Warm greetings from the Religion Department! The response we received last year about our newsletter was wonderful. Many thanks to alumni and friends for your inquiries, well wishes, and contributions! As we begin the fourth year of the revised calendar and curriculum we are glad to report that the department continues to expand and retool course offerings, to explore interdisciplinary options, to contribute heavily to the First Year Seminar program, and to develop engaging Travel Study opportunities and May Experience courses for our students. While traditional course offerings, such as those related to Bible and theology, continue to play an important role within the department’s major and remain popular among students, the department’s general course selections represent one of the most diverse listings at Furman. The fall offerings listed in this newsletter give a good sense of the wide range.

Last year marked the inauguration of President Rod Smolla. On several occasions, colleagues had an opportunity to learn more about our new president. In the spring, at a Religion reception, Rod spoke encourageingly about the role of department in the university in challenging students to think critically and to grow spiritually.

One of the most significant developments in the past year was the gift from Robert Ayers that set up the Robert and Mary Frances Ayers Endowed Lecture Series in Philosophy and Theology. A Furman alumnus Ayers ’39 also did graduate work at Yale Divinity School (where he received ordination), and completed his Ph.D. at Vanderbilt University. He became professor of religion and philosophy at the University of Georgia. The Ayers Lecture Series will alternate between Furman’s Philosophy and the Religion Departments. For our department it underlines the importance of theology in the Religious Studies curriculum and reminds us of the important interface between theology and philosophy. The lectureship complements well the department’s two other endowed lecture series—the Dorsey and Maxine Horton series in Biblical Studies and the Bob and Katherine Kendrik Poenschke series in interreligious dialogue. On November 8th, Ayers himself will inaugurates the series with his presentation about the work of Reinhold Niebuhr. We hope you can join us.

Be sure to read faculty blurbs for updates on their work. We are glad to have back from year-long Sabbaticals our colleagues Alfons Teipen and Lisa Knight. In this issue you learn more about their recent work. Last year also occasioned Lisa’s publication of Contradictory Lives, which she discusses below. Among other faculty notes, Helen Lee Turner has become the Dorothy and B.H. Peace Professor of Religion. John Shelley served as chair of the Poverty Studies Concentration, which became the largest concentration at Furman. It would be remiss if we did not mention the contribution of Sharon Dilworth, our department assistant. She has been with us now for 21 years.

We also include a special section about the work of our former colleague Shelly Matthews. Last year Shelly accepted a position at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. We are sad to see her go, but congratulate Shelly on this opportunity, and hopefully we can send future graduates her way. Furman is now looking to fill the vacancy in New Testament to carry on the work of Smith, McKnight, and Matthews. Emeriti and former faculty continue to do inspiring work. In recent years, Edgar McKnight published Jesus Christ Today, an engaging discussion of recent issues in the field of Jesus studies. T.C. Smith wrote The Tale of Three Sawmill Town, a memoir and history about the Louisiana towns of his childhood. Albert Blackwell remains a dedicated gardener and heavily involved with the International Red Cross.

Let us hear from you.

Next year we hope to feature “Alumni Updates” in our newsletter. But in order for that to happen, we need your news take a minute to fill out the enclosed card to let us know where you’ve been and what you’ve been doing lately.
King has moved to Louisiana to be close to family. We are grateful for the fund that he established to award student work in the area of Christian ecumenism. Jim Pitts recently returned from leading a tour of Egypt, Israel, and Palestine and continues to chair Smyth and Helwys Publishing. Charles Kimball has published When Religion Goes Lethal, which he recently discussed at a Furman CLP event. Our old friends Jonathan Grieser, Vic Greene, and Keith Ray have returned to the pastorate. After many years as pastor of First Baptist in Greenville, Jeff Rogers is teaching adjunct courses in both Furman’s day and evening divisions.

Last year we were saddened by the death of Bob Crapps. Bob’s now classic work (co-authored with David Smith) The People of the Covenant was for many Furman alumni their first exposure to the academic study of the Bible and religion. He also played an important role in developing the field of religion and psychology. His impact on the department and Furman will be felt for many years to come.

Let us know what you have been doing. Your old professors and friends love hearing from you. In this newsletter, we provide a list of coming events. Be sure to check our website for those as well. Especially keep in mind Homecoming on Saturday, October 22. As always, the department will host a morning reception. It’s a great time to see old teachers and classmates. As an alumnus myself (’73), I often see old classmates as well as students. It can be a rewarding experience.

Shelly Matthews Assumes New Position at Brite Divinity School

It is with sadness that we announce the departure of Shelly Matthews from Furman University. Matthews will assume a teaching position at the Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University in 2012, where she will instruct master’s and doctoral students.

Matthews came to the Furman University Religion Department in 1998 not long after receiving her Th.D. from Harvard Divinity School and since then taught an array of courses in New Testament and Biblical Studies that contributed not only to the Religion Department, but also the Women’s and Gender Studies Concentration. Matthews also was instrumental in reconfiguring the Travel Study program for the revised curriculum. Since then, she led several very successful study-away programs.

During her tenure at Furman, she held the Dorothy B. and B.H. Peace Chair and published numerous articles and either authored or co-edited four books. Oxford Press published her most recent work, Perfect Martyr, in 2010. She has been active in both the Jesus Seminar and the Society of Biblical Literature as well as having served on the editorial board of the Journal of Biblical Literature. More importantly, she was a delightful colleague whose hospitality was very well known. As a teacher and mentor, she influenced many students to go on and pursue further study in religion. We here in the Religion Department will miss her greatly and wish her great success at Brite Divinity School.

Recent Books by Department Faculty

Lisa Knight. Contradictory Lives: Baul Women in India and Bangladesh. (Oxford University Press, 2011). In literature and popular imagination, the Bauls of India and Bangladesh are characterized as musical mystics: orange-clad nomads of both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds. They wander the countryside and entertain with their passionate singing and unusual behavior, and they are especially well-known for their evocative songs, which challenge the caste system and sectarianism prevalent in South Asia.

Although Bauls claim to value women over men, little is known about the individual views and experiences of Baul women. Based on ethnographic research in both the predominantly Hindu context of West Bengal (India) and the Muslim country of Bangladesh, this book explores the everyday lives of Baul women. Lisa Knight examines the contradictory expectations regarding Baul women: on the one hand, the ideal of a group unencumbered by societal restraints and concerns and, on the other, the real constraints of feminine respectability that seemingly curtail women’s mobility and public performances.

Knight demonstrates that Baul women respond to these conflicting expectations in various ways, sometimes adopting and other times subverting local gendered norms to craft meaningful lives. More so than their male counterparts, Baul women feel encumbered by norms. But rather than seeing Baul women’s normative behavior as indicative of their conformity to gendered roles (and, therefore, failures as Bauls), Knight argues that these women creatively draw on societal expectations to transcend their social limits and create new paths.
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We are pleased to announce that Robert Ayers (BA ’39) has given both the Religion and Philosophy Departments a gift of $150,000 to be used in the establishment of an endowed lectures fund. Each department will be able to bring in a speaker whose work involves the intersections of religion and philosophy. A Furman alumnus, Ayers is professor emeritus of religion and philosophy from the University of Georgia. He holds a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University. Ayers was instrumental in founding the Religion department at the University of Georgia.

Last fall, Ayers wrote the following:

“I was privileged to attend homecoming and inauguration last week end, and as a 1939 graduate on the old campus, a student and defender of Herbert Gezork, I’m so proud of what Furman has become. Had the present faculty of the Religion Department been teaching during my student days you would all have been fired by the fundamentalist dominated board of trustees. My strong objections by various means to what they were doing concerning Gezork brought on the threat of expulsion by the chairman of the board. All of that conflict led me to go to Yale Divinity School instead of the Baptist seminary that my Dad (a Baptist minister) wanted me to attend.

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“I reconnected with the Baul community in the area for this project, drawing on previous connections and establishing some new ones. This time I focused on collecting teaching narratives and songs that aimed to transform society. Bauls tend to be critical of the normative Hindu and Muslim society in which they live, and argue for a more egalitarian vision that promotes the respect of all human beings, regardless of caste, gender, or religion. Although Baul ideology is well-known, I was interested in tracking how they promote their views and attempt to influence society. I knew that singing songs was one method for spreading their messages, but was that message limited to the stage, or did they promote it in other ways? I found that Bauls converse with a variety of people they meet on a daily basis, including neighbors, passengers on trains, shop keepers, and customers at tea stalls, and some frequently insert their socio-religious views into the conversation. Very often they quote from Baul songs, especially those composed by some of the more well-known Baul practitioners, using those quotes to lend authority to their views. In addition to conversing with others about their views, they have also been used by NGO (non-governmental organization) workers to promote practices and beliefs that have, at least to a large degree, some shared assumptions about human dignity. For instance, an NGO in the town of Bolpur that helps villagers get resources to have latrines built near their homes has hired Bauls to write songs that explain the benefits and convenience of having private toilets and bath areas, especially for women who are less inclined to utilize public facilities. Another NGO in the area promotes education about maternal and infant health care, and

At 92 I’m not doing any more writing. My last book was published in 2006. My activities these days are concerned to a large extent in doing everything I can to support the Fuller Center For Housing in their building programs, especially for earthquake victims in Haiti. If I were younger, I would volunteer to go and help with the building. It would be great if some your students could volunteer to go doing the summer. The address is The Fuller Center For Housing, P.O. Box 523, Americus, GA 31709 and donnel@fullcenter.org

I have known Edger McKnight through the years, largely in meetings of profession societies. A few years ago John Shelley and I had correspondence about the Gezork affair.

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Celebrating Alumni Giving

The department has benefitted enormously from alumni gifts over the past few years: The Fillston family provides annual funding for the department’s video collection; Dorsey and Maxine Horton have endowed a lecture series in biblical studies; Bob and Katherine Kendrick Poerschke have endowed a lecture series in inter-religious dialogue. The family and friends of Robert Cate have provided an annual research scholarship for a deserving student religion major, and Robert Ayers recently endowed a lecture series in religion and philosophy. Many thanks to all our faithful alumni!

Calendar of Upcoming Events

September 17: Ramayana Dance Performance, McAlister Auditorium
September 22: Theologs, Trustee’s Dining Room
September 27: Fall Social and Book Reception for Lisa Knight, Haynesworth Room
October 9: Townes Lecture on Faith & Reason by author Marilyne Robinson, 3 p.m., Younts Conference Center
October 21: Exploration of Vocational Ministry Drop-In
November 8: Lecture on the work of Reinhold Niebuhr by Robert Ayers
February 7: Spring Colloquium, 4 p.m.

Alumni Updates

Gabe Craft (‘02) and his wife Stephanie have been teaching in Ofunato, Japan. They have a little girl named Violet. The city Ofunato was devastated by the earthquake and tsunami. Like many others, they survived by taking refuge in the town’s hospital, the highest structure in town. Recently, Gabe was in Greenville visiting family, friends, and old professors.

Mark Davis (‘00) is currently designing learning and performance management tools for an operations engineer management team with the world’s largest mining corporation in their Shared Service Headquarters in Singapore.

Jimmy Hoke (‘08) graduated from the University of Chicago’s Divinity School with a master of divinity degree. During his time at Chicago, he received a travel grant to study biblical interpretation in South Africa. He is now pursuing his doctorate in New Testament and Early Christianity at Drew University. He is working with Stephen Moore and Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre. His research interests center around the intersections between feminist and queer biblical interpretation, especially in the Pauline epistles.

Melanie Trexler (B.A. ‘04) is a Ph.D. student in theological and religious studies at Georgetown University concentrating in religious pluralism. Her major tradition of study is Christianity and the minor tradition is Islam. She is currently researching Arab Christians in the United States and Christian-Muslim relations.

Tracy Wells Miller (‘03) attended Harvard Divinity School, where she received a master of theological studies in world religions and worked for the Pluralism Project, a research organization documenting religious diversity in the U.S., directed by Diana L. Eck. While at Harvard, she met Valerie Kaur, creator of the film Divided We Fall: Americans in the Aftermath, the first feature-length documentary on anti-Muslim hate violence after 9/11, and she worked with Valerie for three years as communications director for the film. Tracy began volunteering with an ecumenical outdoor church for homeless people, founded by an Episcopal priest. Through her experiences with that community, she began to discern a call to ordained ministry. She spent a year in a young adult vocational discernment program in Omaha, Nebraska (Resurrection House, part of the Episcopal Service Corps), and then moved to Atlanta, where she worked for two years in communications for Episcopal churches while in the official discernment process for ordination. She is now in seminary at the School of Theology at Sewanee: The University of the South, in Tennessee. She will graduate in 2012 and, God willing and the people consenting, be ordained as an Episcopal priest.

Tracy, who received the Scholastic Achievement Award from the Furman Religion Department her senior year, has continued to achieve academically, receiving fellowships from the Fund for Theological Education (FTE) both years of her seminary experience so far. Her second-year fellowship, the Ministry Fellowship, grants her funding for a self-directed ministry project in the summer of 2011, which Tracy anticipates doing in either homeless ministry and urban outreach or interfaith dialogue.
Italy Travel Study

The department sponsored a travel study program in the Spring of 2011 focused on the Art, History, and Culture of Italy. The trip was led by Bryan Bibb, who taught a new course titled The Bible and Art, and a special Humanities offering on Italian Travel Narratives. His colleagues in leading the program were Jim Leavell in History and Eli Hestermann in Biology. Twenty-two students were selected through competitive interviews to participate, and they spent a total of five weeks on campus and eight weeks in Italy.

The itinerary included visits to Milan, Venice, Ravenna, Assisi, Siena, Florence, Naples, and Rome. Students visited many of the famous historical and religious sites in Northern and Central Italy, but were also able to stay in rural “agriturismo” hotels where they experienced country Italian life and food. The heart of the trip was a three-week stay in Florence. The extended visit gave students time to explore every inch of the beautiful city, and also to make excursions to places such as Cortona, Cinque Terre, and Verona.

Eli Hestermann’s course was particularly exciting for the students, as it focused on the agricultural, scientific, and cultural aspects of wine and olive production. Students learned about every aspect of the wine-making process, and enjoyed in-depth tours of over a dozen vineyards and wineries, often led by the owners themselves. Of course, tastings and wine food pairings were an important part of the learning process, but students also became experts in the scientific aspects of fermentation, bottling, and preservation of wine.

The program wound to a close with nine days in Rome in early April, when the weather had turned warm and the flowers were starting to bloom. Students and faculty left with a deeper appreciation of Italian history and culture, but also with love in their hearts for that wonderful place and its people.
Bryan Bibb spent last Spring in Italy leading the department’s travel study program, where he also ran in the 2011 Maratona di Roma. He has enjoyed developing new courses in Bible and Art, a First-Year Writing Seminar on the writings of Neil Gaiman, and a new introductory class titled “The Bible and Ultimate Meaning.” Highlights of the summer include an exciting rafting trip down the Chattooga River with incoming freshman, part of Furman’s new “Pre-Orientation Program.”

Sam Britt begins another term as chair of the department. He has also begun developing a new course on East Asian Buddhism, which will be taught this spring. The University of South Carolina Press will publish his monograph The Children of Salvation: Ritual Struggle in a Liberian Church. It should be out sometime in the new year. Last summer he traveled with family to Ireland.

Lisa Knight spent the past year on sabbatical, during which time she completed her book, Contradictory Lives: Baul Women in India and Bangladesh, published by Oxford. She also returned to India to conduct ethnographic research on the oral traditions of Bauls and their use in transforming society.

Echol Nix recently participated in a week-long seminar at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago studying comparative theology and theologies of religious pluralism. He is also a participant in a year-long seminar on ethics, sponsored by John and Ethel Piper to help students better engage ethical questions and discuss one’s responsibility as a citizen.

David Rutledge has continued teaching God and Darwin courses, and is now proposing a new course on God in a Secular Age. After a good bit of traveling this summer, he is part of the search committee for a New Testament faculty member, and he is helping to plan a conference in Chicago next summer with the Polanyi Society. He would like very much to hear from former students.

John Shelley has just stepped down as chair of the new Poverty Studies Concentration, a program he helped found three years ago. The PVS Concentration is now the largest concentration at Furman. With plans to retire in May 2013, John continues as a member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics and is pursuing two small writing projects: New research on the dismissal of Furman religion professor Herbert Gezork in 1939 and an article on the current debate on a “culture of poverty.”

Brian Siegel is currently teaching his second class in cultural ecology (environmental anthropology), and is beginning work which aims to demon- strate that the first chief of the Lamba people (of the Congo-Zambian Copperbelt) is a mythical representation of the historical Mushi, the Yeka king who conquered the Lamba and established a copper, ivory, and slave-trading empire in the late nineteenth century.

Roger Snead finished a term as chair of the Academic Discipline Committee, taught a new May Experience course on Malcolm X, participated in a Lilly Faculty Seminar on Character Pedagogy, and prepared a new First Year Seminar on Religion and Science Fiction. He continues to work on a second manuscript addressing racial anxiety within African American religious and cultural life.

Claude Stulting The highlight of this past academic year was the May X travel-study program to Turkey that Ed Yazjian and he directed. They took 20 students on a three-week sojourn that included, among other sites, Istanbul, the former capital of the Byzantine Empire and cultural center of modern Turkey; the fascinating rock-cut churches and underground cities of Cappadocia; the center of Sufi mysticism in Konya; the progressive metropolis of Izmir; the extensive ruins of ancient Ephesus; and the calm beauty of Assos. He fashioned a new model for May X travel programs by offering a two-hour companion course in the spring semester for program participants. Both the course and the travel focused on the relation between religion and art in Turkey. Other highlights of the past year included team-teaching the new humanities course, History of Ideas in Context, with Nellie Boucher of the History Department during the spring semester; and making an extended road trip to California to visit daughter Bennett and her husband, Chris, this past summer.

Alfons Teipen was on a full year sabbatical in 2010–11, working on a project that compares the earliest extant biographies of Muhammad in order to elucidate the geographical, ideological, and historical factors that have shaped these narratives. Focusing on the biographies’ accounts of the battle of Uhud, the project aims to demonstrate how these early biographies reflect different perspectives on normative gender roles, the perception of Jews, and the abilities of non-Arabs, and how these perspectives are reflective of different ideological needs in late Umayyad to early Abbasid times.

Vaughn CroweTipton continues to work on a manuscript for a book begun last year during a fellowship at Oxford University. He is also a current particip- ant in the Piper Ethics Seminar.

Helen Lee Turner continues to study the Hopi Indians and the Christian mission on the reservation and presented a paper on the topic at the American Baptist Convention in Puerto Rico. This summer she investigated political elements of that story by looking at the history of the Hopi constitu- tion with two Furman Advantage students, both political science majors. With the assistance of a religion major, she also continued her study of Catholicism in the South Carolina upstate and began recording the histories of the newer immigrant Christian communities (Coptic Christians, Swedish Lutherans, etc.) in the region.

Peter Valdina presented the paper “Translating the Yoga Sutra and Theoriz- ing Religion” at the Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion conference in Louisville in March. In April he was invited to talk as part of a colloquium at Emory University. This November he will present at the American Academy of Religion conference in San Francisco. His paper, “The Mother of Yoga? Print, Patanjali, and Colonial Calcutta” will be part of a session on the impact of print technology in nineteenth-century India.

Ed Yazjian joined Claude Stulting and twenty students in the May X travel-study program to Turkey where they visited various religious and cultural sites starting in Istanbul and then throughout the Anatolia and Aegean regions. He recently finished a translation of a 16th century biography of the poet Chandrabati Devi, one of the three most significant women poets of medieval Bengal. He is currently teaching a course on the Indian epic Ramayana.