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# NumeNews

Newsletter of the Carleton College Department of Religion

Vol.1, No.3 Spring Term '04

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## UPCOMING EVENTS...

Lindesmith Lecture by Eleanor Zelliot:  
"Champions of the Oppressed: Gandhi and  
Ambedkar Revisited." Thursday, May 6, 7:30 pm,  
Boliou 104

African American Urban Church Experience  
Guests: Reverend William Watson III, preacher,  
and the Celestial Choir and Praise Dancers of  
Macedonia Baptist Church in Minneapolis. A soup  
supper follows the service. Sunday, May 23, 5-6  
pm.

Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Student discussion  
group meets twice during the term. April 15 and  
May 6, 8:00 pm, Hill Lounge. Led by Aaron Ban  
and Ezra Lyon.

Jewish Reunion: an alum-organized event as a part  
of Reunion festivities. June 17-20.

## RECENT PUBLICATIONS BY RELIGION FACULTY

Louis Newman, *An Introduction to Jewish Ethics* (Upper  
Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005).

Shahzad Bashir, *Messianic Hopes and Mystical Visions: The  
Nurbakhshiya Between Medieval and Modern Islam*  
(Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

Roger Jackson, *Tantric Treasures: Three Collections of  
Mystical Verse from Buddhist India* (New York: Oxford  
University Press, 2004).

Slavica Jakelic and Lori Pearson, eds. *The Future of the Study  
of Religion*, Numen Series (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

## COMPS 2004

Now that the comps process has been more or less  
completed for this year's Religion majors, this is a great  
time to reflect on this huge undertaking and its challenges  
and rewards as well as recognize the seniors' completed  
projects. Please read our reflections from both students  
and faculty!

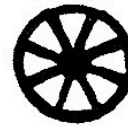
### Faculty Reflection on Comps:

#### Professor Louis Newman

I think most faculty believe that the comps process works  
pretty well, which is why we haven't changed it  
significantly in several years. We try to spread the work  
out over the year, with the proposal due in the fall and the  
comps talks wrapping things up in the spring. Still, the  
heaviest burden of work, for both students and faculty,  
falls in the winter. With each paper receiving a thorough  
reading by two faculty members, students generally get  
more feedback on this piece of writing than on anything  
else they write during their four years at Carleton. There  
is a lot of satisfaction for most of us in watching students  
launch, produce and then, typically, significantly revise a  
major piece of independent research. And because  
students frequently take on topics that are outside our  
specific areas of expertise, we often learn a lot by reading  
the comps papers. Most of the students invest a lot of  
themselves in this work, and we try to match that in the  
quality of attention that we give to their work, both in  
written comments and in one-on-one conversations.  
As with any teaching, here too there are sometimes  
frustrations, as well. Students who miss the deadlines,  
don't respond to constructive criticism, or who just burn  
out before the process has run its course can pose  
challenges for faculty. As always, we try to find a  
balance between "carrot" and "stick" in helping students  
move through the process and feel a sense of  
accomplishment at the end.

See Comps, pg. 2

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## SUGGESTED SUMMER READING

*Comps, continued from pg. 1*

Religion Faculty suggested the following books as great religion reading for the summer...

*Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America.* By Michael Emerson and Christian Smith. Oxford, 2001.

*The Life of Judaism.* Harvey E. Goldberg, ed. University of California Press, 2001.

*To Do the Right and the Good: A Jewish Approach to Modern Social Ethics.* By Elliot N. Dorff. Jewish Publication Society, 2002.

*American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon.* By Stephen Prothero. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003.

*O God of Players: The Story of the Immaculata Mighty Macs.* By Julie Byrne. Columbia University Press, 2003.

*A Woman's Book of Life: The Biology, Psychology, and Spirituality of the Feminine Life Cycle.* By Joan Borysenko. Riverhead Books, 1998.

*No Nature.* By Gary Snyder. Pantheon Books, 1993.

*The Buddha from Brooklyn.* By Martha Sherrill. Vintage, 2001.

*The Taboo of Subjectivity.* By B. Alan Wallace. Oxford, 2004.

*The Death of Vishnu.* By Maril Suri. Perennial, 2002.

*The Dante Club.* By Matthew Pearl. Random House, 2002.

*The Mahabharata: The Greatest Spiritual Epic of All Time.* By Krishna Dharma. Torchlight, 1999.

*Love in a Dead Language.* By Lee Siegel. University of Chicago Press, 2000.

*Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam.* By Carolyn Moxley Rouse. University of California Press, 2004.

### **Professor Roger Jackson:**

While working with comps students year in and year out has both its rewards and frustrations, the former far outweigh the latter. It's extremely heartening to see how much initiative, depth of research, and intellectual sophistication most students are able to bring to their comps process. The best of them, in fact, are producing work that is of master's level, or even beyond. When I write letters for students applying to grad school (whatever the area), it's always helpful, I think, that I can attest to a student's ability to conceive, draft, revise, and bring to completion a major independent piece of work – these often are the qualities that advanced degree programs are looking for in their applicants.

Also, while Louis is right that much about the comps process has remained unchanged for many years (especially in terms of the annual rhythms), there have been a number of changes in the format since I got here 15 years ago. In terms of the written essay, if I recall correctly, in my first few years here, there was a two-track system, where students with a high GPA in the major could write a long (40-50 page) paper on a topic of their choosing (subject to department approval, of course), while those with a slightly lower GPA wrote a 25-30 page paper that was either comparative or theoretical/methodological in focus. We were uncomfortable with the inequities implicit in this system, and so, early in the '90s, leveled the playing field by requiring the same 25-30 page comparative or methodological paper of everyone. Eventually, we began to feel that the comparative or methodological restriction was both too confining and difficult to justify intellectually, so in the late '90s we relaxed those restrictions, so that students could write a 25-30 page paper on any topic that interested them, provided it was approved by the department. What we've come around to, then, is the topical and methodological freedom that we granted higher GPA students when I arrived, with the somewhat smaller page (now word) limit that has been imposed on most comps for many years.

*See Comps, pg. 3*

Please  
Welcome Next  
Year's SDA's!

Sarah Burks '05

&

Pete Franklin '05

*Comps, continued from pg. 2*

In terms of the oral presentation of comps, the half-hour per student presentation time has only been in place for a decade or less. When the two-track system was in place, those who wrote longer comps had a half-hour, while those who did the mere (!) 30-pager presented them at a panel session, with as little as ten minutes apiece for presentation and discussion. Sometime after we abandoned the two-track system, we decided to give everyone a half-hour, as this seemed the minimum "day in the sun" one had earned for all the work put in over the course of the year.

Finally, the senior seminar, taught by the department chair, has been in place for less than a decade, too. Before that – as I told the participants in the very first seminar, in the winter of '95 – the situation was such that you're born alone, you die alone, and you do comps alone. Well, ultimately, you do do comps (like the other two) alone, but if the process can be eased by participation in a community of fellow scholars, one may feel a bit less isolated, and a bit more supported. I think that our hope for the seminar has in fact been borne out over the years.

### Senior Britta Blodgett:

*The Influence of Brahmoism Within the Films of Satyajit Ray*

#### Abstract:

The study of religion and film are rarely linked together, but religion can have a profound sway on the messages put forth in film. Bengali film director Satyajit Ray was one of the great directors of the twentieth century, and although at some points he denied it, Ray's films were greatly affected by his Brahmo religious upbringing. In this paper the influence of Brahmoism, the evolution of Ray's religious beliefs, and the result of this evolution on the way his films represent religion will be analyzed through close reading of three of his films.

#### Reflection:

Comps is this thing that sort of takes over your life; it is not always entirely present, but until it is done it likes to lurk in the corners of your head. That is why it is sort of hard to believe that comps is close to being finished. I am lucky (and sort of shocked) that I still find my topic quite fascinating. Picking a topic you can be interested in for a while makes your job much easier. If you hit February and you hate the wretched Indian movies you are studying, it is going to be a terribly long time until April. I knew that I wanted to do a project that dealt with religion and film or media, but the hard part for me was identifying a topic about which I could get enough information. I also really appreciate that we had to hand in a draft and then got comments back on it. Not every department does that, but since you invest so much time into your comps paper it is nice to be able to really have the time to revise. The revising was hard for me because I sometimes felt lost in the combination of the information in my paper and the information in my head and could not remember exactly how much had changed from the first draft. The senior seminar was good because it gave us strategies for dealing with writing comps, helped to keep us on a schedule, and sometimes served as group therapy. In the end I am glad that I did comps because I learned what a project such as this takes, because I have what I think is an interesting paper, and because the process will soon be over.

*See Comps, pg. 4*

### Alumni News:

**Rebecca Littlejohn '98** received her M.Div. from Pacific School of Religion in 2001. She has been the pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Anniston, Alabama since October, 2001. She married Todd Lesh in 2003 in Anniston.

**Michael Taylor '66**, a professor at Marietta College in Marietta, Ohio, has co-authored a second book, *Spinning Wheels and Their Accessories* (Schiffer Books). During fall 2004, he will be on sabbatical, investigating leadership transitions among German pietist communitarian societies in the United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**Senior Jeremy Lambshead:**

*Investigating the Compatibility of the Dalai Lama's Mind & Life Conferences with Ian Barbour's Fourfold Typology for Religion and Science*

**Abstract:**

My paper analyzes whether Barbour's typology for religion and science is applicable to the relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and neuroscience (in the Dalai Lama's Mind & Life Conferences), or whether this relationship warrants a separate conceptual framework.

**Reflection:**

My comps experience has generally been quite positive. It was something of a challenge to refine a broad interest in the Mind and Life Conferences down to a narrow, contestable focus. Nevertheless, it has been rewarding (perhaps even somewhat exciting) to do an in-depth study on something so near and dear to my (intellectual) heart. At times it was tempting to think "what's the big deal? it's just a longer term paper," but we knew the standards were higher, given the amount of time and energy we were expected to put into our research and papers. After all, I've heard that in the academic world published articles can take a year or more to complete. It was neat to be given ample time and human resources (our comps advisors) to undertake a scholarly endeavor at least slightly reminiscent of those undertaken by professional academics (but perhaps our comps advisors will argue the converse). In many senses, the "comps experience" has been a "taste of academia" that fluctuated from bitter to salty to sweet to sour to spicy – an important taste test for those of us considering further pursuits within academia. It was satisfying to complete a project that was not the result of a weekend or two of research and a few days of caffeinated paper writing. The comps process (writing, receiving detailed faculty feedback, revising, receiving more feedback, and giving a public presentation) has given me at least one big lesson: writing and speaking rely at least as much on the presentation and organization of information as on a clear mastery of the material. Despite the pain and agony of endless comps minutiae, for me it has certainly been a worthwhile addition to the host of academic projects we undertake at Carleton.

**Comps Abstracts**

**Violet Blosser:**

*How to be a Church in the Modern World: Gustavo Gutiérrez's "A Theology of Liberation" and the Vatican Conflict*

Violet wrote about Gustavo Gutiérrez's vision of the church and the role it plays in the conflict between liberation theology and the Vatican.

**Carrie Cox:**

*The Universities of Islam: The Religious Significance of Muslim Schools in the Nation of Islam during the Leadership of Elijah Muhammad*

In her paper, Carrie analyzed the religious reasons, many of which are economic and/or political, for founding and maintaining the Universities of Islam during the leadership of Elijah Muhammad.

**Amy Etzel:**

*The Ritual Process within 'The Legend of Duluoz'*

**John Gabrielson:**

*By Their Fruits*

John's comps was a study of Christian community formation within Latin American liberation and post-liberal theologies.

**Mac Henry:**

*Why Prophecy Matters: Ritual and Logic in the Prophetic Movements of Wangomend and Neolin, 1760-1771.*

Mac's paper centered on two of the many Native American prophets in the Ohio River Valley region in the mid-eighteenth century and the ways scholarly interpretations have ignored these movements' religious significance.

**Cori Sparks:**

*Self-Representation in Hinduism: Two Gurus in America*

Cori analyzed the differences between the autobiographies of Swamis Yogananda and Muktananda and the way their intended (western) audiences affected their self representation.

**Gunnar Stapp:**

*Faith and Morality: The Suspension of Ethics within the Bhagavad-Gita and Genesis*

Gunnar wrote his paper on the issues of "faith" and "morality" in the Abraham Story (Genesis 22) and The Bhagavad-Gita (a Hindu Epic), analyzing these works through the lenses of Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling" and Gandhi's interpretation of the Gita.

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