Winter 2011

NumeNews:
What interests you about the study of religion? What are your interests within the field?
Professor Ipsen: That’s a big question. When I initially came into biblical studies I was a defector from classics. A lot of classicists think that the Bible wrecked antiquity—classical antiquity, so it was like, “How could you go over to the Bible?” I was un-churched, I didn’t grow up with a religious practice, but I was surrounded by tons of people who had a religious practice. I thought, “wow,” I can talk to everybody about the Bible because it pervades culture in so many different ways. With Euripides and Homer it is harder to have conversations with every day people about it. I come from the underclass myself so I also like the attention to liberation and all kinds of issues of concern with the oppressed, it seemed like the closest thing to lower class resistance literature you could find from classical times or from antiquity, so I thought this is my text, it resonates with me.

NumeNews: What is your favorite topic to teach and why?
Professor Ipsen: I have been teaching mainly critical theory for the past ten years and putting liberation approaches and interpretations of the Bible in perspectives of critical theory. I guess my favorite topic is working through the liberation themes in the Bible and how people come up with it and interpret it.

NumeNews: What is your first impression of Carleton students?
Professor Ipsen: They’re awesome! They do all of the reading and they are just so studious. They ask good questions and pay attention to details. I am still adapting to a more reticent reserved Minnesota culture. I am used to students who are much more vociferous so I keep hoping they are not bored with me and are just being polite.
By virtue of a term of earned leave and generous assistance from the College, I was able to take a sabbatical for all of 2009–10. I received support to work on a monograph entitled *Opening the Great Seal: Mahāmudrā in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*. Mahāmudrā, the “Great Seal,” is a crucial term in the tantric Buddhist schools of India and in most traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, where it is synonymous with buddha-nature, emptiness, great bliss, and buddhahood, and also is a system of meditation in which one liberates the mind by focusing on the very nature of mind itself. I’ve published smaller pieces on Mahāmudrā in various places for the past ten years, and am also working on a co-edited volume of conference papers on the topic, as well as a translation of Mahāmudrā texts from the Geluk tradition of Tibetan Buddhism—but *Opening the Great Seal* is my most ambitious Mahāmudrā project, a history of discourse about the term across two cultures, three languages, and a thousand years, with philosophical and comparative reflections about the issues raised by the Buddhist discussions. Having already written about half, I expected to finish the book on my sabbatical.

Sabbatical is never just about the projects one hopes to complete—it’s a chance to step back from the academic whirlwind and reflect a little, take a trip or two, catch up on scholarly reading, reconnect with old friends, go with the flow of life. With that in mind, I planned a fall trip to Spain and Morocco with my wife, after which I would lead a Carleton alumni tour to north India. In the spring we would visit our son in Argentina and go on retreat in Collegeville with a Tibetan Buddhist master. I would have plenty of time to work on the book in the periods between trips.

That, at least, was the plan. The flow of life, however, often is more turbulent than we expect. I came down with an infection on the Spain/Morocco trip, which knocked me flat for six weeks. As I pondered whether I had the strength to lead the alumni trip to India, my father received a diagnosis of terminal cancer. So, rather than leading the trip to India (which went on fine without me) or working on my book, I spent much of the fall and winter going back and forth to New York, staying with my father as much as I could before he died, in February. In March, just as I was ready to get back to work, ice dam leaks in my study forced me to move all my books and files upstairs. By now, my sabbatical was more than half over, and I didn’t have the time or energy to develop momentum on *Opening the Great Seal*—so I chipped away at the edited volume and the translation, taking occasional solace from the roar of Iguazu Falls, the silence of retreat, or the rhythms of the waves in Nantucket Sound. By the time I returned to teaching last September, the edited volume and translation were mostly done, even if the most difficult seal, the monograph, remained unopened.

Of course, it was unfortunate that my sabbatical work was disrupted by illness, death, and ceiling drips. But such is life, so who am I to complain? Indeed, if not for sabbatical, I could not have had the precious time with my father that I did. And, through all the year’s vicissitudes, I probably learned as much about life and the mind as any Buddhist text could have imparted. In this sense, whatever the “measurable outcome,” my sabbatical was valuable precisely because it led me off the printed page, into what Chuang Tzu calls “the alternations of the world, the workings of fate.”

For more information, or to contribute to NumeNews, call or email Sandy Saari at (507) 222-4232, ssaari@carleton.edu
GLOBAL RELIGIONS IN MINNESOTA

This winter, in the course Global Religions in Minnesota, students are engaged not simply in reading historical and theoretical scholarship about religious life in America and among transnational religious communities worldwide, but they are engaged in a broad and impressive array of fieldwork including the following projects:

- Documenting the stories, practices, and conceptions of Somali Muslim identity in Fairbault. (Rachel Foran)
- A exploration of the history, and contemporary cultural dynamics among Jewish and non-Jewish institutions and individuals within the St. Louis Park Eruv neighborhood (Jacob Cohn)
- Explorations of Jewish conceptions of the significance of inter-faith and intra-faith engagements, through a case study of Mt. Zion Temple in St. Paul. (Jimmy Rothschild)
- Examining Maple Grove’s Religious Institutions and their Interactions with one another. (Colin MacArthur)
- The history, life and construction of Watt Munisotaram Cambodian Buddhist Temple in Hampton, MN (Hannah Comstock-Gay)
- The Mega-Religious World of Living Word Christian Center and its active involvement with the national organization Christians United for Israel, Brooklyn Park, MN (Ainsley Land)
- The Personalities, Prayers and Practices at the home-based, Indo-Caribbean Minnesota Hindu Milan Mandir in Eagan, MN (David Tullis)
- Stories and Philosophies from the Minneapolis Friends Meeting in Minneapolis, MN (Katie Powell)
- Considering the Differences and Dynamics in Brazilian Religious Communities in MN (Anna Morrison)

DESCRIPTIONS OF NEW WINTER 2011 COURSES

RELG 125. Jesus and the Gospels The Gospel accounts of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John are among the earliest Christian texts depicting the life, mission or “good news” of Jesus Christ. Comparative critical reading of these four Gospels is the basis for both historical and literary modes of discerning the social world of Jesus, his audiences, and his core message. Through these unique canonical texts that describe Jesus, his social world, and the audiences he inspired, this course will survey key results of the methods of distinguishing the worlds behind, in front of, and within these four Gospels, as well as the means of discerning them.—A. Ipsen

RELG 246. Religion and the Black Freedom Struggle This course will examine the key events, figures, philosophies, tactics, and consequences of the modern civil rights movement in United States. The period from 1955-1965 will receive special attention, but the roots of the freedom struggle and the effect on recent American history will also be considered. Studying primary source documents, film, secondary literature, and music will facilitate understanding of what is widely regarded as the most effective mass protest movement in modern American history. Emphasis will be given to the centrality of religion for the social ethics of key movement participants.—A. Wiley

RELG 248. Religion, Law, Religious Law This course will examine the burgeoning field of “religion and law” through asking two questions central to its inquiry: 1) How does religion become law? 2) How does secular law extend into domains to which religion also stakes claims through the adjudication process? To answer the first question, we’ll examine the development of Islamic shari’a from “God’s Path” into “religious law” in its codification and canonization by the modern state. To answer the second question, we’ll look at American First Amendment jurisprudence, examining recent cases to determine how the law defines “religion” and what assumptions about religion such definitions legislate.—N. Salomon

RELG 287. Many Marys The history of Christianity usually focuses on Jesus: the stories and doctrines that have revolved around him. This course will focus on Mary and the many ways she has contributed to the various lived traditions of Christianity. We will, for example, consider the mother of Jesus (Miriam, as she was first called) as she has figured in literature, art, apparition, and ritual practice around the world. We will also consider Mary Magdalene, her foil, who appears in popular discourse from the Gnostic gospels to The Da Vinci Code. Case studies, texts, images, and film will be our fare.—K. Bloomer

RELG 289. Global Religions in Minnesota Somali Muslims in Rice County? Hindus in Maple Grove? Hmong shamans in St. Paul hospitals? Sun Dances in Pipestone? In light of globalization, the religious landscape of Minnesota, like America more broadly, has become more visibly diverse. Lake Wobegon stereotypes aside, Minnesota has always been characterized by some diversity but the realities of immigration, dispossession, dislocation, economics, and technology have made religious diversity more pressing in its implications for every arena of civic and cultural life. This course bridges theoretical knowledge with engaged field research focused on how Midwestern contexts shape global religious communities and how these communities challenge and transform Minnesota.—S. Sippy
While all Carleton faculty are involved consistently as campus citizens, this year is a uniquely rich year for Religion faculty serving in the Carleton Community. Here are some of the Religion faculty’s commitments:

**Louis Newman:** Director of Perlman Learning and Teaching Center

**Michael McNally:** Faculty Co-Chair of Community Equity and Diversity Initiative

**Lori Pearson:** Posse* Ten Mentor; Elected Member of Faculty Affairs Committee; Faculty Chair of Intergroup Dialogue Pilot Project

**Roger Jackson:** Elected Member of Faculty Grants Committee; Chair of Asian Studies Program in 2011-2012

*For more information please refer to [http://www.possefoundation.org](http://www.possefoundation.org)