



**Institute
for
Religion,
Culture,
and
Public Life**

**Annual
Report
2021–2022**

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Letter from the Director

It was 26 months. That's the time between our last in-person event—a workshop in February 2020 on “Radical Thinking in Religious Contexts: Medieval Women on Self-Knowledge, Truth, and Nature”—and the next, a Master Class, in April 2022, in a series on “Indigenous Environmental Justice.” It was so energizing to be back on campus in that way. Not that we are out of Pandemic time. And indeed, going forward the Institute will surely continue working in a variety of ways: “hybrid,” a term that's become part of everyday speech.

This year was one of transitions and changes in other ways, above all the formal ending of our major Luce-funded project on Rethinking Public Religion in Africa and South Asia, and launching of a new core focus, on Religion and Climate Change. With respect to the former, we say goodbye to longtime fellow, Mohamad Amer Meziane, who was a postdoc on the project. I'm happy to report that Mohamad will be joining the faculty at Brown University in a tenure-track position in the Department of French and Francophone

Studies. With respect to the latter, we held a number of public events and the Master Class mentioned above, led by Kyle Powys Whyte. Several new initiatives in this area are afoot—including the inauguration of a Public Outreach Fellowship for PhD students. In all of this work, the Religion and Climate Change initiative is driven by the increasing recognition that we cannot fully understand or adequately address the history and future course of climate change without taking account of religious worldviews, institutions, and actors.

Forms of public outreach and student support grew yet stronger at IRCPL this year, including the inauguration of a “Public Writing Workshop” for graduate students. It’s clear that early career scholars are keenly aware of the need to make sure their research and expertise reach wide audiences—not just specialists in their field, or other academics. We had a tremendous response to this call for applications, and were able to accommodate ten participants, some of whom have already gone on to publish op-eds and cultural commentaries. I’m especially grateful to the senior colleagues who were so generous in sharing their thoughts and tips for public writing—and even their personal lists of email contacts for editors.

Alongside the Religion and Climate work, this year we also launched “the Magic Series,” with a wide range of events—all detailed below—and, of course, kept on with the

flagship series on Religion and Public Life. Here the benefits of Zoom came through once again, as we were able to organize a talk on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine within weeks of the violent onslaught, highlighting the extent to which the Orthodox Churches figure in the war and recent social history.

There is, of course, much else to cover and acknowledge, so please do take a careful look at the huge range of work and issues covered below. In this, my fourth year as director, I’m evermore inspired, impressed, and humbled by the work of everyone who contributes to IRCPL, and its place not only within the university community but well beyond. My thanks here as well to all our speakers, chairs, and other guests; to our authors; to colleagues and students; and above all, the staff and members of the Faculty Advisory Committee. And of course, to you, for your interest in the Institute’s work.

Matthew Engelke
Director, IRCPL

Religion & Public Life

Religion and Public Life is our flagship series, providing an interdisciplinary platform for exploration and debate on issues of significant importance from leading academics, journalists, artists, social campaigners, and others. In recent years, the series has explored topics including the role of Catholicism on the US Supreme Court and the extent to which religion, culture, and race factor in the atrocities in Xinjiang.

**Will the Real Jihadi Please Stand Up?:
Or, the War on Terror is Dead,
Long Live the War on Terror**

**A lecture by Darryl Li (University of Chicago),
moderated by Lila Abu-Lughod (Columbia, Anthropology)**

On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of 9/11, this lecture critiqued the past two decades of the Global War on Terror, and explored the animating specter of “jihadism,” clarifying the stakes and the harms of this complicated category. The Lecture and follow-on discussion highlighted how believers call many things *jihad*—from personal struggles for self-improvement to armed violence—and debated the proper uses of the word, while also flagging what we have learned from the use of this problematic concept and what the stakes are for thinking about radical politics more generally.

**Modern Sufis and the State:
The Politics of Islam in South Asia
and Beyond**

**A book talk with Katherine Pratt Ewing,
Rosemary Corbett, Anne Bigelow, Kelly Pemberton,
and Anand Taneja, moderated by SherAli Tareen**

Modern Sufis and the State is an edited volume in IRCPL’s book series, which brings together a range of scholars, including anthropologists, historians, and religious-studies specialists, to challenge common assumptions that are made about Sufism in the contemporary world. The conversations at this book launch focused on India and Pakistan within a broader global context and provided locally grounded accounts of how Sufis in South Asia have engaged in the political space from the colonial period to the present. The speakers foregrounded the effects and unintended consequences of efforts to link Sufism with the spread of democracy and critiqued the belief that Salafism and Sufism are antithetical, offering nuanced analyses of the diversity, multivalence, and local embeddedness of Sufi political engagements.

This event was cosponsored by the South Asia Institute, the Middle East Institute, and the Department of Anthropology.

**Gestures of Protest and Piety:
Race, Politics, and Faith in
the World of Sport**

**A panel with Randall Balmer (Dartmouth College),
Ben Carrington (USC), and Samantha Sheppard
(Cornell University), moderated by Frank Guridy
(Columbia, History)**

This panel explored the intersection of race and politics in American sports, focusing on gestures in public culture and the use of the body to signal conviction and commitment. These issues have risen in importance over the past few years, as athletes in the US and now beyond have “taken a knee,” thereby blurring the boundaries between religious, political, and social forms of action. The panelists engaged in a conversation on the intersections of protest and piety in contemporary and historical perspective.

**Atrocities in Xinjiang:
Religion, Race, Culture**

**A panel with Lisa Ross, Magnus Fiskesjo (Cornell
University), and Ajinur Setiwaldi (William and Mary),
moderated by Andrew J. Nathan (Columbia, Political
Science)**

This panel engaged issues related to the ongoing atrocities in Xinjiang, China and the persecution of the Uyghur minority in and beyond the camps, from both a historical and contemporary perspective. While occasional headlines in newspapers and television media often frame the atrocities in relation to “Muslim minorities,” or the question as one of “freedom of religion,” the panelists expanded the conversation to discuss the extent which race and culture also play a role.

*This event was co-sponsored by the
Weatherhead East Asian Institute.*

Religion and the Politics of Belonging during the War on Ukraine

A lecture by Catherine Wanner (Penn State), moderated by Valentina Izmirlieva (Columbia)

Religion is pivotal to how the relationship between the Russian and Ukrainian peoples is understood. This talk, from one of the most seasoned anthropological researchers on Ukraine, offered a comparison of religious affiliation prior to the war, and the complications and changes that have arisen due to the ongoing crisis, especially with regard to the Moscow Patriarchate's support for Putin.

This event was cosponsored by the Harriman Institute.

The Sexual Politics of Black Churches

A book talk with Josef Sorett (Columbia, Religion), Barbara Savage (UPenn), Brad Braxton (St. Luke's School), and Nyasha Junior (Temple)

The Sexual Politics of Black Churches is an edited volume that brings together an interdisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners to analyze the politics of sexuality within Black churches and the communities they serve. For this IRCPL series book launch, the panelists reflected on how Black churches have participated in recent discussions on issues such as marriage equality, reproductive justice, and transgender visibility in American society, and considered the various ways that Black people and groups negotiate the intersections of religion, race, gender, and sexuality across historical and contemporary settings.

Magic Series

The Magic Series is a new thematic area of public events at IRCPL, exploring all the ways in which magic relates to modernity. Through this series, scholars, activists, and practitioners are addressing a range of topics including the difference between "stage" magic and "real" magic, the relationship between magic, race, and colonialism, and the many ways in which the concept of witch-hunts are rhetorically deployed.

Magic and Witch-Hunting in Today's Global Political Economy and Social Protest Movements

A lecture by Silvia Federici (Hofstra University), moderated by Jack Halberstam (Columbia ISSG)

The surge of “witch-hunts” in various countries across the world is a worrisome phenomenon, targeting women and children in particular. At the same time, we are witnessing a new interest in witches among feminists worldwide, as the figure of the witch is taken as a symbol of anti-patriarchal rebellion. In this presentation, Silvia Federici explored the significance of these developments, and the strategies that feminist and other social movements are deploying to end the persecution of so-called witches.

This event was cosponsored by the Institute for the Study of Sexuality and Gender.

(De)Colonizing Magic

A panel with Elizabeth Perez (UC Santa Barbara), Graham Jones (MIT), and Yvonne Chireau (Swarthmore), moderated by Matthew Engelke (Columbia University Religion)

This panel conversation explored the ways in which colonial powers deployed the language of magic as a tool of domination and the extent to which magic and modernity are mutually constitutive. The panelists also discussed how stereotypes of superstition and the occult continue to mark post-colonial subjects and minority communities, as well as whether it is possible (or desirable) to reappropriate the language of magic and enchantment.

Magic, Reason and Magical Thinking

A lecture by Starhawk (witch, peace activist, and ecofeminist)

For over forty years, Starhawk has been a key figure in movements cultivating engaged approaches to magic and ecofeminism. While her work is situated outside the mainstream of academic discourse, it often speaks directly to the conceptual framings of secular modernity and public life. In this talk, Starhawk brought her work and experience to bear on the difference between magic and “magical thinking,” addressing the problematic rise of anti-vax activism and conspiracy theories.

Witches on the Frontier: A Seventeenth-Century American Tragedy

A lecture by Malcolm Gaskill (University of East Anglia, UK), moderated by Julie Stone Peters (Columbia, English)

In the late 1640s and early 50s strange things began to happen in the Massachusetts township of Springfield. As tensions rose, rumors of witchcraft spread, and the community became tangled in a web of anxiety and suspicion, fear and recrimination. In this lecture, Malcolm Gaskill described the story of Hugh and Mary Parsons, a troubled married couple at the eye of the storm, and explored the uncertain relationship between the theory and practice of witch-beliefs, as they appeared in one particular historical case-study.

Dangerous Magic: Enslaved Women, Violence, and The Opacity of Conjure

A lecture by Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh (Stanford University)

This talk reflected on the “dangerous magic” of categories like conjure in the study of religion and slavery, and examined what violent practices reveal about intimate and communal conflict in the lives of southern enslaved people and the limitations of methodological categories when impeded by centuries of epistemic and historical violence. Professor Wells-Oghoghomeh explored the case of Josephine, an enslaved woman accused of poisoning her slaveholders and killing their infant child, and explored the ways bondwomen weaponized ritual knowledge and racialized fears of Black women’s ties to harming protocols to respond to gendered forms of violence in the slavery era.

Religion & Climate Change

The Religion & Climate Change speaker series is part of a larger effort at IRCPL to engage with a critical issue of our time, exploring the ways in which religious communities are reacting to and acting upon the ecological upheavals and disruptions facing people across the globe. It covers a broad spectrum of topics from, on one end, the denial—and sometimes even active hastening—of climate change, to, on the other end, an insistence on proactive stewardship and ethics of conservation. The series is providing a vital space on campus (and beyond) to showcase these key cultural and historical elements of climate history and the climate crisis.

The Devouring of the World and the Climate Crisis

A lecture by Ailton Krenak (philosopher, writer, and indigenous leader), moderated by Els Lagrou (Federal University of Rio)

In this talk, the indigenous thinker and philosopher Ailton Krenak urged us to take seriously the value of the indigenous philosophies of the Americas when it comes to confronting the climate change crisis. The author of *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World* and *A Vida Não Útil (Life is Not Useful)*, Krenak offered a trenchant critique of the extent to which an understanding of the earth as a resource to be exploited has taken hold in the wake of globalization, as well as how the logic of consumption is enabled by the “cognitive abyss”—our inability to listen and to see what is happening to the world. This lecture brought together a global audience, including a large number of Portuguese speakers. The talk was given in Portuguese, and simultaneously translated into English. You can see the recorded video of the talk [here](#).

Making Land Work For Good

A lecture by Molly Burhans (GoodLands), moderated by Manan Ahmed (Columbia, History)

Molly Burhans, whose work has been featured in the *New Yorker* and promoted by the United Nations, joined IRCPL to speak about how technology and science allow us to measure the state of our environment and the damage caused by human activity. A Catholic activist and cartographer, the talk and conversation focused in particular on her project to map the Church’s global land holdings, as well as how to account for its role in colonial conquests.

This event was cosponsored by the Barnard Center for Research on Women, the Barnard Religion Department, Columbia Religious Life, and the Center for Sustainable Development.

In Deep: Water, Covid, Climate Change

A conversation with Elizabeth Kolbert (author), moderated by Mark Taylor (Columbia, Religion)

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Elizabeth Kolbert joined us for an evening to discuss her life, work, and career, up to and including how we can understand the connections between climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic. Joining her in conversation was Mark Taylor, one of the founding directors of IRCPL and a leading figure in the philosophy of religion.

Faith in Thoreau

A panel with Jane Bennett (Johns Hopkins University), John Modern (Franklin & Marshall College), and Alda Balthrop-Lewis (Australian Catholic University), moderated by Branka Arsić (Columbia, English).

This panel conversation brought together scholars to discuss Thoreau’s life and work, and provided a productive entry point into a discussion of religion and climate. Thoreau’s legacy within environmentalism and climate studies has often been harnessed in ways that approximate or play upon the sense of a spiritual or spirited conviction. Panelists explored two main questions: where is “religion” in—and for—Thoreau? And how, if at all, should it be understood in relation to the environmental movement and contemporary climate activism?

The Non-Religious Origins of Religious Climate Opposition? Climate Communication on *The Glenn Beck Program*, 2009 to 2011

A lecture by Robin Veldman (Texas A&M University), moderated by Obery M. Hendricks (Columbia, Religion and AAADS)

In this talk, Robin Veldman challenged typical understandings of how religion affects Americans' attitudes toward climate change. Such understandings are often thought of as emerging from organized religious traditions. Veldman argued that this view misses a significant vector for religious influence on attitudes toward climate change: "secular" conservative media. She walked us through an examination of transcripts from *The Glenn Beck Program* to illuminate how the eponymous host framed climate change in Christian nationalist terms as a threat to the Founding Fathers' vision for America, and suggested that ostensibly secular media sources may be an under-researched mechanism by which religion is shaping climate attitudes.

Initiatives

Systemic Racism Initiative

In partnership with the Office of Student Life, IRCPL provided \$10,000 towards the Racial Justice Mini-Grant Program for students to explore themes of race, racism, and antiracism, and to facilitate collaborative dialogue and action to address systemic barriers towards racial equity. Information about the Racial Justice Mini-Grants projects and recipients can be found on the University Life website. Funded projects included:

“Resilience Against Power and Privilege” Podcast

JoAnne “Jo-Joe” Lee (School of Social Work) and Joel Sedano (School of the Arts)

The Saltwater Railroad: Untold Black Liberation

Malakai Hart (Columbia College)

Race, Racism, and Religion: Silences and Absences, and Histories and Methodologies

Gaurika Mehta (GSAS, Religion) and Zehra Mehdi (GSAS, Religion)

For Pecola: Emerging Evidence of the Structural Consequences of Colorism

Tigidankay (TK) Saccoh (School of Public Health)

Dismantling Racism and Decolonizing Ourselves Through Art

Lisa Cardoso (General Studies), Angie Maldonado (General Studies), and Kaya Kim (General Studies)

Reproductive Justice Panel: What’s Happening in Texas?

Olivia Cordingley (School of Social Work)

How-To Workshop: Making Business Decisions That Mitigate Harm

Wilburt Carpenter (Columbia Business School)

Three-part Seminar Series to Address “Racial Myths” in Global Health

Joanne Michelle F Ocampo (Mailman School of Public Health) and Alejandra Paniagua-Avila (Mailman School of Public Health)

Genealogies of Revolution and the Struggle for Racial Justice in Sudan

Anna Reumert (GSAS, Anthropology)

Zora’s Daughters Podcast

Alyssa A.L. James (GSAS, Anthropology) and Brendane A. Tynes (GSAS, Anthropology)

Public Writing Workshop

In response to overwhelming student interest, IRCPL hosted a public writing workshop over four sessions during the spring 2022 semester. The workshop provided graduate students with advice and support in producing sample op-eds and book review essays aimed at broad, non-specialist audience. The workshop was convened by IRCPL’s director, Matthew Engelke, who ran the initial session and provided feedback on drafts of the students’ writing. He was joined for subsequent sessions by Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins (Wesleyan University), Nadia Marzouki (Center for International Studies, Sciences Po), and Katherine Franke (Columbia University Law School) who, between them, have published in a wide range of leading venues, including the *New York Times*, *New York Review of Books*, *Le Monde*, the *Guardian*, the *Immanent Frame*, the *Nation*, and several others. Some of the students have already gone on to publish in popular venues.

Workshop participants and interests:

Elvira Blanco is a 5th year PhD student in the Latin American and Iberian Cultures department. She studies representations and practices of the communal in contemporary “post-Chavismo” (c. 2013-onward) Venezuela. She was interested in writing about the intersection of religious imaginaries, understandings of the common, and ecological activism.

Nile Davies is a PhD candidate in Anthropology who works primarily in Sierra Leone. His public writing focus used insights from fieldwork (specifically narratives regarding profiteering during 2014–15 West African Ebola epidemic) to think about COVID-19 and conspiracy theories, public trust and related ideas.

Margaux Fitoussi is a PhD candidate in anthropology at Columbia University. She lives between Tunis and New York and her art practice and research focuses on temporality, colonialism, and visual representation. Her ethnographic research in Tunisia examines people, places, and things that are *not* Jewish or *may be* Jewish and explores their relation to Jews and Jewishness. She is also a filmmaker and translator. Her public writing focused on the figure of the “pied noir” in North Africa and the French imaginary.

Chloé Samala Faux is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology. Her dissertation examines the historical and emergent dilemmas of reproduction in contemporary South Africa. Her work centers the ancestral realm as a site of speculation to examine modes of black relationally but also rupture, through the logic and exercise of violence. She put multiple theories of the political, including queer, feminist, Marxist, Afropessimist, Pan-African, and postcolonial thought, into conversation with each other, while grounding her work in ethnographic practice.

Sarah Hedgecock is a PhD candidate in the Department of Religion in the North American Religions subfield. She is currently working on a dissertation about nostalgia, relationality, and evangelical girlhood. She holds a BA in anthropology from Princeton University and an MA in religion from Columbia. Her public writing project focused on Evangelical Christianity and “gender reveal” rituals.

Lotte Houwink ten Cate is a PhD Candidate in History. Her dissertation examines the transformation of sexual and domestic violence—in public perception, social science, and the law—from a private matter to a state concern. She worked on an essay about the reception of affirmative consent in the Netherlands.

Sohaib Khan is an Islamic Law and Civilization Fellow at Yale Law School. He received his Ph.D. in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies (MESAAS) from Columbia University in 2020. Sohaib’s research, teaching, and public writing interests span Islamic law, religion and secularism in South Asia, and Muslim engagements with capitalism.

Nancy Ko is a third-year PhD candidate in the Department of History. Her dissertation, “Scenes of Coexistence: Racial Capitalism and Historical Amnesia in the Jewish ‘Orient,’” draws on insights from Ethnic Studies and Black feminist critique, and nine years of preliminary archival work and language training, to reevaluate the legacies of the Alliance Israélite Universelle. In terms of public writing,

she worked on a pitch to book review editors at *The New Yorker*, *Public Books*, and *NYRB*. She also planned to review Eryn L’Espiritu-Gandhi’s upcoming book *Archipelago of Resettlement*, about the ways the Vietnamese refugee figure is mobilized for unwavering support of U.S. and Israeli military interests.

Connor Martini is a PhD Candidate in North American Religions at Columbia University. His research lives at the intersection of religious studies, science and technology studies, and anthropology, and his dissertation will explore questions of enchantment and presence in an ethnographic study of astronomers and astrobiologists working on the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. Connor’s public writing explores similar questions, focusing on contextualizing natural science news and current events within sets of questions and concerns in the humanities and social sciences.

Sophia Mo is a PhD candidate in French and Comparative Literature and Society. 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. Her public-facing essay project addressed the question of what women have to do to be considered worthy of inclusion in historical narratives.

Masterclass with Kyle Whyte: Indigenous Environmental Justice

As part of its Religion & Climate Change Initiative, IRCPL offered a four-part master class for the Columbia University community on the topic of “Indigenous Environmental Justice: Transforming Sustainability, Empowering Climate Action.” The master class was given by Kyle Powys Whyte, Professor of Environment and Sustainability and George Willis Pack Professor at the University of Michigan. We were joined by faculty, students, and alumni from across the Columbia community and visiting fellows from the Institute for the Study of Human Rights and the Obama Scholars Program, for four classes. The first three classes were conducted virtually, but the fourth session was done in-person—our first in-person event since the beginning of the pandemic.

Using critical Indigenous methods, the master class traced diverse Indigenous roots for imagining and practicing sustainability and climate change mitigation through an environmental justice lens. Participants engaged traditional and recent materials for investigating environmental justice through memory, kinship, non-linear time, epistemology, and constructive criticism of core concepts of crisis and hope. The discussions focused on how sustainability and climate change mitigation might be understood and practiced differently if Indigenous knowledge systems and experiences are more prominently engaged.

Session One: Sustainability as Memory

The leading programs in sustainability education rarely, if ever, offer courses on how memory is a profound basis of thinking about the meaning and direction of sustainability. The session introduced some of the different ways of re-orienting and re-grounding philosophies and practices of sustainability in memory. That dominant discourses on sustainability fail to reflect critically on the founding role of memory is a source of the further entrenchment of environmental and climate injustice against Indigenous peoples today—even through some of the prominent solutions to adapting to and mitigating anthropogenic climate change.

Session Two: Kinship Tellings of Time

Climate change is often discussed in terms of linear units of time. There are concerns about how narrating climate change linearly can eclipse issues of justice in the energy transition away from fossil fuel dependence, some of the major issues involving Indigenous climate justice. There are of course different ways of telling time. In relation to climate change and biodiversity, Indigenous scholars and writers are narrating through kinship, not linearity. The session covered some of the recent interventions by Indigenous scholars and writers on philosophies of kinship and how they relate to time, and how issues of justice are inseparable from the experience of climate change.

Session Three: Crisis Epistemology and Climate Justice

People who perpetrate colonialism often defend their actions as necessary responses to real or perceived crises. Epistemologies of crisis involve knowing the world in such a way that a certain present is experienced as new. The session will discuss newness in terms of the presumptions of unprecedentedness and urgency that underwrite the epistemologies of crisis that are dominant in global climate change discourse. As an alternative to epistemologies of crisis, the session will develop conceptions of epistemologies of coordination. Different from crisis, coordination refers to ways of knowing the world that emphasize the importance of moral bonds—or kinship relationships—for generating the (responsible) capacity to respond to constant change. Epistemologies of coordination are conducive to responding to expected and drastic changes without validating harm or violence.

Session Four: Environmental Justice against Hope

The themes of memory, kinship, and coordination are among the critical philosophies and practices Indigenous peoples bring to environmental justice. As philosophies and practices that are reflective on and reflexive of their rootedness in memory, they form significant sources of motivation, energy, and drive to take action now to address climate change and biodiversity loss. Yet they are philosophies and practices that do not rely on hope, which can be perceived as cutting against the grain of a common belief that hope is a prerequisite for any meaningful environmental advocacy. This in-person session covered the critique of hope and worked to move away from hopeful concepts and beliefs, and toward Indigenous philosophies and concepts of ancestral accountability, kinship time, and collective continuance.

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 research programs that bring together interdisciplinary groups of scholars. This year, we were able to hold one Joint Project in person, awarded in an earlier funding cycle. The selection committee also awarded funding to two new projects, which will take place during the 2022–23 academic year.

Populism and New Theopolitical Formations in the Americas

Principal Investigators: Maria José De Abreu (Columbia, Anthropology), Valentina Napolitano (University of Toronto, Anthropology), and Bruno Reinhardt (Federal University of Santa Catarina, Anthropology)

This April 2022 workshop aimed to establish a dialogue between the critical turn in religious and secular studies and debates around the rise of the radical populist right in the Americas. It explored comparatively new populist theopolitical formations in their relation to a) sovereignty and soil, b) charisma and theatricality, and, c) neoliberalism and secular-religious assemblages. Whereas the correlation between the continent's recent turn to the extreme right side of the political spectrum and changes in the religious field (growth of evangelical and Catholic charismatic Christianity) has been widely noticed, the nature of such cross-fertilization remains insufficiently theorized. Scholars explored this theme through comparative inquiry on the shifting structures of religious and political authority in the region, including their theopolitical entanglements.

And congratulations to the following project teams for their upcoming work:

***The Books of Jacob* Reading and Writing Group**

Principal Investigators: Courtney Bender (Religion, Columbia University), Celmence Boulouque (Religion, Columbia University) and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan (Religious Studies, Indiana University Bloomington)

This Joint Project provides funding for the inaugural year of a multi-year interdisciplinary group project dedicated to reading *The Books of Jacob* by Olga Tokarczuk, first published in Polish in October 2014, and subsequently in English translation in November 2021. An epic historical novel set in eighteenth century Eastern Europe, it gives an account of the rise of the movement around Jacob Frank, a Jewish-born, Christian convert messianic leader who both during his life and in his afterlives has been seen as an arch-heretic of modern Jewish history. Moving across genres of writing, memoir, letters, chronicles, sermons, and more, illustrated with maps and charts and other historical images, evoking characters and voices both human and possibly divine, *The Books of Jacob* is a remarkable achievement. The novel demands much of the reader who is drawn into a wondering, sometimes horrified, complicity with Frank and his efforts to sustain his project.

As a virtuoso portrait of a fascinating and significant historical religious personage,

community, and event, *The Books of Jacob* invites attention from scholars of religion. Taking up threads that other readers and reviewers in Europe (and the US) have identified but not explored at great length, this reading and writing group will work together to consider the religiousness of the work. The group will pay particular attention to the registers and projects of writing religion(s) within Tokarczuk's novel, using it as an occasion for reflecting anew on our own scholarly and interpretive strategies and practices for investigating, representing, and writing religion in the past and present.

Sacred Liberties and Citizenship Practices in Rio de Janeiro's Candomblé Terreiros

Principle investigators: Ana Paulina Lee (Latin American and Iberian Cultures, Columbia University), Ana Luiza de Abreu Cláudio (Instituto Moreira Salles) and Nilce Naira Nascimento and Luiz Fernando Vianna (Instituto Moreira Salles)

This Joint Project aims to create a podcast series titled, "Sacred Liberties and Citizenship Practices in Rio de Janeiro's Candomblé Terreiros." In a collaboration between Candomblé matriarch Mãe Nilce de Iansã and Ana Paulina Lee, Assistant Professor of Brazilian Studies, we seek to reconstruct histories about the terreiro as a nexus of citizenship practices. The terreiro is often understood as a sacred space in Candomblé

religious ceremonies. This project will demonstrate how religious activities and worship practices at terreiros include religious and political rituals. Religious and sociopolitical realms are interconnected in terreiro's activities, which include social aid and health care networks, food distribution, environmental and biodiversity advocacy, economic entrepreneurship for women, and legal struggles for Afro-Brazilian religious tolerance. The project outcomes will be a launchpad for educational programming, legal advocacy, and public-facing outreach that will address histories of Candomblé terreiros as central locations for the practice of citizenship and expansion of human rights, which also includes the terreiro's advocacy in protecting nature as juridical persons.



Book Series

The Religion, Culture, and Public Life series 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.

The Sexual Politics of Black Churches

Edited by Josef Sorett, Columbia University, Religion
February 2022

The Sexual Politics of Black Churches brings together an interdisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners to analyze the politics of sexuality within Black churches and the communities they serve. In essays and conversations, leading writers reflect on how Black churches have participated in recent discussions about issues such as marriage equality, reproductive justice, and transgender visibility in American society. They consider the varied ways that Black people and groups negotiate the intersections of religion, race, gender, and sexuality across historical and contemporary settings.

Through a critically engaged interdisciplinary investigation, *The Sexual Politics of Black Churches* develops an array of new perspectives on religion, race, and sexuality in American culture.

Research Community

Post-Doctoral Research Fellows

Mohamad Amer Meziane is a philosopher whose current research projects and teaching activities involve IRCPL, the Department of Religion, and the Institute for African Studies. He is also a research associate at the Sorbonne Institute for Law and Philosophy (ISJPS) and a member of the governing board of the CNRS based Research Network ICC (Islam et chercheurs dans la Cité), where he holds a seminar series on secularism and public religion. His new research project analyzes the ways in which these imperial transformations are challenged within African spaces. The project questions the boundaries of Africa and the Middle East through the religious, racializing and ecological effects of political geographies. The aim of this project is to try and unfold the contemporary stakes of a systematic critique of these geographies for African theory, from Fanon until today.

Visiting Scholars

Neena Mahadev is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Yale-NUS College. She has conducted fieldwork in Sri Lanka, and also in Singapore, with a focus on the theo-political interplay between Theravāda (Pāli) Buddhism, Pentecostal Christianity, and Roman Catholicism, and the innovations that arise within agonistic religious milieus. Her work appears in *Current Anthropology*, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society*, *Religion and Society*, *HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *Religion*, and *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*. Currently, she serves on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Global Buddhism* and is on the Series Board for New Directions in the Anthropology of Christianity (Bloomsbury). Her research has been supported by fellowships from the National Science Foundation, Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the Max Planck Institute. Dr. Mahadev is finalizing her first book manuscript, *Of Karma and Grace: Mediating Religious Difference in Millennial Sri Lanka*, for the series on Religion, Culture, and Public Life with Columbia University Press. The manuscript was awarded the 2021 Claremont Prize in Religion from IRCPL.

Lucinda Ramberg is an Associate Professor in Anthropology and Feminist, Gender, & Sexuality Studies at Cornell University. Her research projects in South India have focused on the body as an artifact of culture and power in relation to questions of caste, sexuality, religiosity,

and projects of social transformation. Her first book, *Given to the Goddess: South Indian Devadasis and the Sexuality of Religion* (Duke University Press, 2014) was awarded several prizes. Her current book project, *We Were Always Buddhist: Dalit Conversion and Sexual Modernity*, investigates the sexual politics of lived Buddhism through an ethnography of religious conversion in contemporary South India. The research and writing of this book has been funded by the Fulbright Foundation, the American Institute for Indian Studies, and the American Council for Learned Societies/ Robert H. Ho Family Foundation for Buddhist Studies.

Angelantonio Grossi is a PhD student in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University. He is an anthropologist whose work reflects on questions of translation, coloniality, and religious conversion in the engagement between African spiritualists and digital infrastructures in an often-presumed Christian landscape. In his research, he interrogates common delineations of ethnic, linguistic, and geographical boundaries by foregrounding the role of Ghana-based spirit mediums in the mediatization and reevaluation of traditions like Vodou across multi-continental geographies, including Afro-diasporic temporalities and experiences of blackness. At the Institute for Religion, Culture and Public Life he is completing his dissertation entitled *Spirits in Circulation: Digital Media and Indigenous Spirituality in Post-Christian Ghana*.

Summer Research Fellows

The IRCPL Summer Research Fellowship is awarded each Spring to assist students with expenses directly related to research, including travel, lodging, and materials during the Summer or Fall semester. Upon returning from their travel, students will issue reports on the results of their research.

Jealool Amari is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies and the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University. His research is inspired by notions of epistemic rupture and ethical reorientation brought about by colonialism in Islamic Africa. His dissertation is a conceptual history of the East African coast in an era of colonial language standardization, and draws from Islamicate and Pan-African discourse bridging Swahili, Arabic, and English.

Zheng Fu is a PhD student in the Sociology department at Columbia University. Her dissertation will investigate the role that narratives play in conspiracy movements, with a special focus on the concept of body pollution in mobilizing participation in conspiracy movements. She will analyze how the narrative patterns of folklores evolved longitudinally and how conspiracy narratives affect the survival of conspiracy communities through automated text-analysis.

Kit Hermanson (they/them) is a PhD candidate in the Department of Religion at Columbia

University. Their dissertation explores dynamics of gender, race, religion, and anti-capitalism in 19th century intentional communities by arguing that the hundreds of separatist communities founded across the United States are best understood as a political and cultural movement. The IRCPL Summer Fellowship will fund their archival research of the Oneida Community, transcendentalist communes, early Latter-day Saints, radical newspapers, the Society of Public Universal Friends, the Shakers, anarchist free-lovers, and more.

Emily Hoffman is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Anthropology and the Institute of Comparative Literature and Society. Her research focuses on the state child protection apparatus in the United States. She is broadly interested in social reproduction, racial capitalism, Indigenous sovereignty, psychoanalysis, legal anthropology, state bureaucracy, kinship, and political, therapeutic, and religious theories of repair. Her dissertation fieldwork takes place in Eastern Oklahoma. The project examines both the day-to-day operations of the child welfare bureaucracy and the larger cultural itinerary of child abuse and neglect as a concept, as well as the political imaginaries it authorizes and forecloses.

Rishav Kumar Thakur is a third year PhD student in sociocultural anthropology at Columbia University. Rishav studies articulations of, and claims around, identity and belonging in Assam, India. In doing so, his work aims to understand patterns of

violence, dissent and queer imaginations of community in the region.

Chazelle Rhoden is a doctoral student in the Anthropology department. Her research investigates how Black communities navigate environmental conservation engendered by climate change. Her dissertation project brings analyses from afro-religious praxis, where relations with forests and Orixas are integral, to illuminate how social scientists may attend to the biophysical world and anti-Blackness in the face of planetary crisis. She conducts research in Salvador, Brazil, where practitioners of Candomblé have sustained eco-systems through their relationalities and intimacies with the Atlantic Forest.

Sara Jane Samuel is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Sociomedical Sciences. Her research on the intersection of American foreign policy, national security, and public health spans multiple disciplines. Sara's dissertation explores the ways in which mass vaccination campaigns were deployed as a diplomatic instrument by the United States between 1960 and 1990. With the IRCPL Summer Research Fellowship, Sara is grateful to be able to explore how local religious authorities in Mexico and Pakistan have historically mediated vaccine uptake. The main goal of Sara's research is to identify and highlight non-violent and non-militarized ways to protect American security interests and pursue global health equity.

Undergraduate Fellows

The Undergraduate Summer Fellowship supports travel and living expenses for summer research or internship opportunities for undergraduate students with a strong interest in the study of religion and/or secularism.

Lily Conable is a rising senior at Barnard College majoring in Religion. Her research interests include American Christianity, politics, early Christianity, Bible, and the theory of religion. This summer, she will research the Re-Imagining Community, a radically alternative Christian movement from the late 20th century, at Union Theological Seminary and the Minnesota Historical Society. She hopes her research will expand upon and trouble the existing scholarly narrative of American Christianity.

Alethea Harnish is an undergraduate multi-disciplined artist and playwright entering her final year in the religion department at Columbia University. Her senior thesis will explore contemporary forms of New Age Spirituality and how they are informed by recent developments in Quantum Theory, both of which took hold of American society alongside the hippie movement of 1960's and 1970's drug and anti-war culture. It will also demonstrate how all of these threads are intimately entangled with the emergence of contemporary cyberculture in a full-length theatrical performance, tentatively titled *this is your computer on drugs*, to be presented

on Columbia University's campus in Spring 2023. The play will be produced alongside the course she is assisting her thesis advisor, Mark C. Taylor, titled *Hippie Physics, Counterculture, Cyberculture*.

Dissertation Fellows

The Dissertation Fellowship program \$5000 awards to advanced PhD students. Fellows meet once a month with the director of IRCPL to present their research and to workshop chapters of their dissertation.

Anruo Bao is a Ph.D. candidate of Yiddish studies and comparative literature from the Department of Germanic Languages at Columbia University. Her academic interests include pre-modern Jewish mysticism, the literary presentation of the heretic experience, and modern Jewish literature. Now, she is writing her dissertation, *The Saturnine Messiah: On the Image of Sabbatai in 20th-century Jewish Literature*, which explores a 20th-century rise in interest in the life of Sabbatai Zevi, the 17th-century so-call Jewish messiah, on the part of Jewish writers.

Analía Lavin is a PhD candidate in the Department of Latin American and Iberian Cultures at Columbia University. Her research focuses on the intersection of scientific culture, spirituality and secularization through the lens of the naturist movement at the turn

of the twentieth century in Latin America. She holds an MA in Media Studies from New York University, where she was a Fulbright Fellow, as well as undergraduate degrees from Uruguay (Universidad de la República) and France (Université de Toulouse-Jean Jaurès).

Yea Jung Park is a PhD candidate in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Yea Jung specializes in Middle English literature, with particular interest in the intersections of social epistemology, affect, and rhetoric. Her research mines religious and secular medieval texts for their ways of imagining the process of extracting knowledge about the human interior from bodily comportment, showing how religious discourses such as *discretio spirituum* came to feed into daily processes of interpersonal judgment and social habits of mind.

Nick Tackes is PhD candidate in the Religion Department, with a focus on the intersection of Hinduism, health, media, and the environment. His research explores how large-scale religious institutions intervene in consumer culture in order to provide solutions to modern societal problems. Nick's dissertation project offers ethnographic analyses of two Hindu-adjacent groups—the Gayatri Pariwar and the Brahma Kumaris—and the social reforms, ritual practices, and branded goods they use to prepare for the end of the world as we know it.

The Claremont Prize For The Study Of Religion

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.

Timothy Cooper (University of Cambridge) was awarded the 2021-2022 Claremont Prize for the Study of Religion, for his work on the intersection of media and morality in contemporary Pakistan.

Timothy Cooper is a Leverhulme Trust & Isaac Newton Trust Early-Career Research Fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge. He is also affiliated with the Max-Planck-Cambridge Centre for Ethics, Economy, and Social Change and King's College, Cambridge. He received his PhD in Anthropology from University College London (UCL).

His winning manuscript, *Public Demand: Film, Islam, and Atmosphere in a Pakistani Marketplace* centers on Lahore's Hall Road, the largest electronics market in Pakistan. Once the center of film and media piracy in South Asia, it now specializes in smartphones and mobile accessories. Yet the economic promises and moral dangers of film continue

to loom large. Caught between their economic base in secular media and their responsibilities as devoted Muslims, Hall Road's traders frequently defer agency to the force of "public demand". This investment in the virtues of public morality is rooted in a long tradition of inquiry into what the relationship between film and faith should look, sound, and feel like for Pakistan's religiously diverse population. When theology cannot account for ambiguous affects and competing moral stakes, many look to adjudicate the good or bad *māḥaul* that can cling to film and media, using a word commonly translated into English as atmosphere. The book examines the environmental media and mediations that give sense to these felt forces through examples that emerge from Hall Road's economic, moral, and urban form. These include the preservation and censorship of film in and outside of the state bureaucracy, contestations surrounding heritage and urban infrastructure, and the production and circulation of sound and video recordings among the country's Shi'ī Islamic minority. Situated ethnographically among traders, consumers, collectors, archivists, cinephiles, and cinephobes, *Public Demand* argues that the atmospheric conditions of media in Pakistan provide ways of conceiving of moral thresholds that are mutable and affective, rather than fixed ethical standpoints.

People

Faculty Advisory Committee

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

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Madalyn De Jesus

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Co-Sponsored Events

A Religious Right to Abortion?

In this interdisciplinary conversation, a historian, clergy member, and attorney discussed whether the right to religious liberty includes a right to access, provide, and facilitate abortion care as a matter of conscience.

Rev. Dr. Cari Jackson, Director of Spiritual Care and Activism at the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, Professor Gillian Frank, historian of the pre-Roe activist group the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion, and Rupali Sharma, Senior Counsel & Director at The Lawyering Project participated in this panel event hosted by the Law, Rights, and Religion Project.

This event was organized by the Law, Rights, and Religion Project and cosponsored by IRCPL.

Unworlding: A Reading and Discussion with Author N.K. Jemisin

Author N.K. Jemisin read selections from her work and was joined in conversation by Jayna Brown (Pratt Institute) for a wide-ranging discussion on utopias, dystopias, science fiction, and Afro-Futurism.

This event was hosted by the Institute for the Study of Sexuality and Gender.

Partnerships

The Institute for African Studies

The Harriman Institute

The Law, Rights, and Religion Project

The Middle East Institute

Columbia Religious Life

The South Asia Institute

Office of Student Life

**The Center for Sustainable
Development**

The Weatherhead East Asian Institute

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