

# Religious Studies Program

*Excellence in  
Community  
Understanding*



Newsletter  
2020–2021

## RELIGIOUS STUDIES NEWSLETTER 2020-21

### DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Hello and welcome to the new academic year of 2020/2021. While the times we live in currently are strange, we have all found novel ways to adjust. I hope you are all well and staying safe. Since our last newsletter, the Religious Studies Program has had several new and exciting occurrences. It is my pleasure to share these with our students, friends, and the local community.

First, I would like to congratulate the Religious Studies graduating seniors for completing your academic journey at East Carolina University. Unfortunately, because of COVID-19, we were unable to celebrate your accomplishments in our traditional way. This does not diminish our pride in each one of you for a job well done and to wish all of you the best in your future endeavors and success in your careers. Hopefully, when we return to some kind of normalcy, we can still get together to celebrate you in person.

To current students, it has been a challenge adjusting to online study as you seek to complete your courses this academic year. I would like to assure you that the Religious Studies faculty members are doing all they can to work with you and to accommodate the challenges you are facing. Do not hesitate to reach out to the faculty for assistance with any concerns you may have.

I express my appreciation to our faculty for their diligent work and for adjusting to the challenges this academic year has brought. Suddenly, we needed to adapt to teach our students. Not an easy task, but we did. Like you, I am cognizant of how our research agendas have been affected by the inconvenience caused by the pandemic. I cannot forget the friends of the Religious Studies Program, and especially the clergy of the local community. The pandemic has limited our usual interaction. The postponement of the annual Distinguished Lecture of Religion and Culture (DLRC) was not easy, yet necessary.

As we embrace the new year, continue to anticipate even more changes as we adjust to the new reality. Ultimately, life must go on. All scriptures of the world religions have some very meaningful words of wisdom for difficult times. This is one of those times that we can turn to them to find encouraging and affirming messages of hope as we look forward to some kind of normalcy. In times like these, hope is the rare jewel needed to sustain us. We appreciate the understanding and support of everyone as we look forward to the new year. I wish you all a happy academic year and good health.

Be safe,

Mary Nyangweso, PhD  
*Director of Religious Studies*



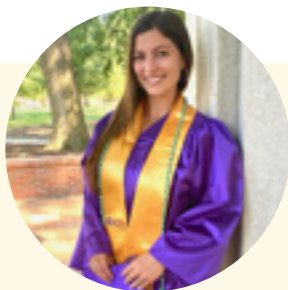
## WHAT ARE THEY DOING NOW?

For some of our students, the academic study of religion provides a foundation for their continued focus on religion in their educational and/or career journey. For other students, the study of religion is a helpful adjunct to educational and/or career plans that move in various directions.



**Tyler Beasley**, a 2017 Religious Studies graduate, currently serves as Senior Business Intelligence Officer for Trillium Health Resources of North Carolina. In this capacity, he is largely responsible for developing analytical and statistical processes to investigate state health data for various populations, giving particular attention to disabilities and cultural factors. His background in the academic study of religion is valuable in understanding the cultural factors at play in his analyses. His work provides the basis for findings and recommendations made to various units of the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. His work provides particularly useful information in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to his current assignment, Tyler served as a Senior Data Engineer at Raytheon Technologies. Tyler also works with graduate students from Wake Forest University on projects aimed at understanding the intersectionality of spirituality and intellectual/developmental disabilities.

**Rez Arranguetz**, who graduated in December 2018, is back at ECU in the College of Business as an MBA student.



**Miranda Oliver** graduated in the spring of 2020. She is currently pursuing a graduate career in medicine. She explains how she "will utilize the knowledge of differing religions and cultures to connect with patients." She said studying religion helped her become a better student and form better study habits that she will carry into her graduate studies.

**Aaron Davis** was a double major in Religious Studies who transferred to North Carolina State University to finish the degree in Religious Studies. He wrote to us that the New Testament course he had with Professor Lee Johnson played a "significant role in literally changing the course of my life." Aaron went on to achieve a Master of Divinity from Union Presbyterian Seminary and is currently a candidate for the Master of Theology there. He is Coordinator of Children, Youth, and Family Ministries at Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Richmond, VA. Aaron serves as a co-chair of the Constructive Theologies section of the American Academy of Religion Southeast Region. The American Academy of Religion is the largest professional academy of professors and scholars who work in the academic study of religion.



**Kathryn Medinas-Lockley** graduated in May, 2016 and used her Religious Studies major as a basis for receiving a Master of Divinity at Duke Divinity School. Currently, she is a Chaplain Resident in the Duke University Health System, a part-time pastor in the United Methodist Church, and a Spiritual Care Coordinator at Heartland Hospice.



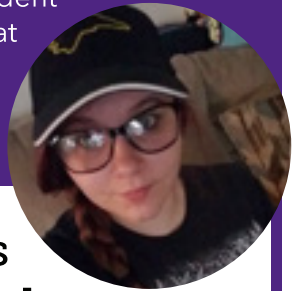
**Dakota Bynum**, a Spring 2020 graduate in Religious Studies and Psychology, is back at ECU in the School of Art and Design. He will concentrate on animation and use his study in religion and psychology to create inclusive video games, cartoons, and other animations. Dakota's particular interest is in highlighting different religions and other cultural perspectives in his technical productions as a way of helping educate about these issues. Dakota continues to hold out the option of a PhD program in religious studies with a concentration in the ancient Near East and a particular focus in Mesopotamia.





## RELIGIOUS STUDIES CLUB

The student-led Religious Studies Club is open to Religious Studies majors as well as other students who have an interest in the academic study of religion. We have had excellent student leaders through the years. The current student leaders are Co-Chairs Sidney McCall and Brandon Burke. Sidney, scheduled to graduate in Spring 2021 with a double major in Religious Studies and History Education, is also the student representative to the faculty committee that governs the Religious Studies Program. Here is how Sidney describes the work of the Club.



**Alexandria Nora Franklin** graduated from ECU in the summer of 2020. She has been accepted to the Cultural Heritage master's in science program at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. She plans to acquire citizenship and find work with the National Trust of Scotland, working to protect the natural landscape, monuments, and castles.

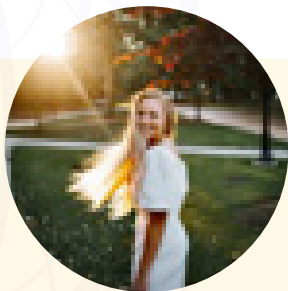
**Kaitlin LeAnn Brown**, a Psychology major and Religious Studies minor, has been accepted into the Master's in Forensic Psychology Program, with a concentration in Forensic Psychology in the Legal System, at Florida's Nova Southeastern University.

“The Religious Studies Club is open to any and everyone. We cover topics from all religions and enjoy looking at different perspectives. Each month we pick a topic of the month and discuss that topic in detail in our meetings. Previous topics have included spirits and the afterlife, the spread of religion by way of trade routes, different new year traditions, and creation myths. We are always open to new ideas and suggestions. If you are an interested student, send an email to me at [mccalls15@students.ecu.edu](mailto:mccalls15@students.ecu.edu) or look at our gallery on our Engage page to join the discussion group.”



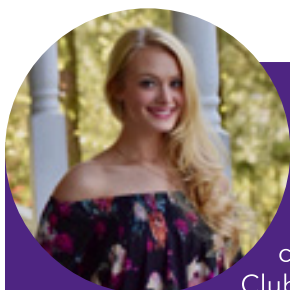
## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS FROM STUDENTS

Many of our students stay in contact and share how the academic study of religion has impacted the trajectory of their lives in a more personal way. Here are a couple of those reflections.



**Darby Williamson Hubbell** graduated in Spring 2020.

My experience at ECU completely shifted when I took Introduction to Old Testament with Dr. Kathy Dawson. I was coming off of a really hard semester, one that included failing a class and changing my major entirely. The Religious Studies Program changed my outlook on my education, professional post-graduation plans, and feelings about myself. Until I took Dr. Dawson's class, I never actually felt valued or seen as an intelligent student by my peers or my teachers. Being in the Religious Studies Program pretty much changed everything for me. The conversations held in and out of the classroom made me crave more general knowledge about the world around me and the people who populated it. It also made me want to actively seek out stimulating academic-based conversations and friendships more than ever before. When I reflect on the best parts of my ECU experience, the main one was finally feeling recognized as a valuable student in the classroom by my professors. That all started with my Religious Studies professors' positive reinforcement and office hour/classroom chats. Those brief moments and conversations had an undeniably large impact on both my academic confidence and my entire life.



### AMERICAN METEOROLOGICAL SOCIETY SCHOLARSHIP

President of the ECU American Meteorological Society Club, McKenzie Swindle has been awarded the "Michael A. Roberts, Jr. Scholarship," carrying a \$2,000 stipend. Many of our students are double majors, and a few are triple majors. McKenzie is a triple major in Religious Studies, Atmospheric Science, and English.



**Alex Bryant**, following his Religious Studies program, obtained a master's degree in education.

Since graduating from ECU in 2017 with a degree in Religious Studies, I have been a ninth grade World History teacher at Purnell Swett High School in Maxton, NC. Although I'm going into my fourth year, I feel like a new teacher again in the pandemic, having to literally change all of my methods to online. At work, in graduate school, and especially in my spiritual life, my experience in the Religious Studies Program has been a major help. My research and writing skills increased immensely in the Program. I remember not

“It cracks me up I get paid to dress like a fool to entertain my kids!”

doing very well on one of my early papers, and that lit a fire under me to improve. It is impossible to teach World History without attention to religion. We have an entire unit dedicated to Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I live in a very conservative area, so when I want to get my students involved and talking, all I have to do is mention some of the eye-opening information I discovered in my religion courses. I wish I had pictures of my students' faces showing the outright shock when they discover something new, and challenging, about a figure they revere. I have instigated some lively and colorful discussions! I am also an advisor for my church's youth group. Last summer, I was a small group leader for the Montreat Youth Conference, a Presbyterian youth center. This summer, I was supposed to be on the Montreat Youth Conference planning committee until COVID-19. I've been asked to join the 2022 planning team. I value my Religious Studies experience greatly. My classmates were wonderful. The professors were even better. I learned about my beliefs in a new way that makes me a better person. The Religious Studies Program at East Carolina greatly changed me for the better.



# DISTINGUISHED LECTURE ON RELIGION AND CULTURE SERIES

People have come to anticipate the quality annual lecture on religion and culture sponsored by the ECU Religious Studies Program. This series, formerly known as the Jarvis Lecture, is in its 28th year and has become one of the most well attended ECU lecture series, drawing hundreds in attendance each year from throughout the region. Series speakers have included prominent interpreters of religion and culture. The list of past speakers can be found on the Program website: <https://religionprogram.ecu.edu/>

As with many events during the pandemic, this year's lecture has been postponed. However, we have secured two excellent speakers for future lectures. More details on their lectures will be forthcoming when plans are finalized.



DR. J. KAMERON CARTER

will speak on "The Religion of Whiteness" in a Spring, 2021 community lecture. The event will be held March 25, 2021, at 6 p.m. Dr. Carter works at the intersection of questions about race and the current ecological ravaging of the earth. He is interested in what these intertwined issues have to do with the modern world, generally, and with America (or rather the Americas) more specifically, as a unique religious situation or phenomenon. He explores these matters with the resources of black critical theory, which is simply to say critical theory, combined with theories of the sacred and languages drawn from the domains of religion, theology, and philosophy. He also draws on feminist, gender, and queer theory, philosophy and aesthetics, and literatures and poetries of the African diaspora, as a further repertoire of resources with which to reimagine matter itself, all with a view to imagining alternative worlds, other ways of being with the earth, and ways of being with each other.



BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

Taylor is one of America's best-known interpreters of religion and will deliver the Fall 2021 lecture. *TIME* magazine listed her as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. She will speak on the topic of her best-selling book, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*. She is also the author of *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*.



## PREVIOUS LECTURES ON DVD

Some of the more recent Distinguished Lecture on Religion and Culture lectures are available at the links provided on our Program website or on DVD. Please contact the Director of the Program, Dr. Mary Nyangweso ([wangilam@ecu.edu](mailto:wangilam@ecu.edu)), for questions or with requests for DVDs. Provide the following information:

- Name
- Complete Postal Mailing Address
- Telephone Number
- Email address
- Lecture wanted
- Number of copies

# RELIGION LECTURE SERIES

## A TRIBUTE TO HENRY FERRELL

By Calvin Mercer



This is an appropriate moment to express appreciation to Dr. Henry Ferrell, who died in summer, 2020, for his important role in establishing the annual religion lecture series. I well remember the visionary moment in the early nineties, at a meeting of the ECU Religious Studies Committee, an interdisciplinary group that guided the Program in its early years.

I was chairing the Committee, and Henry was sitting beside me. A lecture series was not on the agenda, but in the midst of other business, Henry leaned over and whispered to me, "Calvin, I think we should start a religion lecture series. I think I know where we can get some money."

That was the birth of the "Jarvis Lecture on Christianity and Culture," now renamed the "Distinguished Lecture on Religion and Culture." For many years, the Jarvis Memorial United Methodist Church was an important funding source. Thanks, Henry, for your idea and for your critical support of this series through the years.

## FACULTY FOCUS

**Kathy Barrett Dawson** presented "Matthew's Authoritative Jesus" as the Society of Biblical Literature Presidential Address at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature Southeastern Region in February, 2020, on the campus of the University of Georgia. She was elected as the Executive Committee Chair of this organization at the same meeting. Professor Dawson also currently serves as the co-chair of the Bible and Emotion Section of the Society of Biblical Literature at the national level.

**Mary Nyangweso** presented a paper titled "The Social Determinants of Reproductive Health Outcomes in Kenya" at a virtual Conference on Inter-continental Meet on Gender and Sexuality Studies (September 2020). She will present "Circumcision as Inscriptions of Gender: Implications for FGM Eradication or Sustenance," at the Kings College in the U.K. as a virtual symposium on "Patriarchal Inscriptions" on November 28, 2020 and another paper titled "The Pedagogy of Teaching African Religions Effectively," at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in November. This summer, she was invited to serve as co-editor of a Brill series, "Studies of Religion in Africa."

**Lee Johnson** is a contributor to a new volume in the Oxford series: The Oxford Handbook of the Synoptic Gospels. Her entry is entitled "Oral Performance of the Synoptics." She also serves as the co-chair of the Performance Criticism of the Bible and Other Ancient Texts section of the Society of Biblical Literature and the co-chair of the Biblical Performance Criticism—Texts, Tradition, and Interpretation section of the International Society of Biblical Literature.

**Calvin Mercer**, as part of his service to the community during the pandemic, has coauthored, with Portia Bright Pittman, a book that teaches children about how government works, with a theme of gender, racial, and religious inclusion. The award-winning *There Ought to Be a Law: A Bright Day at the State Capitol* has been endorsed by a state senator, education professors, and teachers. Hundreds of copies have been provided free to children. The co-authors also wrote a companion activity book. Mercer moderated a "Pandemic Town Hall for Children," with state Senator Don Davis taking questions from children, teachers, parents, childcare workers, and others who work with children.



Derek Maher, who serves both as a faculty member in the Religious Studies Program and as the associate dean for undergraduate studies, is overseeing a \$200,000 grant from the University of North Carolina System's Student Success Innovation Lab to study and evaluate a peer instructional practice called Learning Assistants in six departments in the College of Arts and Sciences. He is also surveying both physicians and patients on their attitudes concerning religious dimensions of their relationship and interactions. The survey is in collaboration with a physician in the Brody School of Medicine, Dr. Lane Wilson.



## SUPPORTING RELIGIOUS STUDIES' INITIATIVES

Would you like to support Religious Studies Program initiatives? Consider being a donor. Donations provide support for scholarships, study abroad, and public events. The generosity and support of our alumni and friends of the Program have enabled us to host events and to engage the local community. As a donor, you will be kept informed of our activities and opportunities for involvement. You can contribute online at: <https://religionprogram.ecu.edu/give>. We look forward to your support, as every donation makes a difference in our students' lives and impacts the community.

## MERCER'S "EVENTS" EMAIL LIST

"Events" mailings provide information about religion-related cultural and/or academic events in the area and are sent to approximately 1,700 people who have requested to be on the list. This list is not shared with any other group or person. A mailing is only sent about once a month or two. Anyone wishing to receive the "Events" newsletter should send their email to: [mercerc@ecu.edu](mailto:mercerc@ecu.edu)

CHECK OUT OUR WEBSITE:  
<https://religionprogram.ecu.edu>

