

Introduction to the Religious Studies Student Organization 2013 Undergraduate Research Conference: "The Experience of Religion"

By Taylor Wyman

Research, writing, and presentation are essential skills to be developed in the course of an undergraduate education. The importance of religion in human life is an equally important insight, which touches on many academic disciplines. The Religious Studies Student Organization at UWM decided to bring these skills, this insight, and these disciplines together by sponsoring its first Undergraduate Research Conference on April 6, 2013. The conference provided an opportunity for undergraduates to develop their research skills and to present their findings to an audience consisting of peers, faculty, and members of the community. In these Proceedings, you will discover the result of their efforts.

Prior to the conference, participants submitted an abstract of original research in any discipline, with at least half of its content pertaining to Religious Studies. Twelve papers were accepted from the disciplines of History, Philosophy, Art History, Anthropology, Classics, and Literature. They were separated into four similarly categorized panels: *Classical Civilizations*, *The Meaning of God/Religion*, *Judaism and Early Christianity*, and *Anglo-Saxon Religion and Paganism*. All sessions were plenary, and the best paper was honored with a special award: a painting donated by a local artist, David Leiberg. Dr. Norman Sullivan of Marquette University gave an invited lecture on the intersection of religion and his anthropological research throughout the world.

The panel on *Classical Civilizations* was moderated by Dr. David Mulroy. In "The Art and Artifacts Associated with the Cult of Dionysus," Alana Koontz examines the material culture associated with the cult of Dionysus and its festivals, in order to determine how these enhanced the experience of worship. "The Crucial Role Religion Played in the Conquests of Alexander the Great," by Tomi Vandergriff, analyzes the construction of the semi-divine identity of Alexander the Great through his sacrifices to pagan gods after victories in battle and on other occasions. The final paper in this panel, "The Portrayal of Constantine in Art and Architecture," won the Award for Best Paper in the Conference. Taylor Wyman explores the portrayal of Constantine in contemporary art, in order to define his style of leadership and to assess the authenticity of his conversion to Christianity.

The second panel, *The Meaning of God/Religion*, was moderated by Dr. Carlos Galvao-Sobrinho. In "Moral Vocation and Faith in God," Holiday Burke considers Immanuel Kant's moral argument, which weighs belief in God with morality and practical reason. In the second paper, entitled "Humanity: Coping With Divinity," Logan McDermott uses sources from the Ancient Near East to argue that religion functions mainly as a coping mechanism and a source of mental comfort. "Totems, Postulates, Declarations, and Book Clubs," by Travis Buechner, draws on the work of Emile Durkheim and postulates that humans seek order in a chaotic environment through belief in the sacred, which, he postulates, requires the creation of an absolute. Buechner suggests that humans will eventually find this outside of conventional religion--for example, in Physics.

The third panel, *Judaism and Early Christianity*, was moderated by Dr. J. David Hoeveler. "Health Outcomes in the Mellah of Marrakesh from 1879-1912," by Dana Lovrek, concentrates on Morocco's *mellahs*, land communities given to Jews originally for their protection, and the ways that Jewish traditions may have

mitigated threats to the health of the community. In "The Positive and Negative Outcomes of the Jewish Question," Emily Brzezinski explores movements for Jewish Emancipation and Zionism and their relationship to the Final Solution of the Nazi regime. In the last paper in this panel, "The Truth in History," Samantha Wanta revisits the quest for the "historical" Jesus. She calls for a post-modern reappraisal of historical method in the study of Jesus.

The final panel, *Anglo-Saxon Religion and Paganism*, was moderated by Dr. Bettina Arnold and Dr. Derek Counts. "In Your Wildest Memes" by Jordan Burich uses the prehistoric sites of Göbekli Tepe and Çatalhöyük as case studies for archaeological and anthropological research. Burich argues for the interpretation of ritual and religion within the framework of power and ideology in prehistoric societies. In "St. Cuthbert's Deathbed Speech: Why Did Bede Write a Second Prose Life?," Chris Hamilton compares four accounts of the life of St. Cuthbert: one by an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne, and the remaining three by the Venerable Bede. He explains why the bishop who commissioned the anonymous account so quickly turned to Bede for a second version. The final paper, "Instances of Religious Roles of the Anglo-Saxon Warrior Class From *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer*, *The Dream of the Rood*, and *Judith*" by Jessica McGillivray, distinguishes pre-Christian and Christian elements in these four poetical sources.

Following the Conference, participants were given one month to prepare and finalize their papers for publication. Thus, these e-Proceedings are the fruit of months of preparation, but they also reflect years of work by the Religious Studies Program and Student Organization to further the study and understanding of religion. A second conference is planned for 2014.

On behalf of the participants and planners of the Conference, I would like to thank all those who contributed to its success. They include: the Center for Student Involvement; Mr. Nigel Rothfels of the Office of Undergraduate Research; Dr. Rodney Swain, Dean of the College of Letters & Science; our faculty moderator, Dr. Judith Beall, who advised Benjamin Domer and Taylor Wyman in the planning and coordination of the Conference. We would also like to reiterate our thanks to the guest speaker, Dr. Norman Sullivan, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Marquette University, and to the judges of the paper contest, Dr. Stephen Beall, Dr. Katherine Milco, and Mr. David Leiberg, who also donated the prize from his own workshop. We are grateful to the faculty moderators of the four panels: Dr. Carlos Galvao-Sobrinho, Dr. Bettina Arnold, Dr. David Mulroy, Dr. David Hoeveler, and Dr. Derek Counts. Special thanks are due to Don McLeod for his part in putting together these e-Proceedings and those who assisted in this task, including Katherine Bowes, Kate Ganski, Tim Gritten, and Ewa Barczyk. In addition, we extend our gratitude to William James, Program Assistant for Religious Studies. Finally, we thank the many students and volunteers who contributed in other ways to the success of the Conference and to these e-Proceedings.

The comparative and scientific study of religion is a relative newcomer to the American Academy. UW-Milwaukee stands on the cutting edge of this inter-disciplinary endeavor. We have seen a dramatic expansion of the courses offered by the Religious Studies Program and of public events, such as the Conference represented here. We hope that these papers will increase your appreciation of the importance of religion in human life, and that they will whet your appetite to learn more.