



# Letter From the Director

## Dr. Karen Seat



This is an exciting time for [Religious Studies](#) at the University of Arizona. We are delighted to announce unprecedented growth this year, with three new tenure-track assistant professors joining the Religious Studies Program: Dr. Andrea McComb (Native American Religious Traditions; Religion and Ecology), Dr. Caleb Simmons (Religion in South Asia, Hinduism), and Dr. Max Strassfeld (Judaic Studies; LGBT Studies). As a result, the UA Religious Studies Program now more closely reflects the substantial Religious Studies units at most of the peer institutions of the University of Arizona. For a full list of faculty in the Religious Studies Program, visit <http://religion.arizona.edu/our-people>. Reflecting the interdisciplinarity of the field, numerous faculty from throughout the University of Arizona have become affiliates of Religious Studies. Currently, the Religious Studies Program has over 30 [faculty affiliates](#) from more than a dozen disciplines, including Anthropology, Art History, Classics, East Asian Studies, English, French and Italian, Gender and Women's Studies, German Studies, Government and Public Policy, History, Judaic Studies, Middle Eastern and North African Studies, and Philosophy – and our list of faculty affiliates continues to grow.

Embracing the University of Arizona's goal to provide all students with opportunities for authentic, experiential learning—[100 percent student engagement](#)—the Religious Studies Program is entering a new phase of promoting Study Abroad for majors. In honor of Professor Donna Swaim's 50 years as a faculty member of the University of Arizona, we are pleased to announce the launch of the Donna Swaim International Award for Religious Studies, a scholarship that will enable academically-prepared Religious Studies majors to study the religions of the world in the context of their cultures. For more information about this award, see page three.

More exciting news about the Religious Studies Program – including profiles of current Religious Studies students and alumni, scholarship awardees, recent faculty publications, and other notable events—can be found in the following pages.

To all of you who have [supported](#) the Religious Studies Program, we extend our heartfelt gratitude. More than ever, the study of religion in all its complexity and diversity is crucial for comprehending contemporary events in national and international contexts. The Religious Studies Program equips students to participate intelligently in the religiously diverse democracy of the United States, and to engage with cultures throughout the world with deeper understanding and sensitivity. The Religious Studies Program prepares students to become independent thinkers and problem solvers in the twenty-first century.





# The Burns Fund

Established in 2011, the Robert A. Burns Fund honors the founder of the Religious Studies Program at UA. He opened the program in 1978, served as program director until 2011, and is still a member of the Religious Studies faculty.

The Burns Fund is a response to state and university budget cuts. The fund is used to recruit and hire outstanding instructors for the Religious Studies Program, including Burns Faculty Fellows. The fund also has supported the annual Robert A. Burns Lecture Series. Previous Burns Lecture speakers have included Dr. Thomas F. O'Meara and Dr. Daniel G. Groody.

More than 100 donors have made gifts to the Burns Fund. Donations have totaled over \$75,000. If you would like to honor Dr. Burns and support the Religious Studies program, contact Bill Finley at [bfmley@email.arizona.edu](mailto:bfmley@email.arizona.edu) or donate [here](#).



## Burns Faculty Fellows

Thanks to the generosity of Burns Fund donors, to date the Religious Studies Program has been able to recruit and retain the following outstanding faculty.



<p>Dr. Karen Borek Burns Faculty Fellow 2012-2013 Courses Include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• God and the Problem of Evil</li> <li>• Life After Death in World Religions and Philosophies</li> <li>• Jesus in Contemporary Thought</li> </ul>	<p>Dr. Andrea McComb Burns Faculty Fellow 2013-2014 Courses Include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to American Indian Religious Traditions</li> <li>• Introduction to Religious Studies</li> <li>• Religion and Ecology</li> </ul>	<p>Dr. Konden Smith Burns Faculty Fellow 2014-2015 • In addition to teaching courses on American and world religions, Dr. Smith will develop and teach courses on Religion, Film, and Popular Culture.</p>
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# Dr. Donna Swaim



## 50 Years of Service

Dr. Donna Swaim retired in May 2014, after 50 years as an educator at the University of Arizona. Dr. Swaim has touched thousands of students' lives. Teaching her first course at the University of Arizona in the spring of 1964, Dr. Swaim has shared her passion for undergraduate education in numerous settings, including 5 years teaching English Composition, 35 years teaching in the Interdisciplinary Humanities Program, and 10 years teaching in the Religious Studies Program. Dr. Swaim also served as Faculty Fellow for the Athletics Department for 20 years and with the Native American Center for the past 4 years. One of her greatest contributions to undergraduate education at the University of Arizona was leading travel abroad study trips, where students had the opportunity to take part in life-changing global experiences.

During her time at the University of Arizona, Dr. Swaim led student groups on a total of 24 trips abroad, visiting a wide array of countries including Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Cambodia, the Czech Republic, Egypt, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Georgia, Guatemala, Hungary, Iceland & the Faroe Islands, Italy, Latvia, Lesotho, Lithuania, Mali, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal, Nicaragua, Norway, Romania, Russia, Senegal, Slovakia, South Africa, Sweden, Tunisia, Turkey, and Zimbabwe.

## The Donna Swaim International Award for Religious Studies

In honor of her life-long service to the University and dedication to her students, the Religious Studies Program and the UA Foundation proudly announce the formation of the Donna Swaim International Award for Religious Studies, a scholarship that will enable academically-prepared Religious Studies majors to study the religions of the world in the context of their cultures. Dr. Swaim feels that travel is an especially enriching experience for students, because "at the university we learn academically—but travel gets beyond the academic. It lets students live and experience the things they've learned in class."

**To donate to the Donna Swaim International Award for Religious Studies, please click [here](#).** Dr. Swaim has asked that her former students and colleagues post memories and pictures of these trips abroad on her new [Facebook profile](#), so that she can have an electronic record of her time at the University of Arizona.





# Rombach and Bretall Scholarships

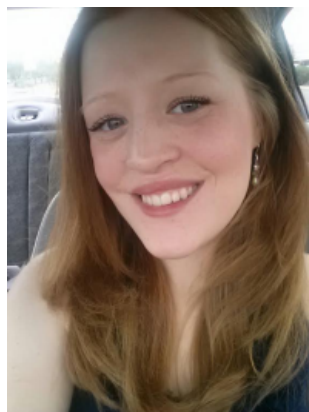
Religious Studies majors have benefited from the generosity two major donors to the Religious Studies Program: Lionel Rombach and Ora Bretall. Every year, outstanding Religious Studies majors receive substantial scholarships from the Bretall and Rombach Scholarship Funds, to apply toward their tuition and other educational needs. Here are the Bretall and Rombach awardees for 2014.

## 2014 Bretall Scholarship Awardees



**Aaron French**

"With human society entering a new era of technological advancement and computer dependency in the 21st century, the study of the Humanities, and especially Religious Studies, has become more crucial than ever. My Religious Studies major here at the U of A has given me the necessary tools and background to go forward into graduate work and accomplish my goals. I am very grateful."  
Aaron French (Triple Major: Religious Studies, Creative Writing, Classics), Bretall Scholarship Awardee



**Tiffany Lee**

"My Religious Studies major has enriched my undergraduate career unlike any of my other majors. Not only have I had the opportunity to take interesting classes with amazing professors, but I've been able to participate in incredible events outside of class. When a group of Tibetan monks visited the U of A for two weeks to build a sand mandala, I was asked to help them, and while they were here I sat with them in between classes, learning about their culture and religion, laughing as they taught me how to make a singing bowl sing. With no other major do opportunities like this arise. I am so glad I decided to make religious studies a part of my life." –Tiffany Lee (Triple Major: Religious Studies, Nutritional Science, and Creative Writing), Bretall Scholarship Awardee







# Rombach and Bretall Scholarships

## 2014 Bretall Scholarship Awardees



**Amme Verbarendse**

“Religious Studies is a diverse program that instructs beyond specific beliefs. I have enjoyed this major because as you will realize, religion is tied to everything around us. It is a perfect second major for those who want to expand their historical, philosophical, and cultural knowledge base. Religious studies courses are challenging, fascinating, and meaningful.” -- Amme Verbarendse (Double Major: Religious Studies and Political Science), Bretall Scholarship Awardee



**Danielle Oxnam**

“To me, the Religious Studies program at the U of A means the opportunity to gain a greater worldview and a deeper, more well-rounded sense of self. Over the past couple of years, this discipline has expanded and challenged my thinking, connected me to an incredible world of scholarship, and paved the path for my future career.” –Danielle Oxnam (Triple Major: Religious Studies, English, and History), Bretall Scholarship Awardee

## 2014 Rombach Scholarship Awardee

**Tyler Federowski** (Double Major: Religious Studies and Philosophy)





# Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture

## State Recognition & International Research

The [Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture](#) provides the University of Arizona with a nonsectarian research and outreach center that engages with fundamental questions of religion's impact on all human societies and cultures. Under the leadership of Director Peter Foley, the Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture (ISRC) has achieved formal recognition from the Arizona Board of Regents as an official research institution with the University of Arizona. The ISRC also has joined the international Consortium of Humanities Institutes and Centers (CHCI). The Religious Studies Program is a sponsoring unit of the ISRC, along with the UA Center for Judaic Studies and the Division for Late Medieval and Reformation Studies.

### **\$425,000 Mellon Grant: Religion, Secularism, and Political Belonging (RelSec)**

In the summer of 2013, Dr. Leerom Medovoi, the newly appointed Head of the University of Arizona's Department of English, brought a \$425,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to the University, which is now housed in the UA Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture. This grant supports a major international research project, titled "[Religion, Secularism, and Political Belonging](#)", or "RelSec." With the University of Arizona serving as the organizational hub for the project, the RelSec grant coordinates research with humanities centers at Portland State University, Utrecht University in the Netherlands, Tel Aviv University in Israel, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, bringing together an international group of scholars to study the forces of religion and secularism across the world. UA Religious Studies faculty have been involved in the University of Arizona-based research group for the RelSec project, including Dr. Peter Foley, Dr. Andrea McComb, and Dr. Karen Seat. As the Director of the ISRC, Dr. Foley, along with Dr. Medovoi, led a delegation of UA researchers to the annual CHCI meeting in Hong Kong in June 2014, where they met with research teams from the other RelSec humanities centers.

### **Dr. Peter Foley - ISRC Director & Associate Professor**



In addition to his work with the ISRC, Dr. Peter Foley visited numerous places for research over the past year, as he completes his book manuscript on the intellectual, political, and social contexts surrounding the production and reception of Anglican liturgies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, after the English Reformation. He conducted research at the Humanist Library in Sélestat in the Alsace in France, and at the Bodleian Collections in Oxford for his liturgy project. In 2013, he presented a paper on his current research at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Senate House in London, and in 2014 he organized a panel for the Oxford Conference of the British Ecclesiastical History Society and the American Church History Society, bringing together church historians from America and Britain. Additionally, in 2014 he was invited to present his research at a fundraising event for the ancient church of St. Pancras in London, founded in AD 314. He was also on the Scottish west coast and Iona in preparation for his course on Celtic Spirituality.



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*"The RelSec research project provides an exciting opportunity for us to bring together scholars at the University of Arizona with scholars from around the world to explore global issues that lie at the very heart of our research interests."--Dr. Peter Foley*



## New Books

### Dr. Alexander Nava, Professor

In *Wonder and Exile in the New World* (Penn State University Press, 2013), Dr. Alex Nava explores the border regions between wonder and exile, particularly in relation to the New World. It traces the preoccupation with the concept of wonder in the history of the Americas, beginning with the first European encounters, goes on to investigate later representations in the Baroque age, and ultimately enters the twentieth century with the emergence of so-called magical realism. In telling the story of wonder in the New World, Dr. Nava gives special attention to the part it played in the history of violence and exile, either as a force that supported and reinforced the Conquest or as a voice of resistance and decolonization. Dr. Nava is also hard at work on a new book entitled *In Search of Soul: Religion, Literature, and Hip Hop*.



### Dr. Aomar Boum, Assistant Professor

This year Stanford University Press published Dr. Boum's new book, *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco*. Once a thriving community, by the late 1980s, 240,000 Jews had emigrated from Morocco. Today, fewer than 4,000 Jews remain. *Memories of Absence* investigates how four successive generations remember the lost Jewish community. Moroccan attitudes toward the Jewish population have changed over the decades, and a new debate has emerged at the center of the Moroccan nation: Where does the Jew fit in the context of an Arab and Islamic monarchy? Drawing on oral testimony and stories, on rumor and humor, Dr. Boum examines the strong shift in opinion and attitude over the generations and increasingly anti-Semitic beliefs in younger people, whose only exposure to Jews has been through international media and national memory.



### Dr. Julian Kunnie, Professor

Dr. Julian Kunnie's forthcoming book is *Globalization and Its Impact* (McFarland). He has submitted a book proposal on *Indigenous Peoples' Religion and Resistance in Defense of Mother Earth* to Routledge. His most recent article on Ecological Restoration in Africa, "Restoring Africa's Heartland: Earth, Women, Culture, and Community" was published in the *Journal of Black Studies* in June 2013. His other forthcoming publications include "Indigenous African Spirituality at the Root of Africana Religion in the Americas" and "Indigenous Cultures and Philosophies in Africa and North America" in the *Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America* (Sage Publications); "Indigenous African Religions" (with Jacob Olupona) in the *Encyclopedia of Religious Practices* (Cengage Learning/Thomas Riggs & Co.); "Steve Biko: A Tireless Warrior Whose Spirit Walks Across Africa Yearning for a Resting Place" and "Hector Pietersen: The Spirit of Ultimate Youth Sacrifice for Justice from 1976" in *Jubilee Journal on the Martyrs and Casualties of the Movement* (Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee/National Voting Rights Museum and Institute); and in Chinese "The Early Civilizations of Indigenous Peoples in the Americas and Diverse American Cultures" in *Political Systems of Early States* (China Sciences Publishing House).



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"A research university is where our society creates, preserves, and disseminates knowledge. Students have the opportunity to study with experts who publish cutting-edge research in their fields."--Dr. Karen Seat, Director





## New Positions

### **Dr. Andrea McComb, Assistant Professor & Director of Undergraduate Studies**



Dr. Andrea McComb was hired by the Religious Studies Program in 2013 with significant financial support from the Burns Fund. A major component of Dr. McComb's position has been advising Religious Studies majors and minors, and recruiting students to the Religious Studies Program. Dr. McComb specializes in Native American and Indigenous Religious Traditions, Religion and Ecology, Chicana/o and Latina/o religious traditions, and religion and colonialism in North America. She received her Ph.D. in Religious Studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 2013, where she studied with Dr. Inés Talamantez, a pioneer in the field of Native American Religious Studies. In the fall of 2013, Dr. McComb hosted a public speaking event for Dr. Talamantez at the University of Arizona. Dr. McComb's book project, *Religion and Power among the Eastern Pueblos of New Mexico*, is a study of religious tradition and identity formation among the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico from the beginning of the Spanish colonization to the present day, analyzing the ways in which the Pueblo Indians have maneuvered to maintain their cultural and religious traditions in different colonial and national contexts. Dr. McComb teaches courses on Native American religious traditions; religion and ecology; religion and culture in the Southwest; and theory and method in religious studies. Dr. McComb is a faculty affiliate of the University of Arizona's Institute of the Environment.

### **Dr. Caleb Simmons, Assistant Professor**



In 2013, the University of Arizona granted the Religious Studies Program a new tenure line in Hinduism in South Asia and the Modern World. After a very competitive national search, the Religious Studies Program hired Dr. Caleb Simmons. Dr. Simmons completed his Ph.D. in Religion at the University of Florida in 2014, where he studied with Distinguished Professor Vasudha Narayanan, a prominent scholar of Hinduism and former president of the American Academy of Religion. Dr. Narayanan aptly describes Dr. Simmons as "ambidextrous," as his specialties span religion and state-formation in medieval and colonial India to contemporary transnational aspects of Hinduism. Accomplished in the South Asian languages of Kannada, Sanskrit, and Hindi—and the recipient of two fellowships from the prestigious American Institute of India Studies (AIIS)—Dr. Simmons has conducted extensive field research in India. He has published on religion and politics in India; contemporary transnational aspects of Hinduism, especially relating to theoretical issues within material and popular culture that arise as a result of globalization; and ecological issues regarding sacred geography in India (for example, he has authored a chapter in an edited volume that examines pollution and plastic waste on the sacred Cāmundī hills of Mysore). His article for *Modern Art Asia* was selected to be reprinted in their anniversary hardcover collection of the best papers of the journal. His current book project, *The Goddess and the King: Cāmundēśvari and the Fashioning of the Wodeyar Court of Mysore*, examines goddesses and kingship in medieval and early modern South India. Dr. Simmons gained extensive teaching experience as an instructor at the University of Florida, where he received a major teaching award, and as a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Mississippi. At the University of Arizona, Dr. Simmons will develop and teach courses on Hinduism and religion and culture in South Asia.







# New Positions

## Dr. Max Strassfeld, Assistant Professor



In 2014, the Religious Studies Program was a beneficiary of a [university-wide hiring initiative](#) of Dr. Susan Stryker, the Director of the UA Institute for LGBT Studies. The Religious Studies Program has become the tenure home for one of the finalists in this search, Dr. Max Strassfeld. Dr. Strassfeld earned his Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Stanford University in 2013, and he specializes in Rabbinic Literature, History of Sexuality, and Religious Studies Theory and Method. In recognition of his work in gender and sexuality, he was awarded the Frankel Fellowship for New Perspectives on Gender and Jewish Life at the University of Michigan in 2013-2014. He comes to the University of Arizona highly recommended by leading scholars in the field of religious studies, including Dr. Judith Plaskow, a former president of the American Academy of Religion. At the University of Arizona, Dr. Strassfeld will develop and teach a wide range of courses, including Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire; Sex and the Body in Medieval Religion; Gender, Women, and Religion; and LGBTQI Issues in Religion. His book project, *Classically Queer: Eunuchs and Androgynes in Rabbinic Literature*, explores the function of the eunuchs and androgynes featured widely in Jewish law, and pairs classical Jewish texts with intersex autobiography, transgender studies, and theories of queer temporality, in order to argue that the rabbis use these figures to map the boundaries of normative masculinity.

## Dr. Konden Smith, Visiting Assistant Professor



Dr. Konden Smith (Ph.D. in Religious Studies, Arizona State University) is Visiting Assistant Professor of Religious Studies and the Burns Faculty Fellow for 2014-2015. Dr. Smith specializes in American Religious History, with a particular expertise in Mormon Studies. Dr. Smith has extensive experience teaching traditional and web-based courses for Arizona State University and Northern Arizona University. He has taught courses on American religious history; world religions; religion and popular culture; western mysticism; ritual, symbol, and myth; New Testament studies; introductory courses on Christianity; and introductory courses on the study of religion. At the University of Arizona, he will teach general education courses on American and world religions, and he will develop new courses on Religion and Film and Religion and Popular Culture. Dr. Smith is the author of *Opening the American Frontier: The Co-Evolution of the Mormon and American Kingdoms of God* (University of Utah Press, forthcoming) and the co-editor of *Reed Smoot: American Politics and American Religion* (University of Utah Press, forthcoming).





# Religious Studies and Medical Humanities

## Humanities, Medicine, and Wellness

The Religious Studies Program has been involved in new initiatives in Applied and Public Humanities, with the appointment of Religious Studies Lecturer Dr. Hester Oberman as the Medical Humanities Liaison for the College of Humanities. In February 2014, Dr. Oberman and Dr. Seat organized the University of Arizona's inaugural Humanities, Medicine, and Wellness Conference (<http://hmw.arizona.edu>), with the support of the [College of Humanities](#) and all departments and programs within the College, as well as the [Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture](#) and the [UA Confluentcenter for Creative Inquiry](#). This conference showcased the interdisciplinary expertise of nearly 40 faculty from UA Colleges of Humanities, Law, Medicine, Public Health, Science, and Social and Behavioral Sciences. Best-selling author Dr. Esther Sternberg, Director of Research at the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine (AzCIM), gave the keynote address, "The Science of the Mind-Body Connection and Beyond."

### Dr. Hester Oberman, Lecturer & Medical Humanities Liaison



As the Medical Humanities Liaison for the College of Humanities, Dr. Hester Oberman has built new bridges between the College of Humanities and the UA Colleges of Science and Medicine. Dr. Oberman teaches courses on Religion, Psychology, and Science, which delve into the field of the philosophy of science and tackles the complex questions of ethics in modern science in an age of globalization and cyber information. Her courses are crosslisted with the departments of Philosophy and Psychology. She has published "A Postmodern Perspective on Mental Health, Spirituality, and Religion: Bridging Humanities and Scientific Views of Religion in the Twenty-first Century," the final chapter in *Mental Health, Spirituality, and Religion in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age* (De Gruyter, 2014). Her current book project is titled *Postmodern Perspectives on Mental Health, Spirituality, and Religion*. In addition to her service for the University of Arizona, Dr. Oberman is also Vice-President of the American Academy of Religion in the Western Region (AAR/WR).



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*"The College of Humanities has a strategic priority in bridging the work of health sciences and wellness initiatives with the interdisciplinary contributions of Applied and Public Humanities." Dean Mary Wildner-Bassett*



# Teaching & Community Outreach

## Dr. Karen Borek, Lecturer, Religious Studies



Dr. Karen Borek served as the Burns Fund Faculty Fellow in 2012-2013, and she continues to teach for the Religious Studies Program. Her teaching repertoire includes "Jesus in Contemporary Thought" and "Feminist Approaches to the Bible," and she has developed new courses for the Religious Studies Program, including "God and the Problem of Evil" and "Life After Death in World Religions and Philosophies." In Fall 2013 she taught "God and the Problem of Evil" for students in the UA Honors College. This summer Dr. Borek is teaching "Life After Death in World Religions and Secular Thought" at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. Dr. Borek serves on the Advisory Board of Arizona Public Media and the Advisory Board of the University of Arizona Poetry Center.

## Dr. Alison Jameson, Adjunct Lecturer, Religious Studies



Dr. Alison Jameson's upcoming summer and fall courses include Comparative Religions, Introduction to Zen Buddhism, The Worlds of Buddhism, and Love in World Religions. She received her M.A. in Philosophy from Ohio University and her Ph.D. in East Asian Studies from the University of Arizona. Her area of research specialization is Song dynasty Neo-Confucianism. In September of 2013, Dr. Jameson and Dr. Oberman hosted the Tibetan Monks of the Drepung Gomang Monastic College at the University of Arizona to participate in a 5-day Mandala of Compassion sand painting. In addition to teaching for the Religious Studies Program, in 2013-2014 Dr. Jameson taught for the UA Department of East Asian Studies as a Visiting Assistant Professor.

## Mary Speidel, Adjunct Lecturer, Religious Studies



Mary Speidel, MA, teaches online courses for the Religious Studies Program during Winter and Summer Sessions, including Comparative Religions: Western Traditions and Women and Religion. Her research and teaching interests include religion and popular culture, gender and religion, women in western culture, and feminist biblical scholarship.



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*"The best part of teaching is introducing new perspectives to students...through studying the humanities we become increasingly aware of different views that we never thought to consider before, which, I believe, is the purpose of a university education."--Dr. Karen Borek*



# Student Profiles

## Religious Studies Major on Arizona Public Media



Religious Studies major Leigh Jensen, who works as a media specialist with the Arizona Center for Judaic Studies, recently appeared on the local PBS show "Arizona Illustrated" with Dr. Beth Alpert Nakhai, an associate professor of Judaic Studies. The interview focused on the Center's recent restoration of a 200-year old, 20-pound Torah scroll originally used by a Sephardic Jewish community in Northern Europe. As media specialist for Judaic Studies, Leigh helped promote and organize the visit of Rabbi Yochanan Salaza, a traveling sofer—someone who travels the world repairing Torah scrolls.

## Religious Studies Major Heading to Yale Divinity School



Dax William Crocker—a Religious Studies major and Honors College student—has been accepted into the Master of Divinity program at Yale Divinity School. Founded in 1701, Yale Divinity School is one of the nation's leading institutes for graduate-level theological study. Dax will start graduate studies there in the fall of 2014. He also plans to later pursue a Doctorate in Theology in order to teach at the university level or to serve as a chaplain in either the United States military or Congress.

Dax served as a pastor for over 20 years in the United States, Italy, Spain, and Sweden before enrolling in the University of Arizona's Religious Studies program. His senior thesis is a comparative analysis of Pentecostalism, Sufi mysticism, and Shugendō Buddhism. Dax will also graduate with a minor in Spanish Linguistics, and he has completed research about the effects of bilingualism on public policy and education. What Dax found most valuable about his time in the Religious Studies program was "learning to study sacred texts using academic criticism. This means to study them not only as inspired books but as books that also reveal the culture, language, world events of the time, and the socioeconomic status of the writers." Last year, Dax was a recipient of the Religious Studies Program's Ora Bretall Scholarship, awarded annually to Religious Studies majors.



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*"I never expected to major in Religious Studies, but I've found it to be a very interdisciplinary and varied major. Many people argue that studying the Humanities isn't practical, but if you reach out to your professors and follow your skills to what interests you, you can make it a very valuable education!"--Leigh Jensen*





# Religious Studies Alumnus Profile

## From Religious Studies to Dentistry



After graduating from the University of Arizona with a B.A. in Religious Studies and a B.S. in Molecular and Cellular Biology, alumnus Vijay Patel pursued a doctor of dentistry degree. Dr. Patel went on to complete a year-long residency with the Pascua Yaqui tribe of Arizona, and in the fall of 2013 he accepted a position in dentistry at the Marana Health Center. Dr. Patel found the Religious Studies Program to be an excellent balance to his medical training. Explaining his decision to double major in Religious Studies while completing his undergraduate work at UA, Dr. Patel recalls his search for a degree that could provide opportunities for critical thinking and personal reflection. "During my first two years as a Molecular and Cellular Biology major, I was engulfed in fact after fact, memorization after memorization. I needed balance. I had faith that college could deliver that, but how? The answer was obvious. Arguably the most controversial topic the world has ever seen is religion. It has built enormous civilizations, and destroyed entire countries. It has healed the sick, and plagued entire populations. A major in such an intricate topic like Religious Studies brought me what could only be described as academic balance, and a more complete philosophy on life. How could anyone ask for more?"

### Religious Studies and Preparing for Medical School

Entrance into medical schools is more competitive than ever, and students have found that combining Religious Studies with their pre-med training gives them an edge. In 2012, the standardized entrance exam for medical schools, the MCAT, added a new section on "Psychological, Social, and Biological Foundations of Behavior." [According to the American Association of Medical Colleges](#) (AAMC), the MCAT now tests students' understanding of a range of cultural issues, "including people's perceptions and reactions to the world; behavior and behavior change; what people think about themselves and others; cultural and social differences that influence well-being; and the relationships among socio-economic factors, access to resources, and well-being." Students with a degree in Religious Studies are particularly well-equipped to engage with these complex social questions.

"My Religious Studies courses were invaluable when I took the MCAT and interviewed for entrance into medical schools. The Verbal section of the MCAT exam has 'mind/body' essay topics that are very abstract, and a lot of people have trouble. But I was used to writing about these issues in my Religious Studies courses. Through Religious Studies, I had a lot of practice with that kind of language and topic. Thank you for preparing me for this!" – Stephanie Cardenas

"I love for medical schools to see that I studied the subject of religion while in college, because I will personally be working with people from different religions and cultures. Religious Studies has better prepared me to interact with people from all walks of life as a physician." - Hayden Hall





## Contribution & Contact Info

The Religious Studies Program continues to provide quality education and outreach due to the generous support we have received. You can make a contribution to help us to continue our outreach efforts and high caliber academic work by sending a donation in the mail, or [contributing online](#).

All donations to the Religious Studies Program are tax deductible.

Online donations may be made [here](#). Alternatively, checks can be made payable to “UA Foundation/Religious Studies” and can be mailed to:

Religious Studies Program  
1512 E. First Street, Room 203  
P.O. Box 210105  
Tucson, AZ 85721-0105

### **Additional Ways to Support Religious Studies**

#### **The Robert A. Burns Fund**

Established in 2011, the Robert A. Burns Fund honors the founder of the Religious Studies Program at the University of Arizona. He opened the program in 1978, served as program director until 2011, and is still a member of the Religious Studies faculty. The Burns Fund is a response to state and university budget cuts. The fund is used to recruit and hire outstanding instructors for the Religious Studies Program. The fund also has supported the Robert A. Burns Lecture Series, an annual community outreach event. To support the Burns Fund, please click [here](#).

#### **The Donna Swaim International Award for Religious Studies**

The Donna Swaim International Award for Religious Studies enables academically-prepared Religious Studies majors to study the religions of the world in the context of their cultures, through study abroad opportunities. This fund was established in 2014, to honor Professor Donna Swaim’s 50 years of teaching and service at the University of Arizona. To donate to the Donna Swaim International Award for Religious Studies, please click [here](#).

### **Keeping in Touch**

If you would like to receive additional updates on the Religious Studies program, please contact Dr. Karen Seat, Program Director, at [kkseat@email.arizona.edu](mailto:kkseat@email.arizona.edu). Additional information can be found on our website at [religion.arizona.edu](http://religion.arizona.edu).

