses, among many other things, and whose decades on campus make her a wealth of information and expertise. Thank you all for your service to our department!



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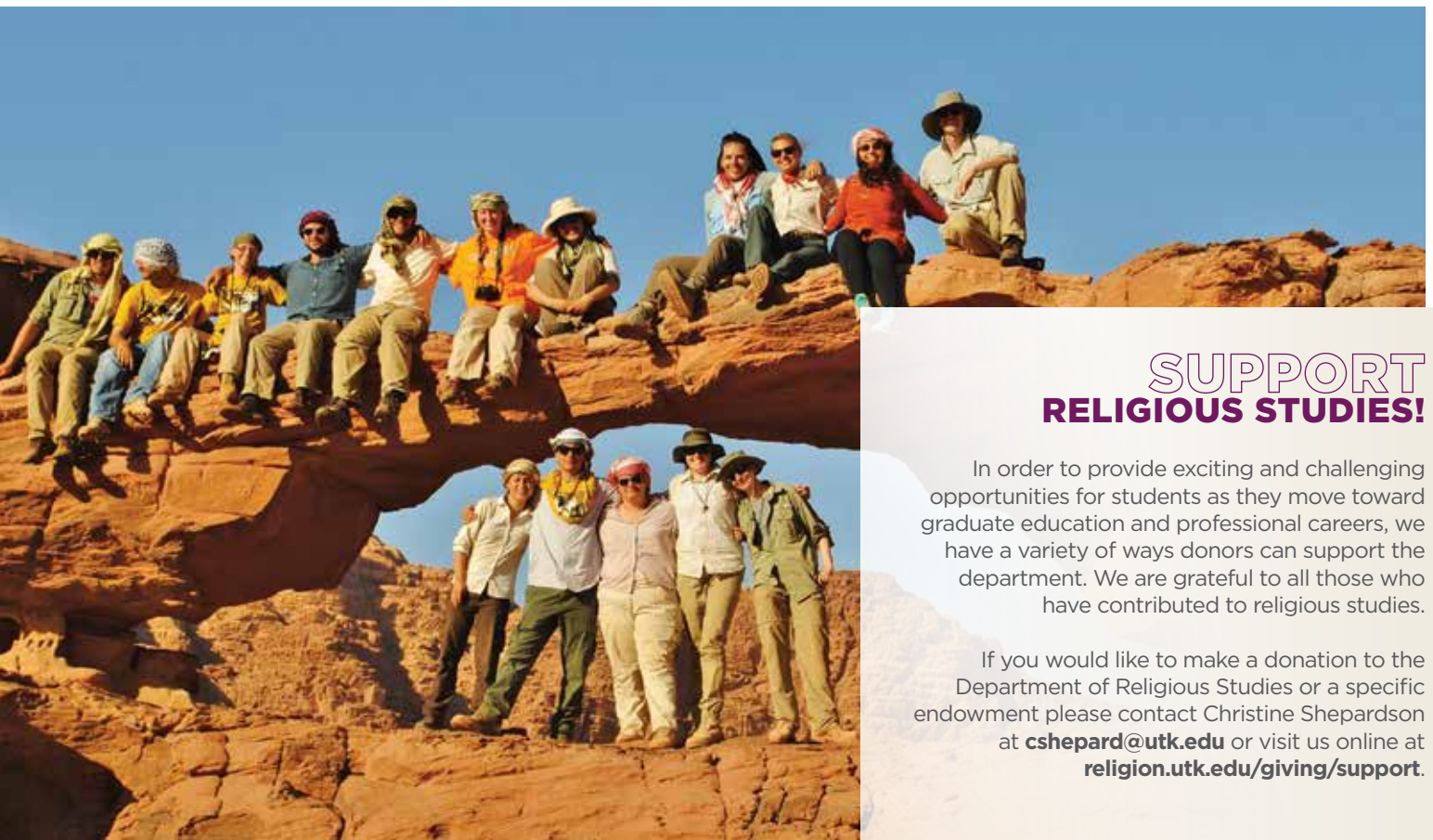
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If you would like to make a donation to the Department of Religious Studies or a specific endowment please contact Christine Shepardson at cshepard@utk.edu or visit us online at religion.utk.edu/giving/support.

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