Introducing...

Elizabeth Perez

Visiting Assistant Professor Elizabeth (Lisa) Perez joined the Religion Department this winter. She is currently working on her dissertation at the University of Chicago, and is expecting to earn her Ph.D. in the summer of 2009. NumeNews asked Lisa a few questions...

NumeNews: What are your interests within the field of religion?
Elizabeth Perez: I am interested in the everyday lived experience of religious practice, and the formation of religious subjects in arenas that are usually not thought of as ‘sacred’ or ‘ceremonial,’ but that entail training of the body and the cultivation of sensibilities that contribute to religious transformation. My long-term research interests include Caribbean altar display; images of the Black female body in the material culture and aesthetic regimes of Afro-Atlantic religions; and popular representations of Haitian Vodou and Brazilian Candomblé.

NN: Are there any projects you are currently working on?
EP: I am currently finishing my dissertation, “Returning to the Drum: Healing and Conversion in An African-American Santería Community,” based on ethnographic research conducted on Chicago’s South Side over the course of eighteen months between 2005-06. I am also the Society for the Anthropology of Religion’s student representative to the American Anthropological Association, and I will be presenting a lecture on my work on a panel at our annual meeting in the spring, near San Francisco.

Professor Anne Patrick to Retire

By Roger Jackson

As many of you are aware, Sister Anne Patrick, the William H. Laird Professor of Religion and the Liberal Arts, will be retiring this June after twenty-nine years on the Carleton faculty. In her time here she has taught a range of courses on Roman Catholic traditions, religion and literature, feminist and liberation theologies, and Christian ethics. The first woman tenured in the Religion department and a past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, she has been an inspiring teacher and mentor to generations of students, and has gained widespread admiration for her scholarship, service to the profession and her order, and persistent work to improve the position of women in the Roman Catholic Church, as well as for her personal integrity, moral sensitivity, and wisdom.

Anne has been asked by the College to deliver the Honors Convocation address on Friday, May 29, 2009, at 3 p.m. in the Carleton Chapel. Her colleagues in the department plan to follow up her valedictory with a celebration on the evening of Saturday, May 30.

We hope that many of you will want to attend Anne’s convocation address and the celebratory events the following day, and will make plans to do so. More details will follow shortly, but we wanted to alert you to the date as soon as we settled on it. If you have any questions, please direct them to me or to the department’s administrative assistant, Jill Tollefson (jtollefs@carleton.edu).
I spent the fall on Antioch College’s Buddhist Studies program in Japan. On this program we lived in a Shin Buddhist monastery in Kyoto, woke up before dawn to attend Shingon services and Rinzai meditation, made pilgrimages to several sacred mountains, and did a week of rigorous training with Soto Zen monks. During the lengthy independent study, I researched Japan’s small but vibrant Theravada community and did two brief homestays with a Tenrikyo priest’s family and my old homestay family from three years ago.

In the hills above the abandoned port of Mojikou stands this mid-20th century Burmese pagoda (see image above). I spoke with the monks who still live in a monastery below this pagoda as part of my Theravada research. The monks prefer to focus on maintaining their sangha and meditating, but the interest of the Japanese locals is in the maintenance of the pagoda, a memorial to Japanese veterans of the Burmese front.

My host family was eager to take me to their hometown’s major religious attraction, an enormous statue of Kannon, the Bodhisattva of compassion (see image at right). Inside the Indian-style stupa, there was an interesting animatronic depiction of the Buddhist hells.

In Tokyo, I attended an evening Shinto festival of medieval origin (see image at left). Part of the festival is the traditional winter hunt for kumade, decorated rakes similar in function to Christmas wreaths, but indicative of material prosperity. When a kumade is purchased the shopkeeper and customer participate in a short but complicated haggling ritual which is difficult to describe here.

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RESEARCHING THE SINHALESE AND THEIR GODS
By Jared Christensen

This fall term I traveled to Sri Lanka with the Intercollegiate Sri Lanka Education (ISLE) Program. Despite the uncertainties of the ongoing conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil separatist LTTE, the ISLE program has been sending students to Sri Lanka safely for more than 25 years. Recently, the program has begun running twice a year with one program in the fall and another in the spring. During these semester-long terms, participating students take courses organized by the program in cooperation with the University of Peradeniya, and live with a host family in Kandy, the island’s second-largest city and cultural center of the Sinhalese. Towards the end of the program, students are granted about a month to engage with the country in a research-oriented independent study.

Even though Sri Lanka is generally represented as a Buddhist society, the island enjoys a diversity of religious traditions due to its multiethnic make-up and colonial history. Sri Lankan Tamils practice their own special brand of South Indian Hinduism, and many other Sri Lankan people profess Islam. But should you think that all Sinhalese people are Buddhists (as nationalist propaganda would have it) I insist on pointing out two things. One, the success of the Christian missionaries. Colonialism may have gone away, but Sinhalese and Tamil Christians have certainly not. Two, there is more to Sinhalese Buddhism than Theravada. In fact, the Sinhalese have a folk tradition to deal in supernatural matters (such as spirits, devils and magic) which strict Buddhism leaves out.

For my independent study, I looked at one aspect of this ‘spirit religion’ of the Sinhalese. And keeping with the theme of challenging the simplistic ideas we have about Buddhism in Sri Lanka, I studied the oracular practices of self-made priests and soothsayers, who belong to a recent trend in cult-groups that have begun to espouse the same kind of theistic devotion often found in Hindu traditions. Yet while they display the power of the gods through oracles and magical acts and preach the love of these gods, many of these priests and their followers unquestionably identify themselves as Buddhists. This was an extraordinary opportunity to work in the field with a subject so strangely challenging to our textbook conceptions and academic definitions.

RELIGION DEPARTMENT DISPLAY CASE:
RELIGION IN COMICS

Batman, Spiderman, Superman...and religion? This winter, the Religion Department’s display case explores the influence of a variety of religions on popular comics, as well as the influence of the medium of the comic strip/book on religious texts. The unique combination of visual and textual elements that make comic books so appealing provides a fresh way to tell old stories. Items featured include well-known comic books (including Wonder Woman and Captain America) that contain religious aspects, religious texts (such as the Gospel of Mark) in comic book form, and comic books that deal specifically with religious issues (such as Kavalier & Clay, pictured above). Be sure to check it out!
We asked the faculty of the Religion Department what they like to read when the weather gets cold...

**Bone, by Jeff Smith.** (Graphic Novel), recommended by William Elison
It was so good I really didn’t want it to end. It’s an epic fantasy story, comparable in some ways to the Narnia books, in that there are protagonists from a modern world who find themselves in a dangerous and romantic fantasy world, only instead of wartime England they seem to come from a kind of goofyball Mickey Mouse comic strip kind of place, and the more realistically drawn realm they journey through is spookier, funnier, and to my mind more richly imagined than anything C. S. Lewis came up with. (I also think, in place of Lewis’s Christian subtext, there are Hinduism-inspired elements that pop up in *Bone*). Another way it invites comparison with the Narnia stories is that it’s being marketed to kids, but I think there’s plenty there for adults—even grumpy academics—to chew on.

**A Tale of Love and Darkness, by Amos Oz,** recommended by Louis Newman

**Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention, by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi,** recommended by Anne Patrick
Based on 30 years of research, and interviews in the 1990s with dozens of creative people in various fields (including Wayne Booth, Nadine Gordimer, Stephen Jay Gould, Jonas Salk, May Sarton, and Gunther Schuller) this book offers a rich description of the creative process and creative lives. Csikszentmihalyi, the former chair of the psychology department at the University of Chicago, has a clear and engaging writing style and proposes a theory of creativity that emphasizes its social dimension. Readers will get some practical ideas for fostering their own creativity from these pages.

**Blessed Among All Women: Women Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time, by Robert Ellsberg,** recommended by Anne Patrick
Ellsberg (the son of Daniel Ellsberg, of Pentagon Papers fame) is an editor for Orbis Books, a leading publisher of liberation theology in English. This is a collection of informative meditations about the lives of women including Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen, Emily Dickinson, Dorothy Day, and Flannery O’Connor. The brief biographies are organized around the eight Christian “beatitudes,” or gospel statements that begin with, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” By perusing this user-friendly volume readers will have occasion to learn about women ranging from the labor agitator Mother Jones to the legendary Lady Godiva (based on an 11th century defender of the poor) to victims of violence Etty Hillesum (“mystic of the Holocaust”) and Cassie Bernall (who died in the Columbine shootings in 1999).

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**Spirits of Banaras Tour 2008**

This past November through the effort of Professor William Elison, students at Carleton got a chance to hear the classical Indian music of professional musicians Ravindra Goswami and Ramchandra Pandit perform. Goswami, a sitar player, is a lauded artist from the city of Banaras in India. Pandit plays the tabla, and is a long-time performer of classical, semi-classical, folk, and popular music, and specializes in explaining Indian music to Western audiences.

**Alumni Tour: Living Religion in North India**

Prof. Roger Jackson will lead an alumni tour of religious sites in North India from October 14 to November 5, 2009. The tour will include meetings with Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain practitioners, and will visit such sites as Delhi, Amritsar, Varanasi, Bodh Gaya, Khajuraho, Agra, and Pushkar. For information, go to: go.carleton.edu/4.

For more information, or to contribute to NumeNews, call or email Jill Tollefson at (507)222-4232, jtollefs@carleton.edu