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RELIGIOUS STUDIES NEWSLETTER



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Oscar Nominated Film Maker, Pawo Choyning Dorji

Letter from the Chair



Happy Fall Semester!

The Department of Religious Studies just welcomed students back to campus and is looking forward to another fantastic year of exciting classes, thought-provoking events, and new research opportunities.

This year's newsletter highlights the many accomplishments of our wonderful faculty and students. Our faculty were highly sought after for their expertise on a range of prominent social issues, from the election of Pope Leo XIV to the role of psychedelics in religious communities.

Our department continues to lead interdisciplinary initiatives that bring together experts, students, and community members to discuss pressing social issues and to build bridges across campus. I invite you to check out the list of our amazing student capstone projects. As always, these projects showcase the creative, innovating approaches to religion that our department fosters.

In these uncertain times, students seek out Religious Studies classes to ask big questions and seek nuanced answers. Our packed events and full course rosters make me hopeful for the future that our students are building.

Very best wishes,
Justine Howe

Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Religious Studies

Faculty Spotlight



Dr. Jonathan Tan: the worldwide media's highly sought after expert on all things Papal

In the fall of 2024, Pope Francis, the first Latin American leader of the Roman Catholic Church, embarked on a historic tour of Southeast Asia. The tour included stops in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and Singapore. Dr. Jonathan Tan, the Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan Professor of Catholic Studies, was kept busy by the worldwide media as our resident expert on Christianity in Asia.

In February, Dr. Tan continued with the momentum from his work on the tour and presented his talk "Beyond a Eurocentric Catholic Church: Insights and Reflections from Asian Catholicism" on zoom.

When Pope Francis passed away on the Monday following Easter 2025, Dr. Tan was again called upon to shed light on his legacy, the papal conclave, and the new successor.

Dr. Tan's expertise created a path to his many interviews and op-ed's, providing a global stage for Case Western's Department of Religious Studies.

2024

Southeast Asia 11-day Tour

Dr. Tan began his worldwide media journey on August 28th, 2024 when he sat with VOA news to discuss the Pope's upcoming tour on September 3rd. Over the next week, he participated in an online roundtable discussion, sat for another six interviews, appeared as a guest on a podcast, and wrote his own op-ed for UCA-News.

2025

Pope Francis

The year began with Dr. Tan's well attended zoom lecture. After the Pope's passing in late April, the parade of interviews began again, followed by two more op-eds and a featured column in The People's Reporter.

Pope Leo XIV

The Papal Conclave concluded with the election of Pope Leo XIV; Dr. Tan finished his marathon of expertise with three interviews and a final op-ed.

Articles and Interviews

The following links provide the complete list of articles and interviews

<https://religion.case.edu/2024/08/29/jonathan-tan-pope-francis-southeast-asia-tour/>

<https://religion.case.edu/2025/04/22/pope-francis-passing-dr-jonathan-tan-discusses-the-legacy-he-left-behind/>

<https://religion.case.edu/2025/05/09/dr-jonathan-tan-offers-insight-on-the-appointment-of-pope-leo-xiv/>

Grants & Fellowships



Dr. Justine Howe and Dr. Michele Tracy Berger receive Faith and Health Campus Grant from Interfaith America

In 2025, Dr. Justine Howe, associate professor and chair of the Department of Religious Studies, and Dr. Michele Tracy Berger, the Nord Family Professor and director of the Baker-Nord Institute for the Humanities, were two of the three Case Western Reserve University faculty members to receive a two-year, \$60,000 Faith and Health Campus Grant from Interfaith America. CWRU was among just 15 campuses across America to receive the award.

As awareness grows around the impact of religion as a social determinant of health, Interfaith America is taking bold steps to equip future health professionals with the tools they need to serve our nation's increasingly diverse communities. Supported by the John Templeton Foundation, the Faith & Health Campus Grants aim to catalyze change within higher education by embedding interfaith competency and religious literacy into health-related education and practice.

Through this grant, our two awardees will lead the College of Arts and Sciences in

expanding curricular offerings at the intersection of religion and health, along with third awardee from the School of Medicine, Eileen Anderson. They will build sustainable partnerships with community-based faith organizations and spiritual leaders providing health services, and strengthen scholarly and public understanding of religion's role in human wellbeing. Through their efforts, our University joins a collaboration with other institutions across fields such as public health and both medical and religious education.

At its core, this initiative reflects a growing recognition that embracing religious and spiritual diversity can significantly improve both individual and community health outcomes. The Faith & Health Campus Grants represent an important step toward a more inclusive, culturally competent health ecosystem.

Congratulations, Dr. Howe and Dr. Berger!

For more information on the Interfaith America Grant, visit:

<https://www.interfaithamerica.org/grants/faith-health-campus/>



Dr. Justine Howe



Dr. Michele Tracy Berger

Grants & Fellowships

Dr. Timothy Beal's Three-Year, Henry Luce Foundation Grant:

Finite Futures: Imagining Alternative Ways Forward in the Anthropocene

What if it's too late to avoid some kind of ecological catastrophe? Maybe it's not, and we should be doing everything we can so that it isn't. Still, what if it is? Shouldn't we also be talking about that? What kind of a future do we want to create for ourselves on such a horizon? What might it mean to collapse well?

"Finite Futures: Imagining Alternative Ways Forward in the Anthropocene" (PI), a \$250,000 grant awarded in 2022 from the Henry Luce Foundation, focused on imagining future possibilities at the intersection of religion, technology, and justice in the face of ecological catastrophe. Dr. Timothy Beal, along with Dr. Joy Bostic, Sarah Gridley, Michael Hemenway, Andrea Jain, Sylvester Johnson, Jenny Preston (Religious Studies MA), Mayra Rivera, Idris Tang, and Jenna Wagner, sought to answer these questions. This past Fall, 2024, the grant came to exciting conclusion with a lecture series of five prominent speakers and educators, in conjunction with Dr. Beal's course RLG 206: Religion and Ecology.

Bayo Akomolafe 9/25/24

2025 Hildegard and Elbert Baker Visiting Scholar in the Humanities

"Death Is a Distraction: Responsibility at Posthuman Precipices"



Nadia Bolz-Weber 11/7/24

Renowned Speaker, Bestselling Author, and ordained Lutheran Pastor

"Let There Be Snacks (and Sex and Songs): Finding a Defiant Hope in What Makes Us Most Human"



Andrea Jain 10/10/24

Professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University

"Swallowing the Future: Cynicism, Nostalgia, and Other Capitalist Techniques for Going Nowhere"



Sylvester Johnson 11/21/24

Professor of Black Studies at Northwestern University

"The Global South Is Our Future: Climate Collapse, Socio-Technical Innovation, and Global Governance after Democracy"



Mayra Rivera 10/24/24

Professor of Religion and Latine Studies at Harvard University

"Icons for Tempestuous Times"



Student Highlights

Capstones

The department had a stellar group of capstone projects this year, which were showcased at its Capstone Celebration on April 9th, 2025.

Patricia Carig

"The Final Girl? Or The Holy Androgene?: An Exploration of the Connections Between a Slasher Film Trope and Genesis I & II"

Vibha Mandayam

"Democratization or Division? Digital Hinduism and the Making of Religious Hierarchies"

Eliana Matos

"The Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit of the Kongos of Villa Mella: A Literature Review"

Nicholas Soares

"The Primacy Problem: How Leadership Differences Complicate Rapprochement between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches"

Hannah Zacharia

"Rituals in Transition: The Evolution of the Syro-Malabar Rituals of Perunnal in Migration"



Sadhana App for Digital Hinduism

Fellowship

Reisacher Summer Fellowship

This fellowship supports summer research projects undertaken by majors or minors in Religious Studies.

Winner: Lily Stuart

"Sacred Music for Nonbelievers: Concert Festivals and American Spirituality"

Awards

The Ratner Family Prize

The highest academic achievement in the study of religion.

Senior Winner: Vibha Mandayam

Senior Winner: Hannah Zacharia

Cont. Student Winner: Asha Kartha

The Eudese and Elmer Paull Prize

For demonstrating an interest in Jewish studies or Jewish contemporary life.

Senior Winner: Sydney Rubin

First-Year Winner: Maya Friedlander

The Ira and Ruth Bressler Prize

For outstanding work in the area of Jewish Studies.

Cont. Student Winner: Ray Perry

Course Spotlight



Dr. Liang and Students at Playhouse Square

Featured Course

RLGN / ASIA 346: Buddhism Goes to the Movies

In Spring 2025, Dr. Jue Liang led her students into the lively expressions of Buddhist teachings, communities, practices, and lives across the cinematic world. This new course, Buddhism Goes to the Movies, explores the rich emanations of Buddhism beyond those traditionally labeled as "films about Buddhism." Students of this course soaked in Cleveland's Playhouse Square for the Life of Pi stage performance, pictured above. The course concluded with a visit from Oscar-nominated director Pawo Choyning Dorji for two film screenings and a lecture. The students were invited to a one-on-one lunch with Dorji. (For more on his visit, see page 12). The final creative assignments of this course asks the students to both make an argument about what a Buddhist film is, and make their own short video, tying in everything they had learned both in the classroom and beyond.

New Course - Fall '24

RLGN / AFST / ENGL / ETHS / WGST / WLIT 365F: Afrofuturism and the Black Imaginary: Legacies and Futures

The term Afrofuturism is an all-encompassing term used to describe creative work - literature (especially science fiction), music, art - that focuses on Afro-diasporic ways of being and knowing. In her newly developed course, Dr. Michele Tracy Berger, explores the theoretical, literary, and cultural expressions of Afrofuturism. Traditional speculative fiction canons have often distorted and/or erased the existence of people of color in the future, this course re-centers these experiences.

New Course - Spring '25

RLGN / ETHS 246: Food, Culture, Ethics, and Religion

Dr. Jonathan Tan's newest course examines how food intersects with culture, ethnicity, ethics, religion, and globalization to shape identity, society, and values across time and geography. Through critical analysis of contemporary and historical practices, students explore how food both reflects and influences social dynamics, power structures, and global transformations in a diverse transnational world.

Alumni Spotlight

Meet Chloe Gerus, a 2021 graduate of CWRU, currently working towards a career in the public sector of criminal law. At CWRU, Chloe majored in Religious Studies and Political Science with a minor in Women and Gender Studies. This year, 2025, she graduated from William & Mary College of Law and has recently taken the Ohio Bar Exam. While she awaits results, Chloe volunteers her time and legal skills to those in need.



Why did you choose Religious Studies?

I grew up going to Catholic school and the natural lawyer in me always wanted to question and debate. I received a great education from every school I had the opportunity to attend; however, the scope of my desire for knowledge in religion exceeded the curriculum. When I began my education at CWRU, I was thrilled to find so many classes that allowed me to explore the world's religions and cultures. CWRU is an incredibly diverse campus and there were so many opportunities—in and out of the classroom—to learn more. CWRU was the perfect place to satisfy that desire for knowledge.

What was your favorite part about the program?

The professors were, and still are, the best part of any program at CWRU. However, the religious studies department in particular was truly magic at work. The diverse professors allowed for amazing courses in so many interesting subjects, I truly did not have the time in my schedule to take every course I wished to. Outside of being the most caring and compassionate on campus, the religious studies professors had the most clear love for their areas of expertise. They talked about their latest books or articles with a fiercely infectious enthusiasm that made me excited to learn. I truly believe CWRU attracts some of the very best people and the religious studies department is a testament to that.

What have you done, during or since your time at CWRU, that you are proudest of?

One of my proudest moments while at CWRU was being selected to be a Baker Nord Scholar. That program gave me so many opportunities to learn about the humanities at CWRU while working alongside the very best people. Friends I made during my time as a scholar have become lifelong friends—and some of the most impressive people I know! I also met one of the most impactful mentors of my entire educational career and he truly helped me through my four years. I am eternally grateful I was chosen for that opportunity and the amazing individuals I have in my life because of it.

(Continued on the Religious Studies website)

Doll Seed: a collection of speculative stories by Dr. Michele Tracy Berger



In October 2024, Dr. Michele Tracy Berger, the Eric and Jane Nord Family Professor and Director of the Baker-Nord Institute, published her latest book, *Doll Seed*, a collection of speculative stories, reimagining Black identity through a

blend of horror, fantasy, and Afrofuturism. The stories touch on freedom and sacrifice, trust and betrayal, otherness, and intersections of identity. Dr. Berger hosted a book signing and reading in conjunction with her debut class, *Afrofuturism and the Black Imaginary* (pg. 7). She was [featured for her gripping collection on ideastream](#) on March 31st, 2025.

Dr. Jue Liang published a short reflection with the Conversation (US), [*What the dead, the uncanny and the monstrous tell us about human nature*](#), on a new course she taught in Fall 2024, titled Ghosts, Zombies, and Monsters: What We Fear and Loathe in Religions. This course was supported by a Flash Grant from the Baker-Nord Center for the Humanities, and explored these fearsome and “other-than-human” beings as embodiment of the issues, concerns, hopes, and fears that have shaped our lives.

Dr. Deepak Sarma's article, [*On the Interactions of Law & Religion*](#), (Canopy Forum, September 13, 2024), dives into the cross-racial surrogacy and surrogacy in India from a Hindu perspective, a perspective not yet studied significantly. The article raises critical questions about surrogacy between Hindu surrogates and non-Hindu parents, highlighting concerns over bodily exchanges and their effects on purity and karma. While the Brahminical perspective stresses maintaining caste boundaries, it notes that most Hindus don't follow these strict beliefs. Dr. Sarma also addresses the 2018 ban on commercial surrogacy in India and the lingering bioethical concerns surrounding earlier surrogacy cases.

Dr. Brian Clites, was quoted extensively in the article [*Pam Bondi Unleashes On Alleged 'Anti-Christian Bias'—And A Christian Leader Has Thoughts*](#) (HuffPost, April 24, 2025), discussing the Trump administration's task force. Dr. Clites, the Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan Professor in Catholic Studies II, states that Trump's executive order “cites the First Amendment protection of religious liberty as its guiding principle, but in fact the order itself is a remarkable incursion against the separation of church and state.” He further observes, “By calling out the protection of women's rights as ‘anti-Christian,’ the administration is uplifting the views of some Christians over and against the views of other Christians,” emphasizing that “American Christians hold diverse views about reproductive justice and Transgender rights.”

Faculty Lectures

Keynote: Dr. Timothy Beal

This Fall, 2024, Dr. Timothy Beal traveled to Aarhus University in Denmark to deliver the Keynote Lecture at the 21st biennial



conference of the International Society for Religion, Literature and Culture. The purpose of this conference is for scholars working specifically or broadly in religion,

literature, and culture to reflect on and exemplify what scholarship within the Humanities, including Theology, has to offer in contributing to a renewed mission for the Humanities, and in concretising its value for our rapidly changing world. Dr. Beal's keynote, ["What's So Generative about Generative AI? Talking with Machines about Creativity, Process, and Attention,"](#) thoroughly embodied this mission.

"Qur'ān Translations and US Muslim Pamphlets: Lived Religion, Revivalist Aspirations, and the Culture Wars" Dr. Justine Howe's Online Lecture

On Tuesday, October 29th, Dr. Justine Howe presented this talk as a part of the GloQur Conversations on Qur'ān Translations Online Talk Series.



Dr. Deepak Sarma: a panelist at Harvard's 2025 PULSE Conference

Harvard University's 2025 PULSE Conference, "Sacred Rights: Psychedelics, Law, and Spirituality," explored the complex relationships between psychedelics, religious communities, courts, Congress, and federal agencies. Dr. Deepak Sarma joined a panel to discuss how constitutional doctrine, drug law, and bioethics affect the spiritual use of psychedelics.

"To Be A Woman: Mothers, Yoginis, & Tantric Teachers in Tebetan Buddhism," Dr. Jue Liang's talk at the Frank Museum of art

Dr. Jue Liang (along with Professor Kati Fitzgerald from Wittenberg University) was invited to speak at the Frank Museum of Art, Otterbein University on Friday, October 4th. This was a special lecture in conjunction with the museum's 2024 exhibition, [Gateway to Himalayan Art.](#)



Events



2025 Ratner Family Lecture: "Ambition and Hope," a conversation with Jackie Hidalgo and Marcus Evans

The Annual Ratner Family Lecture 2025, "Ambition and Hope, Here and Elsewhere," was a conversation between two scholars of religion, Jacqueline Hidalgo and Marcus Evans. On Wednesday April 2nd, 2025, together with Dr. Jue Liang as moderator, they discussed ambition and hope in the religious communities, expressions, and textual/artistic creations in their research. They explored how places, both near and far, imagined and real, define these ambitions and hopes. The conversation continued as students were granted an opportunity to sit down in a casual setting with both lecturers for lunch, an event that was enjoyed by all in attendance, most notably by Hidalgo and Evans.

Talk and Film Screenings by Oscar Nominated filmmaker, screenwriter and director, Pawo Choyning Dorji



This past April 23rd through 25th featured an exciting three day experience with the esteemed film maker, Pawo Choyning Dorji. In association with Dr. Jue Liang's class, *Buddhism Goes to the Movies*,

Dorji presented a talk and screenings at the Cinematheque for his two films, "Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom" and "The Monk and the Gun." Dorji's talk titled, Untying Knots of Light and Sculpting Time: Storytelling in Bhutan, focused on the themes of interdependence, impermanence, and the motivation behind storytelling. Drawing from personal experiences, along with spiritual and cultural insights, he explores how Bhutanese stories are deeply interwoven with Buddhist principles, reflecting Bhutan's unique perspective on creativity, existence, and happiness.



Events

"Sinners: A Multivocal Conversation on the Blues, the Big Screen, and Vampire Slayers"



On Friday, May 2nd, 2025, a cross department panel of experts comprised of Dr. Joy R. Bostic of Africana Religion, Dr. AJ Kluth of Musicology and Music, Dr. John Bickers of Native American and Early American History, and Dr. Noël Voltz of African American, Early American, and African Diaspora Histories, all came together to discuss, *Sinners*, Ryan Coogler's latest film. A packed room of students, staff, and faculty alike joined the conversation on racial and historical memory, visions of freedom, and Africana and multicultural futures. *Sinners* is a cinematic feat and a cultural moment that centers around Africana religion and culture and combines historical realism and fantasy within a multicultural landscape. It is a love letter to blues people, a recognition of the cross-cultural spaces that give shape to the rhythms of (U.S.) American religion, music, and movement, and is an acknowledgment of the tensions that remain.

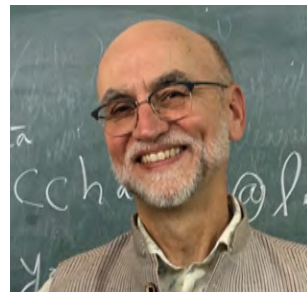
Adam J. Banks Presents, "A Day in the Life of Al Green's Internet: Black Language, Culture and Technology - on Campus and in Community"



Adam J. Banks, Bass Fellow in Undergraduate Education, and Professor of Education and African and African American Studies at Stanford University, delivered a talk on Thursday, March

20th, 2025. His talk explored how Black people in this society have engaged with the mutually constitutive relationships that endure between humans and their technologies. Dr. Banks shared reflections on scholarship, teaching, and pedagogy, as well as his efforts to take intellectual work off campus and into local communities.

"Building Human-Earth Connections through Ecological Action," A Talk with Dr. Chris Chapple



On Wednesday, October 2nd 2024, the Department of Religious Studies welcomed. Dr. Chris Chapple, Doshi Professor of Indic and Comparative Theology and founding director of the Master of Arts in Yoga Studies at Loyola Marymount University. Dr. Chapple joined students and faculty for lunch and a short lecture.