

Religious (W)rites

Video Games Offer New View for Religious Studies

The study of religion is taking some students to the gaming lab at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, allowing them to simulate field work and actively engage with questions about mythological narratives, transformations, and more.

For 20 students enrolled in the first offering of Religious Studies 310 Religion and Gameworlds, the week starts with a classroom discussion of theory. Mid-week they head to the eXperience Point Lab in John C. Hodges Library, working in groups to play games and record observations at every point, as they would in ethnographic field work. In the next class they discuss their observations and analysis.

“To my knowledge, it’s the first course of its kind anywhere to approach the topic of religion and video games from both the side of how religion informs video game worlds, and also from the side of how the experience of playing video games can inform how we approach the study of religion,” said Associate Teaching Professor **MICHAEL NAPARSTEK**, who developed the course.

In one early assignment the students had to describe their ideal video game character. “The layers of depth in the responses was astounding,” Naparstek said. Later in the semester they will work in groups to build their own game world for others to analyze.

“Popular video games—like many popular films before them—draw from the mythologies, cosmologies, unseen powers, and heroic narratives found across the world’s religious traditions,” he explained.

Beyond that, video games offer an interactive experience in a unique way. “A good video game blurs the line between the subjective human player and the objective digital player character, thus raising very interesting questions about who is actually doing what in the game,” Naparstek said. *“When your player character levels up, gaining power, transforms into something else ... who is actually experiencing the transformation?”*

Super Mario Odyssey is one of the games students will play as they analyze agency and apotheosis, someone reaching divine status.

During a recent lab session on the theme of world building, the students pondered how religion plays a role in creating civilizations. Developing and spreading their own religions in the game *Civilization VI*, they explored what it means to win a religious victory in the game.

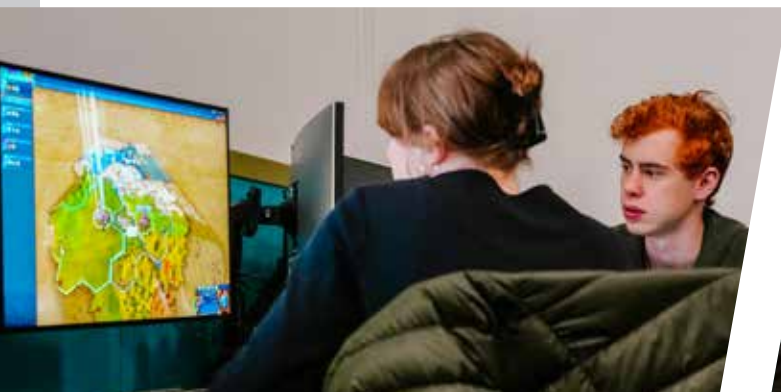
When the class explores god-making narratives, students will play games such as *Refind Self*.

Students in the class major in not only religious studies but also fields ranging from computer science to theatre. “Religion and macroeconomics are the two most powerful forces impacting peoples’ daily lives without folks necessarily recognizing how from day to day,” Naparstek observed.

“As much as the course is designed around video games, it really is about how the intellectual and analytical apparatus that the field of religious studies offers provides relevant insights into our contemporary world,” he said.

Starting in fall 2025, Religion and Gameworlds will count toward the Volunteer core curriculum requirement for Engaged Inquiries.

To launch the course, Naparstek credits support from not only the department, but also the College of Arts and Sciences, the library, and the UT Teaching and Learning Institute.



Students in the Religion and Gameworlds course develop and spread religions in the video game *Civilization VI*, while they record notes on each aspect of the game during a lab session. The course examines how religion informs video game worlds and allows students to explore topics in religious studies through the games.



Helene Sinnreich
PROFESSOR AND
DEPARTMENT HEAD



**Teaching,
Research, and
Outreach Thrive**



MESSAGE FROM THE DEPARTMENT HEAD

Greetings!

This year has been exciting and impressive for the Department of Religious Studies. Chancellor Donde Plowman presented the Dr. Marva Rudolph Access and Engagement Unit Excellence Award to the department, and individual faculty have been recognized too. Associate Professor **MEGAN BRYSON** was honored by the Faculty Senate with its Heart and Soul Award, and Associate Professor **ERIN DARBY** was named a 2024-25 Athletics Professor of Excellence.

I am excited to tell you about some of our teaching initiatives. Last year, in collaboration with UT's Teaching and Learning Innovation, Darby and Associate Professor **RACHELLE SCOTT** developed a specialized version of our Religious Studies 101 course that targets first-year students who struggle during their first semester of college, to mentor them and teach them critical skills. We also now offer online both the religious studies major and our concentration in religion and nonprofit leadership.

Our faculty have been engaged in some really interesting research. Last year, Assistant Professor **MANUELA CEBALLOS** had a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship, during which she completed her book manuscript *Between Dung and Blood: Purity, Sainthood, and Power in the Early Modern Western Mediterranean*. She also had two books come out last year, her translation of Abdelfattah Kilto's *La lengua de Adán y otros relatos* (Medellín, Colombia: Editorial Sílabas, 2023), and a co-edited volume, *Navigating Language in the Early Islamic World Multilingualism and Language Change in the First Centuries of Islam* (Brepols, 2024).

This past summer four of our faculty—Ceballos, Darby, Assistant Professor **MARCUS HARVEY**, and Associate Professor **JOSEPH WITT**—received stipends to support research initiatives. Harvey is spending this academic year at the Denbo Center for Humanities and the Arts, completing his first book, *"Life Is War": African Epistemology and Black Religious Phenomenology*. He is following in the footsteps of Assistant Professor **LARRY PERRY**, who held a Denbo Center fellowship last year.

We are excited that we will be adding a new faculty member next year who will help lead our religion and nonprofit leadership program.

This fall, we hosted our very well-attended annual Siddiqi Lecture on Muslims in the US and a panel on the 100th anniversary of the Scopes Trial, which featured our own faculty experts talking about the intersections between religion and science. In the spring we hosted the Abraham and Rebecca Solomon and Ida Schwartz Distinguished Lecture on Judaic Studies, featuring Kerry Wallach, and our Distinguished Lecture in Religious Studies was given by Harvard University Professor Tracey Hucks. In March we hosted Rachel Havelock, giving the Karen and Pace Robinson Lecture on Judaic Studies, followed in April by the Anjali annual lecture, a talk titled, "Searching for Sarasvati: Race, Gender, and the Social Lives of Sanskrit in America."

I hope we will see you soon at one of our events, in person or over Zoom.

On a personal note, I had a very good summer doing research at the Holocaust Museum and doing some preliminary research in Rwanda looking at Rwandan genocide memorials.

Sincerely,
HELENE SINNREICH





Shepardson Publishing New Research



After completing five years as head of the Department of Religious Studies, Professor

TINA SHEPARDSON

spent her 2023-24 research leave

completing several projects. Among the most exciting was her third monograph, *A Memory of Violence: Syriac Christianity and the Radicalization of Religious Difference in Late Antiquity*, which should appear by late summer 2025.

Shepardson also submitted several shorter research projects and saw the publication of others, including “Teach Your Children Well: Martyrs, Monks and Mothers in Severus of Antioch,” in *New Trajectories in Syriac Studies*; “Jews and Christians in Pagan Antiquity from the First through the Third Centuries,” co-authored with Paula Fredriksen in the *Cambridge History of Ancient Christianity*; “Christianity Emerges in the Era of Late Antiquity,” in *Entangling Web: The Fractious Story of Christianity in Europe*; “Embodied Readers: Teaching the New Testament in Rural Protestant America,” in *Activism, Bible, and Research-Based Teaching: Practical Approaches for the Global Biblical Studies Classroom*; and “Speaking of Jews: Late Antique Antioch’s Shifting Anti-Jewish Rhetoric,” in *Antioch on the Orontes: History, Society, Ecology, and Visual Culture*.

She also published an earlier book discussion and a public-facing essay on early Christians in Gaza. In addition, Shepardson presented new work at UT’s Late Antiquity Faculty Research Seminar and conferences in Santa Barbara, California; San Antonio, Texas; and Chicago.

In spring 2024, she was honored to receive a Best Historical Materials Award from an affiliate of the American Library Association for her 2022 co-edited volume *Invitation to Syriac Christianity: An Anthology*, and UT’s Dr. Gilya Schmidt Endowed Faculty Award in Judaic Studies. Despite being on leave she enjoyed facilitating discussions on religious diversity and inclusion at resident assistant training sessions, giving a public talk on the history of Gaza, and discussing her research with Princeton and Yale University graduate students.

She accepted invitations to be on the advisory boards of the *Journal of Early Christian Studies* and UT’s Department of Africana Studies.

Religion Adds Dimensions to Environmental Studies

By studying religion alongside contemporary environmental issues, UT students are honing their abilities to analyze complex topics that affect their community and the world.

The Religious Studies 343 Religion, Nature, and Ethics class has examined food insecurity and the housing crisis in Knoxville in recent years. This spring semester students are investigating green technology and the technological capacity to deal with environmental problems.

While topics such as religion, nature, and housing seem to have nothing in common, Associate Professor **JOE WITT** helps students see the connections and sort through different perspectives with guest speakers, academic readings, and engagement in the local community.

“The way that I approach religious studies is that it’s a window into understanding humans, who we are, why we do what we do, and how we can do things differently,” Witt said.

In the Department of Religious Studies, students have opportunities to explore ethics, worldviews, and values in ways not covered in other classes, adding to their understanding of the world, whatever their majors or minors.

Robinson Recognized Religious Studies as Vital

SHERILL PACE ROBINSON had just recently begun serving as chair of the Department of Religious Studies Board of Visitors when he passed away in November 2024. However, he was a longtime supporter of organizations in the Knoxville community, including the department, and had shared the following comments.

For Pace Robinson, supporting the Department of Religious Studies was part of a family legacy.

“My parents were very involved in all things Jewish in Knoxville and were integral in the establishment of the chair of Judaic studies,” he explained. *“This ingrained in me a sense of responsibility in maintaining religious education for the students at the University of Tennessee.”*

His parents, however, insisted that he and his siblings attend college away from their Knoxville home. So his wife, **KAREN ROBINSON** ('81), is the only family member to have graduated from Rocky Top. She serves on the UT Alumni Board of Directors.

“I have been a big fan of the university—athletics and academics—my whole life,” he said. After earning a degree in finance, he returned to Knoxville and joined the family business, wholesale distributor Modern Supply Co. Robinson spent his entire career with the company and served as CEO for 25 years before retiring in 2017.

He also served as a volunteer and leader in numerous organizations, including the Knoxville Jewish Federation, Knoxville Jewish Alliance, Heska Amuna Synagogue, Knoxville Jewish Community Family of Funds, Webb School of Knoxville, Knoxville Utilities Board, and Sertoma.

Together he and his wife established the Karen and Pace Robinson Endowment in Judaic Studies.

“Karen and I feel a moral obligation towards philanthropy,” Pace Robinson said. *“We saw the need to help supplement a small but important part of the university's education system. This fund also helped me to honor my parent's efforts with religious studies.”*

As a part of the department's Board of Visitors, he also learned more about the university, how it works and how it benefits students.

“Religious studies is a small but vital part of UT,” he said. “The trend toward de-emphasizing the humanities is concerning and makes the significance of religious studies all the more important these days. The faculty and staff do a great job of managing with limited resources but need outside help to supplement their efforts and continue the vital work of the department.”



University of Tennessee Chancellor Donde Plowman presents the Commission for Disability Undergraduate Student Award to Evan Shannon for furthering recognition of and support for disabled people at UT.

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Undergraduate Opportunities Are Multifaceted

When **EVAN SHANNON** was in middle school, two social studies units made a lasting impression: religion and the ancient world. This spring he graduated from UT with dual bachelor's degrees in religious studies and classics. Then he plans to pursue a master's degree in library sciences and become an academic librarian.

Tapping into a wide range of opportunities at UT, he worked in one of the campus libraries, interned at the McClung Museum of Natural History and Culture, traveled to Greece for study abroad, and earned recognition for supporting disabled people.

Shannon said he was drawn to UT by the strength of the programs for classics and religious studies, then found not only brilliant scholars but faculty who were supportive when he experienced personal difficulties, allowing him to continue studies during a difficult third year that included a hospitalization.

In spring 2024, Shannon completed a curatorial internship with the McClung museum, researching objects and standardizing information recorded about them.

"I was really surprised by just the vastness of McClung collections," he said, noting they range from Egyptian artifacts to freshwater mussels. *"I researched some Alaska Native garments, a 1904 Haggadah (a Jewish text used during the Passover seder), and a set of Roman game pieces."*

The museum internship was part of his religious studies program, as was an undergraduate research assistantship. Working with Associate Professor Erin Darby and Lecturer Michael Naparstek, he vetted

videos and articles to prepare resources for Knox County educators to teach about religion.

"I want every student to feel very intrigued and stimulated by religion," Shannon said.

He took his first trip abroad in summer 2024 to attend the American School for Classical Studies in Athens, an 18-day program. "We went to 37 archaeological sites and eighteen museums, heard 20 presentations from participants and six guest lectures," Shannon recalled.

"My favorite sites were the Nekromanteion and the Sacred Oak of Dodona, as they are both ancient sites where ritual activity has persisted. People leave coins in both sites, and people tie wishes to the Sacred Oak, and I think that continuity is beautiful," said Shannon, who also did both.

During the trip to Greece, he said, "I also loved seeing the sites dedicated to Asklepius, god of healing, and, maybe more so, the ways that museums displayed information about Asklepius."

In ancient Greece, archaeological evidence shows ramps at some temples, but mostly just at those for gods of healing. When Shannon visited Greek museums in 2024, he also noted the most accessible displays also tended to be limited. As an undergraduate at UT, Shannon set out to research disabled characters in myth but found few sources. So, he shifted to explore the lack of research on the topic and presented a paper at the Tennessee Undergraduate Classics Research Conference.

At the Chancellor's Honors Banquet in 2024, Shannon received the Commission for Disability Undergraduate Student Award, given for furthering recognition of and support for people with disabilities at UT.



Evan Shannon tracked his 18-day trip to Greece in summer 2024 on this map. The Society for Classical Studies awarded him the Frank M. Snowden Jr. Undergraduate Scholarship for the study abroad trip.

From Nonprofit Leadership to Healthcare

LANDYN FORD graduated with a BA in religious studies and a concentration in nonprofit leadership in 2023.

During his time at UT, he participated in numerous programs at the Howard H. Baker Center for Public Policy and conducted an undergraduate thesis study on healthcare sharing ministries under the supervision of Assistant Professor Manuela Ceballos.

Ford currently serves as the volunteer programs manager at East Tennessee Children's Hospital (ETCH) while completing a master's degree in healthcare administration through the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill.

In his role at ETCH, Ford oversees various programs, including the VolunTeen Program for high school students, which provides volunteer opportunities and attracts nearly 120 students each summer from across East Tennessee. He has developed two new programs for ETCH: the Children's Hospital Immersive Medical Program (CHIMP) and a Career and Technical Education (CTE) Day. These educational initiatives are designed for students interested in healthcare careers and nonprofit organizations. CHIMP, for example, offers teens who have served at least one summer in the VolunTeen Program a weeklong opportunity to participate in interactive and hands-on experiences, problem-based learning sessions, and healthcare professional forums.

On top of these leadership roles, he assists the adult volunteer program, managing approximately 200 active volunteers, overseeing onboarding, training, and data management.

Ford credits his undergraduate work in religious studies for preparing him for graduate school and his work in the healthcare field, noting the student programs, professors, and classes. "UT prepared me to be a productive student, lifelong learner, and committed member of my community, workplace, and society," he said.

The future looks bright for Ford. After he finishes his master's degree, he plans to pursue further graduate work in bioethics and continue to build a career in the healthcare industry.

We are proud to have Landyn as an alumnus!



Distinguished Alumnus Sykes Serves Community

The **REVEREND LARRY SYKES JR.** ('09) has become an honored church and social justice leader in Kentucky, and in spring 2024 the Department of Religious Studies recognized him with the Charles H. Reynolds Distinguished Alumnus Award.

Sykes felt called to ministry early in his life. "My parents raised me in church, where I cultivated and nurtured my sense of purpose and belonging," he said. "He majored in religious studies with a minor in philosophy at UT, where Charles Reynolds was one of his professors.

"He was a pragmatist, which was a different worldview than the one I was reared by," Sykes recalled.

"He showed us the value religion could have in the solutions it could offer to suffering people all over the world," Sykes said. "He showed me the fundamental aspects all religions share (divine power/authority, sacred texts, ceremonial rites), but in so doing helped me to grow a greater appreciation for my own faith tradition."



My time here was about exploring, questioning, and growing—not just intellectually but also spiritually.”

After graduating from UT, Sykes earned a Master of Divinity from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, earning awards for preaching and church leadership.

In 2011, Sykes became the pastor of Greater Good Hope Baptist Church in Louisville. While there he served as co-president of Citizens of Louisville Organized United Together (CLOUT), through which religious congregations work to solve community problems. “We take a grassroots approach to understand the critical issues that plague our community, and through the power of organized religious congregations, we offer to government and city officials systemic solutions to solve them,” he explained.

In that role he led a successful “Ban the Box” initiative to remove barriers to employment for people with criminal records. “We also worked to provide solutions for affordable housing,” Sykes said.

In 2016, the Louisville Metro Council recognized Sykes with an Outstanding Community Leader Award, citing his work on the “Ban the Box” initiative as well as other ways his church served as a community gathering place for social justice organizations. “We also had a strong mercy ministry in partnership with Dare to Care to provide food resources to at-risk populations,” Sykes said.

He went on to serve three years as associate pastor at Consolidated Baptist Church in Lexington, Kentucky. Currently he is senior pastor at Clay Street Baptist Church in Shelbyville and a leader in fighting poverty and racism.

Sykes recalled not only his interactions with Reynolds as a student but also other UT faculty and staff, within the department and beyond. “Dr. Rachele Scott was also invaluable,” he said. “She has such passion and enthusiasm as she teaches Buddhism, and as a Christian preacher, she made me fall in love with Theravada Buddhism.”

He also fondly recalls his fellow students. “My time at UT was more than just an academic pursuit,” he said. “It was about the community, the friendships forged ... and conversations as deep as we could muster as young adults. My time here was about exploring, questioning, and growing—not just intellectually but also spiritually.”



Rev. Larry Sykes Jr. ('09), senior pastor at Clay Street Baptist Church in Shelbyville, Kentucky, received the Charles H. Reynolds Distinguished Alumnus Award from the Department of Religious Studies in spring 2024.



The Reverend Larry Sykes Jr. ('09) speaks at the Department of Religious Studies spring 2024 Graduation and Awards Ceremony, where he received the Charles H. Reynolds Distinguished Alumnus Award.



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In order to provide exciting and challenging opportunities for students as they move toward graduate education and professional careers, we have a variety of ways donors can support the department.

We are grateful to all those who have contributed to religious studies.



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

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