### Comparative Religion Welcomes

**Dr. Peter Thuesen**

After a long and thorough search, the Department of Comparative Religion is delighted to announce that Dr. Peter Thuesen will be joining us in the Fall of 2001 as Professor of Christianity. Peter received his Ph.D. from Princeton University in 1998 in American Religious History, and since then has worked on a number of aspects of religion in America. Peter’s first book, *In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles over Translating the Bible* was published in 1999. It was awarded the Frank S. and Elizabeth D. Brewer prize of the American Society of Church History. Subsequently, he has been working at Yale University in the Jonathan Edwards Archives - a project that has inspired his current work, he will be contributing volume 27 to *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* series.

Peter will teach CR 192 CHR Special Topics in Christianity: Race and Religion in America (Course Description on page 2) and The Intellectual History of Christianity, this fall.

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The destruction of the two giant statues of Buddha in Bamiyan in Afghanistan by the Taliban authorities in March 2001 was no surprise to those who understand the nature of the Taliban regime and its ideology. The act is consistent with the regime’s oppression of political opposition and women and its obscurantist interpretation and harsh implementation of Islam. It confirmed the authorities’ total lack of sensitivity to Buddhist sensibilities, the official opposition of other Muslim governments, or the rage expressed by international opinion. In as much as the act was directed at wiping out a major symbol of Afghanistan’s pre-Islamic history it also was calculated to reaffirm the government’s defiance of the West – such defiance is perceived by the regime as an effective way through which it can demonstrate the genuineness of its Islamic credentials.

Since the regime claims that its policies are guided by Islamic doctrine it was expected that it would offer a religious rationale for its act: the statues were idolatrous objects and Islam does not allow for idolatry within the realm of its state. The

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They took three centuries to carve out of the sandstone cliffs, when Afghanistan’s Bamiyan region was part a great Buddhist state linking northern India with Central Asia. How many tens of thousands, in this Silk Road melting pot, left their mark upon those sublime projections of the human imagination? The 175-foot high figure was the world’s loftiest Buddha—and among the oldest, standing for over 1500 years. It only took a couple days in March 2001, to blast it, and another, 120 foot image, off the landscape of an Afghanistan never more medieval than under the Taliban “truth seekers” who extended their control over Bamiyan in 1999. “We are not against culture, but we don’t believe in these things,” the Taliban Foreign Minister told reporters. “They are against Islam.” A cautionary tale, perhaps, for those of us who believe in progress, the triumph of reason and tolerance. But it is not my intention to inveigh against religious fundamentalism, or to dwell inordinately upon its Islamic varieties. (The cultural crime of the Taliban pales in comparison with—say—the destruction of the Library of Alexandria by a Christian mob in 415, and it is nowhere near so ugly as a pogrom.) Rather, I want to examine the unusual anger I myself

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Greater Responsibility

fact that these statues have been allowed to exist since the middle of the
tenth century when Muslims first appeared on the Afghani scene did not
evoke any misgivings in the minds of the regime’s policy makers. This
fact, however, is crucial in assessing the situation since it clearly
indicates that Muslims never felt over all these centuries that their
religion was in any way threatened by Buddhist presence or the presence
of Buddhist symbols and memories. They never felt that they had to tear
down these (or other) statues in order to affirm their total commitment to
Islam or better fulfill their religious obligations.

Muslims in Afghanistan, as in other parts of Islamic lands, were
confident enough to engage in the construction of an Islamic “culture”
that was far more flexible than the “dogma” – whereas “dogma” tends to

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FALL 2001
OFFERINGS

CR 4
Art, Ritual & Culture • Hoffman

CR 14
The Arts of Japan • Kaminishi

CR 21
Intro to the Hebrew Bible • Hutaff

CR 24
Iconoclasm & Iqonophobia
• Caviness/Hoffman

CR 25
Art & Politics of the Middle Ages
• Manuelian

CR 35
Intellectual History of Christianity
• Thuesen

CR 41
Contemporary Religion in America
• Lemons

CR 42
Religion in Asian History • Leupp

CR 48
Qur’an and Islamic Traditions • Staff

CR 88
Religion in Colonial America • St. Jean

CR 96
Introduction to the Talmud • Summit

CR 120
Armenian Art, Architecture & Politics
• Der Manuelian

CR 132
Book of Genesis & its Interpreters
• Rosenberg

CR 141
Indian Philosophies • Walser

CR 157
Theories of Spiritual Development
• Scarlett

CR 191
Religion & International Relations
• O’Leary

CR 192B
Gender & Medieval Narrative
• Caviness

CR 192 CHR
Special Topics in Christianity: Race
and Religion in American History
• Thuesen

CR 192 ISL
Special Topics in Islam • Staff

NEW Course Descriptions

CR 192 CHR Special Topics in Christianity (Co-listed HIST 197 PT) Z*2 Block
Race and Religion in American History/ THUESEN

A seminar exploring how American religious history looks when viewed through the
lens of race. Special emphasis will be given to Christian denominations and figures
from the seventeenth century to the present, though the course will also examine
non-Christian groups. Major topics will include Puritan encounters with the Indians;
African-American religious experiences under slavery and its aftermath; and racial
and religious diversity in modern urban America. The course will also give some
attention to theories of race as they relate to religion.

CR 88 Religion in Colonial America/ ST. JEAN (Co-listed HIST 88) Z 3 Block
Conflicting interpretations about religion’s impact on American history and religion’s
influence on slavery, race and politics from the colonial era through the
Revolutionary era.
feel towards this destruction, and to identify the appropriate target for it. I’ve been interested in Buddhism for many years, moved by the basic teachings of the Buddha, the liberating conception of “emptiness” as found in the Heart Sutra, the spirit of compassion that underlies Buddhist missionary activity over centuries. I am impressed by the Buddha’s rejection of caste; his inclusion of women; his missionaries’ effort to reach all peoples “for the good, for the gain, for the welfare of gods and men.” I see the wanton destruction of these images as an attack on the dignified humanism that distinguishes the Buddhist Dharma among belief systems. I feel it in my gut, as though it were an attack on the best parts of myself. We associate Buddhism today with East Asia, but it originated in India, gradually spreading in all directions. Once there were Buddhist monasteries around the Persian Gulf, and Buddhism was even known in Roman Egypt during the time of Christ. But Afghanistan is the farthest west of the major historical centers of Buddhism, and Buddhist artifacts and sutras from Bamiyan grace museum collections around the world. Afghanistan may continue to yield texts and artifacts illuminating the global Buddhist heritage—if the Taliban does not destroy them. 

Buddhism has much to say about ignorance, which gives rise to all else, including desire and death. Hence the Buddhist approaches the fool with compassion. The foolish mullahs who issued, and the militiamen who executed, the fatwa on the statues deserve our compassion. 

But they also require analysis, in the Buddhist spirit of “seeing things as they really are.” These Taliban iconoclasts grew out of the anti-communist forces that emerged after the overthrow of Shah Daoud in 1978. Wrapping themselves in the banners of Islam and anticommunism, they rose in armed revolt against the coalition of pro-Soviet Marxists who had seized power (and whose objectives, including coeducation and universal health care, appear rather progressive in light of all that has followed). The inexperienced regime responded to opposition with brutal force; savage superpower intervention followed. The USSR dispatched troops to prop up the new government, while Washington, hell-bent on reversing Soviet geopolitical gains and furious about its recent setback in Iran, embraced any “anticommunist” forces in Afghanistan. The U.S. pumped hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid into these groups. The Taliban rode to power, funded by Pakistani intelligence and the CIA—for whom their primitive fanaticism (and well-known misogyny) posed little problem. The Buddhist-destroyers are in fact creatures of U.S. policy. So in the end, my indignation focuses not upon the benighted Afghan youth who pulverized the Buddhist images, but on the arrogant power underlying the Afghan tragedy, towering above us, here in the U.S. Afghanistan remains the victim of a spiritual darkness encouraged from without, by the greatest and most destructive of sins—one never mentioned in the classical Buddhist texts. It’s called imperialism, and it inevitably encourages, in everything it touches, ignorance and its attendant evils. But (as Buddhist texts declare) everything passes out of existence in due course. Imperialist intervention, too, will ultimately—for the good, for the gain, for the welfare of gods and men—be gone and done with. I have faith in that!

Gate Gate! Paragate! Parasamgate! Bodhi Svaha!

Gary Leupp is an Associate Professor in the History Department, and Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Comparative Religion. He will be teaching CR 42: Religion in Asian History in Fall 2001.
Greater Responsibility

be exclusivistic, “culture” can be inclusivistic and pluralistic, whereas “dogma” speaks with one voice and tends to be one-dimensional, “culture” speaks with many voices and tends to be multi-dimensional. The fundamental struggle and tension within Islam today is to do with whether Muslims should give precedence to “dogma” and remould “culture” in accordance with its perceived dicta or whether to emphasize “culture” as the essential frame of reference informing modern Muslim perspectives and sensibilities. It is a high tension between a static sensibility that freezes Islam in a “heroic moment” that it strives to revive and re-live and a dynamic sensibility that is cognizant of change and responsive to it.

A central problem the Taliban act raised was to do with the way Muslim communities should treat their pre-Islamic past. Islam has spread over many regions with rich civilisations and histories such as India, Persia, Iraq, Egypt, and Nubia. Great monuments of these ancient civilizations still stand and we are still in the process of excavating, exploring, and reconstructing their rich tapestry. In as much as people anywhere should take responsibility for the future they also should assume responsibility for the past. These responsibilities should be morally and legally binding. People should not for instance squander the resources of the planet because they have to bear in mind and respect the rights and interests of future generations. By the same token, people have a responsibility toward the achievements of past generations for these treasures (whether monuments or artistic and intellectual products) are, in the final analysis, an integral part of the heritage of all human beings. The preservation f this heritage is, hence, a collective, worldwide responsibility as no person or community should be allowed to destroy it in the name of any religion or ideology.

Mohamed Mahmoud is the Chair of the Department of Comparative Religion and a noted scholar on Islam. He regularly teaches courses on the Qur’an and Islam and Human Rights.

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CR 192 CHR Special Topics in Christianity: Race and Religion in History
CR 88 HIS Religion in Colonial America

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