

Department Meeting

Emory University's Department of Religion



LAURIE PATTON is Associate Professor of Early Indian Religions and Chair of the Department of Religion of Emory University. Emory College, now the liberal arts undergraduate college of Emory University, is the oldest college of the University. It was founded in 1836 in Oxford, Georgia. Emory University was established in Atlanta in 1915, but college classes continued to be held at Oxford until 1919 when the college relocated to the new campus in Atlanta. Bible study has been part of the college curriculum since its founding, and for many years a Bible course was required of all Emory College students. The religion requirement was broadened in the 1960s to include a course in modern Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish thought. In the late 60s, it expanded to include non-biblical religions as alternatives to Bible. Various names have been used to denote the department, which became simply the Department of Religion in 1966. It has now grown to include twenty faculty members, with at least two, and more likely three, of them teaching in each of the world's major religious traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity), and several historians of culture working in American religious thought. The Department regularly collaborates with the Candler School of Theology and the Pew Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Religion, housed at Emory's Law School.

RSN: How long have you been in the Department of Religion? How long have you been the Chair?

Patton: I came to Emory in the fall of 1996. I have been Department Chair for three years.

RSN: How many full-time and adjunct faculty do you have in your department?

Patton: We have twenty full-time faculty, including lecturers, and we regularly hire five or six adjunct faculty per semester. We can draw from the pool of advanced graduate students in the Graduate Division of Religion (GDR) and the members of the community.

RSN: Can you tell us a bit about the department?

Patton: While I will be writing a little more about the department's intellectual strengths below, I will say for now that I like to think of us as an intellectual San Francisco — where there is no single majority of religious tradition, culture, or methodology. With twenty faculty members within the department, and faculty

members outside the department who regularly teach with us, we have at least three faculty members teaching the major world traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We are quite committed to a kind of pluralism “on the ground” that might be a model for our students. If we can manage that successfully, then we are embodying the kind of society we are also teaching our students the skills to live in. Such a pluralistic department takes a great deal of collegiality, which is also one of our strengths. Like all departments, we have many old and painful issues, but we hang in there in the difficult conversations and solve problems well.

RSN: What are your core or introductory courses, the courses that year after year seem to attract the most students?

Patton: We just completed a major overhaul of our curriculum, designed in part to focus on making those introductory courses more attractive and more regularly taught. Our core courses are at the 100 and 200 level, many of them also qualifying for our distribution requirements for the college. At the 100 level, “Introduction to Religion” usually involves a comparison between two religious traditions, which also serves to introduce students to the basic issues and categories in the study of religion. We usually follow the “East/West” pattern, and have offered REL 100 courses in Christianity and Buddhism, or Judaism and Hinduism. But we've also done some more creative ones, such as African Traditional Religions and Christianity. Our REL 150, “Comparative Sacred Texts,” introduces students to at least four

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major world traditions through the rigorous methods of textual exegesis — both the traditions' own methods as well as scholarly methods. This has been a very successful class because the skills of textual analysis are transportable across disciplines. Our 200-level classes tend to be comparative, but more tradition- or culture-focused: “Biblical Literature” (205); “History of Religions in America” (209); “Western Religious Traditions” (211); “Asian Religious Traditions” (212); and so on. We also have a course in the classical sacred texts at the 200 level where students can study the work of a great author, such as Augustine, or a genre, such as Midrash or Veda.

RSN: How many students take introductory courses? Is this number increasing?

Patton: Of the four hundred or so students registered for our courses each year, we regularly get about one to two hundred of them in the core courses. We like to keep our enrollments flexible for the faculty members. Some faculty teach most effectively when they cap these core courses at

thirty or forty; some are more comfortable with a full class of eighty to ninety.

RSN: What distinguishes your department from other departments on campus?

Patton: We are a midsize department by Emory's standards, and certainly one of the more respected departments on campus. We have a tradition of embracing social action that goes back to the 60s. Although we've become more “professionalized” as a department, many of our faculty members still engage in a lot of community education and activism. In addition, many of our faculty members' writings are on social justice and religion, and are, in their own right, a form of activism. As a department, we also tend to be able to make stronger stands in the university. For instance, we have this year declared a department-wide “sabbatical” from hosting speakers or planning conferences. We did this as a way of trying to reimbrace ourselves, and inspire others to reimbrace the core values of research and teaching that are at the heart of our mission at Emory. Right now, Emory's extracurricular activities are at an all-time high, and the service burden for faculty is also quite high. We wanted to fight that and get back to basics for all of us. We also actively seek cross-disciplinary appointments in Religion. As one of the stronger departments on campus, we are in a position to help other departments if we collaborate with them on hiring. This stance also protects against the departmental entrenchment that can sometimes happen at a university, for all good reasons but with problematic results.

RSN: In what subfields or subdisciplines would you like to expand your department?

Patton: Our current strengths are in Judaism, Hinduism, and Christianity. We are currently conducting a search in Ethnography of Judaism. After that is completed, our immediate hiring priorities are in Islam and Tibetan Buddhism. Although we have at least nine or ten excellent Islamicists at various schools and departments at Emory, since 9-11 we need a higher faculty representation of Islamic studies within the department itself. We hope to collaborate with another department to focus on Islam in America. In addition, we would like to augment our work in Emory's current study-abroad program in Dharamsala, India, in Tibetan Studies. Two of our faculty members are heavily involved in that program, and we would like to bolster our offerings even more in that area with a new hire.

RSN: What is distinctive about the teaching that you and your colleagues do?

Patton: We have a very distinguished

record of teaching, with six of our colleagues in the department receiving university-wide teaching awards. We tend to teach according to our intellectual strengths — with courses in textual reading and ethnographic methods being some of the major emphases within the department. We have recently collaborated with the Departments of History as well as with the Program in Comparative Literature to make our offerings stronger in these areas. Emory University also has a long tradition of practical training, service learning, and internships. This tradition is enfolded under the term “Theory/Practice Learning” and has been written up in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, as well as in *Liberal Education*. Theory/Practice Learning is a teaching strategy that combines theoretical work with practical experiences. TPL models of teaching create well-structured opportunities for learners to think critically and synthetically, develop and test hypotheses, and reflect ethically and personally on ideas and experiences. This pedagogical approach is applicable in all disciplines and useful across a broad spectrum of activities from problem-solving to research, fieldwork, experimentation, and service learning. For instance, in our Religion 300 course, students may well be asked to work on a Habitat for Humanity project in Atlanta, and to think about the connection between Hegel and Habitat for Humanity. We also offer yearly a “Religion Internship” class for our undergraduates that is entirely based in Theory/Practice Learning.

RSN: Would you say something about the way your department structures the undergraduate major? What types of courses do students take to fulfill the requirements for a religion major?

Patton: As it is presently structured, the major in Religion requires a minimum of forty hours (ten courses), one of which may be taken in a cognate discipline. It is important for the student to work closely with an adviser in choosing a course of study, which may include, for example, an emphasis in Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, African-American religions, religion and conflict, religion in America, religion and ethics, religion and gender, ritual and performance studies, classical texts and religious thought, or comparative sacred texts. All of these are our teaching and research strengths within the department. As mentioned above, our students begin their work with 100- and 200-level courses, which are more comparative in nature. They then move to advanced courses at the 300 level, which are focused completely on specific traditions, such as “Early Medieval Christianity,” “Islamic Civilization,” or “Modern Hinduism.” Finally, the student returns to comparative courses, but with much more sophisticated methods and topics, such as “Mystical Thought and Practice,” “Ritual and Worship,” “Gender and Religion,” “Ethics,” and so on.

All of our students are also required to take Religion 300, “Interpreting Religion,” and Religion 490, “Senior Symposium.” The Religion 300 requirement is an introduction to the various approaches in the study of religion. It has

See **PATTON** p.15

PATTON, from p.13

frequently been taught with a Theory/ Practice Learning component, which asks students to go out into the city of Atlanta and test those “theories” in practical settings. Religion 490 is a rigorous, writing-intensive course that asks students to reflect on their intellectual journeys and develop projects that are the “summa” of their class work at Emory.

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Some of our eighty-odd majors elect to write honors theses in order to graduate with honors. In the recent past, these topics have varied from “Environmental Ethics” to “Ethnography of Black Churches in Atlanta” to “The Aesthetics of Graveyards.”

We also have a large number of elegantly designed joint majors that combine Religion with Anthropology, Classical Civilization, History, Philosophy, and Sociology.

RSN: Would you say more about the organization of knowledge in your depart-

ment? What role does it play, if any, in attracting undergraduate students to your program?

Patton: Here’s where I can feature our intellectual strengths more clearly. Methodologically, we are quite strong in two different areas: the textual study of religion and the ethnographic study of religion. Students who learn with us in a textually oriented manner tend to gain

analytic skills that they develop in a rigorous way over the course of their time with us. Students who are interested in the more ethnographic approach will inevitably do a great deal of fieldwork and reflection about methods of interviewing and so on. We also have productive intellectual alliances across divides — so that the scholars of one tradition, such as Hinduism, are historians, ethnographers, and textualists. Similarly, scholars who focus on one approach to the study of religion, such as history of culture, could be in the areas of American religions or religion and literature. I think our undergraduates sense this productive interdisciplinarity and

work well within its guidelines.

RSN: What about religion departments in other institutions — how are you alike or different?

Patton: Unlike many departments who must make a case for the study of religion per se at their home university, the study of religion is somewhat of a growth industry at Emory. With the recently established Pew Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Religion and the Candler School of Theology, we are a department with a great deal of collaborators and partners within the university itself. The Graduate Division of Religion, the Ph.D.-granting body at Emory, is made up of members of the Department, Candler, as well as other departments in the university. The department has traditionally worked quite well with the Candler School of Theology, which is unusual, given the old — and now somewhat hackneyed — “religious studies vs. theology” debates. We have tried to move beyond that debate and focus on what we can do together. For instance, the Candler School recently received a \$10 million grant from the Lilly Foundation to focus on “religious practices.” In Candler parlance, this translates into a reinvigoration for the fields of practical theology. That’s more of a seminary subject, and doesn’t have much to do with the study of religion at the university. But to their great credit, the Candler faculty members were quite insistent that they did not want to proceed without the Department of Religion. As a result, we collaborated on the grant and will be able to add up to eight new lines in our Ph.D. programs focusing on religious practices. We are hoping many of these students will

be focusing on non-Christian traditions such as Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. The members of the Department of Religion now make up one-third of the entire Ph.D.-granting body, with a huge jump in emphasis on the teaching of world religions and non-Christian religious traditions.

RSN: How do you attract majors?

Patton: We regularly attend “majors fairs” at the university and at Oxford College, a two-year, liberal arts partner college about forty minutes away. I think our excellent teaching and the accessibility of faculty also make a large difference. Many of our majors (numbering sixty to eighty in any given year) are very much geared toward preparation for professional life as doctors, lawyers, and businesspeople. But they tend to want that something “extra” that a straight preprofessional undergraduate major doesn’t give them; so they will double-major, or make their preprofessional preparation secondary to their religion major. We also get the occasional person who has known from the beginning that they will study religion for the rest of their lives. That is always a joy.

RSN: What problems will your department be facing in the near future?

Patton: I worry a great deal about the identity politics that plague so much of academic life these days. That, and an increasing move toward specializations in particular religions, make the possibility of splintering and fractures much more real. In our own department, we have many

See PATTON p.18

ORSI, from p.12

an Italian order of nuns, because, as the pastor of the church said at the time of the school’s founding, the Italian children of his parish were not going to be subjected to Irish-American nuns. This was the bitterest religious conflict in the neighborhood; pluralism was not the operative term for the interactions between Irish and Italian Catholics on Bronx streets. Then I went to a Jesuit prep school in the Bronx, a complicated emotional and intellectual environment — you give us boys, the headmaster told our parents (most of whom had not gone to high school themselves), and we give you back men. I don’t think anyone knew quite what to expect. The Jesuits understood that minds were in bodies and bodies were in the social world, with its realities of social class and distinction, achievement and failure, and learning this one way or another was also what education meant.

RSN: What did you study in college?

Orsi: These were the lovely days after the Second Vatican Council. My mother worked as a secretary in Fordham’s School of Religious Education, and on the weekends young priests and nuns, away from their superiors for the first time and living in little apartments in the Bronx and Manhattan, came to drink wine and eat my mother’s pasta and, as it happened, to fall in love with each other. Lots of post-Conciliar romances began in my parents’ living room. Memory gives me the time as one of great hopefulness and excitement; theology classes seemed to be about taking bigger and deeper breaths in the world. I went on to study theology at Trinity College in Hartford in a great religion department where almost everyone

had been trained at Union Seminary in New York in the days of Niebuhr and Tillich. My teachers here — Frank Kirkpatrick, Edward Cherbonnier, Susan Pomerantz, Richard Fenn, and John Gettier — taught me, it has slowly dawned on me as my own years in the discipline start accumulating, how to think and how to teach.

RSN: At what point did you decide you wanted to become a scholar of religion?

Orsi: After college I traveled around in Europe and the Middle East on a Watson Fellowship studying Christian monasticism in politically turbulent areas to see what effect prayer and spirituality — practices that might be considered the most detached from the world — had on situations of intractable violence. In an Anglican convent in southern England, I met a nun who had lived in northern Ireland in the late 1960s, Sister Eileen, a woman with the most earthed spirituality — my work on lived reli-

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gion, even the resonance that the phrase has for me, the richness and thickness of the word “lived” preceding “religion,” is rooted in Sister Eileen’s vision of the spirit encountered in the grit of everyday life. She told me that she and her sisters used to hang a stone

painted white outside the convent door in their gutted Belfast neighborhood when they were at prayer inside so that local people would know that during these times, at least, their closed and dangerous world opened out to another one.

RSN: Describe the period of your doctoral study. What was it like and how did you feel while studying at Yale? While at Yale, what were your areas of greatest interest and with whom did you study?

Orsi: I came back to Yale to study American religious history with Sydney Ahlstrom. It always stuns me to remember how little I knew about “America” when I got to graduate school, about the US on the other side of the Hudson River. There was one little Protestant church in my old neighborhood but I never saw anyone go into it or come out of it. At Ahlstrom’s funeral in 1984, his brother said something like, “When I think of America, I think of Sydney.” Ahlstrom seemed uncannily to be

Sydney Ahlstrom was a kind, gentle, and generous man. He and Sister Eileen both reminded me of a great uncle I had who immigrated from Tuscany to Boston, where he improbably grew figs in the cold New England soil, ground sausage in his basement, made his own inky black wine, and whose delight in the texture, smells, sounds, tastes of the world have remained for me one of the touchstones of the real.

I just went back to my old church in the Bronx on a rainy, late-winter afternoon. This is absolutely true: wet sparrows clustered in the plaster folds of the statue of Saint Francis in front of the rectory, as they had when I was little and first noticed them there. I managed to convince the person who opened the door, who didn’t know me but remembered my family, to let me wander the church by myself, and I made my way behind the altar, down a long narrow corridor crowded with old Italian saints’ statues that no one can identify anymore, to an almost-secret little side chapel to Saint Anthony. I spent a lot of time in this place when I was an altar boy in the church. The chapel then glowed smoky and dark from the scores of candles the old Italians in black clothes lit for their families and for their memories; now there are electric candles. It’s a powerful experience to be able to walk around inside a space like this, to be able to touch its walls and holy images and listen to the sounds of people at prayer, to sit beside them, and to hear the noises of the street coming through the stained-glass windows donated by long-gone Italian families in the neighborhood, so that the sun warms up memory. I ask more complicated and precise questions now, but when I think about your question “At what point did you decide to become a scholar of religion?” invariably this chapel comes to mind. ♡

the contemporary of the whole American religious past — I didn’t study American religious history with him as much as I encountered it in his remarkable historical and religious imagination. He lit up the past with his deep affection for it all.

ERNST, from p.16

My favorite comment came from Malaysian human rights activist Chandra Muzaffar: "There was a report in yesterday's newspapers here in Kuala Lumpur about the controversy, with a picture of you. UNC's intellectual integrity and moral courage are a beacon of hope for the academic community, worldwide. Irrational fear, prejudice, and suspicion will remain the enemies of justice, truth, and honesty for a long while to come. Here in Malaysia we have to combat another type of irrationality — the irrationality of those who subscribe to a dogmatic approach to Islam. Their thinking is as pernicious as that of individuals who fear any contact with the religion."

This summer reading program was not a revolution. The percentage of participation by students — about 65 percent — was about the same as last year's, and the discussion sessions varied considerably in quality. But a couple of things were achieved in this process. First, the university community made a strong affirmation of academic freedom in the face of attempts by outside religious and political forces to control what books are read. Second, the university declared by this example that it is time to make understanding Islam part of a liberal arts education. Both these conclusions should be kept in mind as we face the challenges ahead of us. ✪

LYNDES, from p.14

interview at the Annual Meeting, I decided to take advantage of this opportunity. I had to identify up to three areas of teaching proficiency by selecting appropriate employment classification codes. As a result of this exercise, I could then carefully select my qualifications to fit succinctly on two pages and to think strategically about how I want to market myself. I then found it much easier to update my curriculum vitae with focused teaching goals in mind. I also discovered that it was helpful to read how various institutions list employment opportunities in *Openings*. Next year, based on the

wording of the advertisements, I will have a better idea of how to tailor my application packet toward those jobs where there is a potential fit between my qualifications and a possible employer.

After going through the process of applying for a job and registering with EIS, I feel that I am in a more solid position as I approach graduation. These activities were incentive to me to update and improve my curriculum vitae, write a cover letter, and assemble possible application materials so that, should a job opportunity present itself, I will be more prepared. ✪

PATTON, from p.15

faculty who also serve as heads of many smaller, interdisciplinary programs such as Asian Studies, Jewish Studies, and Violence Studies. This means that their loyalties are inevitably divided at times. The larger importance and relevance for comparative work, or attention to the larger topic of religion, with all of its problematic definitions, tends to get lost. I recently gave a lecture at a state university that was thinking about starting a religion department, and someone there suggested that there be smaller committees on the study of each religious tradition instead. I said that we had something close to that at Emory within the Department of Religion itself, and it took a great deal of time and effort to maintain the "happy" part of the "happy diversity." I spend a lot of time talking with folks about how it is better to hang together with our common project, as nebulous as that may be at times.

RSN: What advice would you give to faculty members as they deal with a chair?

Patton: I would tell each faculty member to treat the chair as a human being and a fellow scholar and teacher, rather than just someone in a "power-position." That makes for a mature collegial relationship. I would also have them read the recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article on the demands on a chair these days, and how impossible the job can become at times. We share a lot of power within the department with our committee structures — we have a personnel committee, a curriculum committee, an intellectual life committee, and a development committee. That takes off some of the load, so that the chair can focus on advocating on behalf of faculty members, garnering resources for the department, and so on.

RSN: What gives you the greatest satisfaction as a chair?

Patton: I really enjoy the one-on-one work — talking to individual faculty members about their publication plans,

their projects, their hopes, their intellectual dreams, and the courage it will take to fulfill them. I also like building intellectual community, and have started discussion groups and study groups here in the department that have taken on a life of their own. We have a "Religion and Conflict" initiative that has sponsored conferences and inspired faculty to go out and redesign their teaching and research, and that's tremendously exciting to watch. Finally, I love having the opportunity to make things a little bit fairer — getting that salary raise for the person who simply didn't know how to ask; getting the well-deserved teaching award for the person who's been slogging in the trenches for decades without much recognition; giving more dignity and respect to our adjunct faculties; helping senior faculty to retire with a sense of accomplishment and junior faculty to come on board with a sense of confidence and excitement. There's nothing like being able to change academic culture, just a tiny bit, so that the workplace can reflect a better sense of the way one would like the world to be. ✪

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Nominations of winners of campus awards, or any other awards, are encouraged.

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KINNARD, from p.12

Curzon, 1999), focuses on the intimate relationship in medieval Buddhism between philosophical discourse and sculptural representations. In particular, I look at the dynamism and tension between the doctrinal (textual) articulation of visual praxis and the artistic and ritual practice "on the ground," and I explicitly use the work of Pierre Bourdieu to inform this analysis. I am currently working on a book entitled *Shared Spaces and Blurred Identities: The Interactions of Buddhists and Hindus in India* that explores the relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism as it is played out at several shared pilgrimage places in India. It argues that our typical understandings of the monothetic construction and perpetuation of religious identity need to be rethought and conceived of as much more messy and fluid than simple and singular labels can convey.

To that end, I want to encourage my colleagues across the field and subfields of religious studies to consider the Cultural Criticism series as a potential home for their scholarship. I am personally interest-

ed in several contemporary issues that I would be very happy to see addressed in manuscripts and proposals: the ideology and practice of Christian rock music; new religious movements; issues of conversion and syncretism; religion and the popular media (especially television and film); ritual practice and belief; and religion and political structures. This represents my own personal wish list, not an exclusive or complete agenda by any means. More generally, though, it is those works that speak across traditional disciplinary lines that most interest and excite me — the particular study put into a sophisticated and critical methodology, comparative studies that cut across historical boundaries, studies that emphasize the role and place of material culture, and cross-historical studies that put the contemporary religious world into a historical frame.

I welcome submissions of prospectuses or sample work. I can be reached via e-mail at jnkinn@wm.edu, or by phone at 1-757-221-2174 (fax: 1-757-221-2169), or by surface mail at the Department of Religion, P.O. Box 8795, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795, USA. ✪

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Volunteers will review CVs of registered candidates at the EIS Center and provide them with suggestions for changes based on their experience as a member of a job search committee. Consultations will be approximately 20 minutes and take place in person. Volunteers are asked to commit to at least two hours over the course of the Annual Meetings.

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