

# History Happenings

*A newsletter published by the Department of History  
The University of Memphis*

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# *From the Chair:*

Now that I am reaching the end of the final year of my 9-year tenure as chair of the Department of History, it's time for a bit of reflection.

There have been many changes in the department since 2004. These changes have been too numerous to recall, but the major ones include:

- The overhaul of our graduate program to place more planning and control in the hands of the students working in concert with their committees. This has resulted in an increased graduation rate and a shorter time to completion. Our students are producing very high-quality theses and dissertations and securing academic positions at higher rates than the current job market might predict.
- Nothing has changed the department more than the development of our online degree (B.A. and M.A.) programs. The programs attract new students to the university, provide our faculty and graduate students with unique opportunities to master online teaching, and produce a funding stream that has significantly increased our ability to attract, support and retain great students and faculty members. Our dedication to providing the highest quality online education has earned our department kudos from the American Historical Association and a reputation as the finest in the nation for online history education.
- Over the past nine years, the composition of our faculty has changed dramatically. I have had the privilege of signing the contracts of fourteen young, productive, and uncommonly nice new faculty members. And I'm about to sign two more.

I'm very pleased and proud of these changes, but I certainly cannot take all the credit for them. These were group efforts undertaken by all the members of this department—faculty, students, and our very able support staff. That, indeed, is what I'm proudest of as chair. Our department is friendly, collegial, and productive. And as I take this long backward look, I like knowing that I played a part in creating this environment.

When I was elected chair in 2004, after the departure of Dr. Jack Hurley, I thought of myself as a “manager” whose chief duty was to keep the Department of History functioning:



**Dr Janann Sherman delivering her address at the opening of Women's History Month for 2013, at which she was the honored guest**

signing forms, determining budgets, and dealing with student and faculty issues.

But I also aspired to be a leader, someone who provided purpose, direction and motivation towards the realization of a vision. The difference between a manager and a leader is that “Management is doing things right; Leadership is doing the right thing.” [Peter F. Drucker]

So what was the right thing? What was my vision for the department?

My vision was for a harmonious, collegial department in which individual scholars grow and thrive while also considering themselves as integral parts of the larger enterprise.

While I am hesitant to sound like I have figured out how to achieve this vision, I've learned a lot during the process that I'd like to share with you.

Building a cooperative community was not something I could simply impose. Indeed, the first thing you learn as chair is how little power you have. Your primary tool is the power of persuasion. And before you can deploy that effectively, you must establish your credibility as someone people want to follow.

Although it has become a maligned cliché in this age of irony, I still adhere to the golden rule: treat others as you wish to be



treated. Be courteous, respectful, friendly, open, interested. Model the behavior you seek. If you want people to work hard and work cooperatively, then you must do so yourself.

Trust is fundamental, so be fair and transparent. You must acknowledge the challenges the department faces, bring everyone into the discussion of alternatives, and be open about why you have to make the tough decisions.

Those are the baselines, and once in place, building community becomes an endless series of seemingly “little” things engaged in consistently over a long period of time.

To name a few:

- Potlucks. Hosting informal meals for faculty and graduate students helps build relationships of amity and trust
- Encouraging members to share “good news” at faculty meetings
- Sharing decision-making across the faculty through the committee system
- Communicate, communicate, communicate

Ultimately, my primary role as chair has been to figure out ways to help my faculty members be successful; to hire good

people, support and mentor them, and retain them in an era when salaries are stagnant.

The job is difficult but also immensely rewarding in the sense of providing meaningful and valuable service to the faculty, department, and university.

As many of you know, I have purchased a cottage on Vinalhaven Island off the coast of Maine. There I intend to live out my happy ending: writing, traveling, volunteering, and playing in one of the most beautiful places on earth.

There is much that I will miss about my life in Memphis, not least the amazing friends and colleagues I’ve had the privilege to work with every day.

I am announcing today the establishment of the Vinalhaven branch campus. I invite each of you to come and engage in the scholarly pursuit of your choice among myriad topics. These might include: the history of granite quarries, lobster habitat and migration, kayak drift patterns, the antics of shore birds, or the seasonal variations of the magnificent sunsets over the harbor.

Your room will be waiting.

# Memphis in Cuba

*By Dennis Laumann*



**Dr. Dennis Laumann**

This past winter break I had the honor of leading The University of Memphis’ first study-abroad program to Cuba. Thanks to a slight loosening of restrictions on travel to Cuba by the Obama administration, our institution has been granted what is termed a general license from the US government allowing Memphis students to visit Cuba for academic study. As a researcher on Cuba’s African linkages, I seized the opportunity to put together a study-abroad trip to this beautiful, dynamic, and often misunderstood socialist island nation.

The eleven students who accompanied me enrolled in a course entitled “Afro-Cuban History and Culture” and, without exception, embarked on our journey with open minds, quite uncertain what to expect, despite prevailing American notions about Cuba.

When I first visited Cuba as a graduate student in 1996, my initial impression was that it reminded me of West Africa. The sights and sounds I discovered as I explored the streets of Havana were unmistakably African. In fact, while estimates vary from one-third to two-

thirds of the population, most Cubans descend from the over one million Africans who were forcibly enslaved on the island. The slave trade to Cuba ended only in 1866 and slavery was not abolished there until 1886. Thus, the forced migration of Africans — speaking their languages, practicing their religions, and transplanting their knowledge and skills — took place on a massive scale until relatively recently, ensuring the strong African character of Cuban society.

In the several decades between abolition and the Cuban Revolution, Afro-Cubans, like their African American brethren in the American South, endured state-sanctioned segregation, discrimination in education and employment, and racist violence. It is therefore little surprise they enthusiastically supported Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement when it launched a revolutionary war against the US-backed dictator Batista in the 1950s.

The revolutionary victory on January 1, 1959, had a profound impact on the lives of Afro-Cubans. Segregation, discrimination, and racism were immediately outlawed, and schools and professions were opened to all Cubans regardless of "race" or class. The revolutionary leadership embraced Cuba's African links, promoting Afro-Cuban culture through state-sponsored research institutes and artistic groups. Moreover, the

debt Cuba owed Africa was

articulated by the Cuban government, which supported the continent in its own struggle against European colonialism.

Today, Cuba remains committed to what it calls "internationalist" work in Africa, especially in the health field. In Cuba itself, there no longer is any stigma attached to Afro-Cuban culture, exemplified by the fact Cubans of all backgrounds proudly wear the colorful bead necklaces and bracelets associated with the orishas (deities) of Santería. Yet, as in any society attempting to correct centuries of economic and social inequality, entrenched racist ideas and expressions are trickier to combat, a subject that is by no means taboo in Cuba.

Indeed, in contrast to popular American conceptions of Cuba as a closed and oppressive society, the Memphis students were struck by candid and animated discussions with our hosts and ordinary Cubans who spoke freely, at times critically, about their country. Moreover, the Cubans we met were equally interested in learning about life in the United States and especially Memphis. Needless to say, one of the

highlights of our visit were these interactions with Cubans such as our discussion with a community group called Proyecto Espiral, and less formally, the unforgettable New Year's Eve party held in our honor.

The one week we spent in Cuba was comprised of guest lectures by Cuban scholars, meetings with Afro-Cuban artists and activists, and visits to historic and cultural sites. Our host, Dr. Rodrigo González, a director of Cuba Girasol, the non-profit program provider for our trip, guided us throughout Havana and, one particularly instructive day, to the surrounding countryside.



**At the coffee plantation**

We traveled about two hours southwest of the capital to the westernmost Cuban province of Pinar del Río to visit Las Terrazas national park to get a better appreciation of the nature of slavery. Situated within the huge biosphere reserve are the remains of a 19th-century coffee plantation. The beautifully restored and maintained master's house overlooks the ruins of crude and cramped slave barracks in the midst of a breathtaking landscape. The giant circular device used by slaves to remove the husks from coffee beans is nearby and the sadistic implements of slavery, such as whips and chains, are displayed in a small museum.

The impact of the Cuban Revolution on Afro-Cubans is convincingly depicted at the National Museum of the



**New Year's Eve in Havana**



**A Santería shop**



National Literacy Campaign in Cuba. Launched in 1961, the campaign was the world's largest and most organized effort to eradicate illiteracy, encompassing over 100,000 youths who were dispatched to rural areas to teach peasants how to read and write. Rural black Cubans, long and deliberately denied literacy, obviously benefited tremendously from this mobilization, but as significantly young Afro-Cubans from the cities were prominent amongst the volunteer teachers.

A mandatory stop on any visit to Havana is the Museum of the Revolution, housed in the former presidential palace where Batista resided before he fled Cuba in advance of the revolutionary army. A far lesser-known, but no less engaging museum is the Casa de Africa, located on a quiet street in Habana Vieja (Old Havana), a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The museum features art and objects that are gifts from African nations in solidarity with Cuba.



**Plaza de la Revolución**



**Casa de Africa**

Students particularly enjoyed our interactions with famous Afro-Cuban artists and musicians. A highlight was our visit to Callejón de Hamel, a residential alley where virtually all the walls are adorned with beautiful murals by Salvador Gonzáles Escalona, a renowned artist whose work invokes the deities and symbolism of Santería. We also had the privilege of an informal meeting with Alexey Rodriguez and



**A musical moment in Habana Vieja**

Magia Lopez, the married couple also known as Obsession, an award-winning hip-hop group, who shared their experiences promoting Afro-Cuban cultural awareness and then performed a few of their hits. On our

last day, we were treated to a rousing private presentation by the celebrated Afro-Cuban dance and music troupe Okan-Tomi Folklore Company.



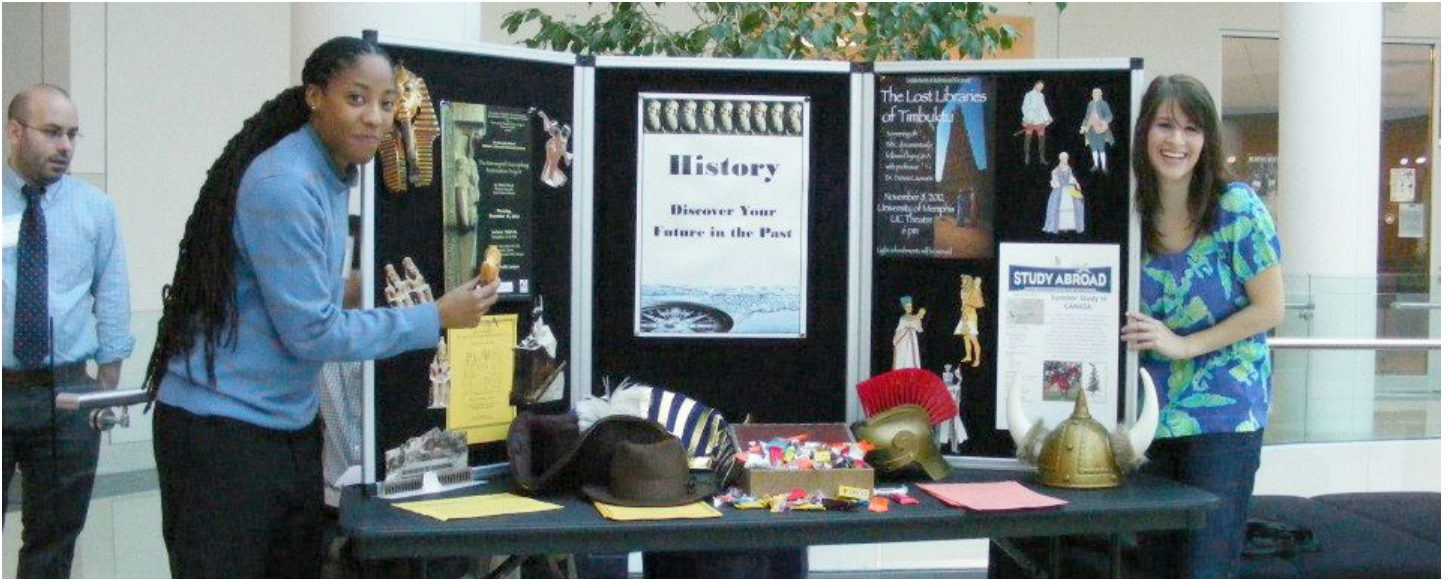
**Attending a lecture by Dr. Digna Castañeda**

While this particular trip focused on Afro-Cuban history and culture, it was only the first of a series of short-term study-abroad programs to Cuba open to students at The University of Memphis. Next up is a Spring Break trip for graduate students directed by Dr. Sharon Wrobel, my colleague in the School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy, entitled "Cuba Comparative Public Administration." More trips to Cuba examining other topics are planned for the summer, and certainly I hope to return soon, too, with another group of Memphis Tigers!



# *14th Annual Graduate Student Conference in African-American History*

*By Micki Kaleta*



Display about graduate study in History at The University of Memphis

In November 2012, the Graduate Association for African American History hosted another successful international conference at The University of Memphis. The 14th Annual Graduate Conference in African-American History attracted applicants from throughout the United States and Canada. The two-day conference featured panels from November 1 through November 2 and was generously sponsored by the Department of History, the Program in African and African American Studies, Student Event Allocation Funds, and the Marcus Orr Center for the Humanities.

Each day featured panel presentations of original research by graduate students from a variety of institutions. Some themes included: African Americans and the Creation of Communities and Identities, Uplift Education and Political Change, Race and Public Space, and Transnational Perspectives. Notably, Anthony Siracusa from Rhodes College held the honor of winning the Memphis State Eight top paper prize with his paper — “Developing an American Ahimsa: The Rev. James M. Lawson Jr.’s Paradigm of Protest.” Presenters and guests alike commented on the level of scholarship evident in each panel session. Additional awards for the Memphis State Eight Paper Prize were presented to Liz Lundeen (University of North Carolina) and Mary Portorti (Boston University) for second and third place, respectively.

The feature event of this year’s conference was to be a keynote address by Dr. Deborah Gray White of Rutgers University entitled “Brown Sugar Melts: African American Women at the Turn of the Millennium.” However, because of the ravaging effects of Hurricane Sandy, Dr. White became stranded in New Jersey. On less than a 24-hour notice Dr. Anne Twitty, assistant professor of history at the University of



Dr. Ann Twitty delivering the keynote address



Mississippi, agreed to serve as Dr. Gray's proxy. We were not disappointed! Dr. Twitty presented a stirring lecture entitled "Promiscuous Legality: Slavery and Legal Culture in the American Confluence" to a nearly full house at the University Center Theater. Graduate students, undergraduates, faculty and staff from The University of Memphis and surrounding colleges joined with local Memphians filled the theater despite the last-minute change in speaker. We were also honored to have Dr. Shirley Raines as our special guest.

Dr. Twitty discussed how enslaved citizens of St. Louis developed and utilized legal knowledge "to manipulate the law for their own gain." Her research truly explained the sophisticated measures that slaves employed to obtain their own freedom. Following the lecture, Dr. Twitty participated in a lively question-and-answer session with the audience.

The week's events were concluded with a roundtable discussion led by recent doctoral graduates, including two from the university's Department of History. Drs. Daryl Carter, Shirletta Kinchen, and Anne Twitty shared their experiences and advice with conference participants. In an informal discussion, they provided advice about surviving comprehensive exams, finishing graduate school, and successfully navigating the job market.

Each GAAAH member worked to ensure that this year's conference was a great success. However, this event would not have been possible without the support of faculty advisors Dr. Arwin Smallwood and Dr. Ernestine Jenkins, the much-



**Making a presentation**

appreciated time and labor of Dr. Aram Goudsouzian, and the tireless efforts of Administrative Associate Karen Bradley. GAAAH would like to give a special thank you to the members and officers of the Graduate History Association who volunteered their time and effort to set up a table at the conference to represent graduate history education at The University of Memphis. GAAAH is also deeply appreciative of the faculty members who volunteered their time to chair sessions and judge the paper competition. GAAAH is grateful for everyone's input and enthusiasm. We look forward to seeing everyone at another successful conference next year.



**A panel discussion in progress**

# The Art of Mind-Bending

## An Interview with Professor Andrei Znamenski

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** Dr. Znamenski, tell us more about the exhibit of Soviet propaganda posters that our university Art Museum put together and to which you contributed.

**Andrei Znamenski:** Last September, I received an email from Leslie Luebbers and Lisa Abitz, the director and curator at our university Art Museum. They told me that in their storage there were twelve Soviet propaganda posters purchased by an American visitor to the Soviet Union in the 1960s, which the museum wanted to put on display. Leslie and Lisa asked me to assist them in translating captions and verses for these posters and to provide a general interpretive framework to help visitors capture the essence of the posters in the context of the time. I gladly agreed to do this. To be exact, these posters became part of a bigger exhibit called “Hot Cold Cool,” which lasted the entire fall semester from September 22 to January 5. They displayed four portfolios of American prints, including an interesting 1960s series “American Artists and Writers Protest the War in Vietnam.” Another room was dedicated to “Out of the Janitor’s Closet,” the artistic critique by Memphis painter Jan Hankins of the Bush and Obama administrations. The third and final hall accommodated the Soviet posters. By the way, one can view the entire collection online at <http://www.memphis.edu/amum/exhibitions/2012/russian.propaganda.prints.php>



**Figure 1: Dr. Andrei Znamenski with Soviet propaganda poster about Africa**

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** What makes these propaganda posters so interesting?

**Andrei Znamenski:** Before I address this question, let me briefly detour by introducing our readers to the origin of propaganda in general and propaganda posters in particular. The word propaganda, which is derived from Latin gerundive “things that must be disseminated,” came to us from Christian tradition. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church was upset about losing so many people. To address this problem, among others things, on June 22, 1622, Pope Gregory XV set up the Sacra Congregatio Christiano Nomini Propaganda (Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith). The goal was to capture and bring new souls to the Catholic Church. Originally, the word propaganda did not have negative connotations. Yet, three centuries later, when propaganda was increasingly used and abused to promote all kinds of ideological agendas with various lethal consequences, the word clearly acquired a negative meaning. In addition to radio, newspapers, television, and mass rallies, posters were one of the tools that the modern state began using to mobilize people for certain causes or to bend their minds in favor of certain policies that, under normal circumstances, the populace did not care about. The first posters were mass-produced in France in the 1870s, when printing industry mastered the use of color lithography for mass production.

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** So, the governments discovered wonder technologies of mass influence, which kings and queens of the past could not dream of.

**Andrei Znamenski:** Exactly. Governments for first time received an opportunity to create what one can call ideological “holodecks” by placing people into propaganda bubbles, which molded the minds of men and women. Or, as they said in the early Soviet Union, it helped to raise the “new man.” The whole idea of propaganda is to appeal not to reason but to human



emotions and to people's hearts. Propaganda frequently relies on distortion and misinterpretation of facts, using stereotypes and half-truths. For the first time this strategy was used on a grand scale during World War I. When they think about propaganda, people usually associate it with National Socialist Germany and Soviet Russia. Yet, it is important to remember that during World War I all warring nations did this. Thus, Britain was infested with posters demonizing Germans as savage Huns. The United States was also one of the most notorious "propagandists," widely using posters in both world wars to mobilize people, frequently resorting to various stereotypes. Not many know that one of the first anti-spy posters (with a caption "Someone Talked") was printed not in Red Russia but in the United States just after the war, during the so-called Red Scare in 1919, when hundreds of people were rounded up and deported without any due process. The war and interwar periods (1914-1945) were the golden age of poster propaganda, when cities in many countries were literally plastered with printed images defending and promoting various causes. Before the rise of television and other visual technologies, the poster's role as a mobilization tool was especially important. Those were the years when nationalism, patriotism, corporate and class solidarity, and all kinds of group-thought were running amok. The highest moral accomplishment was sacrificing yourself for an ideological cause or for your country. An individual's life meant nothing. Russian writer Nadezhda Mandelstam aptly labeled that brutal period saturated with martial and sacrificial ethics as the "time of wolves."

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** After giving such a thorough historical introduction and outlining the origin of the poster propaganda, please, tell us what is so peculiar about the 1960s Soviet posters that were displayed in the art museum.

**Andrei Znamenski:** Propaganda art of the so-called High Stalinism of the 1930s, including the posters glorifying Joseph Stalin, the cult figure of the Soviet Communism at that time, are well known. Yet the posters printed in the 1960s-1970s, which are not so ideologically flamboyant, are less familiar. That is what makes them interesting. These later posters reflected Soviet Communism in a stage of decline, when propaganda was losing much of its steam and its aggressive aspects. Besides, many people stopped taking it seriously. Moreover, we can observe some changes in the nature of the genre. Instead of calling on people to perform heroic and epic deeds and mobilizing them against foreign enemies and spies, the 1960s and the 1970s Soviet posters frequently encouraged people to be more efficient at their work place, less wasteful, to take good care of their factory premises and collective farms, and also to expose corruption. By the way, when I was maturing as a young adult in the 1980s just before the Soviet Union ended, the genre of the propaganda posters was almost dead. I do not actually remember any visible or memorable posters around me at that time except one, "Soviet Economy Needs to Economize" — one of the last desperate appeals to people to be less wasteful — a canvas slogan that was displayed without any images on a central square in the town where I lived.

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** Thus, the posters printed in the 1960s were concerned with more mundane and routine matters?

**Andrei Znamenski:** Yes, correct. Except for one political poster about an international topic ("Colonialism is Doomed") that shows Africa and an African breaking the chains of colonial bondage (Figure 1), all the posters from our university exhibit deal with mundane economic issues. They also use satire as a tool of influence, which was a significant shift from



Figure 2: Soviet propaganda poster about haughty bureaucrats

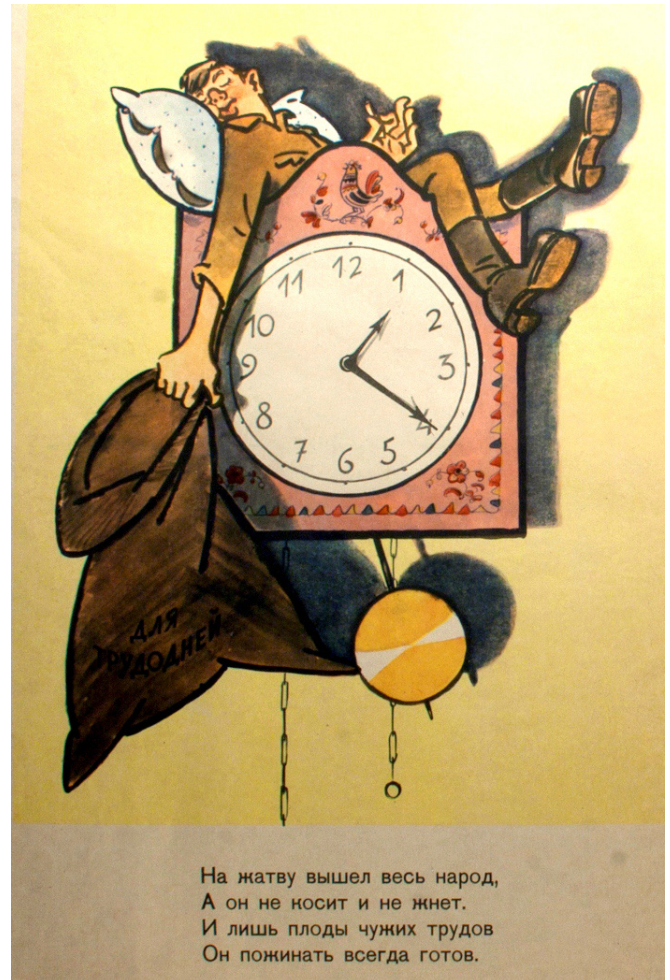
the “wooden” propaganda of the Stalinist age. These 1960s’ posters ridiculed and exposed lazy collective farm workers, drunkards, thieves of state property, bribe takers, bureaucrats, and so on. One of the posters on display (Figure 2) shows an obnoxious bureaucrat leaning on a fence made of words “I am irreplaceable” with a verse underneath that reads: “As soon as he was elevated/His mind has died and ego escalated.” This particular poster obviously targeted arrogant bureaucrats who, after being promoted to higher positions, began to look down upon people.

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** Before we started this interview, you mentioned that the major bulk of the collection concerns the state of Soviet agriculture. Why is that so?

**Andrei Znamenski:** Yes, the greater part of the collection on display deals with the waste, theft, and inefficiency on collective farms. Through visual propaganda, government attempted to somehow improve a situation in this field. Compared to other branches of the economy, agriculture was the Achilles heel of the former Soviet Union. The government project of enforced collectivization of peasant households—which was launched as early as 1929—killed all incentives to work on the land and eventually impoverished the Soviet countryside. Russian peasants were not paid with money, but with so-called points (called work days) arbitrarily assigned by the chair of a collective farm to each adult peasant. At the end of a month the points were converted into a small amount of produce as in-kind payment for labor. The Russian peasants worked the land, but the land belonged to a local collective—private ownership was forbidden and illegal except for tiny backyard gardens. The local farm collectives were required by the Soviet government to deliver the greater part of a farm’s produce to the state. For these reasons, the peasants were not motivated to work. One of the posters (Figure 3) is very revealing in this case: a lazy collective farm worker lies on a clock with an open sack “for work days” and a verse underneath that reads:

The time has come,  
All people in the fields,  
They’re working hard; they mow and harvest,  
Unlike this lazy bum,  
Who surely will come  
To rip the fruits of other people’s labor.

By the 1970s, in order to somehow feed its population, the Soviet Union began importing grain from the United States and Canada. By the way, the sad situation in the Soviet agriculture affected people like me personally, although I am a city guy through and through. My first regular job was teaching history of philosophy at a technical college in 1985. A mandatory part of annual performance for non-tenured faculty was doing community service on a rotating basis in the form of going each September to collective farm fields to collect produce (potatoes, radishes, squash, onions, and so on), which peasants did not care to pick up—they were concerned more about working in their small private backyard gardens. So that year, as a greenhorn instructor, I was delegated by my college to the fields to act as a commissar (yes, they still used this word!). What it meant in reality was that I was forced to play a role of a “master,” and be in charge of about 200 first-year students who lived in barracks. Students could not opt out of this one-month indentured servitude; otherwise they would be kicked out of college. I hated myself because my job was riding around on a horse to watch and make sure that students did not escape into the woods to drink, sleep, or make love, but that they worked eight hours a day under any kind of weather conditions in dirt and rain, digging out produce and packing it in canvas bags. So several of the posters I prepared for that exhibit stirred some unpleasant memories.



**Figure 3: Soviet propaganda poster about a lazy farm worker**

На жатву вышел весь народ,  
А он не носит и не жнет.  
И лишь плоды чужих трудов  
Он пожинать всегда готов.



# Ancient Egypt on Facebook

*By Johna Likens*

My passion for ancient Egypt began when I was a little girl living in downtown Memphis. Sparked by a Christmas present of an Egyptian history book, my fascination began. Luckily, my love for all things ancient Egyptian didn't go unnoticed by my mother. When the traveling Tutankhamen exhibit came to the Pyramid, we were there. After I had seen the wonders of Ancient Egypt in person, my amazement with its marvel began.

My interest in ancient Egypt did not wane over the years. I kept researching and learning through books and the Internet. Then I would write a line or two about studies in history at Memphis. About a year ago, I saw a post on the Ancient Egypt fan page on Facebook saying that they were seeking an administrator to help run the site. I was one of the many who applied and, much to my excitement, I was selected. After a couple of months, the man who originally made the Facebook page decided he did not want to run it anymore. Since I was the only person with the ability to keep the page going, I was very excited to share my love of Egyptology with the public by sharing information on the history and culture of ancient Egypt.

The Facebook page has been an overwhelming success, currently with over 353,000 "likers." I try to post something new at least every other day. I post news articles, pictures, videos, and any other things that relate to Ancient Egypt. Lately, I have been boosting the pages' popularity by offering Egyptian-item-related giveaways for the fans, which has

proved to be a wonderful addition to the page. The page can definitely be a handful at times, especially since I was never given full rights of it and will forever run it alone. I get messages at least 20 times a day asking questions about Egypt. I always reply to every message with the best details I can find in my Ancient Egyptian history books. The interaction with the fans is definitely what keeps me motivated to keep spreading the amazing history of Egypt.



**Johna Likens**

I am currently a senior, attaining my bachelor's degree in history with a minor in anthropology, here at The University of Memphis. I also have the pleasure of working a part-time job at the C.H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa. I plan to enroll in a master's degree program at The University of Memphis in the Fall of 2014, and then I hope to pursue a career in Museum Studies. My main academic interests include evolutionary history, civilizations of the ancient world, paleontology, and anything relating to prehistory.



## **Ancient Egypt**

353,626 likes • 3,790 talking about this

Like

Message



# The Language of Disenchantment: Protestant Literalism and Colonial Discourse in British India

*An Interview with Professor Robert Yelle*

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** This book advances on your previous inquires about the impact of British colonialism in India. Here your quest is the role played by Protestantism in denuding the magical cosmologies of Hinduism for being incompatible with the rational thinking of modernity. Would you want to elaborate on key concepts such as enchantment and disenchantment that inform your discussion?



Dr. Robert Yelle

**Robert Yelle:** The idea of disenchantment in the modern period goes back to Max Weber in his argument, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, that there is something peculiar about Western rationality that ultimately goes back to ancient Judaism and Jewish iconoclasm and monotheism, which insist on the illegitimacy and, ultimately, the non-existence of other gods. Weber's argument is that in the early modern period, especially in Puritanism, this ancient idea is revived and presented forcefully in such a way as to discredit magical modes of working within the world, in particular Catholic sacramentalism. What happens, according to Weber, in the wake of that discrediting of magic is the opening of the space in which now our behavior in the world, especially in the economic domain, can be ordered according to rational modes of organization. There are a lot of complex subtleties even already in Weber's theory surrounding what happens to notions of salvation and Christian tradition and the precise sequence of steps that gets us from the Protestant Reformation to capitalism, but that is (more or less) what he believes.

There have been many criticisms of this idea of disenchantment. Briefly, some scholars have argued that this idea of an enchanted past, when people believed in magic, is a fiction, is a retrospective projection from modernity. This debate has been going on for decades. Anthropologists started criticizing the notion of magic as a category for analyzing other cultures, as evidenced already in Hildred Geertz's critique of Keith Thomas in response to the latter's magisterial work, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. I take the side of Thomas. I think something like disenchantment happened. Other critics of disenchantment have argued in almost opposite, and in fact contradictory, ways that in fact people still do believe in magic. In other words, not only did they believe in magic, but they continue to do so as, for example, some people believe in astrology, and there are followers of various New Age movements. The main criticism that I take seriously here is that disenchantment is a projection. Just as "magic" is a projection onto the past, so is the phenomenon of "disenchantment," and whatever might come afterwards, we have to begin our studies by recognizing that this is not an objective category of description.

My contribution is to say that in fact we know when this category emerges. It has a much older and somewhat different provenance from that which Weber gives to it. It goes back to earlier Christian myths. The disenchantment of the world as the result of the intervention of Christ, the Christ event, the Incarnation, disenchants the world. This emerged originally in, to name one place, Eusebius's 4th-century interpretation of Plutarch's account of the decline of the ancient Greek oracles. According to Eusebius, it is Christ's redemptive sacrifice on the cross that drives the pagan demons from the world. This idea was taken up later by many Protestants, who extended it into a general narrative of the decline of myth, miracles, and magic. I am trying to construct a genealogy of the idea of disenchantment that takes seriously the theological roots of this idea and to show how this idea was applied in colonial India in such a way as to, in this very concrete case, bring about something like a rationalization of Hinduism in particular, since I focus primarily on the Hindu dimensions of Indian culture. I am



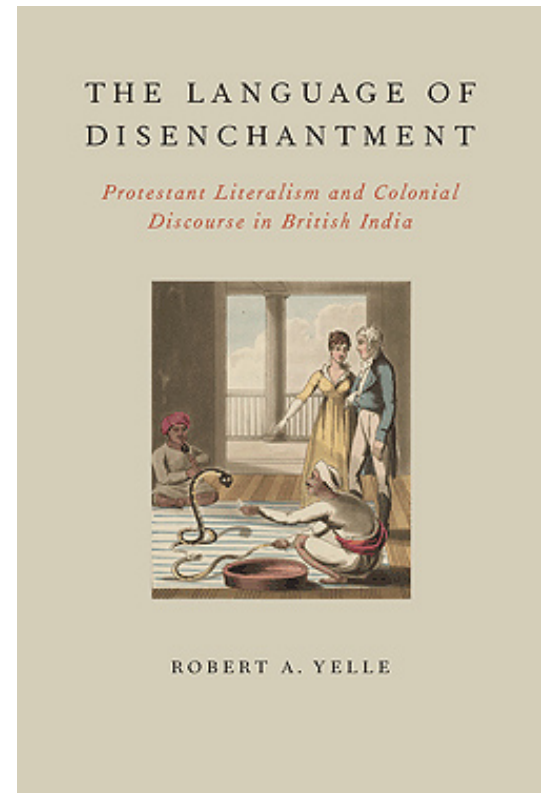
calling into question modern rationality, in a way that extends Weber's argument, by calling into question the premise that rationality and secularism are something distinct from theology.

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** Indian languages, as you examine in your book, were targets of criticism and reform by the colonial authorities. How did idolatry become linked with the so-called linguistic “obscurity” of Hinduism? How did the “Disease of Language,” as Friedrich Max Müller described myth, contribute to Indian “imperfect religion”?

**Robert Yelle:** Idolatry was linked with linguistic obscurity, because, just as plastic images of statues of false gods were seen as religiously misleading, false verbal images were seen as misleading, and in fact, the notion of verbal idols or creating false linguistic images of gods was explained as the result of taking too literally the existence of the names for gods. The error of the pagans was to reason from the existence of the name of the deity to the existence of the thing named. This is a criticism of pagan mythology, as well as an explanation of pagan idolatry, that was popular in the seventeenth century, and it influenced Müller's and many other colonialists' interpretations of Hinduism as being unnecessarily obscure. The deeper idea here is that, just as true worship involved focusing worship on the one true god, so this would required cleaning up the diversity of linguistic ambiguities and confusion in language, the diversity of scriptures that we find in irrational or unreformed, unscientific traditional languages and mythologies, including Hinduism. The idea of removing ambiguity by achieving a univocal language was seen by British colonialists as tantamount to the triumph of monotheism, and as I argue in chapter three in *The Language of Disenchantment*, this project in fact had soteriological dimensions. The idea of conforming all scripts so henceforth all South Asian languages would be written in a modified form of Roman script, was seen as a first step toward conforming the religions. But all this was premised on the idea that idolatry arises out of linguistic confusion, and that the remedy for this is to remove such linguistic confusion.

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** You sustain in your book that a noteworthy legacy of British colonialism was the replacement of the printed text for Indian oral traditions and customs. Would you want to elaborate on this assertion?

**Robert Yelle:** I have actually elaborated on this idea in a chapter that didn't make into the *Language of Disenchantment* but did make it in the other book that came around the same time, *Semiotics of Religion*, where I examined, in part, the attack on poetic, performative language that emerged or followed closely upon the codification of the English liturgy. So, for example, when Thomas Cranmer in his *Book of Common Prayer* condemns, in the preface, “vain repetitions,” and says that he is stripping these out of the liturgy (and in fact he does remove certain earlier, poetic forms of the marriage ceremony that depended heavily on alliteration and that are extant in manuscript forms of the liturgy that were followed prior to and that were displaced by the *Book of Common Prayer*), what this represented, in part, was the replacement of the mnemonic or memory-inducing function of poetry in a culture that was more heavily focused on oral performance by a culture that conversely has come to privilege the printed text. You find this in many colonial contexts where Europeans brought printing and, in the process of recording native languages, they standardized them, they codified them, but they also in some places stripped them of the flexibility and poetry that we associate with oral modes of performance. This certainly happened in India because, although the British were not the first to bring printing there, and Indians had their own script for a couple of millennia, Indians used manuscript writing and they did not privilege the written text in the same way as British did. In fact, many traditions were supposed to be conserved orally, and this was done through elaborate repetitions. Two examples: first, the recitation of the Vedas in different combinations of syllables in different orders in order to preserve them with utmost accuracy over the course of millennia; and second, the elaborate poetic devices that we find in Hindu Tantric mantras, which were also supposed to be preserved, in some cases, secret; preserved from prying ears as it were. The *Tantraraja Tantra*, for example, in a list of the mantradosa or



flaws that render mantras ineffective includes “dagdha satkarnaga” meaning “burned as a result of having gone into six ears,” i.e. having been heard by more than the four ears of teacher and student combined.

When you move from this kind of oral tradition to a tradition that is focused on writing, there are lots of arguments that a profound transformation in mentality occurs. These arguments have been made by Eric Havelock, Jack Goody, and others. I think what you see also in many cases is an attack on poetic, performative language associated with oral culture. This has widespread ramifications, and it certainly also influenced British attitudes toward Hinduism.

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** British colonialism attacked not only Hindu mythology but also the ritual elements of Hindu law, in the same manner that Protestantism has attacked the ritualistic nature of Judaism, as we have discussed in our previous interview. Were both colonialism and Christianity fighting tradition in favor of universal modern values?

**Robert Yelle:** There was a commonality in the attacks that Protestants and Christians more broadly had made against Jews earlier and the polemics that they issued against Hindus that focused on the ritual particularities of these traditions, which distinguish these traditions, supposedly, from a kind of universal, natural religion. This denigration of both of those traditions was informed not only by the early Christian notion that such ritual distinctions are unimportant for salvation, which is an idea that emerged as early as St. Paul, but also and more forcibly in the early modern period, in Deism, which privileged natural religion as a simple form of religion in which precise modes of worship are of no consequence. And that model deeply influenced the British understanding of Hinduism and the comparison between Hinduism and Judaism. But to answer the question whether colonialism and Christianity were fighting tradition in favor of universal modern values, I have to say that the link is that both colonialism and Christianity presented themselves as universal and, therefore, as having displaced earlier, particularistic forms of religion. It is key to the modern self-understanding that secularism is rational and that its rationality is universal. What is important about the argument that I am making is my claims that not only is modernity not universal, in the sense that it emerged out of one particular theological tradition, that is to say Christianity, but the very notion of universality was in fact taken over from earlier Christian notions of the manner in which the Gospel had superseded all earlier and other dispensations as a universal religion.

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** What do you consider to be the contribution of your book to religious studies and to history?

**Robert Yelle:** I think the importance for religious studies is that, first of all, I was trying to do comparative religion in a way that it would be historically accurate and viable. There have been so many criticisms of comparative religion because scholars who compare one tradition with another are seen as having taken the elements they are comparing out of context, illegitimately. One of the ways I have gotten around this problem is to focus on one particular historical encounter in which two very different traditions ran smack into each other, and where the differences between the two could therefore clearly be seen. I think another important contribution of the book is to trace much more carefully, and in much more detail, the theological genealogy of secularism and disenchantment by going back to the Protestant texts in a way that goes far beyond what Weber himself did.

The significance for history lies primarily in the fact that, as I hope to have demonstrated, if one wants to understand what happened in colonial India, or what British colonists thought they were doing, one can't any longer ignore the role of their religion in this process. It is unfortunate that the disciplinary divide means that most postcolonial historians, including historians of colonial India, think that religion is an epiphenomenon, or that it's unimportant, or that it didn't move things, or that what was really going on has to do with politics or economics, but not in any case with religious ideas. Without denying that the political, economic, military, and other dimensions of colonialism are also very important, what I have insisted in this book is that even to understand the basic terms that British deployed in India, one has to know where those terms came from, which in many cases was from Christian theology, and in many cases directly from the Bible. This is a methodological point. I insist that that if you want to do good history of ideas of that period, you have to go back to the cultural sources that each side was drawing on, and was influenced by, in order to reconstruct the conversation that happened between British and Hindus. In this book I primarily looked at the British side. In my first book I looked at primarily Sanskrit texts, and tried to be careful there also in reconstructing the Tantric understanding of what the mantras were.



# *Colonial Africa, 1884–1994*

An Interview with Professor Dennis Laumann



Dr. Dennis Laumann being interviewed by Dr. Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** What were the origins of this project?

**Dennis Laumann:** I was contacted by Trevor Getz, a series editor at Oxford University Press, asking if I was willing to write a volume on colonialism in Africa. It was part of a new series that Oxford put together called *African World Histories*. The point of this new series is to present major areas of African history from the perspectives of Africans. In the past, survey books on African history have been Eurocentric in the sense that they have emphasized the written accounts of Europeans and the idea behind this series was to present major events using African sources and emphasizing how Africans experienced these major events in history. Fortunately, this invitation coincided with me going on sabbatical and so I said I would be happy to do it!

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** Who is the audience for this book?

**Dennis Laumann:** The primary audience is the college classroom, specifically upper-division courses in African history, on colonialism, and in world history as well. One of the ideas that the editors of Oxford had was that a book like this could be used in a world history class to provide focused topical and regional coverage. So that is the first audience. The second audience is for specialists, for scholars who want to read a short overview on colonialism in Africa, presenting the latest scholarship, kind of introducing them to state of the field, so they have an understanding of how we are thinking about colonialism in Africa right now, how we are writing about it. So the book has these two audiences: students and scholars.

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** Was there a need for a new survey of colonialism in Africa?

**Dennis Laumann:** Apparently the editors of Oxford thought so, and I certainly did, too. The field has changed a lot over the past decade in terms of how we think about colonialism. So, the scholarship has evolved: back in the fifties and sixties, scholars had a very Eurocentric notion of studying colonialism, focusing on European diplomacy and European colonial policies. In the seventies and eighties, the emphasis shifted to the topics of African resistance and African agency. More recently, scholars have looked at colonialism in more complicated ways, thinking about the impact of the environment, and obviously gender, women's roles, women perspectives, and the relationship between health and colonialism. So, there was the need to present a more up-to-date overview of colonialism in Africa, and also because the series is focused on African experiences and African perspectives, there was a need to write a history of colonialism in Africa coming from that kind of viewpoint. Moreover, in this succinct book, I emphasize events in Africa within a global context, not independent of events in Europe, Latin America or Asia, but very much in consonance with what was happening in the rest of the world.

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** Why does your study begin with a chapter on economics?

**Dennis Laumann:** As a Marxist historian, I privilege the study of economics as the basis for understanding historical change. To me, it is impossible to explain colonialism in Africa without comprehending the economic changes taking place in the 19th century in the relationship between Europe and Africa. They changed so drastically within a very short time: generally speaking, from being a relationship between relative equals, one based on trade between parts of Africa and parts of Europe, to a relationship where Europe suddenly not only had the need to and the desire to but the ability to conquer Africa. People often forget that Africa was the last continent colonized by Europe and it was colonized for the shortest period. For me, it is important to understand the changing economic situation not only between Africa and Europe, but globally, and that corresponds obviously with the expansion of capitalism and the concurrent spread of imperialism. Fundamentally to me, colonialism is about economic exploitation, so we need to understand what were the economics of the colonial period, what changes were taking place in Europe and Africa, how did colonization change Africa economically. So, there is an emphasis on a Marxist approach to history, which is no longer as trendy as it was, but to me is impossible to understand colonialism without approaching it from a Marxist perspective, because colonialism is essentially about economic exploitation, and

imperialism is an aspect of capitalism. The book begins with Lenin, defining what imperialism is, and ends with the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, when Cuban troops in alliance with African liberation movements defeated the army of apartheid South Africa, marking the end of racist white minority rule in Africa. So, I think that might be controversial with some scholars who either abandoned Marxism or no longer think it as relevant, but part of the idea of the book and the series is also to provoke and to encourage debate and to have students and faculty think critically.

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** Why is there a full chapter devoted to the topic of violence?

**Dennis Laumann:** That was probably the aspect of the book that provoked the most controversy during the review process, but to me, not only it is impossible to understand colonialism without appreciating the economic motives and factors, but it is impossible to understand colonialism without comprehending the violence that is inherent in the colonial experience. So, on the one hand, our studies of colonialism have become more nuanced and sophisticated by looking at things like medicine, fashion, and urban culture and topics like that, but on the other hand, I think we also have moved away from understanding some of the basics of colonialism. And colonial occupation was only possible with either the constant use of violence or the threat of violence. Nobody voluntarily gives up their sovereignty, or agrees to be dominated by another group of people in any way, and colonialism only was possible through violence, and violence to me is not simply physical or military but also cultural and psychological. People might be surprised to know that the first genocide of the twentieth century took place in Africa. That was the German attempt to annihilate the Herero in South-West Africa; that in the Belgium Congo, there was a genocide; that there were massacres all across the continent; and that in many parts of Africa, people only achieved liberation from colonialism through the use of violence. So, I wanted to focus on violence so people can comprehend the true nature of the colonial experience as Africans experienced it themselves.

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** Tell me about the provocative book cover.

**Dennis Laumann:** The cover is by a famous Congolese painter named Tshibumba. He has a series of paintings that depict the colonial experience in the Belgian Congo, which was later known as Zaire, and today called the Democratic Republic of Congo. His work is very well known and critically acclaimed. In some ways, the cover painting appears crude as it depicts a member of the Belgian colonial Force Publique whipping a man's naked buttocks, and another man being

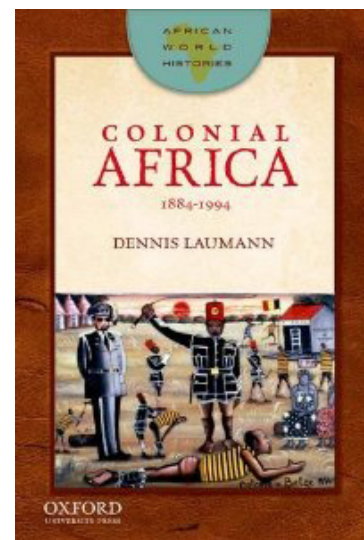


raped by a soldier, and another being chased, but at the same time it represents the reality of Belgium's colonial rule. So, the cover is meant to provoke, to shock, but also to get people to realize in a visual way what colonialism really meant to Africans.

**Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas:** The book concludes with African perspectives on colonialism. What do you think are the major legacies of colonial rule in Africa?

**Dennis Laumann:** The fact that all Africans speak a European language as the first or second language shows that the linguistic geography of Africa was transformed by the colonial experience. Christianity as one of the major religions in Africa today is a legacy of the colonial experience. The boundaries of Africa, and the divisions it caused, for the most part were created by Europeans in the late 1800s. The list goes on. On the one hand, Africa at the end of the colonial era was a very different continent than it was before because of these legacies. On the other hand, we should not place too much

emphasis on the colonial experience because there were African cultural and other continuities despite European colonialism. It is also important to emphasize that Africans did not just receive, adapt, or take uncritically, but Africans transformed Christianity, languages, and culture from Europe and Africanized them as well. It is therefore a mixed legacy. Some of the things that Africans cherish like their religion or their nation are the result of a very violent and very traumatic short period in the long history of the continent.



## *Award in Women's Studies Named in Honor of Dr. Janann Sherman*

While this newsletter was still in preparation, Dr. Janann Sherman, professor and chair of the Department of History, delivered a lecture at the opening of Women's History Month on March 1 entitled "A Personal Journey through Women's History," which traced her own life and career, with frequent reference to what she had learned from researching the books that she wrote on Senator Margaret Chase Smith, Betty Friedan, and Phoebe Omlie.

Dr. Sherman may or may not have suspected that the occasion was going to be used to pay special tribute to her for her work in women's history. Following her address, tributes were made by Dr. Linda Bennett, associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; Dr. Tom Nenon, interim provost of the university; Dr. Kimberly Nichols French, one of her first students in 1994 and a close friend, who is now on the adjunct faculty of The University of Memphis and Northeast Texas Community College; and Dr. Beverly Bond, associate professor and her colleague in the Department of History, who has collaborated with her on several books about women and local history (including the history of The University of Memphis).



**Dr. Chrystal Goudsouzian announcing the Dr. Janann Sherman Undergraduate Award for the Study of Women's History**

assistance to undergraduate students of women's history. Those who wish to contribute to the fund may do so through the [university's online giving site](#) or by mail to Dept 238, The University of Memphis Foundation, P.O. Box 1000, Memphis, TN 38148-0001. Designate the gift as being made to the Dr. Janann Sherman Fund.

As a culmination to the tributes to Dr. Sherman, Dr. Chrystal Goudsouzian announced the creation of the Dr. Janann Sherman Undergraduate Award for the Study of Women's History to honor her and to give financial