

History Happenings

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The University of Memphis*

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From the Chair:

Hello Everyone!

As the University of Memphis concludes its centennial year, we continue to celebrate the achievements of our students, faculty, and those who helped to transform this institution during those 100 years.

Memphis State Eight Day

September 18 will be Memphis State Eight Day on campus, honoring the eight African American students who led the university on a path to equality, fairness and acceptance on the anniversary of the day they arrived, September 18, 1959. A permanent historical marker will be unveiled near the administration building and both City of Memphis Mayor A C Wharton Jr. and Shelby County Mayor Mark H. Luttrell Jr. will issue proclamations for "Memphis State Eight Day."

GAAAH Conference

The Graduate Association for African-American History will be hosting their 14th annual conference on October 31-November 2. This conference attracts historians from colleges and universities around the country and several foreign nations to present their research. Attendance is free and the public is invited. The "Memphis State Eight Paper Prize" is awarded for the conference's best paper.

This year's conference will feature a keynote address from Dr. Deborah Gray White, professor of history at Rutgers University and the author of *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985 and 1999), the groundbreaking gendered analysis of the institution of slavery.

Graduate Students

We are very proud of our sterling graduate students and greet their graduations with a mixture of sadness and elation. A comprehensive list of our M.A. and Ph.D. graduates is on our website: <http://www.memphis.edu/history/> I hope you will visit it often. Webmaster Dr. Maurice Crouse updates the news almost daily.

In 2012 alone, spring and summer, we graduated 9 Ph.D.s and 8 M.A.s. The range and quality of research by our students is astonishing, including such topics as "Saints, Savages and Smallpox," Plantation Schools in Mississippi, African American informants during the Civil Rights era, the life and career of George "Machine Gun" Kelly, the "Nationalizing Effects of the Late Ottoman Royal Public Ceremonies," Mexican-American Educational Equality

in Texas Public Schools, and "Myth, Medicine, Magic and Reproduction in Ancient Egypt."

Transitions

Effective this fall, Dr. Aram Goudsouzian is promoted to full professor and Dr. Suzanne Onstine and Dr. Stephen Stine are now tenured and promoted to associate professor.

Dr. Andrew Daily, who originally joined the faculty as a temporary instructor in our online program, has been appointed to a tenure-track position as assistant professor in European and Caribbean History.

New to our faculty this year: Dr. Christine Eisel has been appointed as an instructor in our online program, specializing in Early America. Dr. Farid Al-Salim, who specializes in Middle East and Islamic Studies, has joined the faculty as a visiting assistant professor following the departure of Dr. Kent Schull, who took a position at the State University of New York in Binghamton. Dr. Chrystal Goudsouzian has been appointed as an instructor and advisor to students.

We will be doing searches this fall for two new tenure-track positions: Middle East and Early America.



Dr. Janann Sherman

We will also be electing a new chair. After nine years in this position, I will happily pass it to a new leader who will bring new energy and new ideas to this wonderful assembly of scholars.

Recording Hieroglyphic Inscriptions in Luxor, Egypt

By Peter J. Brand

The past two years have proved busy and eventful ones for my project to record and publish the hundreds of hieroglyphic texts and wall carvings in the Great Hypostyle Hall of Karnak Temple in Luxor, Egypt. During the 2011-2012 academic year I was awarded a full-year Professional Development Assignment which allowed me to devote my time fully to the Hypostyle Hall Project. It began in the summer of 2011 when we mounted a full-scale expedition of professors and graduate students to conduct epigraphic documentation work at Karnak during May and June. Our field season was funded through grants from the University of Memphis History Department and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

The main objective of this field season was to begin recording the hieroglyphic inscriptions and carved pictorial scenes which blanket each of the 134 columns of the Great Hypostyle Hall with hundreds of individual texts and scenes. Daunted by the sheer size of this monumental corpus of inscriptions, the repetitive quality of many of the stereotyped texts, and by the confusing welter of different pharaonic names that occur on them, scholars had long since shied away from recording them so that this rich data set remains largely unpublished and unknown to science.

Only a few attempts had ever been made to record the column decoration in a systematic fashion, but in each case only a fraction of the data contained on any one column was captured by these efforts. Still we were able to exploit successfully some preliminary sketches of the column scenes glossed with hieroglyphic legends, which the American Egyptologist Harold H. Nelson had recorded shortly before his death in 1954. Nelson's sketches remained hidden and forgotten among his papers in the archives of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago until I rediscovered them in 2009. Among the



Dr. Peter Brand (center), director of the Karnak Great Hypostyle Hall Project, and field workers from Memphis and Montreal

Nelson papers was a notebook with elegant hand copies of the hieroglyphic texts gracing the abaci of the columns. Abaci are the square blocks that rest on top of a column capital. Another American Egyptologist, Ricardo Caminos, compiled the notebook. At first it seemed we could easily check Caminos' hand copies in a matter of a day or two and move on to other work, but the abaci proved much more complex than we realized.

Each of the four facets of these abaci blocks was decorated with the royal cartouche name of the pharaohs Sety I (ruled 1288-1279 BCE) in the north wing and Ramesses II (ruled 1279-1212 BCE) in the south wing of the building. Each king had two cartouches, long oval “boxes” in which were inscribed the hieroglyphs of his two most important names, the coronation and birth names. Pharaohs could expand their names at will by adding multiple honorific epithets and in the hypostyle hall we found not four basic variants for the cartouches of the two kings, but dozens of variant writings and epithets. Adding further to the complexity, we found that Ramesses II had re-inscribed many of the abaci facets along the north-south axis in the south wing. In some cases he erased his own name and altered the hieroglyphic “spelling” to reflect changes to his names in the early years of his reign. In the north wing of the building, the abaci on another row of columns were altered by erasing the names of Sety I and replacing them with Ramesses II’s cartouches. Fortunately, all these modified abaci were palimpsests, so that both versions of the inscription could be read one atop the other and it was only necessary to “unscramble” them.



Student workers from Memphis and Montreal, having a “mummy moment” on the base of one of the columns of the Great Hypostyle Hall

While teams of grad students and professors checked Caminos’ hand copies for errors and missing details, our Polish colleague Janusz Karkowski photographed more than a dozen abaci blocks that now lay on the ground in the yards around Karnak. With the aid of our six-story scaffolding, Dr. Karkowski also photographed a select number of in-situ abaci, which still rested atop their columns, some 45 feet off the ground! From these photographs, graduate student Erika Feleg produced a number of facsimile drawings of the palimpsest inscriptions. Three additional Memphis graduate students participated in the field season: Laura Glymph, Mark Janzen, and Tiffany Redman.

During the balance of my 2011-2012 PDA period I concentrated on finishing a volume of translations and technical commentary on a set of wall reliefs and inscriptions from the interior walls of the Great Hypostyle Hall. This book was partly written by the late lamented Bill Murnane before his death in 2000 when I took it over. It proved to be a very long and highly complex manuscript of more than 1000 pages including a massive 90-page word index of all the Egyptian words and phrases used in the inscriptions. The University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute Publications will publish it both as a book and a free PDF document. We have also posted a preliminary version of the book on the Hypostyle Hall Project’s new website at http://www.memphis.edu/hypostyle/interior_wall_scenes.php

After completing the manuscript and sending it to Chicago, we turned our attentions to creating a new version of the Hypostyle Hall Project’s website. It has now reached the stage where we can formally announce it: <http://www.memphis.edu/hypostyle/>

The website contains hundreds of photos and illustrations of the hypostyle hall and its inscriptions along with explanations of the history, chronology, meaning, function and construction of this marvelous ancient building. Scholars and the interested public will also find web versions and downloadable PDF files containing our illustrated reports on all our field seasons between 1992 and 2011. Under the “reliefs and inscriptions” tab on the left hand-links, users will gain access to translations of the hypostyle hall’s wealth of inscriptions and photo galleries containing high-resolution photos of all these reliefs and inscriptions. Over the coming months and years the website will continue to expand as more inscriptions are added to it and reports on future field seasons appear.

Worshiping Semitic Deities

By Robert C. Griffin

The old adage that “religion and politics make strange bedfellows” was never as true as it was in ancient Egypt’s New Kingdom period (c. 1550-1085 BCE). While the circumstance there was significantly different than was the case for the origin of this modern saying, the intent is the same. In this instance, the reference is to the oddity of the Egyptian pharaohs worshipping the gods and goddesses venerated in the land of Canaan by a vast segment of their traditional enemies. Beginning, then, in the mid-eighteenth dynasty with Amenhotep II (ruled 1498-1469 BCE), these rulers incorporated the worship of various Semitic deities almost seamlessly into the Egyptian pantheon of thousands. What makes this even more odd is the fact that the entire process came on the heels of the expulsion of those former, hated, “foreign rulers,” the Canaanite Fifteenth Dynasty “Hyksos,” who controlled much of Lower Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period from their Delta capital at Avaris (c. 1663-1555 BCE).

The intent of my research is to demonstrate the various ways and means by which these Syro-Canaanite deities were incorporated into the religious thought and cultic rituals of the ancient Egyptians. Additionally, the attempt is made here to determine why these powerful pharaohs even desired to identify themselves with foreign gods and goddesses. The answer to this latter question, especially, goes a long way toward explaining both the historical and theological significance of this syncretic endeavor, and why it happened on such a scale only during the New Kingdom. The seven known Semitic deities venerated in Egypt during this period, listed in alphabetical order without regard to the duration or extent of their cult, include Anat, Astarte, Baaal, Hauron, Mekal, Qadesh, and Reshep.



Dr. Robert Griffin working as an epigraphist at the Karnak Great Hypostyle Hall



Qadesh, Reshep, and Min

It is highly significant that the inclusion of these foreign gods and goddesses coincides with the advent of the Egyptian empire throughout much of Syria-Canaan, and that its terminus equals the demise of that same empire. Understanding as we do the prevalent Ancient Near Eastern worldview associating the power of divinities with a homeland or city-state or main cult location, the best explanation would seem to connect the Egyptian pharaohs’ intent to rule these foreign lands with their perceived need to have the support of the most powerful deities worshipped in those places. The warrant for just such a conclusion is amply demonstrated in a statement by Ramesses II (ruled 1279-1212 BCE) following his momentous Battle of Kadesh against a Hittite-led coalition near the Orontes River, after which he boasted, “I was like Baal in the moment of his power, I killed among them, I did not let up.” In this instance, Ramesses reflects on his status as a divinely empowered conqueror. What is unexpected, however, is that the source of his empowerment is the Canaanite god, Baal.

The claim made here by Ramesses is representative of many similar statements attributed to other New Kingdom pharaohs, as well. In dozens of other such instances, one or more of

the aforementioned Semitic deities is likewise credited with giving the same level of support to these warring Egyptian pharaohs, and always with identical results: there will be an overwhelming Egyptian military victory and the total defeat of the indigenous patrons of these very same gods and goddesses. The propagandistic value of such claims lent validity to the idea of Egyptian hegemony over these newly dominated foreign lands.



Ramesses II and Ba'al

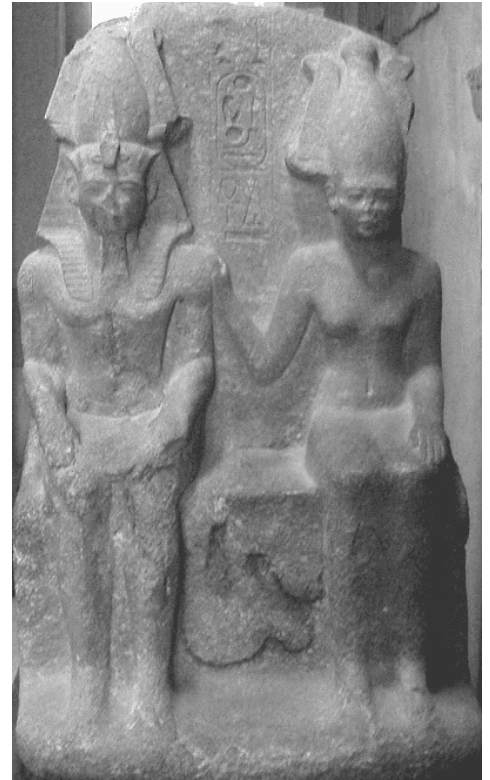
foreign deities in Egypt, not surprisingly (after the initial shock that it happened at all), was made possible by royal support. It is informative, therefore, that these warrior pharaohs intent on conquest and the establishment of a military empire abroad, chose for their patronage gods and goddesses renowned in Canaanite mythology for their own warrior-like attributes.

By the end of the Nineteenth, and well into the Twentieth Dynasty, the so-called democratization of religion which took place throughout Egyptian society was also reflected in the veneration of these same Semitic deities by royal and non-royal subjects alike. The non-royal patrons included native Egyptians, especially soldiers, merchants, and bureaucratic officials serving at home or throughout the empire in Western Asia, as well as numerous Canaanites living and working inside Egypt. This last development clearly reflects a vibrant and ongoing two-way cultural and religious exchange, which continued virtually uninterrupted for nearly five centuries.

The New Kingdom assimilation of Semitic deities into the Egyptian pantheon certainly was not mono-causal, nor was it limited to the pragmatic belief by the pharaohs in the power of these divinities within their own homeland. Other factors, for example, the development of a new “solar theology” within the mainstream of Egyptian religious beliefs, most assuredly played important roles as well. That said, however, it cannot be overstated that the addition of Semitic gods and goddesses into the Egyptian pantheon added a world-dimension to the place of the Pharaoh (and for Egypt) within the larger sphere of all creation. That all deities, both foreign and domestic, were now supportive of Egypt and its king reflected the expanding importance and dominance of Egypt in their new age of empire.

As the title of my dissertation suggests, the methods employed in reconstructing these repeated scenarios include the iconographic study of devotional stelae which commemorate and honor the Semitic gods and goddesses whose support was deemed as being at least partially responsible for Egypt’s success in building and maintaining a military and economic empire in Western Asia. The starting point, therefore, was the iconographic and epigraphic analysis of inscribed reliefs that actually picture and name these deities. Comparisons of other stelae showing these same gods and goddesses, but on which they are not named, were then added and together formed the basis for the historical analysis which followed. Iconographic features such as a deity’s posture, pose, clothing, crown, weapon(s), cultic items, plants, animals, and worshippers were compiled for detailed comparison. Where they exist, the inscribed divine epithets and votive prayers offered to the god or goddess on these items were likewise informative as to the nature of the deity, and for ascertaining the reasons they were worshipped by many Egyptians. The historical analysis of this phenomenon also includes background information as to how these deities were initially brought to Egypt, and to their subsequent relationship to the more traditional Egyptian pantheon.

This quest is further aided by inquiry into the rise of specific cultic sites, such as dedicated chapels, oftentimes located inside or adjoined to traditional Egyptian temples. The most influential promotion and veneration of these



Ramesses II and Anat

How I Became a Medievalist

By Jim Blythe

“Just as delight in food arises from variety, that writing is more delightful which reports the acts and deeds of rulers, of a city, or of some private person who has excelled in their work over a period of time.”—Tolomeo Fiadoni, *Annals*

In February, I told you how I became a photographer and about my close-ups of objects in oil. Subsequently, I completed one series, “Requiem for a Waterbug (?-Feb. 24, 2012)” (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jimblythe/sets/72157629196415022/>), fifteen photos of the eponymous blattarian, whom I found *in extremis* on my living room floor and callously dropped in a bottle. I have also begun



“Enoch Challenges Antichrist” — One of Dr. Blythe’s photographs from the Hillegard series

a second, unfinished, series that is relevant for this article. Shortly after I assured you that there was no connection between my scholarship and photography, I thought of using several photos as illustrations for the apocalyptic visions of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), one of the subjects of my current research.

When I began at Cornell in 1979 I knew I wanted to study the Middle Ages, but had no particular direction. What fascinated me, as I wrote in my application essay, was how medieval mentality was at the same time strangely modernist (much more in tune, for example, with modern art than Renaissance realism) and weirdly alien. I was much more interested in medieval ideas (including those expressed in religion, art, and literature) than in the economy, social life, political history, warfare, etc. (The presidents, kings, and battles approach bored me in public school).

I soon came under the influence of Brian Tierney, one of the most prominent contemporary medieval historians (now, at 90, about to publish a book on natural law), who specialized in medieval canon (church) law and political thought. I hadn’t thought much about Tierney’s specialties and imagined canon law as incredibly boring, but I changed my mind in his seminars. Medieval authors followed a scholastic approach, imagining or citing all contradictory views and attempting to reconcile them, reserving refutation of authorities like the Church Fathers as a last resort, but invariably arriving at their desired conclusion. For example, canon lawyers all cited the authoritative *Decretum* that only a heretical pope can be deposed, but Huguccio argued that this included any “notorious crime.” What if a pope were fornicating on the altar of St. Peter’s and, being admonished, would not stop? Could he not be deposed then? In contrast, Alanus argued that, since no one could judge a pope, it meant that by becoming a heretic the pope was deposing himself. I was even more fascinated by readings about the Spiritual Franciscans, who believed that Francis was the sixth angel of the Book of Revelation and that the Age of the Holy Spirit would soon succeed the current Age of the Son, perhaps replacing the Bible and the Church.

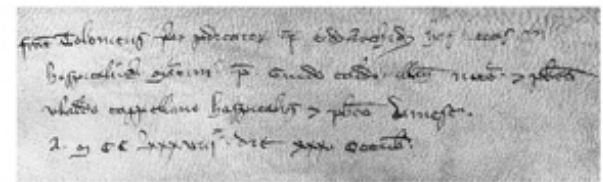
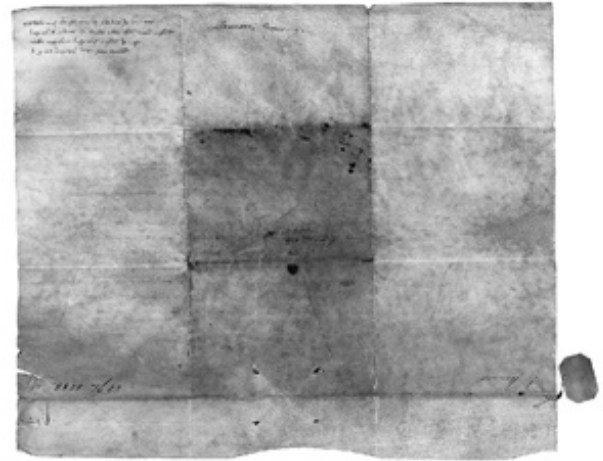
I had trouble choosing a dissertation topic. I didn’t want anything very specific or trivial, but couldn’t think of anything else. Then I came upon something Tierney wrote, that although there was a lot written about mixed constitutionalism (the best government is a mixture of several forms, often monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy) in antiquity and the Renaissance, we desperately needed a history of this idea in the Middle Ages. With some arrogance, since the usual pattern is to do a limited dissertation topic and write a broader book later, I decided I would be the one to do it.

Fortunately, it turned out well. I found mixed constitutional ideas in many medieval authors, showed how their ideas developed, and connected them with the ancients and Renaissance thinkers. It didn't occur to me, or to many other Ph.D. students, that one would get tied to the dissertation area. I planned to turn to millennial thought next, but this took twenty-five years. The reason? If one is lucky enough to get a job, one is thrust into teaching many courses and serving on committees. One simply doesn't have the time to read the literature of a different subfield while maintaining a good publication record. And if one's work is well received one becomes known in that subfield and gets invitations from other similar scholars. A Harvard-sponsored gathering of fifteen scholars led to a major extension of my work into the Renaissance, publication in a prestigious collection, and three more articles. A Liberty Foundation discussion led to new connections and a luxurious weekend at the Park City, Utah, lodge that hosted Romney's billionaire backers recently.

I was lucky in that I did enjoy my area, and my dissertation discussed several medieval writers who were vastly underestimated and neglected, especially the republican political thinker Tolomeo Fiadoni (Ptolemy of Lucca) (c.1236–1327), a student of Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican prior, and, in his 80's, Bishop of Torcello, who also wrote histories, a biblical commentary, and defenses of the church against the emperor. He became the subject of my next three books. I translated his treatise, *On the Government of Rulers*, and wrote two volumes on his life and times and ideas. In recent years I have been gratified to find many others now writing about Tolomeo.

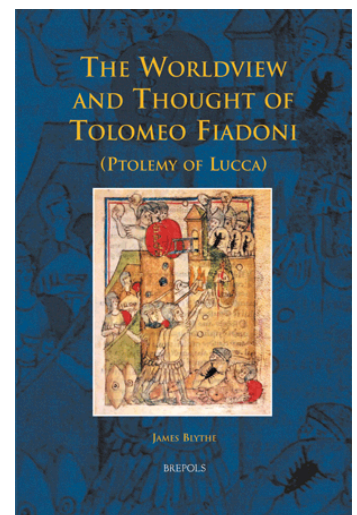
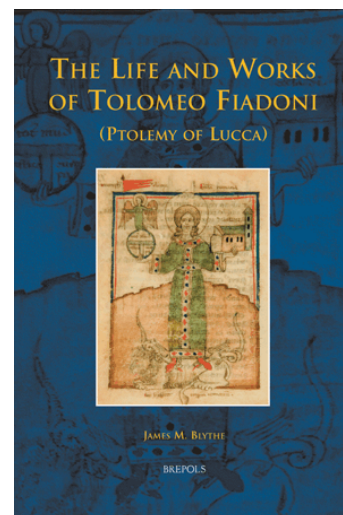
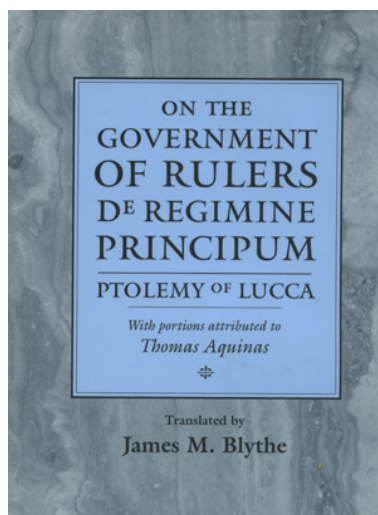
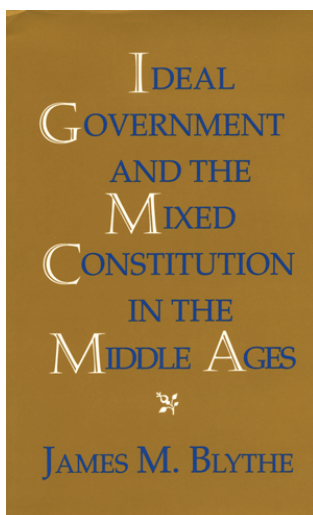
One hazard of intellectual history is a tendency to rip ideas from their historical context in order to arrange them in a chain of development, although no good historian would completely fall into this. In writing the Tolomeo volumes,

I tried to present his complex mentality in the context of his background, experience, and education, analyze his ideas,



Tolomeo's autograph, and detail

and explain how he, like most people, was able to reconcile a variety of contradictory beliefs. Chapters discussed Tolomeo's ideas of natural and supernatural, human origins, nature, the first governments, women, gender and the family, God's plan for history, and empire and papacy. I had to reconstruct Tolomeo's life from sparse information: the few comments he made, the few mentions by other contemporary authors, records, and sixty legal documents that mentioned him (some illegible and most just business contracts that he witnessed).



For my current research I have again chosen a broad topic: medieval providential theories of history, focusing on what moderns call post-millennialism: Christ will come after the peaceful society at the End, which humans themselves will create after going through set stages. Two writers were especially influential, Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202)—whose approach dominated most medieval/early modern apocalyptic movements—and Hildegard of Bingen, who was accepted by the church as a prophet and this year named a Doctor of the Church. After her death the monk Gebeno extracted everything she had written about history and the millennium and his collection spread everywhere. In addition to the final millennial society, Hildegard prophesied two other millennium-like societies at the end of several ages to come.

Post-millennialism, which intersects with utopian thought and belief in progress, influenced optimistic secular social movements. The idea of progress is currently in disrepute, although most still adhere to it, finding support in what they see as more rational and scientific modes of thought, for example, the steady increase in complexity in areas of decreasing entropy (astrophysicist Eric Chaisson, historians David Christian and John McNeil), “scientific” developmental laws of human societies (Marx and others), the evolution of ideas of human rights, etc. Most current religious millennialism is pre-millennialist, meaning that there will be no general improvement until the Second Coming, leading to a pessimism about human ability to improve the world. This is reflected in the popular *Left Behind* novels.

Early Catholicism opposed literal reading of Revelation, fearing uncontrolled prophets branding establishment leaders as demonic apocalyptic figures. Classically-educated,

the Church Fathers found Revelation’s menagerie of beasts, oddly-colored horses, and edible books distasteful. Augustine (354–430), the most important shaper of Christianity after Jesus and Paul, rejected any events of cosmic significance until Jesus returned or any way to predict the End, and



Two of Hildegard’s illustrations

insisted that Christ’s birth, by binding Satan, initiated the millennial period of Revelation. This became the standard Catholic interpretation.

Surprisingly, this project relates to my previous work, which informs my current understanding of millennial thought, for example, the ingenious way that Tolomeo combined a rationalistic political approach with belief in providential history. Many have written about medieval millennialism, but my book is intended to be the first general book on the progressivist tendency, and I am gearing it to an educated, but not specialist audience.

Margaret Mead’s Letters

By Margaret M. Caffrey



Dr. Margaret Caffrey

We become historians, the story goes, because we want to “read other people’s mail.” We want to know the full story of an event, or as much as can be known. We want to look at all the things people don’t ordinarily see—private diaries and journals, letters never meant to be seen by anyone but the sender—and in viewing these hidden sources, to piece together the story not told in public, or not told in full.

I had my greatest opportunity to do this while doing research in the papers of anthropologist Margaret Mead, which are housed at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Mead never threw anything away, if she could help it. There are drawings she did as a small child; notebooks her mother kept on her while she was a baby; papers from her grandparents’ and parents’ lives; thousands of letters, which she made copies of before she sent them, or which

came back to her after friends or colleagues died; all of her published and unpublished work; drafts of her autobiography that contained material not published; and letters to her from friends and colleagues.

The letters fascinated me. I found that if I read them chronologically and in tandem with other people's letters to her at the same time or in response, stories emerged. I could see what was important to her at a certain place and time, what she told some people and did not tell others, her relationships with other people—and if I followed these stories, main themes in her life emerged. It was like putting together a complex puzzle, to follow the trail of her life and thought.



Margaret Mead in Samoa

Working in the Library of Congress is a premiere experience for a historian. There are many different divisions, housed in several buildings. The Mead Papers were housed in Special Collections in the James Madison Building across from the main Library of Congress and at an angle to the Capitol. To do research there you have to have a special Library of Congress photo ID made, which takes your first few hours there. Since 9/11, security is very high. To get to Special Collections, I and my briefcase had to go through a scanner. In Special Collections a security guard checked my ID and wrote down my name and the time I came in. Anytime I left during the day, the guard had to note the time I left and returned. Once past these formalities, however, I got a locker to store things I wasn't using, and chose a seat at a table, plugging in my computer. I looked through the Index of the Mead Papers and choose different boxes of material each day, which were brought to the table on carts, and taken away when I was finished with them. Then I read—and I read—and I read, taking notes as I went along. I immersed myself in Margaret Mead's life and letters.

A friend and I decided that Margaret Mead's letters were too good to be hidden away, seen only by scholars at the Library of Congress, and that editing a book of Margaret Mead's letters might be a good way to introduce her to people who had never heard of her, and to people who had and were curious to know more.

Editing a book means making choices—what letters would explain the main themes of her life, or her relationships with friends, colleagues, lovers, family? How should we organize the letters—by theme, or chronologically? How should we decide what letters to include and what to set aside? How should we organize the book?

We decided to organize the letters in chapters that reflected her relationships with people: letters to and about her birth family; to and about her husbands; to and about her relationships with lovers, particularly anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Rhoda Metraux; to her personal friends; to her colleagues within and outside of anthropology about her work and theirs; and, finally, to her extended family, by birth and by choice.

Mead once wrote that she saw her life as compartmentalized, and remembering that we set up the book to reflect her various compartments. Within each chapter, we decided to set the letters in place chronologically, to reflect changes in relationships over time. We envisioned this as a book few people would read all the way through, that they would dip into the chapters they were most interested in, and gradually get interested in reading other chapters, so we set up each chapter to tell a complete story about its theme, each chapter ending with letters close to or reflecting the end of her life.

It is a book that can be read chapter by chapter, either in sequence or by jumping around, but it can also be read across chapters. Readers can read letters according to the times they were written and decipher for themselves what was happening, like figuring out how to put together a 3-D puzzle. For example, a reader can choose to follow all the letters written to various people while Margaret Mead was on her first and most famous field trip to Samoa; or later field trips to New Guinea and Bali. Readers can follow relationships across chapters, for example, reading all the letters during the time she was married to one or another of her three husbands, anthropologists Luther Cressman, Reo Fortune, and Gregory Bateson.

In selecting the letters and writing the introductions and commentary in each chapter, to my colleague Pat Francis and to me, the book became not just a collection of letters, but a path through which we could follow, and try to illuminate, the journey of Mead's life.

My Trip to Prague

By Amber Anna Colvin

In mid-March, I travelled to Prague, Czech Republic, to attend the First Global Conference on Celebrity, an interdisciplinary conference run by Inter-Disciplinary.Net. While in Prague, I had the opportunity to see the city and attend a great conference with an amazing group of participants.

The Inter-Disciplinary.Net conferences are different from many conferences I've attended in the past. As the only "traditional" historian out of 28 participants in my conference, I was exposed to views and ideas on celebrity from sociologists, anthropologists, art historians, fashion historians, television broadcasters, and film-studies professors. The paper topics ranged from "Buffalo Bill" Cody as a "brand-name" commodity to Kate Moss' smoking on the runway as celebrity transgression to a discussion of



Saint Vitus Cathedral



Amber Colvin, standing before the Prague Astronomical Clock

Foucault's relation to celebrity to my paper, an analysis of early modern English celebrity through monarchical images. Several aspects of the conference were very helpful; for example, all participants were required to attend the entire conference and hear and discuss every presentation, and we attended lunch every day with members of our own conference and the other two running at the same time, the conference on Digital Memory and on Evil, allowing for even more conversation with other scholars from different fields, countries, and disciplines. The conference experience opened my eyes to some new directions for my own research and introduced me to some scholars with whom I hope to work in the future. Two other participants and I have talked about heading another conference project, and I was asked to be on the Steering Group for next year's conference.

Before the conference, in the evenings, and the last day I was in Prague, I got to be a tourist too! I saw most of the main tourist sites in Prague, including the Prague Castle, St. Vitus Cathedral, Charles Bridge, the Jewish Cemetery, the Old-New Synagogue, Tyne Cathedral, Jan Hus Square, the Powder Tower, the Municipal House (thanks Dr. Unowsky for the recommendation!), and Wenceslas Square. I also saw some smaller attractions, like the Prague 9/11 Memorial and the Estates Theater, where “Don Giovanni” premiered in 1787. Several of the participants in my conference and from the other two also went on a nighttime ghost-and-legends tour of the city with a conference leader who had been to Prague several times. I ate some great food, randomly met some other tourists from Memphis, and really enjoyed the city!



Left: The Jewish Cemetery. Right: The John Lennon wall

I am so thankful for the support of the History Department and the College of Arts and Sciences for the opportunity to attend this conference, and I encourage anyone who is interested in interdisciplinary studies to look into the conferences offered by Inter-Disciplinary.Net. There are also publication opportunities (all papers from the conference are being published in an ISBN eBook, and there may be a physical book produced as well) and great people to network and enjoy the city with. Prague is a wonderful city to visit as well!

Giving Back to Ghana

By Dennis Laumann

More than 50 students have traveled to Ghana with me over the past 12 years – both undergraduates and graduates, mostly from The University of Memphis, but also hailing from institutions like the College of William and Mary and the University of Florida– and I have come to realize the experience has a life-changing impact on each and every one. Indeed, some of our Ghana Study Abroad Program alumni return to the West African nation or other parts of Africa to work, volunteer, or travel, and others have completed advanced degrees in international law, development studies, and medicine, paths all influenced, I am told, by their visit to Ghana. Our last study abroad group – five undergraduates, two graduate students, and one retired faculty member

– decided to “give back” to Ghana in a special, tangible, and enduring way. Namely, they initiated their own fundraising campaign to support primary (elementary) education in a Ghanaian rural community that hosted us during our trip.

One of the cultural experiences I incorporate into our study abroad program is a visit to a village to meet a chief. This is meant to introduce students to “traditional” forms of governance which continue to function and thrive in a “modern,” multi-party democracy like Ghana. The encounter with a chief and his court of elders also provides an opportunity for students to practice the customary forms of greetings they learn in class. Our 2009 group visited a



2009 Study Abroad group in Ghana

small village called Atiyeenu in the Ewe language but more popularly known by the English name Airfield, due to its proximity to a nearby landing strip.

Airfield is located outside the large town of Ho, the capital of the Volta Region of Ghana, which is noted for its cultural diversity, rich agriculture, and beautiful landscape. This is the area of Ghana where I have been carrying out research for the past 20 years, a place my Ghanaian friends call my “second home.” Besides visiting Airfield, I take students to Kpetoe, a nearby village renowned for its kente-cloth weavers; a secluded monkey sanctuary in a place called Tafi; and the breathtaking Wli waterfalls situated deep in a lush rainforest. Nevertheless, despite these exotic destinations, study abroad participants always rate their early morning meeting with a village chief as the highlight of their tour of the Volta Region. Students are always struck by the hospitality and generosity of our village hosts who take time off of their busy workday on the farm to greet our Memphis group, answer questions, and pose for a group photo.

Our 2009 group, though, also noticed the poor state of Airfield’s only school facility, a two-room structure with inadequate roofing and devoid of any walls. During our visit with the chiefs and his court, seated on one side of an outdoor opening in the village center with our Memphis group opposite, students in this simple school building were busy listening to their teachers, writing in their notebooks, and performing other activities students can be seen doing everywhere in the world on a weekday morning. I noticed some of our Memphis group stealing glances at the school while we carried on with the formalities of greeting the chief and introducing ourselves.

Not long after our return to Memphis, one of those group members, history graduate student James Conway, decided to organize a fundraiser to assist the Airfield school. A reunion group meeting was held at the home of distinguished scholar and activist Dr. Miriam Decosta-Willis, who also participated in our 2009 study abroad trip, to discuss a plan of action. We created an informal organization called SAAVE (Supporting Africa’s Atiyeenu’s Villlage School) and James crucially enlisted the support of our department’s Graduate Association for African American History (GAAAH). Subsequently, the main fundraising activity over the past three years has been GAAAH’s annual “penny drive” in support of the Airfield school. Combined with individual donations, especially generous support from Dr. Decosta-Willis, GAAAH collected \$850 for the Airfield School and it was agreed I would present the donation on my next trip to Ghana.



Dr. Dennis Laumann with truckload of donated items

Thus, in June I traveled to Airfield along with my wife, Rebecca Laumann, the Study Abroad Director at The University of Memphis. In advance of our visit, I asked my good friend Joseph “Montana” Asamoah, who has assisted me with my work in the Volta Region over the past two decades, to inquire about the Airfield school’s needs. A “wish list” of many required items for the primary and junior secondary (middle school) classes was produced, ranging from notebooks to pens to science equipment. We purchased as much of these supplies as possible with the \$850 funds at a shop in Ho, loaded up the back of our truck, then traveled to Airfield on the morning of Thursday, June 21. To our surprise, a large assembly of students, teachers, and community leaders who put together a formal program in recognition of our effort greeted us. We also were delighted to meet three American college students who were volunteering at the Airfield school over the summer through an organization called Pagus:Africa.



Rebecca Laumann presenting the donations at the Airfield school

While Ghana has a reputation as a stable, peaceful, and relatively prosperous African country, it faces many of the challenges common to the developing world, including a shortage of capital, the legacy of colonialism as well as the reality of so-called global free trade. Ghana’s progressive government has launched important initiatives to support rural education, such as a free meals program and a school construction campaign, but communities like Airfield often have to generate their own funds to meet the growing demand for education. Our donation, therefore, helps the community provide the needs of their young people by ensuring they have access to some of the basic required school materials. Their appreciation was evident by the large warm welcome we received when the donation was presented as well their expressed desire for a continued relationship with our institution.



Welcoming program at the Airfield school

We were happy to learn that since our 2009 visit, a proper building has been constructed for the primary school; however, the simple two-room structure we saw last time is now being used for junior secondary school classes. The community therefore hopes to erect a suitable junior secondary school building in future. Additionally, the new primary school building is in desperate need of better-quality roofing as the classrooms often are flooded during the heavy downpours, which are common during the rainy season. Another project the schoolteachers discussed with us is building a small dormitory so that they could reside in the community itself, a typical arrangement in Ghana, rather than commute every day from Ho, which is an expensive undertaking on their meager salaries. The school also hopes to create a library for student and community use as well as a small children’s playground. And of course there is a continual need for funds to purchase regular school supplies for classes at both the primary and junior secondary levels.

The Memphis study abroad group and the leadership of GAAAH deserve recognition for their selfless commitment to this fundraising effort, a significant and concrete expression of thanks to the Airfield community for their hospitality and generosity during our 2009 visit. We hope to maintain and strengthen this linkage in future in a number of ways, not least the continuation of GAAAH’s annual penny drive. For example, under consideration is the creation a new kind of study abroad program to Ghana, which would entail a week, or two, of volunteer work at the Airfield school. Additionally, we have created a fundraiser account on Facebook so anyone, including readers of this newsletter, can make a donation toward future assistance to the Airfield school (<https://fundrazr.com/campaigns/8Kyt7>).

I am honored to be part of this new linkage between Ghana and Memphis, thanks to the Airfield community and Memphis study abroad program alumni, and I look forward to many more trips to this special community in the Volta Region.

Five Years with Heloise

By Carol Ciscel



Dr. Carol Ciscel

I began my program in 1999 at the age of 57. Well, better late than never, right? Since I had no graduate work in history, except for an American economic history course while I was working on my M.A. in economics (1982), I had 60 hours of course work ahead of me to get a Ph.D. in history. A bit like being thrown in the briar patch—wonderful if you love the classroom as I did. But then came the inevitable day in 2004 when I had taken all the course work I needed, including 30 hours of Latin, 12 hours of German, 9 hours of Middle Egyptian, and 6 hours of French. The wonderful ride was over and I was facing comprehensive exams and the “beast that will not die” that is the dissertation. Sitting for the comprehensive exams felt surprisingly comfortable. The four hours for

each of the four exams flew by. I got a little flustered during my orals; maybe it was because I was coming down with flu, but I had trouble retrieving the words “social history” to answer a question Dr. Brown kept giving me chances to get right. But then I was confronted with something truly hard: picking a topic for my dissertation.

I spent the entire spring semester of 2005 mulling that over. I had heard all the good advice – you should come into your Ph.D. program already knowing what you want to write about, then everything you do can be preparation – but I hadn’t done that. I was just having fun and trying to satisfy all the requirements for the 3-field program. I really enjoyed the reach of global history with Dr. Blythe and the philosophy of history with Dr. Caffrey, but my grasp was not large enough to venture into those fields; I needed something much more manageable.

Suddenly I began to wonder why I hadn’t majored in American history. If only I could sequester myself in some accessible archive somewhere and discover something untouched by other hands! But my field was medieval history and the archives lay out of my reach, so I turned to what I had done during my course work: three major papers on three individuals – the Pharaoh Akhenaten, the Spiritual Franciscan Peter Olivi, and the scientist Isaac Newton – and another on the early Christian theologian John Damascene – and decided I needed to find a really interesting person in the Middle Ages to write about. Dr. Blythe supplied the crucial piece to this puzzle by introducing me to Heloise and to the letters she and the great scholar Peter Abelard had exchanged about 1132.

The letters mesmerized me and I knew I had my topic. There was just one little problem: did I truly have something original to say? A number of rather recent books by respected medieval scholars had already plowed new ground. There was nothing else to do but start at the beginning and encounter the texts in the original Latin. So I went to my Latin instructor with a proposal: tutorials in fall 2005 and spring 2006 to translate as much as I could of the letters. I had already read them in Betty Radice’s translation, but encountering the Latin was full of surprises. It was like the difference between speeding down an interstate and riding a bicycle along a country road. The latter lets you savor more of the landscape.

This same semester, fortuitously for me, Dr. Sherman began offering her dissertation support group and suddenly I wasn’t alone. It was immensely helpful in putting together my prospectus and I was also able to try out a couple of different formats for my paper – maybe a chapter on twelfth-century Paris, another on women’s monasticism, etc. None of those chapters materialized in quite that way. The outline was a work in progress, but sometime in 2006 the basic shape came clear: two introductory chapters laying out the story and its reception down through the centuries, three chapters delving into the meat of the letters, then two concluding chapters – one on Heloise herself and the other on love in the twelfth century. I realized that Heloise has been misinterpreted on several dimensions: for example, she was much more than just Abelard’s girlfriend;

Abelard had not silenced but consoled her with his second letter; she was very aware of the risk she ran by submitting to the monastic life at Abelard's command, but the ever-obedient Heloise solved the dilemma by asking for new orders – by asking Abelard to “excite me now to God.” Every time I went back to the secondary sources, however, I felt intimidated by the more seasoned scholars and it wasn't until November 2006 until I finally sent chapters 1, 2, and 3 to Dr. Blythe to review.

In the meantime I had gotten a bit distracted. In June 2006 Dr. Marius Carriere at Christian Brothers University asked me to take over his introductory American history classes for a year while he stepped into the dean's job. The next summer Dr.



Heloise and Abelard

Gail Murray, then chair of the Department of History at Rhodes, asked me to teach medieval courses while they looked for a new full-time appointment. I thoroughly enjoyed both opportunities, but they did slow down my progress. Nevertheless, I realized that I needed considerable time to think deeply about Heloise. This wasn't just an exercise in putting together what I had learned through my research; I had to engage my own imagination and analysis and I needed long stretches of time to do that.

At the International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan in May 2007, I gave a paper on Heloise. I was nervous of course, but the session that Whitney Huey organized – Broadening the Cloister: Reconstructing Monastic Dialogue about the Feminine – was custom made for both us and Julie Elb from Memphis and another scholar, April Najjaj from Greensboro College. The session was well-attended; Dr. Blythe was happy; I got some good feedback; and people even laughed at my jokes! That paper became the first third of chapter 5, where, after laying out in chapter 4 all the reasons why Abelard's second letter to Heloise was in fact consoling, I point out that Heloise was not crushed,

but happy when she wrote her third letter teasing Abelard and laying out her analysis of the monastic life. This is usually considered a boring letter – and this by historians who are not easily bored!

It wasn't until August 2008, however, that I finally delivered chapters 4 and 5 to Dr. Blythe. Then just a few months later, my mother died and I didn't turn in chapter 6 until August 2009 and chapter 7 in January 2010. In the meantime, of course, I was submitting rewrites of earlier chapters as well. In June 2010 I submitted a complete, edited “final” version. How naïve of me! Dr. Blythe still had questions and requests for re-writes, but he agreed that I could submit my intent to graduate, set a date for my defense, and deliver copies to my committee.

By the time I got to my defense, I had explained and elucidated my thesis so many times to friends and family that I could go on for hours at the drop of a hat. The defense was a pleasure; the hard part was fighting – for five long years – the recurring notion that what I was doing wasn't good enough. Being awarded my diploma was reassuring, but winning the Outstanding Dissertation prize was even better! For one thing I knew I had at least one more reader. My heartfelt thanks go out to my department for giving students recognition in this way. It really matters. Thank you. Thank you for a wonderful decade.



The tomb of Heloise and Abelard

After Secular Law: An Interview

Dr. Robert Yelle was one of the editors of After Secular Law, along with Dr. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Professor of Law and Director of the Law, Religion, and Culture Program at SUNY, Buffalo, and Dr. Mateo Raussig-Rubbo, Associate Professor of Law at SUNY, Buffalo. The book was published by Stanford University Press in 2011. Dr. Yelle wrote the lead essay, "Moses' Veil: Secularization as Christian Myth."

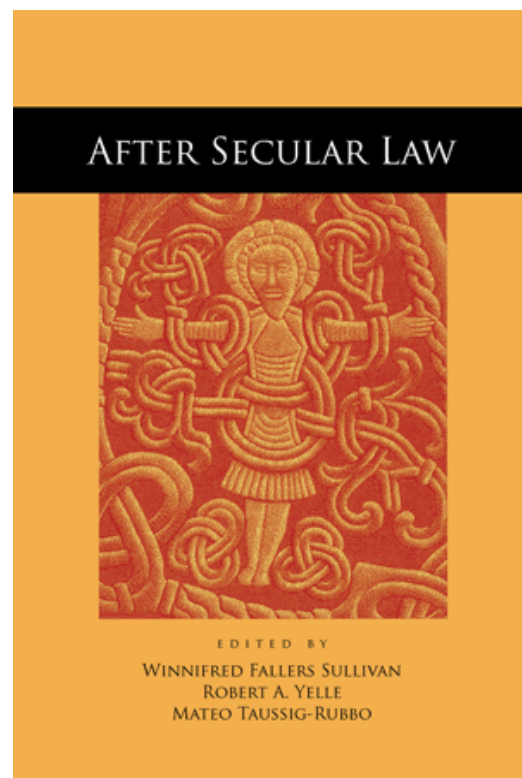
The following is a transcript of an interview with Dr. Yelle by Dr. Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: The central objective of the book that you have edited is to throw light on the boundaries between the realm of religion and the secular world, when the — seemingly — clear-cut separation between the two realms, a legacy of the Enlightenment and secular liberalism, is being challenged. Would you want to elaborate on this? What have you led to re-examining secularism and to re-enacting religion? What does the "Law," a main concern of the book, have to do with this discussion?

Robert Yelle: A lot of people think that law and religion really have nothing to do with each other, but this is a fallacy. This is taking the normative position of secularism, which is to say that there is a separation between law and religion or church and state, and then to say that in fact, descriptively and not only normatively, law and religion have nothing to do with each other. But that is a mistake. Law, as we know, is inevitably involved in regulating religion both at the macro-level in terms of freedom of religion and also in terms of new programs for introducing religion or accommodating religion within administrative systems. The prison system or the systems of military chaplaincies are two examples of what one of my colleagues and co-editors of the book, Winnifred Sullivan, had studied. So, law inevitably is involved in determining what the appropriate boundary between law and religion is, and therefore in determining its own boundaries. In this sense, the concerns of law are central to the discussion.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: In the chapter "Moses' Veil" you argue that the divide between the sacred and the profane was triggered by the liberal order, placing Christianity instead as the promoter of the two distinctive kingdoms, validating the concept, "Political theology." What are your claims here?

Robert Yelle: My claim here is simply that there is a theological basis for the contemporary divide between law and religion, church and state. In certain Christian conceptions there is a distinction between the civil and ecclesiastical domains and so forth that goes all the way back to the Gospel dispensation. Not only is there a structural parallel but there is a genealogical or historical connection between secularism and Christian theology in the sense that in more recent centuries, in the early modern period many thinkers went back to the Bible and to Christian doctrine in order to develop the notions of freedom of religion, and of religious toleration within a Christian framework in terms of older concepts that were articulated by Saint Paul.



Especially influential was Paul's idea that true religion is a matter of grace and not of law. Paul's opposition between *charis* and *nomos* or grace and law was a critique of Mosaic tradition. Paul relocated authentic religion in a condition of grace, which in the Reformation became Luther's notion of *sola fide*, faith alone, and in Pietism the notion that religion is about internal piety. So, this placement of religion outside of

the public domain in some kind of interior space is something that clearly has roots in Christianity, and there is a kind of structural and genealogical parallel between secularism and Christian theology that is quite ironic given that most people, without knowing the history of these developments, simply assume that secularism is “nonreligious.” This is the basic problem that I am trying to struggle against in making this argument. In this sense then, secularism is a political theology.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: You beautifully explain the meaning of Moses’ veil, as a symbol of obscurity, of rituals and carnal law and the spiritual transformation that occurred when Christ removed the veil, opening new paths of communication between Jews and Gentiles. “Lifting the Veil” symbolizes the triumph of spirit and reason over superstition, ceremony and ritual. The parallel of this metaphor with the recent events in France concerning the removal of the veil of Islamic migrant women is revealing. Does the French policy represent the old battle between barbarism and civilization? Between superstition and Reason?

Robert Yelle: Yes, there is a clear parallel with some recent debates in France which I gesture at, as I am not an expert in the French situation, but there is another parallel between the older Christian condemnations of ritual particularism that was directed against Jews and also against Moses’ veil [the veil worn by Moses when he returned with the tablets of the Law]— which is an image that Paul actually uses in Second Corinthians, chapter 3 — a parallel between that and what is happening in France now, where these hallmarks of ritual particularity, that in this case happen to identify Muslims, are seen somehow as antithetical to the contemporary concept of French *laïcité*, a word we translate as “secularism,” as a kind of universalism, defining the public space from which religion has to be excluded. So without going further into making claims that take me beyond my field of competence, both of those cases represent a struggle between universalism and particularism and in that sense we can say that what the French are doing finds some kind of precedent. Some French philosophers like Alain Badiou, in his book on Saint Paul and the origins of universalism, are making similar arguments.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: You make a distinction between the natural or moral law, the civil law and the ceremonial law. Why does this distinction matter for our understanding of the secular and religious spheres?

Robert Yelle: First of all, this is a distinction that was made first by Christians. It goes back to Paul’s distinction between

grace and law and his statements to the effect that certain of the Mosaic laws are abrogated. Within a few centuries, Christians are categorizing the Mosaic laws into several divisions and arguing that some of these divisions in fact are not law anymore for Christians. They have been abrogated for them. Paramount among those were the ceremonial laws. Natural laws, moral laws are universal laws that are binding on everyone. This is a concept that continues all the way into the Deist period with a notion of natural law and natural religion; now we are talking about the 17th, 18th centuries. But these are very old distinctions. My argument here is in part that the re-categorization of Mosaic Law in this way, is a radical violation of orthodox Mosaic tradition. This division establishes the notion that true religion is not about performing ceremonies, but is about some interior condition that is also potentially universal, which is why Christians don’t need to obey the ceremonial laws. They don’t have to keep kosher, they don’t have to get circumcised; this is something that Paul already says. There is precedent for that with our notions of the kind of universal public domain that excludes at least as law, as legally binding requirements, particular kinds of ceremonial conformity.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: The Protestant Reformation that challenged the doctrine, rituals and ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church motivated debates on issues concerning the separation between religion and the state, not only in Europe but also in America. Would you want to elaborate on these theological debates in the United States?

Robert Yelle: I don’t say too much about America, because again, it is beyond my area of expertise, but in my chapter I do note that Roger Williams, in the 1640s, has often been credited with being the earliest exponent of the notion of religious toleration in America, against the Massachusetts Bay Colony. His argument for religious freedom was theologically based. So, the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony had gone back to some of the Mosaic Laws in framing their code of laws in the 1630s and requiring people to obey and conform to these. Williams argues this is in violation of Christianity because Christianity is about religious freedom, precisely because of Paul’s notion that true religion is not about the performance of external ceremonies but is about some internal condition of grace associated with Christian freedom. Although clearly there is a point in which this kind of argument about religious freedom becomes unhitched from its original theological moorings, I think it is nevertheless important to understand that it had its origins in a specific tradition because so many traditions don’t accept the notion that religion doesn’t require us to

perform external actions. I mean, Orthodox Hindus, and Muslims, at least according to dharmashastra in Hinduism or sharia in Islam, would regard that as alien.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: Theological ideas, as you have demonstrated in your chapter, have fostered secularization in modern times. Nonetheless, you recognize the presence of many other contributing factors. Would you want to elaborate on this point?

Robert Yelle: Certainly, as I point out in my chapter, I think it would be naïve to argue that this process of secularization is just a consummation of originally Christian theological notions that religion is about freedom, because these ideas were articulated within a particular historical context, they were involved in the wars of religion and eventually with industrialization and colonialism. Max Weber himself had already made the argument, whether you believe it or not, that part of what enabled the success of capitalism is the Puritan idea that ceremonial laws have been abrogated, which freed up the possibility for non-religious action, utilitarian action in the public domain. That move was originally made as an attack against the Catholic Church, but it wasn't motivated simply by theological ideas because, as Weber points out, it had an economic *telos*, it facilitated capitalist, utilitarian modes of engagement with the world, and so it is not my contention that this was driven only by theology. I also want to make the point from a political perspective. The redefinition of religion as interior rather than a matter of external performance has been one of the most consistent trajectories within what we call secularism, although it was generally done in a Christian idiom in earlier centuries by thinkers such as Hobbes, and Locke and Kant and many others. Once you redefine religion as being about matters of interior faith or piety, you have removed strategically the possibility of conflict between individual religion and the public domain or what we call politics. And so, there is a sense, I think, in which much of this is about avoiding conflict.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: Do you think so?

Robert Yelle: Oh! I think so. I think that, coming out of the wars of religion, people are fully aware of the dangerous possibilities involved when religious disputes creep into the public domain. Theological positions could lead to certain kinds of public commitments, therefore, this kind of interpretation of Christian doctrine facilitated the

displacement of religion into the domain of the private, in which it is in essence sequestered, and the possibility for this kind of larger conflict about sovereignty is removed. In fact this is what Hobbes does! Right? For Hobbes the Leviathan has both the civil and ecclesiastical powers, but he also argues that basically religion is about the spirit and affirming only that Jesus is the Christ, and that the sovereign is free to command us in terms of our external actions. This is what I call interiorization, and this removes the possibility of conflict between the so-called religious and secular spheres, but it was done partly to avoid conflict. I don't think it was only in order to facilitate economic acquisitive behavior, but that is certainly part of the argument.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: Is secularization a myth, as you claim?

Robert Yelle: Part of my point is that people interpret secularism as a theory, or as an accomplished fact. Mark Lilla, in his book *The Great Separation* from 2007, basically argues that the great separation between politics and theology happened, but my point is that this very idea of separation goes back to much older Christian myths about the nature of the division, the origin of the division, between law and religion or Christian grace and Mosaic law. In this sense it is a myth. As we know, secularization as a hypothesis has not explained the resurgence of religion, has not explained the continuing strong religious commitment on the part of many Americans or the fact that even now Christianity is the fastest growing religion on the planet, where it is expanding in places in the developing world. But my argument is not that secularization is false. My argument is to say that we ought not to establish a hierarchy of traditions whereby secularism is true and all of the so-called religions are forms of superstition that are in fact myths, and are false. It is rather a question of recognizing that we inhabit a certain set of moral commitments, a cosmology, an anthropology, a vision of the human, a notion of sovereignty and also notions of salvation, because this notion of secularism as a release from religious un-freedom, as I traced in my chapter, has a direct precedent in Christian notions of salvation, as salvation from the law. So, I think, in this sense it can be said that secularization is clearly a myth. Now, what we do going forward, what kind of ideas we embrace from inevitably accommodating different traditions in a plural world, is something that I don't try to address in this chapter.

Reconstructing Graceland

By Scott P. Marler



Dr. Sarah Potter, Dr. Eric Foner, Dr. Scott Marler, and Elvis Presley: A souvenir photograph from Graceland

When I learned last winter that I'd have the pleasure of escorting the esteemed Columbia University historian Eric Foner on the morning of his two-day visit to the University of Memphis, I wrote him a letter of introduction and asked if he had any preferences about what he might like to do. He replied that he'd previously toured the National Civil Rights Museum and Stax Records, but politely inquired whether I'd consider it "too lowbrow" for us to visit Graceland, Elvis Presley's legendary Memphis home.

To be honest, I shuddered at the prospect. Since moving to Memphis, I'd vowed never to go to Graceland, largely because I despised most of what Elvis represented. Having come of age as a fan of punk and post-punk, I'd long dismissed Elvis as the epitome of mainstream rock's bloated self-indulgence during the 1960s and 70s. But despite a scathing anti-Elvis verse from Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" that kept coming to mind, I couldn't very well say "no" to a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian. "Graceland it is," I replied.

We began our morning with breakfast at the Peabody Hotel, where we enjoyed a relaxed conversation about southern history and the profession in general. I pointed out that the Peabody's fabled elegance obscured its segregationist past; in the late 1950s, for example, the Southern Historical Association cancelled an annual meeting there after the hotel refused to accommodate African American historian John Hope Franklin, then serving as the group's president. After driving to Graceland, located in a downtrodden area of south Memphis, we were met by Dr. Sarah Potter, who had written an undergraduate thesis several years ago under Foner's direction.

The ten dollars it cost to park proved to be just the tip of the exorbitantly priced iceberg that is Graceland. Individual tickets were nearly four times as much, and dozens of kiosks offered overpriced food and souvenirs. In the slow, winding line for the shuttle to transport us across the boulevard to the mansion itself, everyone had to pose for a photo, which was then offered for sale upon returning from the grounds. (Dr. Foner kindly purchased ours and shared them with us.) Knowing that about 600,000 tourists visit Graceland annually, I did some quick math, and it struck me that little of this prodigious income was spent on maintenance or upkeep, since everything appeared a bit shabby.



Famous meeting of President Richard M. Nixon and Elvis Presley, December 21, 1970, when Elvis was appointed as a Federal Agent-at-Large in the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs

After arriving at the mansion, our shuttle's group was marshaled into a semi-circle on the front porch, where a tour guide described various rules before we could enter. (At this point, Foner quietly noted that all the low-wage drivers and guides were African Americans, suggesting a sort of residual plantation mentality at work. But his comment made me realize that all the employees I'd encountered handling money were whites—the flip-side of the same tendency.) One rule was that no one was allowed to go upstairs. I had wondered whether we'd be allowed to view the infamous toilet on which Elvis reportedly collapsed and died, but apparently, this would have exceeded the degree of bad taste that even the estates' overseers could stomach. I did know, however, that said bathroom is located directly overhead when you enter the front door—and that was quite close enough for me.

Admittedly vexed by all the herding, money-grubbing, rules, and surveillance, I grumbled a comment that journalist Hunter Thompson once made about 1970s Las Vegas: "This is what the world would look like if the Nazis had won the war." And that was before even entering the interior, with its shag-carpeted walls, faux wood-paneling and mismatched furniture. Once inside, we were struck not only by this general garishness, but also by how relatively small the mansion is. More quickly than expected, you've left the house and are being funneled through a succession of memorabilia rooms. My favorite was the collection of hideous sequin-studded jumpsuits that Elvis favored in his declining years.

Exiting through the rear exterior grounds, we first passed a swimming pool (kidney-shaped, of course) and then swung around to the "Meditation Garden," where I was shocked to discover Elvis's body was actually interred. Although I later learned that grave robbers had plagued attempts to bury him in Forest Hill Cemetery, I still thought the confluence of corpses and commerce disturbing. Neither could I fathom why anyone would need to "meditate" about Elvis, but here Foner made another good point, mentioning the memorial grounds in New York's Central Park just across the street from where John Lennon was murdered. Lennon was a personal hero of mine, and I've made my own pilgrimage to Strawberry Fields, so who am I to cast stones?

Similarly, it may be revealing that none of our high-powered intellectual trio was able to resist buying a keepsake or two before leaving. Interestingly, each of us represented a different generation, so our visit to Graceland probably prompted us to (re)construct our own "memories" of Elvis in very different ways. In the end, however, we all agreed that we'd had a pleasant and memorable experience—and indeed, I'm now glad that Foner suggested it. But please, don't ask me to go again anytime soon. Theodor Adorno's astute analysis of the meaning and value of kitsch notwithstanding, once was enough for me.