

January 25, 2005

Dear Majors and Minors,

Now that we've all settled into the rhythm of the new semester, I thought I would write to let you know about a few of the things going on in the Department and about some future plans.

If you're a regular visitor to the Department's website, then you might already know about this semester's major event: a two day conference on Africa and the academic study of religion, sponsored and planned by the Department, with the assistance of a variety of other units on campus. Prof. **Ted Trost**, who heads up the planning committee, is currently in the midst of arranging travel plans for fourteen people who will come and share their research with us. The event will be held at the Bryant Conference center on April 7 and 8, and will be opened and closed by two invited speakers; everyone else submitted proposals and our faculty selected the twelve most interesting papers, all from early career scholars. You'll surely be seeing some advertising later in the semester.

We are also sponsoring three public lecturers. Please plan to attend the third annual Aronov Lecture, delivered by Prof. Judith Plaskow, of Manhattan College, on March 3, 2005. Prof. Plaskow, who was the President of the American Academy of Religion in 1998, is an expert on feminism and the study of religion; a collection of her essays, *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexuality*, will be published this year by Beacon Press. If you visit the Events page of our web site you'll also learn about two other lectures in our Religion *in Culture* series, by Prof. Amilcar Shabazz (Department of American Studies) and Prof. Maarten Ultee (Department of History), both to be delivered in February. (We couldn't plan these events without the help of **Betty Dickey** and **Donna Martin**, in the main office, and of course, Prof. **Trost**.)

A little later this semester, you'll receive a copy of the second issue of our Department newsletter, this year edited by Prof. **Catherine Roach**. Among the pieces she commissioned are a number of essays by our students along with an article by **Joe Bettis**, the first Chair of our Department, back in the mid-1960s. And later in the semester, prior to registration for Fall classes, you'll receive a letter from the Department, detailing Fall course offerings. With that in mind, the Department is offering REL 100 (**Trost**) and REL 110 (**Jacobs**) in Interim and REL 110 (**Jacobs**) in Summer Session I. Because Interim and Summer courses only run if a sufficient number of students enroll, we have little choice but to offer lower-level, Core courses. Although not all professors are available to supervise upper-level Independent Study courses over the summer (REL 360, 361, 460, and 461), some are; so please keep in mind that you can approach a professor and request an Independent Study course that fits in both their and your areas of interest. (If you do approach someone with such a request, please keep in mind that supervising Independent Study courses is an additional, unpaid duty outside the professor's normal teaching obligations.)

Although I do not wish to steal their thunder prior to the descriptions of their current research projects that you'll find in the upcoming newsletter, I want to bring to your attention some of the things that your professors are doing. I've already listed two important duties served by Prof. **Trost** (chairing our conference planning committee and our speakers committee), but he is also the co-editor of a multi-authored collection of essays on teaching African American religion, to be published later this year by Oxford University Press. This multi-year project, which involved all of the authors meeting on several occasions to plan and develop the chapters they contributed, was supported by a nationally recognized grant. Prof. **Murphy**, who is devoting all of his time this semester to his research, is working on his second book, along with an edited collection of essays on the definition of religion. Despite not having formal teaching duties this semester, some of you might see him nonetheless, either in your classes as a guest lecturer or in his role as the advisor to the student association. Prof. **Roach** has just had a proposal accepted to develop a new program unit within our field's main professional organization, the American Academy of Religion (or simply, the AAR). This means that scholars who work at the intersection of sexuality and religion will now have a place to present their research at our annual meetings; please congratulate her when you see her, for this is no small accomplishment. Those taking upper-level courses may be wondering where Prof. **Jacobs** has been hiding this semester; apart from putting the final touches on a book that he will soon publish, he's teaching a large enrollment section of REL 100. This is a first for him, so he's immersed himself in the literature of the field and can be found walking over to ten Hoor each Tuesday and Thursday, along with **Marianne Stanton**, a student assistant hired by the Department, to teach in a large lecture room that the Department of Anthropology has provided for us. And not long ago Prof. **Schaeffer** sent the manuscript for his next book back to Oxford University Press, after having corrected the proofs and produced his index. Within the next few months we can therefore expect to see it appear in print (this is his third book since arriving at the University of Alabama in 2000). As for me, my next book should appear any time now, I'm soon off to deliver an invited lecture at Syracuse University, and, along with Prof. **Jacobs**, I'll be presenting some of my research at an international conference in Tokyo in late March. It's a busy semester for everyone.

Above, I mentioned the Religious Studies Student Association. Before I close I want to say that I'm not sure if everyone realizes that the Department has financial resources to support a wide array of student activities. Although our faculty members are quite pleased to help in planning these activities, and Prof. **Murphy** tells me that he has a few plans for the current semester, the association works best when students take on a leadership role. Although I realize that many of you have very busy lives away from Manly Hall, I hope that this semester we can form a small but active group of people who can assist the Department to plan events in which all of our students will want to participate. Please contact Prof. Murphy if you wish to get involved.

Finally, keep in mind that the Department is once again planning its annual Honors Day reception, on the balcony of Manly Hall at 12:30 p.m. on April 15. Although we will be awarding our Silverstein Fellowship, the event is for all graduates *as well as all majors and minors*. If you speak to anyone who attended in the past, or has seen the photos on

the web site (go to Students Desk and click on Photo Gallery) then you'll learn that we put on a pretty good spread and have a pretty good time. By the way, if you are planning to graduate I certainly hope you have done your degree check with Arts & Sciences, have applied to graduate, and are considering writing something about yourself and your future plans for our alumni web page. Anyone with questions about graduation can speak with Prof. **Trost**, our undergraduate advisor.

I hope your semester goes well and that you feel at home up here on the second floor of Manly Hall. From the services offered by the main office, our efforts to hire majors and minors to work in the main office (by the way, this semester **Christine Scott** has joined **Samantha Sastre**, **Josh McDonough**, **Marianne Stanton**, and **Guy Cutting**, who graduated in December, is working part-time for us to help plan our conference), and the improvements to our lounge and library (complete with our wireless internet connection for those of you with laptops), to the nationally- and internationally-recognized accomplishments of your professors, we hope it is more than evident that the Department takes your education quite seriously.

We may be a small Department, but we tackle big ideas.