Department Welcomes New Faculty

There is a new face in the Department of Comparative Religion this year. That face belongs to Elizabeth Lemons, who will be joining us as an adjunct professor this fall. Dr. Lemons recently received her Ph.D. in the Study of Religion from Harvard, with a specialization in Theology and the Modern West. Her dissertation, more specifically, looks at the interactions between Theology and discourses about gender and sexuality in “Spiritualist” movement writings of the 19th century.

The multi-talented Dr. Lemons will be teaching a number of courses for us this year. This fall, she will be teaching CR 41 - Contemporary Religions in America. This class will explore the various religions in contemporary United States and their interactions with the larger “American Culture.” She will also be teaching CR 55 - Topics in Major Religious Doctrines. This class will look at the ways that three religious traditions (Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism) look at God, the creation of the Universe, and the End of Times. From this initial inquiry, the class will then incorporate an understanding of the cultural and political implications of these ideas.

Looking forward to next term, Dr. Lemons will be teaching our “Philosophy of Religions” class, and a class in Contemporary Religious Issues.

As is evident from the range of the courses which she is teaching as well as from her written scholarship, Dr. Lemons expertise covers both the socio-cultural realm as well as areas such as Philosophy of Religion and Feminist/Gender studies. As such, she will be a welcome addition to the department.

Office Hours:
Tuesdays 2:30-3:30, Miner 120

Meet Our November Speaker
PAUL MIRECKI

Monday, November 22, 1999
Miner Hall, Room 221

Paul Mirecki, an associate professor of religious studies at the University of Kansas, is a specialist on Greek and Coptic manuscripts pertaining to early Christianity as well as Manichaeanism and other Gnostic trends in the ancient Mediterranean world. In 1991 he discovered, among the unstudied texts in the Berlin Egyptian Museum, fragments of a previously unknown text ("The Gospel of the Savior" as it has been named). With his colleague Charles W. Hedrick (Missouri State University), Mirecki has published a translation and scholarly commentary on this fragmentary text, which may date to the first or second century after the death of the historical Jesus, and which includes both familiar sayings of Jesus (although in a very different order than they appear in any of the canonical gospels) and hitherto unknown sayings. Mirecki's work sheds light on the religious context of early Christianity in eastern Mediterranean societies in the generations immediately after Jesus, and reminds us that there were many texts purporting to convey the sayings and acts of Jesus which were never incorporated into the Bible, but indeed, in many instances, deliberately destroyed.

Buddhist Reflections on God and Atheism
By Joseph Walser

(A talk given Goddard Chapel, March 1999)

One of the broadest distinctions that can be made between spiritual paths is that between Theism (faith in and worship of a transcendent Being) and non-theistic paths, (religious paths which emphasize a kind of salvation through one's own effort which may or may not replicate the existence of a transcendent being).

Since the scope of Buddhist Practice encompasses both of these trends, I will turn my reflection to the ways that Buddhism ties these paths together. The non-theistic trend in Buddhism is emphasized in Theravada Buddhism. In one of the prominent sermons in this tradition, the Buddha instructs his disciples to "seek out your own salvation with diligence" and to "be a lamp unto yourselves". The implication here is that the path to Nirvana is to be tread by oneself, and ultimately no one may help you. Quite different are the writings from the Japanese Pure Land Practitioner, Shinran. Shinran acknowledges the existence of the path of self-cultivation, but admits that he would be unable to follow it. He has no option but to rely on Faith

Department of Religion Contest
$50 Essay

For the best student essay on Religion to be published in our next issue.
Buddhist Reflections on God and Atheism

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alone, and even this is not produced through his own effort but through the Benevolence of the Buddha of Infinite Light, Amitabha.

These two perspectives seem to be incompatible, and yet there are a number of ways that the Buddhist tradition brings them together. While Theists and non-theists may not see eye to eye on What or Who exists ultimately - Buddhism softens this divide by shifting the perspective. Instead of asking "What do you believe in?" it shifts the question to "whom do you want to become?" The issue of belief (or understanding) is then brought forth in a purely instrumental sense as something like a catalyst producing a fundamental transformation of the character. The cornerstone of Buddhism, which both the Theistic trend and the non-theistic trend hold to be central, is that one should become one who is free of greed, hate, and delusion. Put another way, one should become one whose wise activities are motivated solely by an urgent longing for the wellbeing of others.

Even within the Theravada tradition, it is acknowledged that there are many ways to achieve this goal. The many paths here do not mean that there are many goals but rather that there are many starting points. Some of us are governed primarily by desire, others by anger, and others by doubt. The 5th century Sri Lankan monk Buddhaghosa explains that the adoption of a path of faith by some or a path of philosophical analysis by others should be seen as two different antidotes to two different temperaments. For those primarily governed by desire, that desire can easily be redirected into faith. For those governed by anger, that hatred can be easily harnessed by philosophical investigation. The important point here is that both paths end in the transformation of the initial greed or hate into their corresponding virtues.

Let's look at the transformation of hatred into the proper use of intellect. Ordinary hatred identifies objects and people in our world as harmful or malevolent. As against us in some way. There is a fundamental self-centered orientation that is at the basis of such anger. It views the world exclusively from the standpoint of what each and every thing is to me or for me. (This orientation is just as true for those with excessive self hatred as excessive self-love). Philosophical analysis turns the tables and asks the question - what purpose am I for? Instead of viewing all things as naturally lending themselves to our grasp, we can for the first time see them as having a separate claim on us. To make this more concrete - instead of looking at an a chicken as "dinner", I can more easily see it in terms of its own creaturely ends. Such philosophical analysis ends in opening up to compassion for the other and the silencing of self-centered desire and hatred.

Opening oneself to the other is also the cornerstone of Pure Land Buddhism - or the faith in the power of Amitabha Buddha. Our tendencies to operate from a self-centered perspective is here seen in our attempt to act from Self-Power. If we take seriously the existence of the Buddhist path, then we must acknowledge the existence of a Benevolent Reality that one is enlightened to. Faith, then, or the radical kind of faith which transforms you, is then the radical allowing - or opening up to a force which is radically other. The radical otherness encountered in faith places the center of momentum of your life outside yourself, and again the orientation of self-centered desire is shifted to an other-centeredness. This shift in orientation calls one's own blind passions into question. Perhaps for the first time we are opened to the possibility of meaningful compassion.

Hopefully, in the brief glimpse that I have given of these two traditions you will find something familiar and something unfamiliar. For those of you who pursue a path of faith, the teaching that there is an "Other Power" which breaks through the haze of our self-centered perspective to produce a radical transformation should be familiar. What may or may not be familiar is the idea that this shift in perspective is synonymous with a compassionate orientation to others and is for the purpose of ending the suffering of others. Yes, one is "saved" to use a different idiom, but this salvation is not for you but ultimately for all sentient beings. The other-centered
For those who wonder what your professors have been doing in all of their spare time, let me assure you that they have been busy! Our chair, Mohamed Mahmoud organized the 18th Conference of the Sudan Studies Association on June 4-6, 1999 at Tufts. The conference was attended by about 74 participants and featured 48 papers. Professor William Adams, who specializes in the history of ancient Nubia, gave a keynote speech and actress Tamodor Sheikheldin Gibreel gripped the conference by her superb performance of a one-act play. The first day of the conference was marked by a special reception at the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists marking an exhibition by Boston-based Sudanese painter Khalid Kodi.

Tufts Chaplain and Department of Comparative Religion Lecturer, Scotty McLennan has a new book coming out this fall from HarperSanFrancisco entitled, Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning. It is based on interviews with Tufts students, faculty, staff, and alumni, among others, and identifies six stages of spiritual development throughout the human life cycle. Five major world religious traditions are also referenced throughout the book -- Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. McLennan taught a course by this name in the spring of 1998 in the Experimental College, which helped him sharpen insights for the book.

Gary Leupp has also been busy writing and publishing. Over the summer a 2 volume work entitled The Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing included 6 entries by Dr. Leupp on Japanese historians and historical works. He also published an article entitled "The Five Men on Naniwa: Gang Violence and Popular Culture in Genroku Osaka" in a volume entitled Osaka: The Merchants' Capital in Tokugawa Japan. He has recently finished a book manuscript entitled Race-Mixing and Interracial Marriage in Japan: A Social History, 1543-1900.

Joseph Walser has recently submitted an article revising the date of the second/third century Buddhist philosopher, Nagarjuna. This fall he will be presenting a paper on the social constraints on Nagarjuna's religious philosophy at the American Academy of Religion conference which will be held in Boston in November. In addition to teaching Introduction to Religion and Introduction to Hinduism this fall, he will also be presenting a paper on Buddhist responses to religious pluralism in ancient India later this term to the Tufts community.

Peggy Hutaff spent two weeks in June traveling in northwestern Ireland with family and friends. Their party of ten enjoyed the hospitality of Irish bed-and-breakfasts - and the cool Irish climate - as they visited one of the country’s most rugged and beautiful areas. Of special interest were sites of prehistoric importance. Near Sligo, Peggy and companions climbed Knocknarea, the mountain atop which is a huge cairn dating back about five thousand years, believed to be where the legendary Queen Maeve lies buried. In July, Peggy headed west with friends to explore several national parks: Yellowstone, Bryce Canyon, Sion, Arches, and finally, the stupendous Grand Canyon. She found the scenery magnificent, and the western landscapes quite a departure from our environs on the east coast. Throughout the summer, Peggy worked on translating from French into English a commentary written by a fellow New Testament scholar on the Gospel of Luke; the work is to be published in the Hermeneia Series of commentaries on books of the Bible.
Buddhist Reflections

(Continued from page 2) perspective which is salvific does not vanish once salvation has been achieved.

For those who embrace a path of self-transformation, the idea that self-reflection can mould character should be familiar. What may or may not be familiar is the teaching that desire and anger are founded on a misunderstanding of the world, and again, that enlightenment by one's own effort is not a matter of picking yourself up by your bootstraps, but of being re-oriented toward otherness. Enlightenment is not for you, but is always directed toward the other.

In short, when I think of what advice Buddhism both Theists and non-theists it is this suggestion. Believe what you like, but remember that Belief has implications and consequences for action. The beliefs that you pursue are intimately connected to the person that you wish to become, and in the end the person that you become may be more important that the beliefs that got you there.