Phyllis Trible Lecture and Panel

By Margaret Cremin ’08

Students in Anne Patrick’s Christian Feminist Theologies course will attend a lecture given by Phyllis Trible, an internationally-known biblical scholar, in Minneapolis on Thursday, October 18. She will be discussing a book she recently edited, titled Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives. Trible’s lecture will explore the ancient stories of “the flawed family designated to become a channel of blessing for all the families of the earth,” and how these stories relate to contemporary concerns. On Friday, October 19, the class will attend a panel discussion featuring Phyllis Trible and three scholars from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, followed by round table discussions, a question and answer session, and book signing. The lecture and discussion coincide nicely with Anne Patrick’s syllabus for the course; the class will be reading Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children right before the event.

Studies Abroad and at Home

Junior Fellowships

Prayer in America
By Elizabeth Lienesch ’08

This summer I was lucky enough to receive a fellowship from Carleton to study “Prayer in America.” There’s no use in pretending that this summer was a comprehensive, all-encompassing study of prayer; I only visited places of worship for Muslims, Jews, and Christians, and the diversity of prayer within even just one of these groups would take a lifetime to study . . .

The Search for Liberal Theology in Modern China
By Aimee Downes ’08

I can’t escape the theme of searching when it comes to China. My interest in China was first cultivated by watching Big Bird in China, the 1983 special. Big Bird’s search was for Fènghuáng, a phoenix. Somehow I don’t think this lighthearted introduction to China has much to do with Jonathan D. Spence’s Search for Modern China, but I couldn’t help noticing this theme . . .

Marian Devotional Sites
By Margaret Cremin ’08

This past summer, I traveled to Marian devotional sites in Europe to interview women and to observe and participate in ritual. I could explore an area of religion that I could couldn’t fully understand by simply reading about it, plus I got to be outside for most of the summer in the Southern European sunshine, and I got to eat delicious chocolate and cheese. Not a bad summer, not a bad summer at all . . .

Religion Majors Honored

The Religion Department wishes to congratulate our majors who received various awards at the Honors Convocation in May of 2007 and the Opening Convocation in September of 2007.

Independent Fellowship Research
Elizabeth Lienesch ’08

Larson International Fellowship
Margaret Cremin ’08

Chang-Lan Fellowship
Aimee Downes ’08

Honorable Mention, Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics Essay Contest
Sophia Paraschos ’07

Read the NUMENews Online! Link to Sophia’s prize winning essay and get news from the department and around the world at: http://apps.carleton.edu/curricular/religion
Meet the Department:
INTERVIEWS WITH
Professor Asuka Sango . . .
By Emma Glidden-Lyon ‘08

NumeNews: Can you tell me about your path towards becoming a religion professor? You’ve said that you were originally interested in studying Christianity. Why did you change to a broader study of Japanese religions?

Professor Asuka Sango: That’s always a tough question to answer… Let me start with an anecdote. When I started teaching Japanese language to college students as a graduate teaching assistant, I realized that there is a difference between using a language and studying it—that is, discussing, systematizing, comparing, and explaining how the language functions. Being a native speaker does not necessarily make you a good language teacher. In retrospect, I underwent a similar transition in my approach to Japanese religions. I grew up in Japan and often visited Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples to pray for divine protection in times of troubles. But I simply took these religious practices for granted and did not think twice about them until I studied Japanese religions at college (after I came to America). As for my interests in Christianity, since in Japan I attended a private school run by Catholic nuns for almost ten years, I regularly studied the Bible with my nun-teachers. Naturally, I was much more interested in Christianity than Japanese religions then. I eventually shifted my focus to East Asian religions for personal and linguistic reasons. Practically speaking, I was much more proficient in Chinese and Japanese than in Greek and other non-Asian languages that are required for pursuing the study of Christianity. Personally I became fascinated with the process of rediscovering Japanese religions.

NN: You’ve just finished your dissertation, “In the Halo of Golden Light: Imperial Authority and Buddhist Ritual in Heian Japan (794-1185).” Can you tell me about your work?

AS: Japan’s Heian period (794-1185) is usually considered the apex of the imperial court’s power. Heian Japan was also a highly ritualized society where ritual performance mediated acquisition of bureaucratic positions and ranks, of friends and enemies, of cultural knowledge, and of economic wealth. My dissertation analyzes how various constituencies of Heian society—Buddhist temples, individual monks, the state, the imperial family, and aristocrats—attempted to legitimize themselves in the court society (whether successfully or unsuccessfully) by conducting, attending and sponsoring Buddhist rituals. In particular, I examine the history and format of the emperor’s Buddhist rituals that were closely associated with the Buddhist Scripture, the Golden Light Sutra, and the ways in which the competing political figures emulated or remodeled the emperor’s Buddhist rituals for their own purposes.

NN: You’re teaching a course called Women in Buddhism that addresses, in your words, the “various, often contradictory, images and roles of women in Buddhism.” How do you teach such a course to students who many not come to the class with a strong grasp of Buddhism?

AS: I think it is more important or helpful if students come to a course like this with a set of relevant questions or issues in mind (rather than background knowledge in Buddhist doctrines and practices). In this class we are trying, first of all, to carefully identify the particularities in Buddhist views of the feminine, and then to relate them to broader issues of gender and sexuality. I believe maintaining this balance is a key for teaching a topical course like this.

NN: Next term you will be offering Buddhism and Ecology; can you tell me about that class?

AS: Although my primary research area is Japanese Buddhism in ancient times, I am very much interested in engaged Buddhism in modern and contemporary societies. Therefore, in this and all other Buddhism-related courses that I teach, I approach Buddhist teaching not as an abstract history of the intellect, but as a “lived” history of applying the resources of Buddhist traditions to address contemporary social problems, such as the destruction of the environment. In this course, we will critically examine the intersection of Buddhism and ecology—Buddhist perspectives on ecological issues as well as ecological perspectives on Buddhism—in order to address key questions such as: Is Buddhism really “eco-friendly”?; Is Buddhist enlightenment limited to humans? Can animals or plants be enlightened, as well?; The idea of “no-self” is a key concept in Buddhist philosophy. But does “no-self” also mean that we have no individual responsibility?”

NN: How do you like teaching at Carleton so far?

AS: I am loving it! The transition from being a graduate student to being a teacher is a big one, but it has generally been a very positive experience thanks to everybody’s kindness and help. My impression is that Carleton as a school allows its faculty to be imaginative and innovative in teaching. I also feel that teachers at Carleton care a lot about teaching, which creates a healthy and sanguine atmosphere conducive to our growth both as teachers and as individuals. Finally, I think Carleton students are delightful to work with. I particularly enjoy class discussion because students’ questions and comments draw attention to aspects of the materials that I have not contemplated before. I always learn something new from students’ discussion.
... AND PROFESSOR

Will Elison.

NumeNews: Can you tell me about your interest in religion and your reasons for becoming a professor?

Professor Will Elison: I think that religion, as a field of study, is just more-ish—what scholars of religion get to work with has bolder colors, heavier ideas, wilder imaginations than what’s on offer in other disciplines. As far as my orientation within the discipline goes, I identify myself as a historian of religion, but much of my training has been in anthropology, and I guess what that reflects in my sensibility has something to do with a desire to encounter other people’s subjective experiences through my own lived experience. Comparative religion is a concept I was introduced to at an early age, because I come from a bicultural family, and while religious belief wasn’t at all central to the way I was brought up, as a child I rubbed up against a lot of religious practice and performance—my father’s immigration to this country from Europe was facilitated by the Catholic Church, and the aunt who brought him up lived in a rectory in Brooklyn; my Japanese mother was also raised by an aunt, who lived in a Zen temple in Kyoto. It seems possible, come to think of it, that the combination of exposure to these traditions in practice with a lack of formal instruction in their teachings made them seem even more mysterious and intriguing to me in my early adventures as a boy ethnographer.

NN: You’re still working on your graduate degree, can you tell me what you are working on and how it has changed over the years?

WE: Old news. Why, I haven’t been working on that graduate degree since approximately 11 a.m. last Wednesday. Between you sending me these questions and me thinking of answers, I’m happy to say, I’ve metamorphosed into a Visiting Assistant Professor.

As for my research: My dissertation is part of an ethnographic project based in Mumbai. My interests have actually changed a lot since I first set out to do fieldwork there. Initially I was attracted to the idea of doing research on the Hindi film industry, Bollywood as it’s called, and specifically on the cinematic presentation of tropes and images that cite visual media used in religious observances. So it was going to be a project that really focused on visual culture—I was hoping to see how a lot of theory-head ideas I had picked up in grad school about visuality and ideology would translate into social practice. Then, once I started fieldwork in 2002—I’m sure this is typical, not just for ethnographers but for anyone tackling a big research project—what happened is that the questions I was pursuing very quickly led me in a different direction. What I’ve ended up writing about and becoming committed to, not just in terms of staking out a field of professional expertise but also in terms of bonds I’ve made with people in Mumbai and their stories, has to do with folk-religious practices of marking space in the city. Basically I’m looking at two marginalized urban constituencies: migrants from villages who settle in shantytowns that I see as being built on the model of ancestral villages, and a so-called tribal community whose members consider themselves the true natives of Mumbai. I think that for people in both groups it’s important to recognize parahuman neighbors—local deities, ancestors, and spirits—as members of the community, and to build dwellings for them alongside their own. The link with film is that the tribal villagers, who are identified as forest dwellers, happen to inhabit land that has been taken over by film studios for shooting.

NN: Can you tell me about your research experiences in India? What drew you there?

WE: At the risk of offending both people from India and people who attend small, cozy, private liberal arts colleges, I went to India for the first time on my junior year because it seemed as far away from my small, cozy, private liberal arts college as anyplace I could imagine. I spent most of the year in Banaras, the holy city on the Ganges that pious Hindus across India consider to be the best place to die, because to die within its precincts is to attain liberation. I’m a total sentimental fool about that year—in a lot of ways I actually took it pretty easy, spending a lot of time shopping and hanging out with other Americans—but I remember it as a really intense encounter with a series of intellectual and emotional challenges. I was pretty clueless when I started college; I was getting lousy grades and didn’t really know what I was interested in, and acting on a vague attraction to Indian culture and signing up for the study abroad program turned out to be a more successful move than it had any right to be. Something really clicked for me in Banaras.

There are two observations I’ll share about my recent Ph.D. research in Mumbai, both of which have more to do with ethnographic methodology than with Mumbai as a specific place. The first is that once I got there I had a really hard time getting started doing fieldwork—I’m talking months of valuable, Fulbright-funded time that I let go by, with the meter running on my research visa. At bottom, I realize now, the problem was that I was simply shy, and it took a lot of gumption for me to introduce myself and try to make connections with people I wanted to do research with. It’s a lot like asking somebody out for a date: “Hi, um, you seem like a really interesting person, and I wonder if you’d like to be my informant sometime?” The situation gets even trickier in India because, unlike in a lot of other cultures (and unlike dating in the United States), social drinking is not really considered a respectable way to break the ice in most Indian social circles.

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You end up drinking a lot of tea, although caffeine doesn't make people chatter the way alcohol does. Actually, fieldwork makes you really aware of how much social interaction is mediated by the consumption of mild intoxicants. Cigarettes help a lot too—you can offer them around and make friends that way, or introduce yourself by hitting someone up for a smoke—and in North India paan, or betel nut, works the same way, although it can be hard to understand what people are telling you when their mouths are full of chaw.

The second thing is that, although I don't have a cell phone here in the States, my phone was an invaluable tool when I was doing my fieldwork. It could lead to odd juxtapositions, which were helpful in illustrating to me what vast gaps I was trying to negotiate among different social constituencies in Mumbai—this became a theme I've gone on to develop in my dissertation. For example, I might be having dinner in a fancy restaurant with English-speaking, upper-class friends, and I'd get a call in Hindi from one of the tribal guys I was working with at the other end of the city: “Hey, tomorrow's the tiger festival and people will probably be getting possessed. Don't you think it's about time you came up and did some more research?” Or conversely, I'd be talking to the resident of a mud-and-reed cabin about how his village is under threat of demolition and I'd get a call from downtown: “Are you coming to the gallery opening?”

NN: In the winter you are offering a course entitled Visual Cultures of South Asia and you've mentioned your interest in film. What types of film are incorporated into this course and how do they relate to the religious aspects of South Asian culture?

WE: One of the ways I'm thinking of that course is as a stealth vehicle to get Carleton students addicted to Bollywood. A lot of times Americans new to Hindi commercial cinema experience what turn out, on some reflection, to be rich and provocative differences with standard American filmmaking styles as fakery or bathos or cheese. So the short answer is that I'll be serving up a selection of very fakey, bathetic, and cheesy Bollywood texts. The visual culture course will be the main opportunity to do some analysis of South Asian cinemas at a formal level, but I'm planning to incorporate films in all of my other syllabi as well. For example, there's a whole genre of Indian films called "Muslim socials" that will be represented in my South Asian Islam class; there's another genre of so-called "saint films," or biopics of holy men, that will get some attention in my Beyond Hindu and Muslim class; and there's a wonderful film by the Bengali auteur Satyajit Ray, Devi, that I'll show in my Hinduism survey that is not only a sensitive exploration of goddess worship on a narrative level but formally does really interesting things with relating practices of visual worship to film spectatorship. Finally, I should mention that my contribution to the Religion and Film exhibit that's currently occupying the display case in the department lounge is a set of goddess films, movies that are actually produced as spectacles that mediate cultic devotion to Hindu goddesses. If you want to know more about how they're related to other visual media, and why it's goddesses and not gods, drop by the lounge and check out the exhibit.

NN: Finally, the obligatory question, how do you like teaching at Carleton so far?

WE: I don't think the environment could be more welcoming. The support the institution gives teachers, the warmth and openness of faculty colleagues, and the combination of seriousness and enthusiasm that students bring to their work—Carleton is a terrific place to be a rookie professor. But of course I'm not saying that it all comes easy. There are high expectations to live up to—professoring is like performing on stage, and I'm performing the role of somebody who's supposed to be smart and together. To put the challenge in Hindu terms: How can I make sure my karma fulfills my dharma? This year is actually a repeat engagement for me, since I first came to the Religion Department in 2002, when I taught for two quarters, and so there have been no big surprises this time around. But the transition from threadbare urban graduate student to respectable academic in bucolic Northfield—that lush autumn foliage!—still has its elements of culture shock. Again, to be all South Asian religions about it, it seems kind of samsaric, like rebirth into a higher station in life.

Robert Russel to be the First in New Ian Barbour Lecture Series

By Roger Jackson

I'm delighted to announce that the inaugural Ian Barbour Lecture will be delivered on Wednesday, January 16, 2008, by Prof. Robert Russell. Prof Russell, the founder and director of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley, and professor of Theology and Science at the Graduate Theological Union, also in Berkeley, will speak at 7:30 p.m. in Severance Great Hall. His lecture is tentatively titled "Where Science Meets Religion: Five Issues on the Frontier."

Prof. Russell holds a B.S. in Physics from Stanford, an M.S. in Physics from UCLA, a B.D. and from the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, and a Ph.D. in Physics from UC-Santa Cruz. Before settling in Berkeley, where he also has taught at the Jesuit School of Theology, he was an assistant professor for three years (1978-81) in the Physics department at Carleton.

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Go Forth: Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics

By Sophia Paraschos ’07

When I entered the Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics Essay Contest last fall, it was my impression that the prize was awarded each year to five students who demonstrate the ability to reflect in writing on a chosen ethical situation. When I left New York City in September after the day-long ethics and writing conference and award ceremony, my view had changed. Being named one of the competition’s finalists had been a dream, a goal, an accomplishment, and now a challenge.

The five finalists gathered in the Elie Wiesel Foundation’s office on Madison Avenue in New York City. Five low-key girls, feigning “business casual,” wide-eyed and nervous as we entered the building. Making small talk as we pulled up our chairs and pulled out our notebooks, the comment, “isn’t it funny that we’re all girls?” was met with an enthusiastic correction from the head of the table:

“We’re not girls,” said the day’s moderator, poet Barbara Helfgott Hyett, “we’re women; for the first time in this contest’s existence, we are all women.”

In the course of the day, we debated, we struggled, we challenged each other to think about our own essays with new eyes. We were unafraid—polite, but strong in our criticisms, in our praises, and in our emotions. The prevailing sense was that we were all in this together.

But what was “this”? Why the overwhelming sense of solidarity? We had already won the award, right? The competition was over, and we were in glamorous New York City to celebrate our victory. And yet, in the office lined with Holocaust literature, pictures of malnourished children in the midst of current humanitarian crises—in the room next door to one of history’s most renowned and vigilant human rights warriors, it seemed not only that there was much to be done, but that it was incumbent upon us five women to get it done.

We were not human rights crusaders. We were not humanitarian aid workers. We were not doctors without borders. We were students, and more important, we were writers. We were being recognized for our words, and as Wiesel has famously declared, “Words can sometimes, in moments of grace, attain the quality of deeds.” We five women were struck that day by the enormity of the suffering in our world, and by a glimpse of our role as writers in its alleviation.

Undoubtedly, these five women will go on to affect the world in profound ways—as teachers, doctors, immigration lawyers, development workers, or human rights defenders. But always, we will be writers—our ears ringing with Barbara Helfgott Hyett’s closing entreaty to “go forth with a pen in your hand.”

Lecture Continued from page 4...

He is a popular and well-traveled lecturer, the author of countless essays and articles, and has written or edited ten books, including Chaos and Complexity: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action, Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments, and Fifty Years in Science and Religion: Ian G. Barbour and His Legacy.

The Ian Barbour Lecture was established on the occasion of the department’s 50th anniversary in 2006, through generous contributions from alumni and faculty. It honors the long and distinguished career of Ian G. Barbour, who is the Winifred and Atherton Bean Professor of Science, Technology, and Society, Emeritus. Prof. Barbour taught at Carleton for thirty-one years. He helped to found the Religion department in 1955, and also helped found the concentration that is the forerunner of today’s ENTS. A pioneer in the field of science and religion, he has published many books, including Myths, Models, and Paradigms, Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues, and When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers, or Partners?. He was invited to deliver the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1989-90, and in 1999 he was awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in the Study of Religion.
Everywhere I went I was welcomed. People were often surprised to hear about what I was doing, but were also interested, supportive, and kind. And, most importantly, people were willing to let me participate in their prayer practices. Despite the fact that none of the places I visited were in my own tradition, I was not treated as an outsider. At the mosque, I learned how to perform ritual ablutions. I sat in silent meeting at the Quaker Center. I attended the liturgy of the hours five times a day at the monastery. At the Jewish center I jumped into the lake for my first mikvah, a cleansing ritual to prepare for Shabbat.

I was not expecting, nor did I get, any “answers” from this summer. There is no way to sum up the personal prayer lives of Americans. But my visits this summer did lead me to the conclusion that Americans need new ways to think about prayer. It’s often difficult for people to describe their experience with prayer. I think that much of this struggle springs from the fact that people are hesitant to accept the ambiguities and difficulties that result from the actual practice of religion.

I don’t know if my summer helped me reach any groundbreaking academic conclusions, but I do know that I really enjoyed exploring the ways real people live out their faith. I also know, thanks to my travels this summer, that the practice of religion is of the utmost importance to many people all over this country, and if you ask, they’re happy to tell you why.

The first stop was Hong Kong. There I worked with a Unitarian Universalist group and also got quite a healthy dose of Hong Kong nationalism, since I was there during the time leading up to the 10th anniversary of the transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong from the UK to China. I think Hong Kong’s identity was on everybody’s mind, which was particularly helpful for me as I tried to understand the differences between attitudes toward religion on the Mainland and in Hong Kong.

The next stop on my trip was Shanghai, where I attended the Fourth International Symposium on the Social Scientific Study of Religion. The theme of the symposium was religious identities, religious congregations, and social change. I had an amazing time finding out what’s going on in the study of religion in China, with days filled with lectures and punctuated by informal (and sometimes downright hilarious) discussions with a convivial community of scholars around tables laden with Chinese cuisine.

Finally, I made it to Beijing. I had a “front row” view among crowds of people lining the streets around Tian’anmen Square for the festivities marking the beginning for the one-year countdown to the Olympic Games. The main focus of my time in Beijing, however, was attending worship services at Chongwenmen and Gangwashi Protestant churches.

From city-wide celebrations to church services, my search in China led to many fascinating experiences. As I continue to process and interpret my observations, I look forward to sharing what I find.

At Lourdes, one of the largest pilgrimage sites in the world, I was able to attend a nighttime candlelit procession, where the Virgin is carried for hours while the rosary is recited in a dozen languages. It would be hard for anyone not to feel a spiritual connection to the Virgin Mary during this ceremony. I talked to one woman who told me that she had saved for her entire life to come to Lourdes, and that she knew that the Virgin Mary would help her husband’s heart disease. She told me, “As long as you pray hard enough to the Virgin, anything can happen. She knows how to help us, she feels our pain, she loves us.”

In contrast, I also attended the Festival of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Madrid, Spain. People waited in line for hours to kiss a picture of the Virgin. I guess someone figured out that this might not be the most sanitary practice, so a priest stood next to this picture and wiped it down with disinfectant after every kiss. Who said that scientific understanding can’t co-exist with religiosity? Bars set up stands on the street, with banners of the Virgin flying above. These people were having a really great time—colorful costumes, sangria, and loud Spanish music—Viva la Virgen!

Many of the women who make pilgrimage to these sites are fully aware of the contradiction of Mary’s Virgin motherhood, yet are still able to gain something immensely meaningful from their devotion to her. They come not for themselves, but rather to pray for their loved ones—their family members, their friends, their communities. Through their utter devotion, they gain a powerful connection with the divine.