I would like to take this opportunity to welcome all students, faculty members, and friends of East Carolina University’s Religious Studies Program to the inaugural issue of the Religious Studies newsletter. We have already had several exciting events during this school year, including the successful 24th Distinguished Lecture in Religion and Culture (DLRC) where we were honored by the visit of Dr. Eboo Patel. The founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core, Dr. Patel is a dynamic speaker who fluently speaks of the power of religion as a bridge of cooperation, rather than a barrier of division. Almost four hundred students, faculty members, and community members attended the lecture and discussion in Wright Auditorium. More recently, we also hosted a successful panel entitled “Politics and Religion Two Topics to Avoid At Parties: A Panel Discussion” and attended by about 150 people, including many from the community. On January 25, we were also honored to host Professor of New Testament, Dr. Leif Vaage from the University of Toronto, who spoke on “Jesus, The Cynics, and Imperial History: Recalling the Unreal.” We promise to continue to engage our students and the community with such important lectures.

At East Carolina University, we recognize that religion is not only a universal phenomenon found in all human cultures, it is also a major force in society that is shaping the globalizing world. This realization grounds the academic study of religion. Religion is a crucial human expression that is pivotal to understanding historical, social, political, intellectual, and artistic movements throughout the world. The Religious Studies program at East Carolina University provides students with the opportunity to explore these diverse and related forms of human expression in an interdisciplinary fashion. Students enjoy a rich array of approaches to understanding religion as well as courses in individual religions including World Religion, Judaism, New Testament, Paul’s Letters, Religion and Film, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Religion and Science to mention just these. The goal of the program is to provide our students an opportunity to appreciate religious values that define human experience. Skills learned in the program include critical thinking, effective communication, and an appreciation of diversity and service. In addition, our program prepares students for careers as journalists, teachers, lawyers, doctors, business leaders, therapists, and ministers who can operate effectively in a global world. It is the mission of the program to foster critical inquiry into the relationships between religion and other aspects of society even as we promote awareness of and respect for diversity and responsible citizenship. This year, our goal is to network with local and international communities where possible.

This spring, we have many other activities lined up, including the initiation of an advisory committee, local lectures, Religious Studies Club meetings, and much more. As we grow together, I would like to invite your support. I encourage everyone to consider participating in events we hold to uphold our sense of community. Alumni are always welcome to our events. To enhance this sense of community, we are creating a Facebook account to help promote interactions. You will receive an email shortly regarding joining the group. I will also lead the program in hosting coffee hour every Wednesdays and Fridays between 10:00 am and 11:30 am in Austin 319. Whenever the faculty have a meeting any of these days or times, or if the room is occupied for any reason, coffee hour will be moved to Austin 325A. Those interested in participating or contributing to this gathering, let me know at wangilam@ecu.edu. All who have interest at joining our Religious Studies Program’s community as students, friends, donors, or any other capacity, you are welcome. We need to pull together for the growth of the program. For details about the program, visit us at http://www.ecu.edu/religionprogram/ or contact us at wlangilam@ecu.edu or by phone at (252)-737-2422 or our administrative Assistant, LaShonda Brown at Brownlas14@ecu.edu or (252)-328-6193. I wish you all a great year.

Thank you,

Dr. Mary Nyangweso

Director, Religious Studies
The purpose of the Religious Studies Club is to create an environment in which students from all religious and non-religious backgrounds can interact and engage in discussion about religion from all perspectives. The Religious Studies Club seeks to foster an understanding of world religions through discussion regarding topics and issues within different faiths. All members are encouraged to share their views in a respectful manner.

The club hosts meetings that bring people together to debate a variety of topics and hear students’ views. We have advertised the club in fairs around campus in order to gain the interest of students. The Club’s officers have put together a dinner for all Religious Studies Majors to get together and plan how we can improve our program. Those on the Board have also been active ambassadors of the Religious Studies Program. In our meetings, we have evaluated topics such as non-canonical books of the Bible and the different versions of Hell for multiple religions. This semester, we plan to entertain topics of controversy, such as the politics of today. The Club will also host several speakers and lecturers who will give presentations from different religious perspectives.

As an academic organization, we do not favor any particular religion, faith, or belief. However, we encourage exploration of students’ individual practices and beliefs and their participation no matter their background.

Heather Parra—President
Sherry Eads—Vice President
Casey Sumlin—Secretary
The Religious Studies Program and its faculty enjoyed a very active outreach to the campus and larger community in the 2016-2017 school year, hosting visitors and sitting on panels.

The premier annual public event of our program is the annual Distinguished Lecture on Religion and Culture. During the fall, the 24th annual lecture featured Dr. Eboo Patel, the founder of the Interfaith Youth Core. His topic was “Interfaith Leadership Can Save the World.”

We are delighted to announce that during the 2017-2018 school year, the Whichard Chair in the Humanities, which rotates among the humanities departments and programs in the Thomas Harriott College of Arts and Sciences, will be hosted by the Religious Studies Program. We have invited Dr. Joseph Hellweg to visit us from Florida State University. He will teach courses for us, hold a faculty seminar, and engaged the community through public lectures on his research. We are excited for all the ways that he will inspire new connections across campus and throughout the community. We are also grateful to the Whichard Family for their support of this Distinguished
**Advisory Council**

Join Advisory Council Initiative to help promote collaboration between the Religious Studies program and the local community. Look out for events announcement. You want to join the council, for details contact wangilam@ecu.edu / 252-737-2422

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**2016/2017 Graduates**

**Majors Multidisciplinary – Religious Studies**

Beasley, Tyler - Religious Studies, Anthropology
Braswell, Jordan - Religious Studies, minor in Psychology
Bryant, Alex D. - Political Science, Religious Studies
Colvin, Brandon - Religious Studies; Anthropology
Copeland, Megan M. - Religious Studies; Minor-Psychology
Gilpin, Nicholas E. - Religious Studies; Sociology
Garbacik, Brianna K. - Mathematics Ed.; Religious Studies
Jennings, Meredith E. - Religious Studies; History
Liverman, Ellen J. - Psychology; Religious Studies
Livingston, Logan E. - Religious Studies; Minor-Art
Parra, Heather V. - History; Religion Studies
Perez, Joseph P. - Recreation & Parks Management; Religious Studies
Singh, Sukhmani - Religious Studies; Psychology
Sumlin, Casey E. - Mathematics BS; Religious Studies
Trulin, Devin D. - Religious Studies

**Minors- Religious Studies**

Buck, Daniel B. - Public Health Studies
Hinton, Zoe W. - Neuroscience
Proctor, Bryson E. - Anthropology
Shamberger, Rebekah S. - Performance; Voice Performance
1. RESEARCH, GRANTS, PUBLICATIONS

- Dawson, K. B. “American Judaism – An Overview,” presentation to the Adult Christian Education class, St. Timothy’s Episcopal Church.
- Johnson, L. presided over a joint session at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting between the Performance Criticism of the Bible and Other Ancient Texts section and the Cognitive Linguistics section.
- Mercer, C. “Why Bad Things Happen to Good People: The Problem of Evil and Suffering” ECU Lifelong Learning Program

2. INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

The Religious Studies Program at ECU is in the process of initiating internship opportunities for interested undergraduate students. Internships provide students with valuable experience in non-profit, educational, faith-based, governmental, and the private sector. It is a great opportunity to translate the knowledge and skills learned in courses into a professional context, while exploring potential career paths. Community members can contribute to initiative through collaboration with the program. Interested students should consult with their adviser. Further details are available at http://www.ecu.edu/cs-cas/religionProgram/careers.cfm. Know of other possibilities, contact us at wangilam@ecu.edu or 252-737-2422.
Dr. Derek Maher, associate professor of Religious Studies, will lead this program for the 12th year in a row. Students will earn 6 semester hours of RELI 2500, and graduate credit is also possible. The program fee includes tuition, visa, application fee, hotels, intercity transportation within India and Nepal, tours, guides, entry fees, musical performances, health insurance, and some group meals. The course provides Foundations Curriculum: Humanities credit.

The 28-day program will include visits to Delhi, Agra, Varanasi, Bodhgaya, and a range of smaller sacred sites in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in India. In addition, students will visit Buddhist sites in Nepal.

The heart of the program will be a research project through which collaborative teams of student researchers investigate and document particular Buddhist holy sites. Students will learn research methods in the discipline of Religious Studies, and during the spring semester develop a research plan to be executed during the time in India.

For details visit
http://www.ecu.edu/cscas/religionprogram/india-abroad.cfm
These are some of our Faculty Profiles:
Other Faculty will be profiled in future Newsletters

Dr. Lee Johnson
http://www.ecu.edu/cs-cas/religionprogram/Johnson.cfm

Dr. Johnson teaches courses in biblical studies, including upper level courses in the teachings of Jesus and the letters of Paul. She also has introduced two new courses at ECU that deal with the intersection of the Bible, religion and culture: “Religion and Film” and “Use and Abuse of the Bible.” She specializes in Pauline studies and through her work with the Performance Criticism of the Bible and Other Ancient Texts group in the Society of Biblical Literature explores how written letters would have been presented, performed and preserved in the New Testament era. She has published numerous articles in Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Biblical Interpretation, and Biblical Theology Bulletin, as well as contributing to volumes in the Religious Rivalries series, Women in the Biblical World, and Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement. She is currently completing a monograph on Paul as letter-writer in a non-literate culture.

Dr. Calvin Mercer
http://www.ecu.edu/cs-cas/religionprogram/mercer/index.cfm

Dr. Mercer teaches, at the introductory level, biblical studies and world religions. He teaches upper level courses in religion and social issues, and religion and science. He is a recipient of the university’s “Scholar-Teacher Award.” His current research focus is on the religious implications of radical human enhancement technology, such as the effort to terminate aging in the human species and upload information in the brain to a digital format. His seven books, authored or coedited, and 32 articles focus on biblical studies, and religion and culture. He co-edits, with Steve Fuller, the series Palgrave Studies in the Future of Humanity and Its Successors and was founding chair of the American Academy of Religion’s “Human Enhancement and Transhumanism” group. Trained in clinical psychology, he practiced professionally and utilizes insights from psychology in his research on religion. He frequently gives public lectures on human enhancement and on his psychological interpretation of fundamentalism. As part of his community service, Dr. Mercer serves on the Greenville City Council.

Dr. Mary Nyangweso
http://www.ecu.edu/cs-cas/religionprogram/Mary-Nyangweso.cfm


Dr. Bob Bunger

On the basic level I teach Societies Around the World, Cultures of Africa, Cultures of the South Pacific, etc. and on the more advanced level, Anthropology of Religion and Motherhood of God in Asian Traditions. On occasion, I teach Asian Studies 2000 and Philosophy 1620 (World Religions). My central interest is in how and why religions spread and change. What facilitates the spread of a religion to a culture and how the religion and culture transform one another in the process. More specifically I am interested in the spread of Buddhism, how and why it spread in Asia in the past, and how it is spreading to the West in modern times. Also I am interested in the role of goddess archetypes in Buddhism, Buddhist Dharma as beautiful woman.

Dr. Kathy Dawson

Dr. Dawson began teaching at ECU in the Fall of 2015. She received her Ph.D. in Religion from Duke University in 2012. Prior to coming to ECU, she taught Greek at Duke Divinity School and New Testament courses at Duke University. At ECU, she teaches Introduction to Religious Studies, World Religions, Introduction to the Old Testament, and a newly developed course on Judaism. Her current research focuses on the relationship between ancient rhetoric and the methods of persuasion in the letters of the Apostle Paul. She has presented numerous papers at the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, and she currently serves as the chair of the New Testament Section of the South-eastern Commission for the Study of Religion. Dr. Dawson frequently speaks to church groups in Rocky Mount and Greenville, NC on a variety of subjects including: the Old Testament Prophets, the Theology of the Apostle Paul, American Judaism, the Gospels, and the New Testament epistles.

Other faculty include Dr. Derek Maher and Dr. Laura Mazow.

Other Faculty Profiles
HOW TO SUPPORT THE PROGRAM

RELIGIOUS STUDIES GENERAL PURPOSE FUND

This fund assists with miscellaneous expenses, e.g., graduates' recognition ceremony, community programs, and student majors' events. Thanks for letting me know about your gift (mercerc@ecu.edu) so I can ensure it's credited to the proper account.

Make check payable to "ECU Foundation, Inc.," on the memo line put "Religious Studies," and mail to:

Division of University
Advancement 2200 South
Charles Blvd.
Mail Stop 301
Greenville, NC 27858

If you wish to make a pledge, use this pledge form: http://www.ecu.edu/cs-admin/ecuf/upload/Pledge-Form-InteractiveECUFUNDATION-REV4-24-14-2.pdf

For more information on the program, please watch this overview https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoi3lDA2xEg.

"If I went back to college today, I think I would probably major in comparative religion, because that's how integrated it is in everything that we are working on and deciding and thinking about in life today." -- United States Secretary of State John F. Kerry