Introductory Remarks by Department Chair

I’m delighted to begin by welcoming our newest tenure-stream faculty member in Religious Studies, Dr. Laura Yares. Dr. Yares is our Department’s specialist in Judaism, and also brings much experience in the nonprofit world. Dr. Morgan Shipley is now officially a Continuing Academic Specialist, teaching courses and also serving as our Department’s advisor as well as engaging in outreach and recruitment. Dr. Margot Valles has joined us as a fixed-term faculty member, jointly appointed with the English Department. And attorney Jerry Lindman continues to teach and develop important and well-received courses in our Nonprofit Leadership initiative, still the only such initiative in Religious Studies in the U.S.

Our Department is now in the strongest position it’s held since it was first created in 1948. As you’ll see from the faculty notes about our work, we have a terrific, highly productive faculty group dedicated to undergraduate teaching and to research and publication excellence as well as to university, college, and departmental service. It is also a collegial department, with a developing initiative in online pedagogy and a remarkable list of recent publications. Just to mention a few recent major achievements: Dr. Chris Frilingos published his book Jesus, Mary, and Joseph: Family Trouble in the
Chair Remarks continued

Gospels (U of Pennsylvania P), Dr. Mohammad Khalil published *Jihad, Radicalism, and the New Atheism* (Cambridge UP), and Dr. Amy DeRogatis was co-PI with Dr. Isaac Weiner (OSU) on a successful $750,000.00 grant from the Henry Luce Foundation on “The American Religious Sounds Project.”

We have an exceptional group of students, who last year founded a new registered student organization, the Religions Exploration Club. And this fall, one of our graduates, Emma Pittsley, (now employed with the Parliament of the World’s Religions) returned with the Director of that international nonprofit in order to introduce him to fellow students and faculty during our Fall Welcome Reception. We had a full house. Dr. Jon Keune continues to organize the annual Undergraduate Research Symposium, which features students not only from MSU, but also from WMU, CMU, Kalamazoo, and other Michigan universities and colleges. And he also founded and directs Theta Alpha Kappa, our undergraduate Honors society for the study of religion.

If you’d like to contribute financially to our Department and its unique initiatives on behalf of our students for fellowships, scholarships, or some other larger initiative, please contact Christine Radtke in the College of Arts & Letters Development Office, whom you can reach by emailing our secretary, Ashley Housler, at housed@msu.edu. Although these are challenging times for everyone engaged in scholarship and teaching in the humanities, we are all proud of our Department faculty and students and what they’ve achieved—as well as of what they will achieve. We have a unique, student-centered and highly productive Department, and are optimistic about our collective future. Arthur Versluis, Professor and Chair, Department of Religious Studies
Welcome our newest faculty member, Dr. Laura Yares

I am thrilled to have joined the Department of Religious Studies at Michigan State University this fall. I come to Michigan from Washington, D.C., though my roots are on the other side of the Atlantic. I was born and raised in Birmingham, England, and completed my B.A. and an M.St. in Jewish Studies at Oxford University before moving to North America in 2006. My first stop was in Canada, where I spent two years as a Rhodes Foundation Scholar working on an M.A. in Religion and the Social Sciences at McMaster University, before coming to the United States in 2008 to begin work on my Ph.D. at Georgetown University, completed in 2013. My research has focused on education as a site for understanding the ways that religion is taught and learned, and for understanding the ways that Jews in particular have thought about Judaism, the religious other, and the identity of the Jewish child.

Following the completion of my Ph.D., I spent four years in the nonprofit world, working as Director of Educational Research at Hillel International. I am particularly excited to be joining a department with an already flourishing program in nonprofit leadership, and look forward to opportunities to share this other realm of my professional resume with Michigan State students. While at Hillel, I also had the pleasure of serving as an adjunct faculty member in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at The George Washington University, teaching a graduate seminar in Jewish education for their M.A. program in Experiential Education and Jewish Cultural Arts.

My research interests continue to focus on Jewish education, both historically and in contemporary practice. My Ph.D. dissertation, which I am currently developing into a book manuscript, focused on the development of supplemental education in nineteenth-century American Judaism, and the process by which Judaism came to be described as a “religion” within educational literature. Some recent publications stemming from my dissertation include an article on nineteenth-century Jewish engagements with psychology for the Journal of Jewish Education (May 2016), and an article on the integration of flowers into Jewish confirmation ceremonies for Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies (Summer 2017). In December, I will present on nineteenth-century Jewish educational approaches to teaching the Bible at the annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies.

In addition to developing my doctoral work to become a book, I have also begun a new project in partnership with the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. This project will explore Jewish learning in cultural arts venues, and I will be spending the next year developing and implementing a pilot research study.

I am delighted to have joined the MSU community and am looking forward to getting to know the great state of Michigan. As a first-generation college student, the mission of MSU and its history as a land grant institution resonate quite personally for me, and I feel privileged to have the opportunity to play a role in the educational journeys of MSU students.
Amy DeRogatis

I am delighted to announce “The American Religious Sounds Project” that I co-direct with Isaac Weiner (OSU) has been awarded a $750,000 grant from the Henry Luce Foundation. This multi-year collaborative project has involved undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and community members at both institutions and in both regions. Last spring, we piloted the project at three institutions: St. Louis University, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and Georgia State University to prepare us for national expansion. Besides geographic expansion, this second phase will include awarding mini-grants to support interpretive scholarship and community engagement projects as well as further development of our sonic digital archive. You can read more about the project here: [http://www.cal.msu.edu/news/american-religious-sounds-project-awarded-750000-grant](http://www.cal.msu.edu/news/american-religious-sounds-project-awarded-750000-grant). In conjunction with this research project I presented at national and international conferences and co-wrote an article “Turning Students into Scholars: Using Digital Methods to Teach the Critical Study of Religion.” I continue to work on my manuscript “Mormon King” and presented a talk last spring about material culture and the Strangite community in nineteenth century Michigan. Along with teaching and mentoring undergraduates, I am the Faculty Excellence Advocate for the College of Arts and Letters. In this position I have dedicated my time to promoting best practices in tenure-stream faculty searches as well as promoting the recruitment, retention, and promotion of underrepresented faculty.

David Stowe

Since our last newsletter I have published several articles in *The Conversation*, the most recent on reggae music and Psalm 137. [https://theconversation.com/reggaes-sacred-roots-and-call-to-protest-injustice-99069](https://theconversation.com/reggaes-sacred-roots-and-call-to-protest-injustice-99069). My chapter on "Religion and Race in American Music" appeared in the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History*. I am currently working on a film documentary on contemporary resonances of Psalm 137 with a colleague from Film Studies, Dr. Swarnavel Pillai. I continue to co-chair the Music and Religion Unit of the American Academy of Religion. Last spring I was on sabbatical, mainly in Austin, where I gave a lecture on Christian popular music at University of Texas and finished the first draft of a novel, *Learning from Loons*, which has a strong religious studies undercurrent; one of its subplots involves evangelical Christian beer brewing.
Chris Frilingos

My book, *Jesus, Mary, and Joseph: Family Trouble in the Infancy Gospels* (pictured right), was published in Fall 2017 by the University of Pennsylvania Press. The book investigates ancient childhood stories about Jesus and Mary. Since the publication of the book, I have published several articles online, including “How Parenthood Has Changed the Way I Read Ancient Stories of Joseph and Mary’s Relationship with Jesus,” in *The Conversation* (Dec. 12, 2017). Links to this essay and others may be found at [http://www.chrisfrilingos.com/](http://www.chrisfrilingos.com/).

I offered a new course in the 2018 spring semester, “Apocalypse Then and Now” (REL 425), exploring ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses, such as the Book of Revelation, as well as the dramatization of apocalyptic themes in modern fiction, such as Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*.

In the 2017–18 academic year, I hosted several speakers. Dr. Nyasha Junior (Temple University) spoke to students and faculty on the topic, “Gloria Steinem, Alice Walker, and Biblical Studies.” Dr. Andrew S. Jacobs (Scripps College) gave a lecture on the topic, “Gospel Thrillers: Fear, Desire, and the U.S. Bible.”

Arthur Versluis

Recently I published a new book, *Platonic Mysticism* (SUNY Press), which has generated a number of very positive reviews, in particular by scholars of Platonism. In it, I argue for a reframing of how we understand the term “mysticism,” placing it back into its historical context in Platonism, as opposed to the more nebulous meanings it has taken on in the past century. In 2018, the Association for the Study of Esotericism (of which I’m president) held its seventh international conference at Rice University (the first ones were in 2002 and 2004 at MSU). I also presented at an international conference on transdisciplinarity, held in Cluj, Romania. It was quite intellectually stimulating to be in an event with scholars, scientists, and physicians. I currently am working on a book that brings together the themes of several of my most recent books in order to advance a transdisciplinary argument about the humanities and the study of religion in the twenty-first century. And I continue to edit *JSR: Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, our most recent issue featuring a lead article by Prof. Christopher Partridge and focusing on the intersections of religious and political radicalism.
The trip to Japan introduced me to many helpful people and opened new paths for my ongoing research on Buddhist connections between India, Taiwan, and Japan. I continue developing a digital humanities project—the Bhakti Virtual Archive (BHAVA)—which is attracting good attention. My main collaborator and I were invited to present on BHAVA at digital humanities conferences at Emory and Stanford, and we have submitted an NEH grant proposal to bring it to fruition.

My teaching continues to cover foundational courses for the department, and this past year I had the pleasure of guiding an outstanding student, Madelyn Averill, as she wrote a senior thesis on women leaders of Hindu nationalist organizations. Her prize-winning paper will be published in the Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa next year. It’s inspiring to see what MSU students do!
Morgan Shipley

From an introductory course on the world religions, to courses on mysticism, new religious movements, or religious studies theories and methods, I seek to create space in the classroom where we can explore what it means to live in a world of religious diversity and what it means to partake in interreligious dialogue. I challenge my students to understand that the study of religion is not apologetic, dogmatic, or confessional, but rather functions as a rigorous, critical, analytical, and reflective examination of understandings of the “religious” and its relations with other areas of life.

As the Academic Advisor, I work with students to construct an academic plan that will prepare them to succeed at all levels of their being: intellectual, emotional, and mental. My research explores the lived experiences of under-studied, underrepresented, and/or maligned religious movements and moments in American history, particularly those connected to mystical experimentation and esoteric beliefs. I am specifically interested in teasing out what new religious movements tell us about the history of American pluralism and the conditional realities of religious tolerance.

Forthcoming publications include an article for a special issue of Communal Studies commemorating the 40th anniversary of Jonestown, an article that unpacks the spiritual utopianism of the MOVE organization for a special issue on race and utopia for Utopian Studies, and two book chapters, one that explores the connection between The Beatles, psychedelics, and religious insight in the postwar counterculture, and a second that locates the psychedelic genesis for Zalman Schachter-Shalomi’s re-imagining of Judaism. I am currently working on a book manuscript, *Entheogenic Religions in an Apocalyptic America: How Psychedelic Sacraments Sparked an Esoteric Revival*, which explores the sacramental use of psychedelic substances within non-traditional religious settings in postwar America.

Gretel Van Wieren

This year I am teaching three courses in the Concentration in Nonprofit Leadership: Introduction to Religion and Nonprofits (REL 185), Religion and the Environment (REL 210), and Religion and Nonprofit Leadership (REL 485). In terms of research, I had a book come out in the spring of 2018, *Food, Farming and Religion: Emerging Ethical Perspectives* (Routledge), and have another book coming out in the fall of 2019 -- *Spirit of the Woods: An Experiment in Connection with Nature* (Oregon State University Press). I continue to work on projects with my Mellon Foundation/Humanities Without Walls grant on the New Ethics of Food, including a special issue on food ethics that will be coming out in the *Public Philosophy Journal* by the end of the year. In November, I gave a talk on food systems at the Parliament of the World’s Religions meeting in Toronto.
I am delighted to join Religious Studies this year! I have always been passionate about the relationship between religion, literature and translation. In REL 205: Myth, Self and Religion, I get to explore that relationship with wonderful students from across the university. Our study is also contributing to a project I am working on about Jews, dogs, and dog-men. The project is an amplification of a dissertation chapter exploring the significance of a half-man half-dog in the Yiddish chivalric epic *Bovo-bukh*.

As a Lilly Teaching Fellow (2017-18), I turned a class (IAH 241c) on Arthurian literature into an online role-playing game to see if students would be able to better connect what they read about in course texts to real-life through comparisons with their avatars. The project was a success and I am holding the class again this semester.

Before I was appointed in the Department of Religious Studies, I taught for the English department, Jewish Studies and the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in the Arts and Humanities at MSU. I continue to teach for all of these units. My spring courses include a course on Modern Jewish Humor (IAH 207), the representation of Jewish men in modern literature, film and pop culture (ENG 354), and REL 205 again.

I look forward to increased collaboration with my students and colleagues in Religious Studies.
Jerry Lindman

“Nonprofits can’t make a profit.” “Nonprofits don’t have paid staff, they only use volunteers.” “Nonprofits all do the same thing.” “Nonprofits get most of their funding from donations.” “Nonprofits should be run like a business.” These statements represent common myths and misunderstandings about nonprofit organizations and serve as a barrier to understanding the size, scope and potential of nonprofits’ today and their growing role in all aspects of the economy and civil society in the US and across the globe.

Dispelling these myths is one reason I enjoy teaching my course, *Introduction to Religion and Nonprofits* (REL185). Breaking through these misunderstandings is the first task in the overall objective of helping students gain a new appreciation for this growing sector and explore opportunities for their unique role within it.

I have been teaching this course as part of the Nonprofit Leadership Concentration offered by Religious Studies. This Concentration of four courses prepares students for leadership of today’s nonprofits and religious organizations, leadership that is vital to nonprofits impact on needed social change.

Fundamental to future leaders’ success is a grounding in the realities of the sector - nonprofits can earn a profit; do have paid professional staff; serve a wide variety of social and civic missions, and cannot be run like a business.

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Nonprofit Leadership and Gifts in Support of Our Shared Initiatives

Did you know that the Department of Religious Studies here at Michigan State University is the only Religious Studies Department in the United States with a nonprofit leadership career track for our students? This career track requires only four courses, none of which are additional, as they all count toward a B.A. in Religious Studies. Studying religion at Michigan State University prepares our students with global cultural knowledge for a range of possible careers in government, the corporate world, or nonprofits, and we are now the only place at MSU where students can get a Concentration in Nonprofit Leadership that will appear on their official transcripts. We have alumni working in the nonprofit world now, and in fact this year one of our alumni, Emma Pittsley, brought the Director of the Parliament of the World’s Religions to MSU to meet with our students.

If you are an alumnus and would be interested in coming back to meet with faculty members and/or current students, please contact Ashley Housler, at housler@msu.edu.

If you’re in a position to contribute a gift in the form of a scholarship, fellowship, or even an Endowed Chair in support of our department, faculty and students, and our shared initiatives, you can contact Ashley Housler at housler@msu.edu and she will put you in touch with Christine Radtke, Senior Director of Development in the College of Arts & Letters.

To subscribe to the Department of Religious Studies’ mailing list, REL-INFO, simply send an email to the email address listserv@list.msu.edu with the words “SUBSCRIBE REL-INFO” in the message of the email, not in the subject line. After this email is sent, you will receive a confirmation email from listserv@list.msu.edu with a link to confirm your interest in subscribing to REL-INFO. It is imperative that you follow this link to complete the subscription process.
Religious Studies Seniors

Emily Quinlan

I declared an additional major in Religious Studies in 2016, after taking REL 101 as an elective, and also added the Nonprofit Leadership Concentration. I was drawn to the program because of the excellence of its faculty members and the emphasis placed on individualized attention for students. In my time as a Religious Studies major I have taken classes with a variety of faculty members, and everyone has fostered an atmosphere in which myself and other students are treated with respect. The faculty in the department of Religious Studies places a premium on being attentive to student needs and concerns, without judgement or disapproval. I feel I can approach my professors with my concerns or issues and they will not only hear me out but will also do whatever they can to make sure we reach a mutually beneficial resolution. Additionally, all of the classes I have taken in my time as a Religious Studies major have been taught in engaging and comprehensive ways, so that it is a pleasure to attend lecture and participate in discussions. Majoring in Religious Studies has allowed me further develop my passion for the study of religion through the exploration of my interests, supported and furthered by the talented and attentive faculty members.

After graduation I'm hoping to work for a few years before applying for grad school, and I'm looking at getting a job at one of the local nonprofits, or in a larger program like AmeriCorps. I'm going to be applying to the College Advising Corps in particular, and would like to use the knowledge base I've formed studying at MSU to work with different communities and organizations.

Caleb Stenske

I'm Caleb Stenske, a fifth-year senior with double majors in Religious Studies and Japanese.

Last year I had the honor of being chosen to receive the Anderson Award, which helped greatly with my plans to go study abroad in Japan. While studying Japanese, I fell in love with Japan's rich culture and famous religious sites. Religious Studies remains my passion; however, upon graduation, I hope to return and teach English in Japan before finding a graduate school that allows me to continue my study of East Asian Religions.

I am currently beginning work on my senior thesis with Professor Keune on Korean religions in Imperial Japan. I hope to present my paper at the American Academy of Religions Midwest Conference in March as well as the Undergraduate Research Symposium here at MSU in April.
Online Learning

The Department of Religious Studies always has focused on terrific undergraduate teaching, and in the past few years we’ve also developed a robust online teaching portfolio. In addition to a slate of summer online courses, we now have a number of hybrid and online courses during the academic year that draw on the strengths of Michigan State University’s D2L online learning platform. And we’re even in the process of exploring online graduate education so that, for the first time in the Department’s history, we may well offer Religious Studies graduate courses and a graduate certificate and program. That’s only in the planning stage, but it’s another exciting development that demonstrates again the continuing evolution of our Department, so we wanted to share it with you. Stay tuned!

Online and Hybrid courses:
REL 101: Exploring Religion
REL 185: Intro to Religion and Nonprofits
REL 205: Myth, Self and Religion
REL 275: Magic and Mysticism
REL 301: Methods and Theories of Religion

Religions Exploration Club and Theta Alpha Kappa

Over the past ten years, we’ve had multiple Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) generated by Religious Studies students. Faculty members have also served as formal or informal advisors to various groups as part of our Department’s commitment to engagement and outreach. We currently have two main student groups associated with our Department: our chapter of the National Honors Society Theta Alpha Kappa, faculty advisor for which is Dr. Jon Keune, and the Religions Exploration Club, in which our Religious Studies majors Skylar Berlin and Erica Lavista have been the driving force this year. Theta Alpha Kappa inducts Honors members each year at our Religious Studies Undergraduate Research Conference, when we also present Departmental Awards to students. And the Religions Exploration Club sponsors events, including a major event this past fall. This spring, the group will sponsor public talks by faculty members as well as various other events for students. Our Department is unusual for its emphasis on undergraduate teaching, and encouraging student engagement is in our Department’s DNA. Theta Alpha Kappa and the Religions Exploration Club are important examples of that.

Skylar Berlin

Erica Lavista