

January 8, 2002

Dear Religious Studies Majors and Minors,

Welcome to the start of another semester. As you may know, this past semester was my first at the University of Alabama-coming here from Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, MO-so it's great to see that both you and I have survived the Fall and have at least made it to January. In the future, I hope to send a letter such as this prior to each registration period, to let you know about the classes our faculty are planning to offer, along with courses in other Departments that have caught our eye and, therefore, might spark your interest too. The study of religion takes place all across campus and we hope that all REL majors and minors take advantage of the opportunities presented by other Departments in the College of Arts & Sciences.

There have been a few developments in the Department of which I would like to make sure you are aware. We have a student/faculty lounge in the room that previously housed the Department Office. **Betty Dickey**, the Department's Administrative Assistant, moved her office next door and so **Manly 212 A** is our new lounge. We have coffee makers (25 cents a cup), a microwave, and fridge as well as couches and chairs. We are even talking to the Department of Art to see if we can arrange for student art to hang on the walls. We hope that you'll stop by, hang out, do some reading, or just generally populate the space from time to time.

The Department's web site has also undergone a make-over. **Professor Kurtis Schaeffer**, our newly appointed webmaster, has the basic outline now up and he will be working on the site during the coming semester. We anticipate syllabi being posted on the site for all of our courses, along with links to resources that you might find useful. Perhaps future letters to majors/minors will simply be posted there.

Some of you already know that **Professor William Doty** retired at the end of the summer. William, who taught courses on myth, ritual, Native American religious traditions, and the psychology of religion, worked at the University of Alabama for twenty years, and taught at several schools before coming to Tuscaloosa. You can still find him working away in his office, currently involved in museum studies, and we hope to see him teaching the occasional class for us in the future. Because of his retirement, the Department is currently searching to hire a new person, so you might see a new face or two in your classes in January, teaching as part of their campus interviews. We plan on scheduling a time for candidates to meet with students, so please watch for notices. With the addition of this new faculty member, the Department will have the largest teaching staff in its history and will therefore be offering a wider variety of courses-both introductory and advanced-on a dependable schedule. Speaking of retired faculty, **Professor Patrick Green**, the former Chair of the Department who retired a few years ago, is now back in our classrooms in Manly Hall, teaching two courses this semester, Introduction to the New Testament and a 400-level seminar on the Gospel of Mark.

We have also reinvigorated our local chapter of **Theta Alpha Kappa**, the national honors society for REL students. **Professor Catherine Roach** is the faculty advisor and you can get information in the lounge on joining (as an honors society there is a minimum GPA requirement). This semester we also hope to see a student organization for all REL students come into existence. The Department web site has a link for student activities, so please check that out later in the semester for more information.

This past semester we hosted our first "**Religion in Culture**" lecture, delivered by Professor **Michael Murphy** of the Department of Anthropology. He spoke on the history of devotion to the Virgin Mary in southern Spain, and the ways in which these practices are linked to social identity construction and contestation in this region. In the future we hope to see two such public lectures each semester, so keep your eyes peeled for advertisements. Although the occasional outside speaker will be invited, the lecture series is intended as a way to invite professors from other Departments on our campus to speak with our faculty and students about their own work in the study of religion. We currently have two such lectures cooking for this semester, so we hope to see you there.

And, speaking of lectures, **Professor Steve Jacobs** had a busy Fall semester planning and participating in events for **Judaic Studies**. As you may know, some years ago the University received a considerable donation to hire a scholar of religion who studied Judaism and to fund activities devoted to the study of historical and contemporary Judaism. What came to be known as the Aaron Aronov Endowed Chair in Judaic Studies has been held by several scholars over the years and Professor Jacobs, who was hired just one year ago, has breathed new life into Judaic Studies' (JS) profile on campus.

Remember, the Department not only offers a major and minor in REL but also offers a minor in Judaic Studies and REL majors can minor in JS-so long as you do not "double count" courses for the various requirements. Speak with either Professor Jacobs-the JS advisor-or I if you're interested in the JS minor.

I'm particularly pleased to announce a few other pieces of good news. **Professor Roach**, who teaches for both our Department and for New College, has had her manuscript accepted for publication by Indiana University Press. The book, her first, is entitled *Mother Nature: Reading Popular Nature Imagery through a Lens of Religion, Psychology, and Gender*, is expected to appear later this year or early in the Spring. **Professor Ted Trost**, who also teaches in both the Department and New College, is co-editing a collection of essays, including some of his own work, on teaching African American religious traditions. This promises to be a busy and productive research and writing semester for him, since he is also finalizing the manuscript for his own first book, *Douglas Horton and the Ecumenical Impulse in American Protestantism*, to be published later this year and distributed by Harvard University Press. In the Fall **Professor Schaeffer's** first book, a collection of essays he edited and introduced entitled, *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature in the Himalayan Plateau*, was published and he recently was contracted by Oxford University Press for another book comprised of his own introduction and English translation of a medieval Tibetan nun's autobiography. And, as for Professor Jacobs, well, if you've ever been over to his office, you'll know that

apart from his work for our JS program, his laser printer never stops printing his own work. He has several essays and an edited book or two soon to appear in print.

What I hope this tells you is that the faculty members are experts in their own right, busy doing their own research and writing, and that teaching is one of several important components to their work as university professors. As many of you already know, teaching innovative, engaging, and thought-provoking courses is something in which scholars of religion specialize. Given that we have had such a turnover in the faculty due to recent retirements and new hires, the faculty is busy revising the curriculum and we hope to see a new curriculum in place within the year.

Students who entered under the 1998-200 or the 2000-2002 catalogue will, of course, still fulfill those requirements, unless they wish to change to the new curriculum. More on this topic later.

One final piece of news: early in each Spring semester an undergraduate student is awarded the **Ulysses V. Goodwyn Endowed Excellence in Religious Studies scholarship**. It is awarded based on a student's GPA, academic achievement, and extra curricular activities while in university. Because the amount of the award varies each year, we have sometimes been able to recognize two students. If you wish to apply, please pick up an application at the Department office and return it by **Friday, January 25**.

Well, that's a lot of information. Visit the web site occasionally, to see what's new in the Department. Consider making an appointment early in the semester with your advisor to discuss your progress in the degree and your major or any other concerns that you might have involving the Department, the University, or the study of religion in general. Also, please stop by the main office soon to give us your current email address and, if you're graduating, keep in touch and let us know what you're doing and where you are.

Sincerely,

Russell McCutcheon
Chair, Department of Religious Studies.