

A large, teal-colored circular brushstroke graphic is positioned on the right side of the page, partially overlapping the 'ir' and 'cpl' parts of the main title. The background is a dark blue color with a white double-line border.

# ir cpl

Institute for  
Religion,  
Culture, and  
Public Life

Annual  
Report  
2020-2021

# Contents

- 1 Letter from the Director
- 4 Rethinking Public Religion in Africa and South Asia
- 8 Religion & Public Life
- 12 Death and After Lecture Series
- 16 Initiatives
- 20 Joint Projects
- 24 Book Series
- 28 Research Community
- 38 People
- 40 Co-Sponsored Events

# Letter from the Director

---



For the second year in a row, I write this with the work of the institute largely virtual. We are now—September 2021—seeing a “return” of sorts on campus, but even so a large part of what we do at IRCPL remains online.

For the 20-21 academic year, the virtuality had some silver linings. Perhaps above all it allowed us to extend our reach well beyond Morningside Heights and New York City. At one of our lectures, the majority of the audience was Zooming in from Uganda. These are modes of connection and reach we hope to continue. Zoom also allows for much faster turnaround times. In February, we were able to arrange, in fairly short order, a workshop for early career Nigerian academics. Likewise, in response to the growth of Q-Anon last fall, and then the assault on the US Capitol on January 6th, we partnered with three other university centers to put together lunchtime seminars on conspiracy theories and apocalyptic thinking, featuring academics and journalists who had in some instances been in the field literally days before.

Disruptions to the previous academic year also allowed us to deepen our programming, by taking themes into a second annual cycle. Our “Death and After” series, for instance, was extended a full 14 months, and provided the opportunity to showcase cutting-edge and emerging approaches to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This year also saw the formal completion of our three-year grant from the Henry Luce Foundation on “Rethinking Public Religions in Africa and South Asia.” This project has been the anchor for IRCPL since my arrival in 2018, and a resounding success. We are already seeing publications emerge, and more are in process. Just as importantly, the project has forged and strengthened networks of academic connection and exchange.

As you’ll see in the pages to follow, much else was afoot, from our partnerships with the Vice Provost for Faculty Advancement and Office of University Life to fund anti-racist initiatives, to not one but two cohorts of dissertation fellows, whose projects I have found deeply inspiring. Columbia is producing amazing scholars and public thinkers. We have also set the foundations for a new, multi-year focus on the theme of “religion

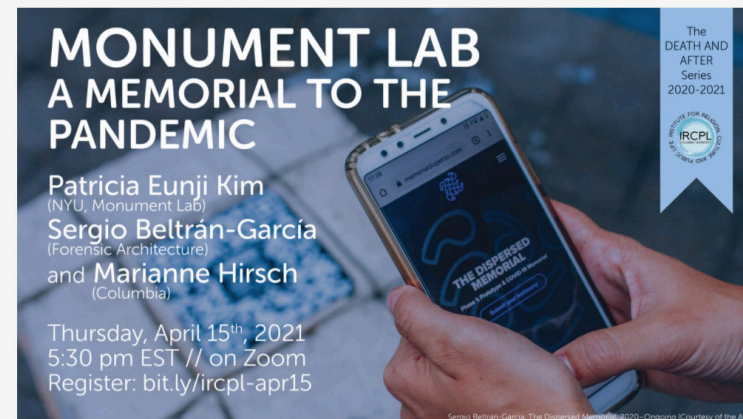
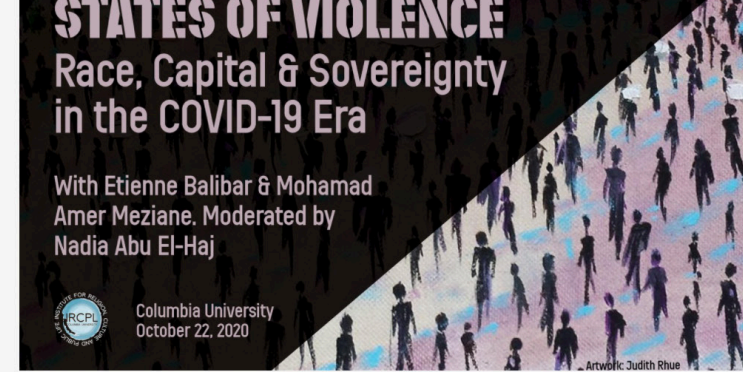
and climate change.” Initial consultations and roundtables have already taken place, and it will feature strongly in our upcoming programming and funding.

In all of this, I’d like to offer a special word of thanks to the IRCPL staff, as well as the faculty on our Advisory Committee. Their contributions are central to IRCPL’s success. My thanks to you all, as well, for your interest in the Institute. Hope to see you online soon, and in person, perhaps, in the not too distant future.

Sincerely,

**Matthew Engelke**

Director of the Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life; Professor of Religion



# Rethinking Public Religion in Africa and South Asia

---



In partnership with the Institute for African Studies and the South Asia Institute, IRCPL is leading a multi-year project funded by a generous grant by the Henry Luce Foundation. The program, now in its third year, considers the ways in which religion becomes public through diverse forms of encounter, with a focus on interregional parallels, differences and flows across South Asia and Africa. By attending to the broad array of phenomena that comprise lived religion and its place in public life, our goal is to rethink the concept of “public religion.” The project also aims to shift public and academic discourse away from a tendency to foreground discrete religious traditions, sectarian boundaries and identity politics, which all too often reduces the variety of ways in which religion’s place can be seen within social, political, and cultural life and reinforces the boundaries between communities.

## LECTURE SERIES

The transition to online events made it possible for a significantly larger number of guests to attend our events, allowing us to disseminate content further and to unexpected audiences across the world. In September, celebrated writer [Amitav Ghosh](#) gave a talk, **Future or Past? Climate Change as Seen from the Global North and South**, on the imagining of climate change in South Asia to a global audience of almost 200 people. A month later, scholars from the US and Uganda gathered virtually to attend [Derek Peterson](#)'s lecture on **The Government of Religious Life in Idi Amin's Uganda**, which explored how dictator Idi Amin controlled and manipulated public religion in light of the advent of public radio in Uganda, and the reaction of religious groups to a more narrow and less free public sphere. In the spring semester we hosted [Ebenezer Obadare](#), from the University of Kansas, for a presentation entitled **When Women Rebel: Confronting Charismatic Authority in Nigeria**. Prof. Obadare's lecture focused on four women in their individual confrontations with four influential Nigerian pastors. The final speaker in the series, [Nusrat Chowdhury](#) (Amherst College), used Neamat Imam's novel *The Black Coat* as a point of departure to discuss the generative potential

of mimicry in contemporary democracies in her lecture **A Second Coming: Mimicry and Monumentality in Bangladesh, 50 Years On**.

Videos of all the lectures in this series are available on our website.

## WORKSHOP

Organized by Prof. Brian Larkin, **Religion and the Mastery of Public Space in Nigeria** paired early career Nigerian scholars with Barnard and Columbia faculty in a day-long workshop. The papers examined the relation between religion and public space focusing on Muslim movements in Northern Nigeria, approaching the question in three main ways. First, they brought to the foreground the many and diverse ways Muslim movements assert their presence over public space and the response by other movements and by the state. Second, they showed—in contradistinction to contemporary arguments—that these issues are not new and that control of public space has long been an aspect of West African religious life. Finally, while recognizing that these actions emerge from deep traditions within religious movements, the workshop also revealed their common religious ecology.

## COURSES

[Mohamad Amer Meziane](#) taught two courses this year. The first is **Islam and the Secular: Rethinking Concepts of Religion in North-Western Africa and the Middle East**, which offered a critical discussion of the conceptual apparatus of the anthropology of Islam and secularism and of the ways in which it shapes recent interventions in history and theory. The second course, **African and North African Philosophy: An Introduction**, surveyed and problematized the field of African philosophy, and tackled the contradiction between claims of authenticity and demands of liberation, traditionalism and modernity, religion and secularism, culturalism and Marxism. [Jay Ramesh](#), a recent PhD from Columbia's Religion Department, was hired in the spring to teach the course **Colonialism and Religion in South Asia**, which had previously been developed and taught by Rajbir Judge.

## PROGRAM DETAILS

[Future or Past? Climate Change as Seen from the Global North and South](#)  
Lecture | September 30, 2020  
Speaker: Amitav Ghosh (author)

[The Government of Religious Life in Idi Amin's Uganda](#)  
Lecture | October 14, 2020  
Speaker: Derek Peterson (University of Michigan)  
Co-sponsored by the Department of History

[Religion and the Mastery of Public Space in Nigeria](#)  
Workshop | February 5, 2021  
Participants: Mamadou Diouf (Columbia), Matthew Engelke (Columbia), Murtala Ibrahim (Utrecht University), Brian Larkin (Barnard), M. Sani Umar (Ahmadu Bello University), and Abdullahi Shehu (Bayero University Kano)

[When Women Rebel: Confronting Charismatic Authority in Nigeria](#)  
Lecture | February 23, 2021  
Speaker: Ebenezer Obadare (University of Kansas)

[A Second Coming: Mimicry and Monumentality in Bangladesh, 50 Years On](#)  
Lecture | March 10, 2021  
Speaker: Nusrat Chowdhury (Amherst College)

# Religion & Public Life

---

The year began with a panel discussion on the recent book **Break Every Yoke: Religion, Justice, and the Abolition of Prisons** (by [Joshua Dubler](#) and [Vincent Lloyd](#), 2019). Dubler and Lloyd, in conversation with Rev. [Lynice Pinkard](#) and activist [Ghani Songster](#), argued that religious ideas and practices offer a roadmap for envisioning alternative ways of administering justice and ending mass incarceration.

IRCPL postdoctoral researcher [Mohamad Amer Meziane](#) was joined in conversation by French scholar [Etienne Balibar](#) for a panel entitled **States of Violence: Race, Capital and Sovereignty**. The two philosophers discussed the two major crises of 2020—Covid-19 and police brutality—in relation to our concepts of violence and the political. How are we to think about violence both before and after the pandemic? Are we seeing a ‘return’ of the state to the center of politics, or simply its unmasking?

In the spring semester, we invited [Julie Byrne](#) (Hofstra University), [Jonathan Calvillo](#) (Boston University), and [Mary Anne Case](#) (University of Chicago) to reflect on the appointment of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court. While Coney Barrett’s faith generated a good deal of media coverage, she is only one of six **Catholic judges on the Court**—and some scholars have been talking about a “Catholic Court” for years. Our panel delved into this issue, and explored whether we can trace the influences of Catholicism on judicial reasoning.

Finally, we celebrated the publication of the edited volume **At Home and Abroad: The Politics of American Religion in the Religion, Culture and Public Life** book series with Columbia University Press. The two editors, [Winnifred Sullivan](#) (Indiana University) and [Elizabeth Hurd](#) (Northwestern University) were joined by a panel of scholars to discuss the ideas, people, and institutions that provide links between domestic and foreign religious politics and policies.

## PROGRAM DETAILS

### [Break Every Yoke: Religion, Justice, and the Abolition of Prisons](#)

Panel | September 23, 2020

Speakers: Joshua Dubler (University of Rochester), Vincent Lloyd (Villanova University), Rev. Lynice Pinkard, and Kempis “Ghani” Songster (activist, founder of The Redemption Project). Moderated by Kendall Thomas (Columbia Law).

Co-sponsored by Columbia Religious Life.

### [States of Violence. A Conversation About Race, Capital and Sovereignty in the COVID-19 Era](#)

Panel | October 22, 2020

Speakers: Mohamad Amer Meziane (IRCPL) and Etienne Balibar (French). Moderated by Nadia Abu El-Haj (Anthropology, Barnard).

### [Catholics and the Court](#)

Panel | January 28, 2021

Speakers: Julie Byrne (Hofstra University), Jonathan Calvillo (Boston University), and Mary Anne Case (University of Chicago). Moderated by Katherine Franke (Columbia Law).

### [At Home and Abroad: The Politics of American Religion](#)

Panel | March 17, 2021

Speakers: Osman Balkan (Swarthmore College), Sarah Dees (Iowa State), Elizabeth Hurd (Northwestern University), Candace Lukasik (Washington University in St Louis), and Winnifred Sullivan (Indiana University). Moderated by Courtney Bender (Columbia, Religion).



Screenshot from At Home and Abroad, March 17, 2021



# Death & After Lecture Series

---

The “Death and After” lecture series, launched in 2019, continued during the 2020-21 academic year. While the first year focused on the questions of “what is death, and what comes after?”, this year we decided to investigate our relation with death and the dead. A panel with architect [Karla Rothstein](#) and filmmaker [John Bruce](#) explored the ways in which we care for the dead and for the dying: prof. Rothstein’s work revolves around new ways to commemorate and place the dead, especially given constraints of space in urban cemeteries, while prof. Bruce trained to be an end-of-life doula for his 2017 documentary film *End of Life*.

We continued the series with a conversation on *Life After Death in Black America*. We invited a group of scholars, including [Karla Holloway](#) (Duke), [Nyle Fort](#) (Princeton), and [Rhon Manigault-Bryant](#) (Williams College), to talk about the flourishing of black communities despite the looming prospect of

premature, untimely, or even primordial death.

The question of memorializing death was raised again during a conversation with Dr. [Patricia Kim](#) and [Sergio Beltrán-García](#), from the Philadelphia-based organization Monument Lab. How can communities grieve their losses, when the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage lives and livelihoods? Kim and Beltrán-García argued that a memorial to the pandemic must also confront the very issues of labor, race, gender, and access that both created and exacerbated the conditions of vulnerability.

Finally, Duke University professor [Anne Allison](#) gave a lecture on the focus of her most recent fieldwork in Japan: *seizen seiri*. This practice is described as making mortuary arrangements for and by oneself while still alive, and it raises the question of what happens when the sociality of being cared for by others is handled by the self in anticipation of death.

## PROGRAM DETAILS

### Life in Proximity to Death: Questions of Design

Panel | October 27, 2020

Speakers: Karla Rothstein (Columbia, GSAPP) and John Bruce (Parsons School of Design). Moderated by Maggie Jones (The New York Times Magazine).

Cosponsored by Columbia GSAPP. Part of the Reimagine End of Life Festival.

### Life After Death in Black America

Panel | November 17, 2020

Speakers: Karla Holloway (Duke University), Nyle Fort (Princeton University), and Rhon Manigault-Bryant (Williams College). Moderated by Josef Sorett (Columbia, Religion).

### Monument Lab: A Memorial to the Pandemic

Panel | May 27, 2021

Speakers: Sergio Beltrán-García (Forensic Architecture) and Patricia Eunji Kim (NYU; Monument Lab). Moderated by Marianne Hirsch (Columbia).

### Grieving One-Self: Mortuary Care for Social Singles in Japan

Lecture | June 22, 2021

Speaker: Anne Allison (Duke University). Moderated by Mark Rowe (McMaster University).

Sergio Beltrán-García, The Dispersed Memorial, 2020–Ongoing (Courtesy of the Artist)



The DEATH AND AFTER Series 2020-2021

# LIFE AFTER DEATH IN BLACK AMERICA

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 17  
5:30PM on ZOOM  
REGISTER at [IRCPL.COLUMBIA.EDU](http://IRCPL.COLUMBIA.EDU)

KARLA HOLLOWAY  
Duke University

NYLE FORT  
Princeton University

RHON MANIGAULT-BRYANT  
Williams College

Moderated by JOSEF SORETT,  
Columbia Department of Religion

Image Credit: Kehinde Wiley, *President Barack Obama*, 2018; National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.

The DEATH AND AFTER Series 2020-2021

# GRIEVING ONE-SELF

## Mortuary Care for Social Singles in Japan

a talk by  
Anne Allison (Duke)  
in conversation with  
Mark Rowe (McMaster)

Tuesday, June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2021  
5:30pm EST // on Zoom  
Register at [bit.ly/ircpl-june22](http://bit.ly/ircpl-june22)

Artwork: Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892), courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art



# Initiatives

---

## THE CENTER AND INSTITUTE INITIATIVE TO ENHANCE REMOTE LEARNING AND TEACHING

The transition from in-person to online instruction presented a set of unique challenges for Columbia students and faculty who had to find new ways to teach, learn, and connect with each other. As Columbia University embarked on its second virtual semester in the fall of 2020, a consortium of centers and institutes at the University collaborated on an initiative to meet the needs of instructors and students looking to test out innovative pedagogical strategies, tools, and other creative ways to engage in the virtual classroom. A call for proposals was developed to support supplemental course-related activities with potential to enhance the remote/hybrid learning and teaching experience. Organized and coordinated by the Center for Science and Society, seven additional centers and institutes were

recruited and provided grant funding for the initiative: the Center for American Studies, Center for Justice, Center for the History and Ethics of Public Health, Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life, Institute for the Study of Human Rights, and Weatherhead East Asian Institute.

IRCPL funded three of the twelve projects that were selected.

## PROGRAM DETAILS

### The Ancient Empires

Grant Awardee: Joel van de Sande and Gustav Kalm (graduate students). Instructor: Terence N. D'Altroy (Loubat Professor of American Archaeology).

Funds were used to support guest speakers who are experts in Egyptian heritage. Both speakers discussed ideas of preservation and restitution of ancient artifacts.

### Museums and Sacred Things

Grant Awardee/Instructor: Courtney Bender (Associate Professor of Religion).

Funds supported a guest speaker from the New York Historical Society and a guided Zoom tour of the Guggenheim Museum.

Funds were used also to pay entry fees to museums.

### Religion and Climate Change: India

Grant Awardee/Instructor: John Stratton Hawley (Claire Tow Professor of Religion at Barnard College).

Funds supported three guest speakers from the United States, Israel, and India. Students created a final project exploring how, if at all, religion brings resources to meet climate change challenges.

## SYSTEMIC RACISM INITIATIVE

In partnership with the Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Advancement, IRCPL funded a project entitled “Addressing Racism and the Academic Study of Religion,” which aims to address how race and racism shapes and delimits the scope of the department’s work (i.e. research, curricular, program, faculty hiring, etc) and speaks to the relationship between race/racism and religious difference in the context of the academic study of religion, more broadly.

Similarly, in partnership with the Office of Student Life, IRCPL provided \$10,000 towards the Racial Justice Mini-Grant Program for undergraduates to explore themes of race, racism, and antiracism to facilitate collaborative dialogue and action to address systemic barriers towards racial equity.

### PROGRAM DETAILS

Dr. Josef Sorett, on behalf of the Department of Religion: **“Addressing Racism in/and the Academic Study of Religion”**

Lauren Ritchie, CC: **“Columbia Climate Conversations”**

Thomas Koenigs and Deidra Brooks, CSSW: **“Coming Home: Photovoice and Anti- Racism in the Time of COVID-19”**

Alexis Young, CC: **“The Intersections of Blackness: An Anti-Racism Project”**

Trisha Mukherjee, CC: **“CU Against Racism: A Podcast Series Exploring Anti-Racist Efforts at Columbia”**

William Milligan, GSAS: **“BIPOC Alumni in STEM”**

Saman Kamgar-Parsi and Caitlin Yee, CSSW: **“The Racialization of Reproductive Justice: In conversation with Loretta Ross”**

Isabella Livorni on behalf of the Anti-Racist Language Pedagogy Working Group, GSAS: **“Creating an anti- bias, anti-racist framework for language learning courses in collaboration with the Center for the Professional Education of Teachers at Teachers College”**

Sameea Butt, on behalf of RISE: Working Group on working group on Race, Inequality, Solidarity and Economics, SIPA: **“SPEAK UP: Addressing Race and Racism in the Classroom”**

Brendane Tynes, GSAS: **“Zora’s Daughters Podcast”**

Sumaiya Zama, GSAS: **“Black Islam in Harlem”**

## ROUNDTABLE ON RELIGION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The IRCPL faculty and staff, in coordination with Miriam Laytner, a PhD student at CUNY and Mellon fellow/intern at IRCPL, put together two roundtables on Religion and Climate Change based on an open call for proposals. We received about 40 proposals, for 14 spots on two roundtables. Most of the participants were graduate students and postdocs, working across a range of disciplines and issues: weather in 19th-century Tagalog literature; ethnographic studies of Extinction Rebellion in London and coal miners in West Virginia; and curation at Museum of the Plains Indian.

### PROGRAM DETAILS

Roundtable | June 3 and 4, 2020  
Panel 1: ecospirituality; religion and secularism; time scale and temporality; religious protest and climate justice activism.  
Panel 2: skepticism and denialism; stewardship, dominion or care; notions of innocence; human/non-human relationships; and climate justice in relation to race, (post) colonialism, and indigeneity.

# Joint Projects

---

As part of its mission, IRCPL works to facilitate the study of religion and public life for faculty in a wide range of departments. With the annual Joint Projects Award, IRCPL selects a number of projects and works directly with Columbia faculty to organize conferences, working groups, seminars and other programs that bring together an interdisciplinary group of scholars.

## AMBEDKAR'S RELIGION

Principal Investigator: **Anupama Rao** (History, Barnard)

This project has two interconnected aims. The first is to explore the considerable holdings of the American Marathi Mission located at Burke (UTS) and Andover-Harvard Theological Library. These records provide detailed accounts of the work of Nonconformist missionaries amongst lower-caste and Dalit communities in western India, and allow us to map underexplored links between Christian conceptions of egalitarianism and anticaste radicalism as these developed in tandem across the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The second aim of the project is to draw on ongoing primary research in these understudied archives as the spine around which to be able to better contextualize the 1956 Buddhist conversion of Dalit leader and Columbia's native son, B. R. Ambedkar through inquiries into the longer-term trajectories of Dalit religiosity, debates about caste and Hinduism, and the disciplinary formation of comparative religion and cultural

anthropology as these together enabled the rediscovery of Buddhism in India.

In brief, the project seeks to provide historical depth and conceptual clarity to answer the question “why Buddhism,” and to better understand the experimental nature of Ambedkar’s Navayana [new vehicle] Buddhism. It does so in two ways, by: a) addressing Ambedkar’s conversion as a critical event that requires a far deeper understanding of regional and historical debates about Hinduism and Buddhism in India, and b) thinking about Buddhist conversion through longer-term religious histories that can be fruitfully explored through our considerable holdings at Burke (UTS), in collaboration with records at the Andover-Harvard Theological Library.

Prof. Rao and her research assistant Rohini Shuklaha (Department of Religion) have been working through materials at Burke related to the American Marathi Mission, with a particular focus on the setup and ‘Indianization’ of mission from the late nineteenth century. This is material that has not been explored before and they began to explore regionally specific material in Maharashtra related to internal debates

about translations of the Bible, the work of Indian converts in the AMM, and reports from the field which provide a good deal of ethnographic detail.

## OCEANIC IMAGINATIONS: FLUID HISTORIES AND MOBILE CULTURES

Principal Investigators: [Mana Kia](#) (MESAAS) and [Debashree Mukherjee](#) (MESAAS)

This project was designed to explore the theoretical, methodological, and material insights to be gained from an oceanic perspective on culture, religion, and the practices of everyday life. Oceans have for long been understood as conduits of movement linking different land masses and peoples together. As connective zones, oceans push us to break out of the siloes of area studies and think more expansively past the transnational. And thus, we know that the circulation of people, texts, goods, practices, and ideas have thick and deep histories across Africa and Asia. However, beyond economically determined factors, what are the constituting elements of these networks of circulation? Moreover, can we think the ocean

not only as a space that connects to other places but as a watery, vital place with its own material specificities?

The project started with a lecture by anthropologist Pamila Gupta, who used a photographic darkroom in Zanzibar as an entry point to explore concepts of darkness, aesthetics and materiality. Then, in February, Profs. Kia and Mukherjee invited Mauritian artist Shiraz Bayjoo to discuss his practice, which explores how racial hierarchies persist through reductionist narratives, exposing the enduring legacies of the plantation colonies of the Mascarene Islands. Finally, a three-day workshop linked the insights of an earlier model of oceanic studies that broke new ground in studies of race, colonialism, and material culture, with emerging interests that seek to revitalize our assumptions about the environment, aesthetics, and belief systems.

## PROGRAM DETAILS

[Of Sky, Water and Skin: Photographs from a Zanzibari Darkroom](#)

Lecture | October 30, 2020

Speaker: Pamila Gupta (University of the Witwatersrand)

[Shame and Resistance in the Post-Colony: Plantation Legacies and Racial Hierarchies in the Mascarene Islands](#)

Lecture | February 12, 2021

Speaker: Shiraz Bayjoo (artist)

[Oceanic Imaginations: Fluid Histories, Mobile Cultures](#)

Workshop | May 6-8, 2021

# Book Series

---

The Religion, Culture, and Public Life series at Columbia University Press is devoted to the study of religion in relation to social, cultural, and political dynamics, both contemporary and historical. It features work by scholars from a variety of disciplinary and methodological perspectives, including religious studies, anthropology, history, philosophy, political science, and sociology. The series is committed to deepening our critical understandings of the empirical and conceptual dimensions of religious thought and practice, as well as such related topics as secularism, pluralism, and political theology.

## **MODERN SUFIS AND THE STATE: THE POLITICS OF ISLAM IN SOUTH ASIA AND BEYOND**

Edited by Katherine Pratt Ewing and  
Rosemary R. Corbett  
August 2020

**Modern Sufis and the State** brings together a range of scholars, including anthropologists, historians, and religious-studies specialists, to challenge common assumptions that are made about Sufism today. Focusing on India and Pakistan within a broader global context, this book provides locally grounded accounts of how Sufis in South Asia have engaged in politics from the colonial period to the present. Contributors foreground the effects and unintended consequences of efforts to link Sufism with the spread of democracy and consider what roles scholars and governments have played in the making of twenty-first-century Sufism. They critique the belief that Salafism and Sufism are antithetical, offering nuanced analyses

of the diversity, multivalence, and local embeddedness of Sufi political engagements and self-representations in Pakistan and India. Essays question the portrayal of Sufi shrines as sites of peace and harmony, exploring cases of tension and conflict. A wide-ranging interdisciplinary collection, *Modern Sufis and the State* is a timely call to think critically about the role of public discourse in shaping perceptions of Sufism.

## **THE ARAB AND JEWISH QUESTIONS: GEOGRAPHIES OF ENGAGEMENT IN PALESTINE AND BEYOND**

Edited by Bashir Bashir and Leila Farsakh  
December 2020

Nineteenth-century Europe turned the political status of its Jewish communities into the “Jewish Question,” as both Christianity and rising forms of nationalism viewed Jews as the ultimate other. With the onset of Zionism, this “question” migrated to Palestine

and intensified under British colonial rule and in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Zionism's attempt to solve the "Jewish Question" created what came to be known as the "Arab Question," which concerned the presence and rights of the Arab population in Palestine. For the most part, however, Jewish settlers denied or dismissed the question they created, to the detriment of both Arabs and Jews in Palestine and elsewhere.

This book brings together leading scholars to consider how these two questions are entangled historically and in the present day. It offers critical analyses of Arab engagements with the question of Jewish rights alongside Zionist and non-Zionist Jewish considerations of Palestinian identity and political rights. Together, the essays show that the Arab and Jewish questions, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which they have become subsumed, belong to the same thorny history. Despite their major differences, the historical Jewish and Arab questions are about the political rights of oppressed groups and their inclusion within exclusionary political communities—a question that continues to foment tensions in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. Shedding new light on the intricate relationships among Orientalism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, colonialism, and the impasse

in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this book reveals the inseparability of Arab and Jewish struggles for self-determination and political equality.

### WHEN THE STATE WINKS: THE PERFORMANCE OF JEWISH CONVERSION IN ISRAEL

By Michal Kravel-Tovi  
January 2021

Religious conversion is often associated with ideals of religious sincerity. But in a society in which religious belonging is entangled with ethnonational citizenship and confers political privilege, a convert might well have multilayered motives. Over the last two decades, mass non-Jewish immigration to Israel, especially from the former Soviet Union, has sparked heated debates over the Jewish state's conversion policy and intensified suspicion of converts' sincerity. **When the State Winks** carefully traces the performance of state-endorsed Orthodox conversion to highlight the collaborative labor that goes into the making of the Israeli state and its Jewish citizens. In a rich ethnographic narrative based on fieldwork in conversion schools, rabbinic courts, and ritual bathhouses, Kravel-Tovi follows

conversion candidates—mostly secular young women from a former Soviet background—and state conversion agents, mostly religious Zionists caught between the contradictory demands of their nationalist and religious commitments. She complicates the popular perception that conversion is a "wink-wink" relationship in which both sides agree to treat the converts' pretenses of observance as real. Instead, she demonstrates how their interdependent performances blur any clear boundary between sincere and empty conversions. Alongside detailed ethnography, this book develops new ways to think about the complex connection between religious conversion and the nation-state. Kravel-Tovi emphasizes how state power and morality is managed through "winking"—the subtle exchanges and performances that animate everyday institutional encounters between state and citizen. In a country marked by tension between official religiosity and a predominantly secular Jewish population, winking permits the state to save its Jewish face.

### AT HOME AND ABROAD: THE POLITICS OF AMERICAN RELIGION

Edited by Elizabeth Shakman Hurd and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan  
March 2021

**At Home and Abroad** bridges the divide in the study of American religion, law, and politics between domestic and international, bringing together diverse and distinguished authors from religious studies, law, American studies, sociology, history, and political science to explore interrelations across conceptual and political boundaries. They bring into sharp focus the ideas, people, and institutions that provide links between domestic and foreign religious politics and policies. Contributors break down the categories of domestic and foreign and inquire into how these taxonomies are related to other axes of discrimination, asking questions such as: What and who counts as "home" or "abroad," how and by whom are these determinations made, and with what consequences? Offering a new approach to theorizing the politics of religion in the context of the American nation-state, this book also interrogates American religious exceptionalism and illuminates imperial dynamics beyond the United States.



# Research Community

---

## POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCH FELLOW

**MOHAMAD AMER MEZIANE** holds a PhD in Philosophy from Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University. His first book, *Des empires sous la terre* (Empires under earth), will be published in 2021 by Éditions de la Découverte. Through a particular focus on French colonialism in 19th-century Algeria, it deploys a new critique of Orientalism by examining two of its intertwined effects: the Hegelian idea of Christianity's secularization in the modern world and the colonization of North Africa and the Arab world in the aftermath of the Expedition to Egypt. His current publication and research projects focus on climate change and fossil-empires but also on socialism and decolonization. Mohamad Amer Meziane also serves as a member of the editorial board of the journal *Multitudes*. He has two papers forthcoming: "How the Critique of Heaven Confines the Critique of the Earth," in *Qui Parle*, and "Is Orientalism Islamic?" in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*.

## VISITING SCHOLAR

**MIRIAM LAYTNER** is a PhD student in anthropology at the CUNY Graduate Center, where she is also a Mellon Humanities Public Fellow. Her research revolves around issues of power and identity in the context of climate crisis. More specifically, she is interested in narratives of place and belonging embedded in representations of the landscape of the United States. Her dissertation will examine religious and spiritual representations of nature and the non-human in rural Oklahoma. A trained oral historian, Miriam is also the Oral History and Documentation Fellow at the New York Academy of Sciences Anthropology Section, where she oversees documentation of the recent history of the Section and its relationships to feminist and progressive organizations in and around New York City.

## SUMMER RESEARCH FELLOWS

The IRCPL Summer Research Fellowship is awarded each Spring to assist students with expenses directly related to their research. A separate competition is run for undergraduate students.

**Callum Blackmore** is a PhD candidate in historical musicology at Columbia University studying French opera in the long eighteenth century. His dissertation, provisionally titled “Opera at the Dawn of Capitalism: Staging Fiscal Crisis in France and Its Colonies from Rameau to Cherubini,” explores representations of economic life on the operatic stage in the lead-up to the French and Haitian Revolutions. The IRCPL fellowship will support archival research on representations of clerical figures in French Revolutionary comic opera.

**Alejandro Cuadrado** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Italian and the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University. In his research, he explores the intersection of religious life and social institutions in late medieval Italian literature, with a focus on the depiction of religious orders in Dante’s work. More specifically, his dissertation seeks to understand how Dante tells the history of medieval religious institutions and orders

in the Commedia, bringing together poetry, religion, politics, and history.

**Lynton Lees** is a PhD candidate in the History department. Her research examines the politics of education in the late British empire. In her dissertation, she explores how educators developed new forms of education to teach democratic citizenship to children in the British empire amid the rise of totalitarian education in interwar Europe. Tracing the dissemination of these ideas across the British world during postwar reconstruction, her research reveals the exclusion of imperial subjects in Britain’s non-white colonies from these blueprints for self-governance on the eve of decolonization. Drawing on extensive archival research in the UK, her work seeks to recover the influence of prominent Christian thinkers in the intellectual project of democratic defense through children’s education, and the evolution of colonial missionary activity within broader transformations in imperial pedagogical thought and practice.

**Sophia Mo** is a PhD candidate in French and Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University. Her dissertation is a transnational feminist intellectual history of the Algerian revolution (1954-1962) and the first post-independence regime (1962-1965). Examining the understudied work of female journalists in the Francophone and Arabophone press, it shows how women made intellectual contributions as reporters, mediators, and translators to the project of connecting Algeria to other national liberation movements.

**Howard Rechavia-Taylor** is a doctoral candidate in the department of Anthropology. He is broadly interested in the political, legal, and psychological grammars by and through which historical afterlives are articulated, made legible, and reckoned with in and for the present. In his dissertation research, he focuses on the aftermath of German colonialism and the manner in which the German government is dealing with transnational legal and political claims to repair the legacy of genocide in Namibia. What happens when colonial histories become diverse demands for reparation in western courtrooms, negotiating tables, and

parliaments? How does the legacy of the Shoah and the figure of the Jew come to form the manner in which demands for repair are articulated and responded to in Europe’s powerhouse? How do the history and contemporary practices of white nationalism and white supremacy in both Namibia and Germany intersect with these struggles?

**Julián Sánchez González** is a researcher and essayist currently pursuing a PhD in Art History. His research focuses on the relationship between artistic and spiritual practices in the modern and contemporary eras, particularly in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States. Previously, Sánchez González pursued an MA in Art History at NYU’s Institute of Fine Arts and a double BA in History and Political Science at the Universidad de los Andes, and served as Coordinator of the Education Department at the Museos del Banco de la República in Bogotá. His writing has been published by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros (CPPC), Oxford Art Online, the Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano, the Universidad Tres de Febrero, and Artsy, among others.

**Doha Tazi Hemida** is a PhD student in the department of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies and the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University. Her research interests include Islamic and comparative political philosophy and theology. She works with Arabic, Persian, French and English texts. Fatima-Ezzahrae Touilila is a PhD candidate in the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies and the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. She holds degrees in Law and Political Science from Sciences Po (Paris) and Columbia University. Her research brings together history, political philosophy and anthropology. Her current project focuses on the French colonization of North Africa and its conception and management of Islamic institutions.

**Habiba Mbugua** is a junior in Columbia College studying Creative Writing. Her research this summer focused on depictions of women in Kenyan oral literature specifically relating to narratives involving women's use of "supernatural agency." By studying these narratives, her project aims to complicate the concept of a "traditional" woman and to offer flexibility to rigid

gender roles both inside and outside of the oral canon. She is currently developing her research into a written collection with the goal of preserving the fluidity of oral traditions through creative adaptation.

**Peter Gado** is a BA candidate in Columbia College studying linguistics and religion. He is currently researching the writings of Surdas, a 16th-century bhakti poet from northern India. Peter's work, bridging the fields of religion, linguistics, manuscript studies, and art history, focuses on a specific group of illustrated manuscripts produced in the royal court at Mewar at the turn of the 18th century.

## DISSERTATION FELLOWS

Dissertation Fellows—advanced PhD students in different disciplines—meet monthly with the director of IRCPL to present their research and to workshop chapters of their dissertation.

**Marina Alamo Bryan** is a PhD Candidate in Sociocultural Anthropology. Her research attempts to understand what it means to find a murdered body in Mexico today, and what it means for it to become evidence of what and for whom. Building on anthropological scholarship on bureaucracy and forensics, her doctoral dissertation project examines the encounters of state authorities and communities searching for the disappeared, to interrogate how bodies in the ground are translated into terms of legibility and meaning. Her work looks at social processes of public truth production by bringing into conversation forensic and humanitarian exhumations, alongside recent critical perspectives on bureaucracy, bearing in mind longstanding approaches to the anthropology of death and the anthropology of the state, to address how dead bodies become evidence and how belief systems and truth claims circulate around and through them.

**Roy Bar Sadeh** is a PhD candidate in the Department of History. His dissertation is an intellectual and socio-political history of

the idea of a Muslim minority and its role in connecting Islamic modernists throughout South, West and Central Asia. Roy examines how between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries Islamic modernists in British India confronted, and redefined their categorization as "minority" by engaging with various intellectual and state building enterprises across empires and emerging nation-states in both the Ottoman and post-Ottoman Mashriq, as well as in the Soviet Union. Drawing on Arabic, Urdu, Russian, Persian, Hebrew, and English sources, he explores how this diverse group of Muslim intellectuals engaged with ongoing global debates about minority status and political emancipation.

**Nile Davies** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology. His dissertation examines the historical conjunctions of labor, settlement and the built environment in the Western Area of Sierra Leone, where centuries of successive arrivals have produced powerful ideological associations between place, space and categories of personhood ("creoles", "nati-

ves”, “strangers”). Charting the vexed status of the city through its material and economic disparities, his ethnographic work considers the politics and affects of building and dwelling in post-conflict Freetown. He asks how social value and inequality might be rendered in our bodies and the relationships to the landscapes we build. How have violent discrepancies within communities reflected the strained connections between ends and means?

**Aaron Glasserman** is a PhD candidate in the Department of History. He is currently writing a dissertation, *Islam and Muslim Politics in Modern China*. Focusing on the central province of Henan, it situates the formation of a national Chinese Muslim political constituency and the division of Chinese Muslims into rival sects in the party politics, mass media, bureaucratization, and war that followed the collapse of the Qing dynasty. It traces changes in the interpretation of Islam as well as changes in how Chinese Muslims have related to one another and to the broader social and political context of post-imperial China. Its larger historiographical claim is that these developments were interrelated and must be integrated into a coherent narrative. It draws on more than a year of documentary and ethnographic

research in archives and mosques throughout Henan, in other parts of mainland China, Taiwan, and Japan.

**Karim Malak** is a sixth year PhD candidate in the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies. His research focuses on the changes in colonial and postcolonial sovereignty through the introduction of secular governmental calculative technologies—such as accounting, auditing and the census—during the Anglo-Egyptian colonial encounter of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

**Alexandra Méndez** is a PhD Candidate in Latin American & Iberian Cultures and the Institute for Comparative Literature & Society. She specializes in early modern transatlantic cultural studies, Spanish and Italian historiography of the Americas, and book history. Her dissertation examines the exchanges of texts and ideas that conditioned the selection, translation, edition, and publication of historical texts about the Americas in early to mid-16th century Venice. Reading letters, inventories, decrees, and printed books and paratexts, she analyzes the exchange between Spanish intellectuals and a group of individuals connected to

Venice’s Library of St. Mark. She illuminates how library practices such as collections management and gatekeeping conditioned the way texts were selected and prepared for publication, and the way knowledge was curated and mediated for a public audience.

**Verena Meyer** is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Religion. Trained in Islamic Studies and specializing in Islam in Indonesia, her research focuses on the ways in which traditionalist and modernist Javanese Muslims construct and maintain their group identities through memory practices of authoritative founding figures and by appropriating canonical texts in Arabic, Indonesian, and Javanese. In addition to her ethnographic work on contemporary Islam, she has also explored themes of coherence and paradox as modes of theological articulation in classical Malay and Javanese poetry and their reception of Arabic philosophical traditions.

**Margaret Scarborough** is a PhD candidate in Italian and Comparative Literature. She holds a BA in European and Middle Eastern Languages from the University of Oxford, in Italian and Arabic, and a Masters, also from Oxford, in Medieval Studies. Her doctoral research explores the heretical styles of existence of

queer and feminist authors and activists in late cold-war Italy and their legacies. She draws attention to the ways that Pier Paolo Pasolini, Carla Lonzi, and others developed interpretation-based and process-oriented practices of selfhood by adapting and implementing notions and methods drawn from art, philology, linguistics, and new media. Her work draws on diverse sources, including screenplays, diaries, manifestos, and treatises of political philosophy, to trace an alternative genealogy for contemporary Italian Thought.

**Yayra Sumah** is a doctoral candidate in the department of Middle Eastern South Asian and African Studies. She holds bachelors and masters degrees in Political Science with a minor in African Studies from Boston University, magna cum laude. She is an interdisciplinary scholar with a research focus on the history of colonialism in Congo (DRC), Kimbanguism, African Christianity and Central African spirituality. Her dissertation brings together history, anthropology, religion, philosophy and political theory in an original interpretation of Simon Kimbangu’s movement in Belgian Congo. It considers the stakes of the meaning of Kimbangu for the postcolonial African debate on what it means to be ‘decolonized’ and ‘African’.

## THE CLAREMONT PRIZE FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Now in its second year, the Claremont Prize is dedicated to the publication of first books by early career scholars working in any discipline of the humanities or social sciences. Prize-winners are invited to IRCPL to participate in a workshop and the books will appear in IRCPL's series, "Religion, Culture, and Public Life," published by Columbia University Press.

This year's winner, **Neena Mahadev**, is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Yale-NUS College, Singapore. She received her PhD from Johns Hopkins University and has held research fellowships from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Max Planck Institute, and the J. William Fulbright Foundation. She presently serves on the Editorial Board of the Journal of Global Buddhism, and will serve on the soon-to-be-launched book series *New Directions in the Anthropology of Christianity* (Bloomsbury Academic).

Her book, **Of Karma and Grace: Mediating Religious Difference in Millennial Sri Lanka**, interrogates a multi-religious public at a time when the growing presence of charismatic and evangelical and Christianity agitated hostilities of majoritarian Buddhist revivalists. In 2004, a contingent of Buddhist monks elected to Sri Lanka's Parliament proposed a ban against what they deemed to be "unethical" conversions to Christianity. Subsequent wide-reaching Western humanitarian aid and intervention during the tsunami (2004) and war's end (2009), served to intensify nativist contentions against those who propagate a "foreign" faith. Conflicting theological and political approaches to the nation manifest in the ways in which

Buddhists revivalists call upon Sri Lankans to abide by the karmic inheritances of the self and the nation on the one hand, and in how Sri Lankan evangelists project the possibility of forging a new future "through the grace of God," on the other. Examining these disparate orientations to religious continuity, rupture, sovereignty, and persuasion, Mahadev takes a "multicameral" approach to conversion disputes.

Situated ethnographically among modernist and traditionalist Theravadin Buddhists, Pentecostal Christian "newcomers," and long established Christian denominations, she examines how maverick religious leaders answer the call of millenarian religious competition, attracting devotees whilst shielding their practices from the affronts of rivals, and at the same time underscoring their love of the nation. This complex Sri Lankan public does not necessarily issue wholly hostile responses to competing streams of religious projection, however. *Of Karma and Grace* demonstrates how inter-religious competition creates a field that is also generative of possibilities for diversification of religious forms, of leniency, and identitarian ambiguity—features of a religious public that allow plurality to flourish even in the face of ever-rearticulating conflicts.



# People

---

## FACULTY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

### **Courtney Bender**

Ada Byron Bampton Tremaine Professor,  
Department of Religion

### **Beth Berkowitz**

Professor, Ingeborg Rennert Chair of Jewish  
Studies, Barnard Department of Religion

### **Elizabeth Castelli**

Professor, Barnard Department of Religion

### **Mamadou Diouf**

Leitner Professor of African Studies and  
Chair, Department of Middle Eastern, South  
Asian, and African Studies

### **Brinkley Messick**

Professor, Departments of Anthropology and  
Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African  
Studies (Committee Chair)

### **Anupama Rao**

Claire Tow Associate Professor of History,  
Barnard and Middle Eastern, South Asian and  
African Studies

### **Camille Robcis**

Associate Professor, Departments of French &  
Romance Philology and History

### **Jack Snyder**

Robert and Renee Belfer Professor of  
International Relations, Department of  
Political Science

### **Josef Sorett**

Chair and Professor of Religion and African-  
American Studies, Department of Religion

## STAFF

### **Matthew Engelke**

Director

### **Walid Hammam**

Associate Director

### **Madalyn De Jesus**

Business Officer

### **Marianna Pecoraro**

Program and Communications Manager

# Co-Sponsored Events

---

**PANEL** | *Apocalypse Pending: Religion, Politics, and Social Media, #1.* With Joan Donovan and Brandy Zadrozny.  
Organized by The Society of Fellows and Heyman Center for the Humanities  
October 20, 2020

**PANEL** | *Apocalypse Pending: Religion, Politics, and Social Media, #2.* With Sarah Posner and Kathleen Stewart.  
Organized by The Society of Fellows and Heyman Center for the Humanities  
October 27, 2020

**LECTURE** | *The Third Annual Ambedkar Lecture: Race, Caste and Social Justice.* With Isabel Wilkerson.  
Organized by the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society  
November 13, 2020

**PANEL** | *Apocalypse Pending: Religion, Politics, and Social Media, #3.* With Susannah Crockford and Will Sommer.  
Organized by The Society of Fellows and Heyman Center for the Humanities  
February 11, 2021

**ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION** | *The Question of Faith in Contemporary Black Life.* With Besheer Mohamed, Kiana Cox, Rev. Leslie D. Callahan, Marla F. Frederick, and Mark Anthony Neal.  
Organized by the Center on African-American Religion, Sexual Politics and Social Justice  
February 18, 2021

**PANEL** | *French Culture Wars? The Political and Intellectual Stakes of the Polemic on "Islamism-Leftism."* With Eric Fassin and Maboula Soumahoro.  
Organized by Maison Française  
May 6, 2021

[ircpl.columbia.edu](http://ircpl.columbia.edu)