



ELON

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF
Religion, Culture and Society

ANNUAL REPORT

2019-2020



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MUSLIMEDIA SEPT. 11

The Oaks and East neighborhoods along with the CSRCS hosted a dinner conversation with Elon University students, faculty, staff, and local Muslims on Sept. 11 at the Burlington Masjid. Dubbed "Muslimedia," the event provided an opportunity for the Alamance County and Elon University communities to engage in open and honest conversations regarding the portrayal of Muslims in the media, the role the Masjid plays in the community, and other related topics.

Sonya Walker '20 and Marjorie Anne Foster '20, both Multifaith Scholars and double majors in journalism and religious studies, also offered brief remarks about their individual research projects, which focus on the experiences of Muslims in US airports and in colleges respectively.



SEEING OURSELVES IN BOOKS: WHAT A JEWISH TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION STORY ILLUSTRATES ABOUT FAMILY AND IDENTITY SEPT. 19

High Point University Assistant Professor of Religion Amanda Mbuvi offered a lecture on contemporary Jewish family identity. Her talk focused on *Rebecca's Journey Home*, a children's book about an American family's experience adopting a baby from Vietnam and navigating issues of race, religion and nationality. Mbuvi discussed how children's books illuminate each of those modes of identity, as well as Jewish identity's distinctive relationship to them. Although the book's portrayal of Jewish identity remains within the confines of American racial logic, she argued, it also points to the potential of Jewish tradition to reimagine belonging that goes beyond the limitations of that American approach to communal identity so that any body can be seen, without qualification, as a Jewish body. Co-sponsored with Religious Studies and Jewish Studies.

"TWO FLAGS," FILM SCREENING WITH DISCUSSION BY FILMMAKER PANKAJ RISHI KUMAR OCT. 2

This Tamil- and French-language film examines the life and politics of Pondicherry, a South Indian city that was once a French colony, as its Tamil French residents geared up for the 2017 presidential elections in France. "Two Flags" explores notions of identity, citizenship, and home in the post-colonial era. A post-film discussion with award-winning filmmaker, Pankaj Rishi Kumar, followed the screening. Co-sponsored with French.



[*Click here for the official trailer of Two Flags*](#)

EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED: AN EVENING OF STORIES. MOST WEIRD, MANY TRUE OCT. 7



Performance artist Peterson Toscano was hosted by the Office of Sustainability for Sustainability week, during which Toscano visited classes and engaged student groups. His night of comic storytelling sponsored by the CSRCS connected climate change to religion and to Toscano's "bizarre" personal experiences, exploring the serious worlds of environmental justice, gender, sexuality, religion, and privilege.

SATTRA TRADITION: CONTINUITY, CHANGE AND CURRENT ENTANGLEMENTS

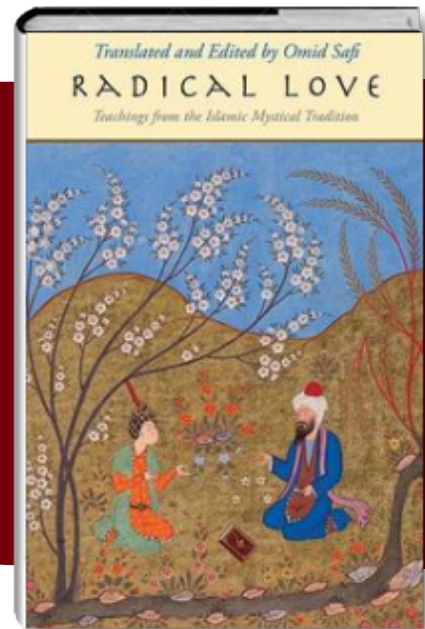
OCT. 30

CSRCS Visiting International Scholar, Baburam Saikia (University of Tartu, Estonia), presented his ongoing research for his Ph.D. dissertation. For more, see below under CSRCS Staff.

RADICAL LOVE — TEACHINGS FROM THE ISLAMIC MYSTICAL TRADITION

NOV. 7

Omid Safi, Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern studies at Duke University and prominent Muslim intellectual, spoke on his recent book, *Radical Love*, a collection of his own translations of Sufi poetry with commentary. To a nearly full McBride Space audience of captivated students, faculty, and community members, Safi read and discussed poems that pointed to different elements of Sufism, the Islamic movement that celebrates the relationship between God and humanity through poetry and song. Co-sponsored with the Elon Muslim Society and Muslim Life.



BITTERSWEET MEMORIES OF SURVIVAL

FEB. 14

With a standing-room only McKinnon Hall audience, local Holocaust survivors Agnes and Robert Heller shared numerous stories from their childhoods in Hungary. They discussed the worsening conditions during World War II, the time they spent hiding during occupation, and their eventual meeting in 1952. Co-sponsored by Elon Hillel, Jewish Studies, Religious Studies, The Department of History and Geography, The Dean of Elon College, the College of Arts and Sciences, the Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual Life, and Chabad Elon.



2020 SMITH-CHASE LECTURE: WHITE CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGE: THE ILLUSION OF RELIGIOUS EQUALITY IN AMERICA

FEB. 24

Khyati Y. Joshi, a scholar and thought leader in issues of race, religion, and immigration in the United States, spoke about the connections between Christian privilege and white supremacy. Joshi's writings, speeches and coursework focus on promoting cultural and religious pluralism in the United States. The annual Smith-Chase lecture is sponsored by the Religious Studies Department and honors the legacies of former Elon faculty members Shelton Smith and Carol Chase. Dr. Chase passed away in May 2020, not long after the lecture series that she helped to endow was renamed in her honor.



MUSLIM COOL: RACE, RELIGION AND HIP HOP IN THE UNITED STATES

FEB. 27

Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, a professor and Director of the Arab and Muslim American Studies Program at University of Michigan, offered a lecture and performance based on her 2016 critically acclaimed book, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion and Hip Hop in the United States*. The book explores the intersections of race, religion and popular culture in the Muslim U.S. Dr. Su'ad is a scholar-artist-activist, as

well as the founder and Senior Editor of Sapelo Square, an award-winning website dedicated to the comprehensive analysis of the black Muslim experience in the U.S. In 2018 CNN recognized Su'ad as one of the top 25 influential Muslims in America. Co-sponsored with Muslim Life and the Elon Muslim Society.



RELIGION IS ALWAYS IN THE ROOM: LESSONS FROM REPORTING ON THE GOD BEAT

MAR. 2

Liz Kineke, former executive producer for CBS Religion & Culture and an award-winning journalist, discussed her career on the religion beat. As a reporter and producer Kineke came to learn that every story has a religion angle. During her 14 years at CBS, she produced weekly, half-hour documentaries on religion, culture, and public life. She discovered that although religion pervades the experience and commitments of Americans, impacting our politics and our cultural life, we think of faith largely in terms of private and personal concerns. As a reporter, she tried to change that. During her visit, Kineke also spoke with NC religious leader Jonathan Wilson-

Hartgrove in Dr. Anthony Hatcher's Religion and Media class and consulted with journalism students in the Multifaith Scholars program.



[Click here to watch "Faith on the Frontlines," one of Kineke's mini documentaries from CBS.](#)

LESSONS OF LEADERSHIP FOR ISRAEL AND AMERICA

MAR. 7

David Makovsky of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy drew from his new book, co-authored with Ambassador Dennis Ross, *Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny*. The book tells the story of four Israeli leaders who made historic decisions, three in pursuit of peace, applying these examples of leadership to the next difficult decision facing Israel: how to separate from the Palestinians and preserve Israel's identity as a Jewish and democratic state. Makovsky asked: what are the qualities of a leader who will be able to make this decision and how do politics in Israel and the US contribute to making the choice? Co-sponsored by Elon Hillel, Jewish Studies, International and Global Studies, Political Science and Policy Studies, the Center for the Study of Religion, Culture, and Society, and the Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual Life.

INTERRELIGIOUS SYMPOSIUM IN CELEBRATION OF ARTHUR VINING DAVIS GRANT MAR. 11

Amy Allocco, associate professor of religious studies and director of the Multifaith Scholars program, organized and moderated "[What Does Multifaith Mean? Scholarship, Teaching and Mentoring in Interreligious Contexts](#)," a symposium to celebrate the conclusion of grant funding of the Multifaith Scholars program by the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation. Speakers included Corinne Dempsey, director of International and Global Studies and professor of religious studies at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York; Hans Gustafson, director of the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning and adjunct professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota; and Shana Sippy, assistant professor of religion at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. These prominent scholars addressed an audience of around 50 students, faculty and community members to speak about the questions and issues the emerging field of interreligious studies must confront.

The panel marked the conclusion of the Multifaith Scholars program's first three academic years. These initial years were funded by a grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations to promote global engagement, undergraduate research, and intensive mentoring to better serve a world grappling with religious conflict. The successful Multifaith Scholars program will continue with university funding.

EVENTS CANCELLED OR POSTPONED DUE TO COVID-19

Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, Inaugural Spirit and Pride Speaker, Apr. 2 (*co-sponsor*)

Panel discussion with Public Health Studies: Religion and the Anti-vaccination Movement, Apr. 9

Multifaith Scholars Senior Showcase, Apr. 20

2020 Powell Lecture: Shaul Magid (Dartmouth College), "The Struggle for Home and Homeland: American Jews and Zionism from the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform to Judith Butler," Apr. 29 (*co-sponsor*)

Valerie Kaur, Baccalaureate speaker, May 21 (*co-sponsor*)

MULTIFAITH SCHOLARS NEW CLASS

In March, five members of the Class of 2022 were named members of the [fourth cohort of Multifaith Scholars](#). Directed by Amy Allocco, this two-year fellows program selects students to participate in specialized coursework, faculty-mentored undergraduate research, campus leadership, and community engagement in multifaith contexts. Students in the program are awarded \$5,000 annually to support research and study in global contexts connected with religious diversity, pluralism, and conflict. The newest members were selected based on their potential as academically curious and socially engaged multifaith leaders committed to their development and the enhancement of their local and global communities.

The 2022 cohort is most interdisciplinary to date, representing majors in Computer Science, Journalism, Cinema and Television Arts, and Arts Administration. Each student is minoring in Interreligious Studies and other diverse departments, bringing a broad range of talents, skills, and experiences to the program.

MEET THE COHORT



JOYCELYN BENTLEY

Major: Cinema and Television Arts

Minor: Interreligious Studies

Mentor: Assistant Professor Ariela Marcus-Sells (Religious Studies)

Project Title: Then and Now: The History of Black Muslims in North Carolina

Proposed Research: Bentley's project will develop an oral history of the al-Razzaq Islamic Center in Durham, N.C., recording the narratives of its elders to preserve the important role of Black Muslim communities in local North Carolina history.



KATIE GRANT

Major: Computer Science

Minors: Mathematics and Data Science, Interreligious Studies

Mentor: Professor Megan Squire (Computer Science)

Project Title: Analyzing Recruitment and Retention Techniques of Christian Identity Extremist Groups in an Online Context

Proposed Research: Grant's research will use social network analysis (SNA) techniques to illustrate the connections between Christian Identity, a religious group that has advanced anti-Semitic and racist ideologies and been linked to terrorist acts.



HALLIE MILSTEIN

Major: Journalism

Minors: Professional Writing Studies, Interreligious Studies

Mentor: Associate Professor Geoffrey Claussen (Religious Studies)

Project Title: Jewish Identity and Wall Street

Proposed Research: Milstein will use qualitative research methods

to study the relationship between Jewish values and the New York financial industry, as well as the Occupy Wall Street movement.



ALAA SULEIMAN

Major: Computer Science

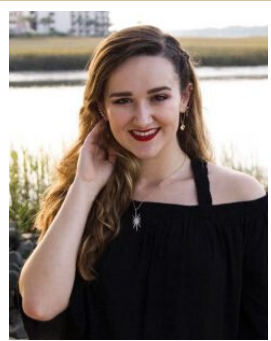
Minors: Italian Studies, Interreligious Studies

Mentor: Associate Professor Evan Gatti (Art History)

Project Title: Religious Fabric

Proposed Research: Suleiman's research analyzes the intersections

of materiality and religious symbolism, the exchange of textiles between Christianity and Islam, and issues of the display of textiles and clothing in museums, as well as historical influences on contemporary fashion.



EMILY WILBOURNE

Major: Arts Administration

Minors: Dance, Business Administration, Interreligious Studies

Mentors: Assistant Professor Casey Avaunt (Dance) and Associate Professor Pamela Winfield (Religious Studies)

Project Title: The Influence of Japanese Imperialism on Buddhist Seungmu Dance in Korea

Proposed Research: Wilbourne's research will track the variation of

religious implications in Korea's Buddhist Seungmu dance from the fourteenth century to Japanese imperialism of the 1900s.



MULTIFAITH SCHOLARS CLASS OF 2020 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Because the Multifaith Scholars Senior Celebration could not be held in person, the symposium took to Twitter to present the work of the five graduating seniors about the research of Marjorie Anne Foster, Kathryn Gerry, Katie Hooker, Hannah Thorpe, and Sonya Walker. Scan this QR code to be taken to the full Twitter thread. Tweets include video presentations that can be found under the Senior Celebration playlist on Youtube.



SYMPOSIUM TO CELEBRATE ARTHUR VINING DAVIS FOUNDATION

See above under Events

“On the Edge” is a bi-annual symposium at Elon University that brings together scholars working at the theoretical and methodological boundaries of those fields that have a stake in the critical analysis of religion—law, history, psychology, anthropology, literature/textual studies, philosophy, art history, political science, classics, and gender studies. “On the Edge” aims to exercise a self-conscious attention to methodological advances that can be made through interdisciplinarity. Its proceedings contribute to a richly contextualized and multi-layered understanding of the role of religion in societies past, present, and future.

2021 ON THE EDGE SYMPOSIUM: RELIGION AT THE BORDERS

The CSRCS announced that the theme for its [2021 On the Edge Symposium will be "Religion at the Borders."](#) The Call for Papers describes the concept for the upcoming meeting: "As borders demarcate edges, edges can be powerful places from which to understand, undermine, or underscore the stability of centers. Geographical borders may serve to delineate religious identities, while recitations, practices, and rituals may define the boundaries of belonging within religious communities. Borders might also separate orthodoxy from heterodoxy, serve as transitional or liminal spaces, or provide sites for critiquing mainstream ideas or identities. Borders are also bridges, that is, areas where people, cultures, genders, families, economies, and religious traditions meet and meld. An examination of “Religion on the Border” offers the opportunity to expand and redefine the intersections of religion, society, and culture across time and space. The symposium will feature keynote speakers Leah Sarat (Arizona State University) and Banu Gokariksel (UNC-Chapel Hill). Elon faculty co-conveners are Amy L. Allocco (Religious Studies), Evan Gatti (Art History), and Sandy Marshall (Geography). It will be held Feb. 11-13 either on campus, virtually, or in some hybrid format depending on public health circumstances.

BOOK BASED ON 2019 SYMPOSIUM TO BE PUBLISHED BY EQUINOX PRESS

Pamela Winfield (Religious Studies) and co-editor Mina Garcia Soormally (Spanish) will publish *The Religious Body Imagined* with Equinox Press. With chapters written by each of them and by 10 other scholars who attended the symposium of the same name at Elon in 2017, the book is expected to appear in 2021.

SURF SYMPOSIUM

Every year, the CSRCS supports the development of a SURF Symposium for the Spring Undergraduate Research Forum (SURF DAY). Before COVID-19 led to campus closures and event cancellations, five students from the South Asia Research Group at Elon (SARGE) in advanced stages of their research were preparing to present their work to the campus. Their symposium was titled, "Profiling South Asia: Knowledge, Representation, and Self-Understanding in Global Contexts." Projects explored changing practices of representation, including how the flow of goods and ideas between India and the Gulf states impact interreligious relationships in both places; how South Asian Muslims and Sikhs negotiate airlines' profiling practices; how public information can run up against village-level values. Presenters were to include Griffin Bariss (Public Health Studies '21), Marjorie Anne Foster (Journalism '20), Kathryn Gerry (International and Global Studies '20), Erin Jenkins (Political Science '20), and Sonya Walker (Journalism '20).

[Click here for the digital SURF abstract booklet](#)

SCHOLAR DEVELOPMENT GRANTS 2019-2020

Designed for first- and second-year students just embarking on the process of understanding the role of religion in society, Scholar Development Grants offered through the CSRCS introduce students to the research process in their individual disciplines, help them conceive a research topic, and prepare them to write research proposals for Elon's signature research programs or for external funding. 2019-2020 recipients and their mentors were:

- Rachel Cifarelli, "Secularism, Pluralism, and American Gods" (Andrew Monteith, mentor)
- Nick Hom, "Analyzing Religious Themes in the Cilappatikaram" (Amy Allocco, mentor)
- Alaa Suleiman, "The Appropriation of Religion in Contemporary Fashion" (Amy Allocco, mentor)
- Liora Wittle, "Experiences of LGBTQ+ Women in the Jewish Community" (Geoffrey Claussen, mentor)

COURSE DEVELOPMENT GRANTS-- NEW INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES COURSES

Under Course Development Grants from the CSRCS Elon faculty revised existing courses in Summer 2019 for inclusion in the Interreligious Studies minor. The following courses taught by these faculty will now count as electives in the minor:

GBL 106/206 Nation or State: In Search of Hawaiian Identity (Cassie Kircher and Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler)

POL 366 Middle East Politics (Baris Kesgin)

SPN 485/455: Idolatry and the Construction of the Spanish Empire (Mina Garcia Soormally)

VISITING INTERNATIONAL SCHOLAR IN RESIDENCE, FALL 2019

Baburam Saikia, a PhD candidate (ABD) in the department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu (Estonia), was hosted by the CSRCS this past fall. Sakai came to Elon to study under Dr. Amy Allocco for a semester and conduct research towards his Ph.D. thesis. Saikia's research focuses on Folklore & Neo-Vaishnavism (i.e. modern forms of devotion to Vishnu) in Assam, a state in Northeast India. Saikia's research studies the process of traditionalization in the context of socio-cultural change including power relations in Sattras, the influence of external forces, and the support of the local population for Sattras authorities. This research is a result of various ethnographic encounters in the field. Sakai was himself raised in a Sattras from the age of 5 when his parents sent him to live at the monastery. He remained there until 2016, when he left to begin graduate study at the University of Tartu. At the Sattras, he became a full-time practitioner of Sattriya dance, drama, and music, a set of devotional traditions associated with Assamese Vaishnavism. Following his semester at Elon, he returned to Assam to conduct the fieldwork portion of that thesis research.

CSRCS FACULTY RECEIVE NATIONAL GRANTS

CSRCS Director Brian Pennington and Multifaith Scholars Director Amy Allocco were awarded two grants to undertake course development and studies of interreligious pedagogies by national foundations. A \$7,500 Cohort Grant for Interreligious Pedagogies from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion “encourages the development of learning cohorts of faculty members who wish to collaboratively engage around issues of teaching in inter-religious studies through structured peer observation visits to each other’s classrooms.” Their project brings them together with faculty from Augsburg University and the University of St. Thomas, both in Minneapolis, Minnesota. During 2019-2020 team members conducted 3-day site visits at each other’s campuses in order to learn from the work happening in each institutions’ undergraduate research and engagement programs. The cohort is examining interreligious pedagogies under three categories: a) classroom, b) civic/community engagement, and c) undergraduate research, with the intention of mitigating the challenges of teaching interreligious studies.

Additionally, Allocco and Pennington were separately awarded Curriculum Development Grants from the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), with funding from the Mellon Foundation. The grant supported the revision of their winter-term study abroad course GBL 186/286 India's Identities: Religion, Caste, and Gender in South India to develop enhanced coverage of interreligious relations in India.



PENNINGTON APPOINTED CHAIR OF NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

CSRCS Director Brian Pennington was appointed by the president of the American Academy of Religion to a four-year term as the chair of the AAR's Committee on Teaching and Learning. The AAR is a 10,000-member organization and the largest society for the scholarly study of religion in the world. Its Committee on Teaching and Learning promotes excellence in teaching and learning in religion by developing programming for the AAR's Annual Meetings, overseeing the AAR's Excellence in Teaching Award, and producing [webinars and online content](#) related to teaching in Religious Studies, including the semi-annual "[Spotlight on Teaching](#)."

CSRCS SCHOLAR 2020-2022: SANDY MARSHALL

Sandy Marshall, Assistant Professor of Geography, has been named the 2020-2022 Center for the Study of Religion, Culture, and Society (CSRCS) Scholar.

During his term, Dr. Marshall will develop community-based research standards and a story-telling project for the center. Marshall comes to this position with strong credentials for the work he will undertake. As a human geographer who examines the impact of conflict, division, and displacement on children and youth in the Middle East, religion has been a consistent cross-cutting theme in his research. Marshall has worked with Palestinian refugee children and a community-based youth organization to curate photo exhibits and film festivals to display the creative outputs produced

by the participants. He has worked with youth organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, and Lebanon to design digital storytelling projects with youth, and he developed a community-based learning project in the Tuscon, Arizona area in which students produced digital stories about the food traditions of refugees living in the region that became the basis of the Emmy-nominated documentary film, "Tastebud Memories."

During a two-year appointment, CSRCS Scholars undertake activities and initiatives that promote their own professional development and assume leadership in some of the CSRCS's ongoing initiatives. Dr. Marshall is the first Elon faculty member to be named to this role.



COMMUNICATIONS INTERN

The CSRCS would like to thank its Student Communications Intern, Katie Dalrymple '22, for all her amazing work this year!

Katie managed the Center's Twitter feed, produced numerous pieces for Today at Elon, and did graphic design for various online and print pieces. We couldn't do it without her!

Multifaith Strategic Planning and Implementation Group members Geoff Claussen (Religious Studies), Jan Fuller (University Chaplain) and Brian Pennington led a year-long and campus-wide effort to discern new pathways and areas of development for the university's multifaith initiative. Coordinated with Elon's university strategic planning conversations, these discussions were aimed at correlating multifaith efforts with Elon's institutional goals. The Boldly Elon plan pledges "to foster deeper learning and better prepare students to lead in communities around the globe," and to "increase representation, enhance support networks and advance all community members' intercultural and multifaith learning." The group is now finalizing a new 5-year strategic plan that will begin in Fall 2020.

