THE THING THAT I HAVE VALUED MOST DURING MY TIME IN THE DEPARTMENT IS THE KNOWLEDGE AND PASSION OF THE PROFESSORS. THEIR EXCITEMENT MAKES LEARNING FROM THEM A VERY POSITIVE AND REWARDING EXPERIENCE.

Erin Clark, class of 2020

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Be sure to check us out on our social media:
The Rowland A. Sherrill Religious Studies Awards are made possible by the generosity of friends and family of Rowland A. "Tony" Sherrill (1944-2003). Professor Sherrill joined the IUPUI faculty in 1973 and was beloved by students and colleagues. He served for seventeen years as chair of the Religious Studies Department and helped found the IUPUI-based journal Religion and American Culture.

The Rowland A. Sherrill Prize recognizes the best paper submitted in an essay contest on the topic of religion and culture.

Winner of the 2020 award is Victoria Eckert, for her paper on "The Parallel of Religious Ritual and Abortion."

Dr. Matthew Condon praised how Victoria “adapts Victor Turner’s theory of ‘ritual process’ to the process of abortion. At once rigorous and original, Ms. Eckert refuses conventional solutions to a hotly contested topic.”

The Rowland A. Sherrill Outstanding Religious Studies Award recognizes an undergraduate who has made substantial contributions to the life of the department through scholarship and service.

The 2020 winner is Ahmed Abbas.

Dr. Andrea Jain wrote of Ahmed, “a double major in Religious Studies and Global and International Studies, Ahmed Abbas has made significant contributions to the culture of the school, the university campus, and the city at large. His enthusiasm for intellectual engagement and commitment to social justice are ongoing, and his ambition is inspiring.”

The Tony Sherrill Up-and-Coming Student Award recognizes a student in her/his first two years as a major or minor in the Department of Religious Studies who shows great academic promise and has contributed to fostering a greater understanding of religious studies on campus.

The 2020 winner is Mickey Yoder.

Dr. Peter Thuesen wrote “Michaela (Mickey) Yoder, a double major in Religious Studies and Global and International Studies, is a top-notch student who has discovered the joy of studying religions at home and abroad, from her ancestral Indiana Amish to Shiite Muslims in Iran.”
Commemorating Our Graduates…

Tribute to Erin Clark

What kind of person becomes so fascinated by a topic that she’ll travel more than 7,000 miles to learn more about it?

A person such as Erin Clark.

When Erin became interested in Tibetan culture, she wasn’t content simply to read about it in books. She traveled to Tibet to discover its culture firsthand. That’s the sort of enterprising, adventurous spirit Erin is.

Originally from Lafayette, Indiana, she first obtained an associate’s degree at Harrison College before starting at IUPUI. As a student in the Honors College, she blossomed academically, working in Professor Adam Hirsh’s pain laboratory in the School of Science as part of her psychology major while also pursuing a double major in religious studies.

I had the privilege of teaching her in three classes: Introduction to Christianity; American Religion; and Religion, Death, and Dying. In an autobiographical paper for the American Religion class, she wrote with affectionate humor about the diversity of opinion, both religious and secular, in her family. It highlighted one of her most endearing qualities: her gentle ability to appreciate all kinds of people, whether religious or skeptical, cooperative or curmudgeonly, urban or rural, liberal or conservative.

Erin consistently models this ethic in the classroom. In my Religion, Death, and Dying class, she completed two (yes, two!) final projects. In the first, she conducted a survey of healthcare workers on their attitudes and practices related to death in the workplace. For the second project, she traveled to Bloomington to interview a monk at the Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center about Buddhist teaching related to death. That she was so enterprising in researching these two projects bodes extremely well for her future: Erin ventures fearlessly into unfamiliar situations and seeks wisdom wherever it may be found. May she enjoy many successes on her journey!

--Dr. Peter Thuesen
Tribute to Victoria Eckert

Victoria Eckert’s award-winning essay “The Parallel of Religious Ritual and Abortion” showcases her talents and courage as a student of Religious Studies. Her essay takes an original look at the fraught issue of abortion by applying Victor Turner’s threefold theory of the “ritual process” to the process of abortion. Critically, she does so from the perspective of the woman who must negotiate the uncertainties of the procedure, from the hazardous moment the choice is made to uncertain recovery. Throughout, she steadfastly refuses conventional solutions to a hotly contested topic and, importantly, she proposes how religious communities may best consider the needs of the woman throughout the process.

In the classroom, Victoria has repeatedly demonstrated her capacity to synthesize unfamiliar academic theory and material with ease. Always prepared, she consistently has offered clear and astute comments in class that propel class discussion forward.

Of a subject matter that we all know can produce more heat than light, she consistently has asked perceptive, thoughtful questions on any given topic at hand. Her natural curiosity never has detracted from the aim of any particular lecture or classroom exercise; rather, she always managed to raise the level of any class discussion with clarity and wit by offering astute insights and by making connections that build on other students’ remarks.

Victoria is a gifted student, full of promise, whose future is as bright as she is.

--Dr. Matthew Condon
Tribute to Ahmed Abbas

How lucky for me that you happened to take my Introduction to Religion course in your first semester at IUPUI. We actually met a few weeks earlier when you initiated the connection with an email sharing a bit of your background as the son of parents from Pakistan. Ever since, I have enjoyed watching and listening as you dance to your original beat!

Your loud-and-proud identification as South Asian speaks volumes about you. You affirm the harmony of difference and solidarity in all that you do. South Asian identity spans different countries and cultural, religious, and political allegiances. It also witnesses to historical and regional kinship across the global South Asian Diaspora. You groove to this harmony of kinetic particularity in the treble clef and unifying chords of connection in the bassline. Dissonance doesn’t frighten you because your heart drives toward deeper understanding and fuller relationship through sharing, growth, and transformation.

What moves you have mastered during four years of experimenting with ideas, speaking your mind, listening to people, and leading change by encouraging everyone to be as passionate, risky, and committed as you are. Your personal beat is a two-stepper, for sure. Warm and intellectual. Generous and critical. Argumentative and attentive. Socially-engaged and self-reflective. Always appreciative of the communities who support you and dedicated to recognizing people and groups of people who are overlooked, excluded, or oppressed.

And how you sing your melodies. One of my personal favorites is your tune, “Religious Studies is dope!” Many times you have shared how Religious Studies courses helped you develop your voice. What a voice you have—capable of jaw-dropping intellectual riffs in which you digest and apply complex theories to analyze economic, political, and cultural arrangements of power.

The Shariah-ization of zakat. The obliteration of secularism. Unlike some intellectuals, you do not stop at diagnostic abstraction. You act; your community is a wider public. You have translated your ideas, style, and vocabulary beyond the academy, teaching community members how to prevent Islamophobia, inviting fellow students’ artistry to express identities, and learning with and embracing your peers from Dove House and Tower Dining Hall.

Wow, how much you have accomplished in four years at IUPUI and how many ways you have contributed to the classroom, on campus, and in the community. Masarachia Fellow. Social Justice Scholar. Muslim Youth Collective Co-Founder. Our Religious Studies faculty is delighted to recognize you as the 2020 Rowland A. Sherrill Outstanding Religious Studies Student. Keep dancing as you embark on law school!

--Dr. David Craig
The Deeper Meaning of Illness by Dr. Rachel Wheeler

Illness often induces a crisis of faith. When a new kind or severity of illness confronts us, that spiritual crisis is also an epistemological crisis. It shakes the foundations of our knowledge. Our inherited ways of thinking cannot make sense of what we are experiencing.

I learned this from my scholarship long before I learned it personally through my own confrontation with illness. My research focuses on Native peoples’ encounters with Christian missionaries in the eighteenth century. People, whether individuals or communities, rarely change religions or adopt dramatically new religious practices when things are going well. But when crisis lands, spiritual experimentation soon follows. Native peoples who turned to Christianity generally only did so once their community had reached a breaking point. By some estimates, the new diseases brought with Europeans resulted in a mortality rate of up to 90% within the first half century of contact. Obviously, such epidemics resulted in extreme stress: the loss not only of family and friends, but also storehouses of knowledge and labor that sustained community. In desperation, some Native peoples appealed to the God brought by Europeans to confront the diseases brought by Europeans.

When I faced a health crisis of my own in recent years and found little help through conventional Western medicine, I became an exile. What I understood as a physiological problem unleashed an epistemological crisis as well. The medical framework I had put my faith in had no answers, and proved unable to make sense of my experience, let alone heal me. For years, this profound sense of alienation led me in desperation from one alternative healing practitioner and modality to another, at one point spending way too much money on a “medical intuitive” who told me to eat steak and iceberg lettuce. I did finally find something that worked (it wasn’t the steak!), but the path was not a straight line.

After years of feeling terrible and consulting doctor after doctor, I was told that I had been exposed to Lyme disease. I was thrilled to finally have an answer. But that answer did not bring healing. Instead, it left me feeling invaded by an enemy I could never hope to expel even if I escalated the weaponry, thus risking serious collateral damage.

It was another alternative practitioner (who is also an MD) who helped me reframe my thinking, telling me the goal was a mutual non-aggression pact. He said there was no reason I couldn’t live quite happily as host to this organism, and most importantly, that my body had the knowledge to do this, it just needed a spark to reignite its healing powers. I got better. My restoration was not about eliminating the disease, but finding an epistemological framework that allowed me to reframe my relationship to it as host rather than victim.

With the coronavirus pandemic, many people are experiencing similar feelings of helplessness in the face of a novel threat. No one has the acquired immunity that might protect us, and our medical system is being overwhelmed, with no agreed upon answers. Many of us are spending anxious days over-consuming news in hopes that we will see that someone has made sense of this epidemic and can narrate our way into an “after.”

The anxiety that comes from not knowing is already pushing people to desperately cling to premature promises of a cure. I understand that desperation. But the deeper question that medicine cannot answer is how to heal – how to restore a sense of wholeness as we learn how to live with a virus that has revealed the many ways our society is broken.
**Meet A Minor**

**John Upchurch** is a graduating senior majoring in History and minoring in Religious Studies. After being accepted into three top-notch graduate programs, he decided to pursue his master’s in history at IUPUI. His goal is to complete a Ph.D. in Environmental History at either Harvard, Yale or McGill.

John’s passion for history is infectious. “*There is something about history,*” he says, “*you almost feel like an adventurer. You may not be hacking through the jungle as in days of old, but there is still that excitement of finding the answer to a question and it feels like a fantastic epiphany has just occurred.*”

In particular, John is interested in the power of history to affect social and environmental justice. “*There are a lot of depressing things that you learn in history - so many stories that haven’t been told about scandal and outright banditry,*” he says. “*My romantic ideal of being a historian is to tell some of these stories - I like the idea that people might not have gotten justice in their time, but we can give them justice now by telling their stories.*”

John took his first class in religious studies with Dr. Condon because “*it sounded interesting. I’d never considered religion as an academic field before. My sister also earned a religious studies minor at IUPUI and she encouraged me to do so as well. Up to that point I had never thought ‘oh, religion is something that academics discuss and theorize about.’ It had never occurred to me that anybody outside of clerics discussed these things.*”

**Q: Why Religious Studies?**

**A:** Religious studies broadens your perspective and teaches you to be more humane. The courses that I have taken in the department have dispelled a lot of the mystery and stereotypes that surround various religions. They have taught me to be more patient, sensitive, and imaginative and made me a much more curious and imaginative historian.

I think I’ve gained a much broader ability to interact with diverse peoples as a result. I can confidently say that this minor has greatly improved my skill set as a historian and broadened my thinking. The methods of inquiry I learned in the capstone carry over well into my major. I know my minor has positioned me competitively among other graduate students.

I also love the diversity of thought among the faculty. There is a diverse set of research specialties among the faculty and they have some of the most imaginative courses.

**Q: Any Favorite Classes?**

**A:** Religions of the African Diaspora (R328), taught by Dr. Hayes, has been my favorite by far. It really dispels a lot of stereotypes and opens your eyes to a rich world of religion and lived experience. That class more than any taught me to always carefully consider any subject of inquiry and challenge even my most basic assumptions about them. I especially enjoyed reading Dr. Hayes’s book *Holy Harlots: Femininity, Sexuality, and Black Magic in Brazil.* It is a look into a culture I don’t think many people know.

**Q: Advice for Jaguars?**

**A:** I think for any young scholar, religious studies is a fantastic field that will stimulate your mind and nurture your curiosity. It will help you both in your personal life and in your ability to work with diverse groups of people. That is something that appears a lot in professional job requests.
Kamna Gupta is a graduating senior majoring in Medical Humanities and Health Studies and minoring in Religious Studies. She hopes to use what she has learned from both these degrees to further pursue her studies in medical ethics. She says, “I hope to better understand religious diversity in society and in medicine especially how it guides medical decision making and end of life care.”

Kamna decided to pursue studies in religion after her brother, an IUPUI graduate, recommended taking a few courses. She says, “I decided to try one out my first semester on campus, and absolutely loved it!”

The Religious Studies faculty is another reason that drew Kamna to this field of study. She states, “I have made friends and mentors through my time in IUPUI who I can truly rely on to support me and my academic endeavors. The Religious Studies faculty truly care about their students.”

Q: What have you gained through studying religion?
A: There are a multitude of things I learned - predominantly, about different religions, but more deeply about how religious values and worldviews affect decision making and political stances. This was really important to me because understanding people’s religions helped me understand why and how they make medical care decisions.

Q: Advice for Jaguars?
A: Religion has applications in every part of life. It is worth understanding and analyzing how religion and spirituality have affected modern life and how it is used to further political and societal agendas. It is also important to be open-minded about religious beliefs and the best way to do that is via studying religions and their framework.

Q: Final Thoughts?
A: Taking a class in Religious Studies shaped my undergraduate career and how I view my professional goals. This could not have been done without the support of the liberal arts staff, especially Dr. Matthew Condon who inspired me to continue in Religious Studies and Dr. David Craig who pushed me out of my comfort zone multiple times to grow in this field and beyond.
Tornado God: American Religion and Violent Weather

By Peter J. Thuesen

One of the earliest sources of humanity’s religious impulse was severe weather, which ancient peoples attributed to the wrath of storm gods.

Enlightenment thinkers derided such beliefs as superstition and predicted they would pass away as humans became more scientifically and theologically sophisticated.

But in America, scientific and theological hubris came face-to-face with the tornado, nature’s most violent windstorm.

Striking the United States more than any other nation, tornadoes have consistently defied scientists’ efforts to unlock their secrets.

Meteorologists now acknowledge that even the most powerful computers will likely never be able to predict a tornado’s precise path.

Meet Dr. David Craig

Chair of Religious Studies!

Background
Dr. Craig was born and raised in Oberlin, Ohio. In his senior year of college, Dr. Craig took “Religion and Alienation,” a course about the critics of religion who question, analyze, and examine religion’s negative effects - this gave Dr. Craig a new perspective and way to think about the world! This spark of interest led Dr. Craig to take more courses with the same professor. Although he worked with the Environmental Protection Agency after graduation, Dr. Craig would find himself coming home to read authors like Søren Kierkegaard until late into the night. This is when he knew he was hooked on Religious Studies!

Favorite Course
One of Dr. Craig’s favorite courses to teach is “Consumption, Ethics and the Good Life.” This “big think” course looks at contemporary consumption through the lenses of ethics, critical theory, public policy, economics, and religion. This course fascinates Dr. Craig because it shows him how complicated issues really are. In all, he says, “I like courses in which students teach me...and this is one of those courses.”
Similarly, tornadoes have repeatedly brought Americans to the outer limits of theology, drawing them into the vortex of such mysteries as how to reconcile suffering with a loving God and whether there is underlying purpose or randomness in the universe.

In this groundbreaking history, Peter Thuesen captures the harrowing drama of tornadoes, as clergy, theologians, meteorologists, and ordinary citizens struggle to make sense of these death-dealing tempests.

He argues that in the tornado, Americans experience something that is at once culturally peculiar (the indigenous storm of the national imagination) and religiously primal (the sense of awe before an unpredictable and mysterious power).

He also shows that in an era of climate change, the weather raises the issue of society’s complicity in natural disasters. In the whirlwind, Americans confront the question of their own destiny—how much is self-determined and how much is beyond human understanding or control.