

Spring 2013

## Philosophy & World Religions Department Newsletter, v6, Spring 2013

University of Northern Iowa. Department of Philosophy and World Religions.

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**UNI** DEPARTMENT OF  
PHILOSOPHY & WORLD RELIGIONS

DEPARTMENT NEWSLETTER  
SPRING 2013

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# NOTES FROM THE HEAD



We have had an excellent academic year. Among other things, two of our faculty members, James Robinson and Betty DeBerg, who were on a two-year phased retirement contract due to cutbacks last year, have been allowed to renegotiate their position, so both of

these fine faculty will be with us for the foreseeable future. Professor Robinson will initiate a new phased retirement agreement, and Professor DeBerg will be joining the department full-time. Retaining these faculty is an extraordinary boon to the department, especially for our religion program.

Our department offered a new religion course this semester, "New Religious Movements," taught by Betty DeBerg. The course has focused on two new traditions, Mormonism and Scientology. As part of the course, Professor DeBerg brought her students to Nauvoo, Illinois, the last town in which Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, lived with his followers before his death. Nauvoo not only houses Smith's home and grave, but it also features a newly rebuilt temple that replaces the old Mormon temple in that town.

It is wonderful that we also have so many graduates from our programs this year. If we include those who graduated last December and this May and August, we have 12 graduates from our Philosophy Major and 8 graduates from our Major in the Study of Religion. You will find a listing of these graduates later in this newsletter.

During this year, our faculty have been very busy restructuring our majors. At the center of the restructuring was our effort to identify what we took to be the key goals and outcomes that we can expect of students when they graduate from our programs. We organized our course offerings around these goals. The principle behind this organization is that students tend to enjoy their courses more fully when they understand their purposes and goals and how they all fit within a larger program of study. These restructured programs will constitute exciting experiments, which will be initiated in the fall semester, 2014.

While there is much to celebrate this year, we nevertheless are very sorry to lose one of our faculty members, Harry Brod, who will be joining the sociologists in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology in the fall. As many of you may know, Professor Brod specializes in men's studies. In fact, he is one of the international leaders in this area of gender studies, having helped to create the subject of study several decades ago. During his time with our department, Professor Brod has taught in the humanities sequence of the Liberal Arts Core, as well as several courses in his special area of study, such as "Money, Sex, and Power: Theories of Race, Class and Gender," and a sociology course, "Men and Masculinities." This year he published his most recent book, "Superman is Jewish?" – which we featured in our last newsletter (Fall, 2012). It has been great to have Professor Brod among us, and we wish him the best as he moves on.

There is also some exciting news about Professor Susan Hill, who has been selected the new Director of the Center for the Enhancement of Teaching. UNI has been without a center for teaching for a number of years. Given UNI's commitment to undergraduate teaching, faculty are delighted that they once again have a place to go to develop and participate in a community of teaching, and to share and learn about improved teaching methods. Being one of the best teachers on campus, Professor Hill is the perfect person to take on the leadership of this Center. Department faculty are also pleased that she will continue to participate in our departmental affairs, and to teach one religion course a semester for our program.

It is always great to hear for our alumni. I encourage you to send us a short message which we can include in next year's newsletter. Your peers are eager to hear about what you have been doing. And if you are in the area, please stop by to let us know what you've been up to. It is always great touching base with all of you who have meant so much to us over the years.

Best wishes to you all,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jerry Sorleson". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Jerry Sorleson  
Head of the Department

# ON ART AND CENSORSHIP

by Margaret Holland



In 1979 the Iowa legislature passed a law to ensure that the fine arts would play an integral role in state construction projects. A small percentage (.5%) of the total cost of the construction and renovation of state buildings is spent on acquiring art to be displayed in or near the buildings. As a result of this legislation, UNI has an Art and Architecture Committee which acquires contemporary artworks for display on campus. The Committee's Vision Statement suggests that public art should be a vital part of the campus experience, to enrich the quality of campus life, and to expand appreciation of the visual arts.

Questions about the role of art on campus have arisen lately; there seems to be some disagreement about what qualities UNI should look for when acquiring new artworks. In the Fall 2012 Newsletter, Professor Soneson wrote about his experience of serving on the Art and Architecture Committee. He discussed his impression that some members of the Committee were uncomfortable with challenging or unsettling artworks. Apparently, some Committee members view the Dennis Oppenheim sculpture *Stage Set for a Film #1* by the WRC (pictured above) as foolish. They would like to make sure that, in the future, money is not spent on similar works. Though I was not privy to the Committee's discussions, since I teach Philosophy of Art, Professor Soneson has invited me to share my thoughts regarding the role of art on campus.

Over the years I've heard many comments about the Oppenheim sculpture, virtually all of them negative. While I am not going to suggest that this sculpture is a great work of art, I do think it is one of the best works of

art on campus. I appreciate it in part because it makes a demand on the viewer to use her or his imagination, it has multiple layers of meaning, and it challenges the viewer to examine it from different perspectives. *Stage Set for a Film #1* presents a facade which includes elements that represent the activities one might engage in at the WRC, e.g., weights and a diving board. Perhaps it suggests that when one works out at the WRC, one is constructing a facade to present to the world? Oppenheim's work is particularly valuable on a college campus because it requires the viewer to engage with it, to use imagination, to be playful and to participate in the creative process. This type of artwork, which requires activity on the part of the viewer, may appear to be quite different from, say, a pleasing representational painting or other seemingly straightforward work. However, in the case of both the Oppenheim piece and in the case of a representational work, it would be helpful if the viewer had some understanding of the history of the particular art form. Being able to place a work of art in its historical context, to understand what the artist is responding to and influenced by, may be useful for appreciating the work. In the case of non-representational art, we may be more aware that we do not understand the work than we are aware of not understanding representational works. With representational art, we may assume all we need is to see that it mirrors the world in a pleasing and accurate manner. Non-representational art does not allow us to make such easy assumptions.

Whether or not the Oppenheim sculpture pleases the campus community is, I think, less important than whether we think carefully about art and the role of art on campus. I suggest that genuine works of art bear and require repeated viewings. They sustain extended examination, both because they have a complex set of features which require time to perceive, and because background knowledge of historical context deepens our perceptions of the works. Art should serve the educational mission of the university. In order for art to provide an educational experience, the audience needs to understand that, as in any academic discipline taught in university classes, art requires openness to learning something new and patience to withhold judgment until one understands the work. UNI could further its educational mission by providing regular tours of campus artwork. With knowledgeable guides, we could come to have a better understanding of the art on campus.

# ON FREEDOM AND EQUALITY

by Jordan Bancroft-Smithe

When I was asked to contribute the fourth part of this series in the Department of Philosophy and World Religions newsletter on Freedom and Equality, I wasn't sure what I could add to the conversation. Dr. Soneson, Dr. Clohesy, and Dr. Robinson had already contributed a great deal in the previous three parts. So I decided to look for common themes between the three articles and see if I could find some way to bring them all together, and what better way to do so than through my own philosophical lens as a student at an institution of higher learning. Dr. Soneson briefly wrote about free action and the implications those actions might have on other people, Dr. Clohesy wrote about freedom and equality both in our laws and in our market, and Dr. Robinson wrote on the meaning of the word "freedom" as also encompassing social justice.

In what way are these three different perspectives on freedom and equality linked? I believe they are inextricably linked through education, specifically the importance of equality in education. In our technologically progressive society, it is more important than ever to receive an education.

The American Dream is a term that gets tossed around a lot when talking about these three things; freedom, equality, and education. Many see the American Dream as a goal, as an end product. Whether you struck it rich or have become famous beyond measure, these seem to be the things people think of these days when you mention the American Dream. But I think of the American Dream as something different. I think of the American Dream as the framework which enables us the freedom and the equality to pursue what it is that we do best. And I believe that education is the vehicle that allows us to navigate this framework and enables us to achieve our highest potential as human beings.

I see education like a train. It takes you from point A to point B. Some people get off earlier than others, but in the end they all get to their destination. Everyone has their own destination in mind, and we all wish for the freedom to choose what that destination is. The problem is that not everyone has that freedom. For us to prosper individually, and consequently as a society, as many barriers as possible need to be removed from our education system, otherwise

the earlier stops are going to be overcrowded and there will be too many people vying for the same destinations. Of course, the issue at stake is that of social mobility, which is an integral part of the American Dream, and life in general.

This is why institutions such as comprehensive public universities, community colleges, or even public primary and secondary schools are so important to our society today. Their purpose is to provide the means for citizens to get from point A to point B when it comes to social mobility. Through hard work and perseverance any individual should be able to achieve their own "American Dream," which in turn makes for a successful society.

By having barriers which prevent people from continuing on to the appropriate destination, or from even getting on the train at all, progress stagnates. The resources at the end of the line get loaded upon too few people, and the resources towards the beginning of the line are spread too thinly among too many people. Those resources found in between become underutilized as too few people make it that far, which creates an ever-widening gap between the two ends of the line.

One point I'm making is that freedom and equality are so related that equality begets freedom, and the freedom others have achieved begets equality for others. By maintaining our support for public institutions of learning, we can achieve some measurable amount of freedom and equality for everyone. But the fight to maintain this modicum of support for education isn't going to be easy. For years there have been forces at work to dismantle our education system, and it is becoming ever increasingly more important to remain vigilant against these forces.

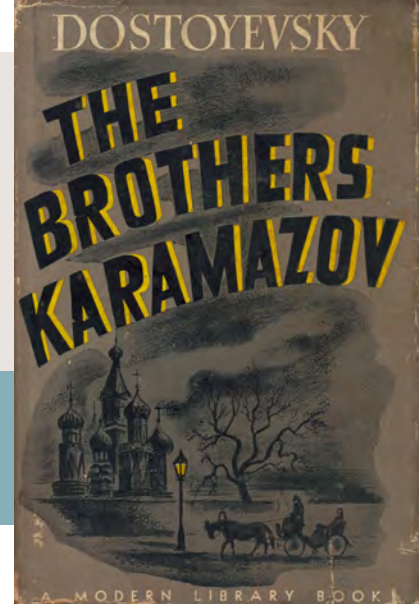
Jordan is a fifth-year Philosophy and Music student, graduating this May. He has served as UNI's student body president for the 2012-2013 school year, and has been instrumental in reviving the Philosophy Club, serving as its president for the past two semesters



# THE MOST IMPORTANT BOOK I EVER READ

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN BURNIGHT:

## *The Brothers Karamazov* - FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY



The obvious choice for the most important book Assistant Professor of Religion John Burnight has ever read would be the Bible. It is, after all, what his academic work focuses on. The Bible has influenced thought and culture since its creation and remains one of the most widely-known and well-read books in the world. However, if we discount the Bible when talking with a biblical scholar, the most important book Burnight has ever read is *The Brothers Karamazov*, the final novel by Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky. It tells the story of four brothers: one a novice in the local monastery, one an atheist, one living the life of a sensualist, and one illegitimate son working as a servant in the father's house. When their father is murdered, we assume that one of the sons is guilty. However, what is truly intriguing about this book is what is beyond the plot: the extraordinarily complex and intriguing issues dealing with the big questions of philosophy and religion.

Burnight first read this novel as an undergrad. He had just finished reading *Crime and Punishment*, also by Dostoyevsky, which he found on a list of top 100 books a person should read in a lifetime. A friend suggested he continue with *The Brothers Karamazov*. Now, he has finished all but one of Dostoyevsky's major works (he is currently reading *The Devils*), and this one still resonates with him.

Burnight cites three chapters that really stuck with him over the years. The first is titled "Rebellion," and is mainly a discussion between Alyosha, the novice monk, and Ivan, the atheist. Taking place early in the novel, Ivan questions the existence of God and brings to light the problem of evil. How can Alyosha believe in a god that is all powerful, all knowing, and all good, yet allows there to be evil in the world. If this god exists, Ivan would not worship him.

In the next chapter, "The Grand Inquisitor," Ivan describes Jesus returning to earth

during the Spanish Inquisition. He is arrested, thrown into jail, and interrogated by the cardinal. In essence, this chapter puts Jesus on trial, and the cardinal argues that humans cannot handle the freedom that he gave them. He justifies the control and structure of the church, due to the innate need of humans to be servile. Burnight finds importance in this chapter because it shows a critique of the church, yet a belief in both God and Christianity. Furthermore, he finds himself intrigued by the psychological insights presented in this chapter.

The third chapter that stands out in Burnight's eyes is called "Ivan's Nightmare," and occurs much later in the book. Here, the devil visits Ivan in a fever dream, making him question all his prior beliefs. This chapter raises epistemological questions, especially when it comes to religion. Ivan does not believe that the devil exists, and is convinced that he is talking to himself, but somewhere there remains that sliver of doubt. If the devil exists, then so can God.

Therefore, there is a tension at the heart of *The Brothers Karamazov* between what Dostoyevsky himself believes and the theories he puts forth in the book. He advances the argument against God, while retaining his own belief. Burnight believes this is a testament to the sophistication of Dostoyevsky's thinking, that he is able to see multiple sides of the issue and present them fairly. Furthermore, Burnight finds it extremely compelling the way these issues bear upon Dostoyevsky's own life, for he lived a fairly decadent lifestyle, often broke because of his gambling habits, yet there is a profound spirituality in his writing. "In his personal life," continues Burnight, "Dostoyevsky was greatly flawed. Many biblical characters are the same way; Moses and David both did great things, but they were flawed."

"This book fundamentally altered how I

look at literature and the human condition," says Burnight. Even now, it still holds an influence over him. After going through grad school, he now knows more about the subject matters of religion and philosophy, but this has made him approach the book differently; in fact, he says, "if anything, it made me appreciate it more."

*The Brothers Karamazov*, more than any other book in Burnight's opinion, demonstrates the ability of a story to convey moral and philosophical truths. It shows that you can find truths, other than just historical truths, in fiction. This idea impacted how Burnight teaches the Bible, because people sometimes forget to see that the Bible is more than just a historical record but contains exceedingly important truths.

As a result, *The Brothers Karamazov* is the most important book John Burnight has ever read because it has so affected his frame of mind and therefore the way he approaches philosophy and religion. Its sophisticated arguments made him truly think about these subjects and come to his own conclusions.

Although *The Brothers Karamazov* may be the most important book that Burnight has ever read, it is not his favorite. A favorite, according to Burnight, is one that elicits an emotional response, and provides entertainment throughout the read. Therefore, his favorite is *Crime and Punishment*, which, while dealing with some of the same themes as *The Brothers Karamazov*, has a tighter story and a more gripping plot. "I couldn't put it down," he says. However, it is interesting that his favorite and the most important are by the same author. Actually, Burnight says that he would choose *The Brothers Karamazov* as his second favorite and *Crime and Punishment* as the second most important book he has ever read.

# JEROME



Religion and philosophy have always been a huge part of Dr. Jerome Soneson's life. Before his interests broadened to encompass philosophical and theological questions, he planned on following in his grandfather's footsteps in becoming a minister. While attending divinity school and exploring the possibility of entering the ministry, however, Soneson became convinced that teaching was his calling, following in his father's footsteps—who taught philosophy and religion at the college level. "I was too drawn to critical theological reflection to ever be a successful minister," he says.

Soneson took a number of classes from his father in college, and cites his influence as one of the most crucial shaping forces in his own life. "He was an exciting and stimulating teacher and shaped my vision of what it is to teach at the college level."

Soneson did his graduate work at Harvard, receiving a Master of Divinity degree from Harvard Divinity School, and a M.A. and a Ph.D. from Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in the Study of Religion. Gordon Kaufman, Soneson's doctoral advisor, was another huge influence. Soneson not only admired Kaufman's "extraordinary capacity to think critically," but also how his theology informed the way in which he lived his life.

Soneson's own area of study is theology, which he identifies as "critical reflection about human talk about God." Kaufman influenced his study tremendously, for he addressed some of Soneson's own deepest questions—questions about "epistemology in light of historical relativity and scientific methods, about ethics in light of religious pluralism, and about theology in light of human evil." For Soneson, theology remains a cultural matter, dealing with how God is talked about and what individuals take to be their most important interests. This combination of theology, ethics, history, and philosophy is exceedingly important in Soneson's mind because "if we don't think about these matters, sooner or later we will end up doing horrible things ... all the while thinking that what we are doing is good."

# SONESON

## PROFESSOR OF RELIGION

Soneson has now spent twenty-two years teaching at UNI, the past four of those as the head of the department. Being the head of the department allows Soneson to focus on administrative work, such as writing reports, setting up schedules, leading meetings, and so on. His main focus these days is on the development and growth of the department as a whole. Although this does not allow him as much time in classes, heads are still expected to teach one class per semester, including the summer. Soneson rotates through teaching a two-year course load which includes "Religion and Ethics," "Philosophy of Religion," "Humanities I," and "Humanities III." He also teaches a LAC capstone course titled "The Holocaust in Literature and Film" during the summer. These courses each present their different challenges, interests, and strengths. He frequently challenges himself in his classes to prompt student interest. "As head," Soneson continues, "my greatest challenge is to help raise morale. This is a difficult issue in the department, given the threat of losing our majors that we faced last spring. Even though we were able to keep the majors, the very idea that we were expendable is extraordinarily disheartening. Responding to this problem is a long-term matter, and involves identifying realistic reassurances, supporting professional opportunity for faculty, encouraging our student clubs,

helping to build community among faculty and students, and so on."

Soneson hopes that students see their studies in the department as "the first-class education it is, something that deepens and enriches their intellectual and personal life, and that prepares them to live an exciting and responsible life." In fact, this is one of the most important things about a college education in general, according to Soneson. Socrates, he notes, said that "there is nothing more important than discussing virtue every day, ... for the unexamined life is not worth living." Soneson uses this quotation to guide his own understanding about the purpose and value of education. He believes that a good education helps students think critically about good and evil, and in doing so, it helps them avoid identifying "difference" or "otherness" as wrong or evil. Philosophy and the study of religion, in particular, help students interpret human difference, and even conflict that might arise due to difference, as an opportunity for deeper understanding and reconciliation. In a world in which humans now have the power to destroy most of life, he concludes, "there seem to be few things more important and more practical than an good education in philosophy and the study of religion."



# END <sup>OF</sup> THE YEAR LUNCHEON



The faculty of the Philosophy and World Religions Department hosted the annual End of the Year Luncheon to honor graduates and celebrate with majors, minors, faculty, and friends on April 25, 2013. Lunch was served as the graduates were presented with cards signed by the faculty and friends gathered to discuss achievements, events, and future plans.

## JORDAN BANCROFT-SMITHE



### **Majors in Philosophy and Music**

**Hometown:** Waverly, IA

**Future Plans:** "My plans right now are to work and pay off some loans while exploring options in this area. Then I hope to eventually go to graduate school."

**What does your major mean to you?** "The philosophy major has done so much for me in my time here at UNI. Because of the skills I learned in class from my professors I feel like I am prepared to pursue my options to the best of my abilities."

## CHRISTIAN BRANTLEY

### **Major in Philosophy**

**Hometown:** Homewood, IL

## ROBERT CONWAY



### **Major in Philosophy and a minor in Ethics**

**Hometown:** Polk City, IA

**Future Plans:** Rob graduated in December and plans on advancing his career with American Income before opening his own gastropub.

**What does your major mean to you?** "Studying philosophy has been the single greatest asset working for me to quickly learn, interpret, and use information within the working world. With it I see systems, solutions and their practical application to the problems before me. Combined with the communications skills I picked up in college, skills which can not be taught in any classroom, I am confident in my role as a young professional."

## JANEY DECHOW

### Major in the Study of Religion with minors in Textiles and Apparel and Ethics

**Hometown:** Spring Grove, IL

**Future Plans:** Janey is moving to Virginia Beach, getting married in June, and looking for a year of experience before pursuing a masters in counseling.

**What does your major mean to you?** "No feeling compares to the ones I receive from walking out of a class full of intense, and profoundly inspiring discussion. This major has taught me so much in and outside of the class, and that is an education worth having. I love UNI's religion department and every teach I have had. Because if this major, I can mean it when I say: I am going to miss going to class at UNI."

## KELSEY DELAP

### Majors in the Study of Religion and Biology (Biomedical Emphasis)

**Hometown:** Charles City, IA

**Future Plans:** Kelsey graduated in December and plans on attending the University of Iowa to pursue a master's degree in public health.

**What does your major mean to you?** "The courses within the Study of Religion major helped me develop into a well-rounded student. The completion of this program has given me confidence that I will be able to write, speak, and think at the graduate student and professional level."

## JON DOLAN

### Major in the Study of Religion

**Hometown:** Marble Rock, IA

**Future Plans:** "I will be attending Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, to pursue a Master's of Divinity degree to eventually become a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)."

**What does your major mean to you?** "The best thing about studying religion at UNI is that one has an opportunity to study not just Christianity, but many of the world's major religions. This will allow me to be a more well rounded pastor to my parishioners, especially when they come to me with questions about Buddhism or Mormonism or Islam or Judaism, just to name a few religions that I had an opportunity to study at UNI."

## JOSEPH ENABNIT

### Major in Philosophy

**Hometown:** Radcliffe, IA

**Future Plans:** Joe will be taking graduate classes in Cognitive Science at University of Minnesota.

**What does your major mean to you?** "The philosophy major has helped me to grow into a free thinking, critical, observant person with the ability to think outside of the box and to solve complex problems. No other major at this university does a better job of equipping students with critical thinking, reading, and writing skills, and it often successfully instills a lifelong interest in studying philosophy and continued learning."

## ALEXANDER GUZMAN

### Major in Humanities

**Hometown:** Waterloo, IA

## TOM HEATHERSHAW

**Major in the Study of Religion****Hometown:** Waterloo, IA**Future Plans:** Thomas plans to enroll in Loras Seminary in the fall of 2013 in Dubuque, Iowa, to prepare for the Catholic priesthood.**What does your major mean to you?** "I've always been interested in religion growing up and it has been mind opening to learn about other cultures and religions that you do not experience in the United States. It gives you a sense of respect for people that have different cultures and beliefs from you. I enjoyed all my classes at UNI and encourage everyone to take at least one religion course at UNI. Some of the best professors teach these courses."

## XIAO QING HU (RICKIE)

**Major in Philosophy****Hometown:** San Francisco, CA**Future Plans:** Rickie plans to simply "be himself" and figure out life as it comes.**What does your major mean to you?** His major is important to him because it enabled him to figure out who he really is.

## NATHAN KONRARDY

**Majors in Philosophy and Communication (Interpersonal)****Hometown:** Durango, IA

## LAYA LIEBSELLER

**Majors in the Study of Religion and Anthropology****Hometown:** West Des Moines, IA

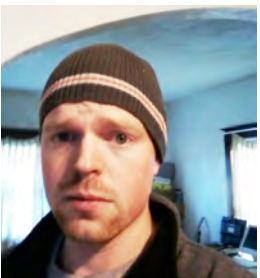
## BENJAMIN LYNCH

**Majors in Philosophy and Criminology****Hometown:** Charles City, IA

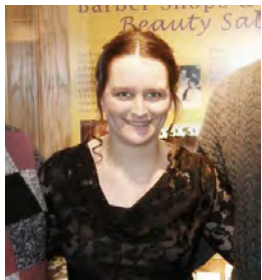
## DINAH MAXWELL

**Major in Humanities****Hometown:** Keswick, IA

## NICHOLAS OLSON

**Majors in Philosophy and Computer Science****Hometown:** Wheeling, IL**Future Plans:** "My post graduation plans have fallen through twice now in the past year, so I am re-evaluating and hoping that the third try will be a charm. However, I plan on working for a at least a year or two in my chosen field before thinking about a graduate program, so that I might have an idea of exactly what I want my specialty to be."**What does your major mean to you?** "Majoring in philosophy might have seemed like a strange second major for an aspiring computer scientist, but its heavy focus on logic make the two quite compatible. Additionally, it helped to enhance critical thinking and evaluation skills which are crucial in any profession or major."

## EMILY O'LOUGHLIN



### **Majors in Philosophy and History with a minor in Art**

**Hometown:** Kelley, IA

**Future Plans:** Emily has recently accepted a position as the Assistant Director at the Parker Historical Society of Clay County based in Spencer, Iowa.

**What does your major mean to you?** "The philosophy major and my involvement in Philosophy Club has helped me expand and refine my skills in critical thinking, problem solving, self-reflection, leadership, and communication both written and spoken. I would not have achieved all that I have in my college career without the skills I have gained from the major."

## JACKELIN RANGEL

### **Major in Humanities**

**Hometown:** San Antonio, TX

## GREG STAEBELL

### **Major in Philosophy**

**Hometown:** Glenwood, IA

## JAMEY STALEY

### **Majors in the Study of Religion and History**

**Hometown:** Sioux City, IA

**Future Plans:** Jamey graduated in August and will begin graduate studies in Medieval History in England in the fall.

## CALE SWANSON

### **Major in the Study of Religion with a minor in General Business Concepts**

**Hometown:** Boone, IA

**Future Plans:** "After graduation I am looking forward to travelling the country a little bit, then I will be moving to Minneapolis."

**What does your major mean to you?** "My college journey has been uniquely my own, and not without complications and struggles. Dr. Soneson, Dr. DeBerg, Dr. Robinson, and Dr. Hill really give personal attention to their students, and it is exactly what I needed. The passion that they have for their material is unmatched by any other professors on campus, as well as the care they give their students. Without you all I really don't think I could have made it this far, so I wanted to thank you for all that you've done. It means the world to me."

## MICHAEL TAYLOR

### **Major in Philosophy**

**Hometown:** Cedar Falls, IA

## DREW WASESKUK

### **Major in the Study of Religion**

**Hometown:** Cedar Falls, IA

# ... making **SERIOUS STUDY** possible

final thoughts from graduating senior **EMILY O'LOUGHLIN**

I declared my philosophy major in the spring of 2010 after taking three philosophy classes and realizing that the number of classes required for a minor would not be enough to satisfy my curiosity about the subject. Declaring the major opened several opportunities for me, as it does other majors in the department. Among those opportunities were departmental scholarships, a position as an officer in the Philosophy Club, and contact with more of the professors in the department through classes and club activities.

The philosophy major and the club both tend to attract thoughtful students who want to learn about themselves and the world as they engage in extracurricular activities on campus, whether in Philosophy Club, student government, or one of the numerous other student organizations. The costs of college often necessitate part-time jobs, which can distract students from studies and activities. If more scholarships were available, philosophy students could have more time to devote to their studies and activities, benefiting both them and the department. The departmental scholarship I received for the 2010-11 school year, and the Dean's Awards I received through departmental nomination during 2011-12 and 2012-13 helped me afford the tuition, fees, and books as the cost of a degree continues to rise each year.

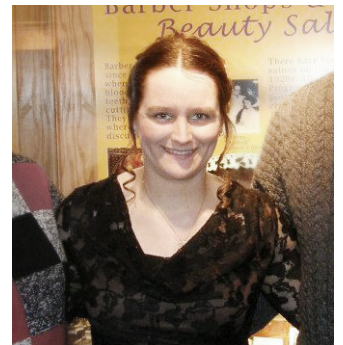
The Philosophy Club itself has done a lot to make philosophy visible on campus by bringing in nationally recognized speakers like Stephen Nathanson, Russ Shaffer-Landau, and Massimo Pigliucci. Other club activities have included helping at the Majors in Minutes fair hosted by the Academic Advising Office, attracting potential students at the UNI Up-Close days, and co-sponsoring events like the Progressive Picnic (a multi-club recruitment effort) and Darwin Week (a

week dedicated to critical thinking organized by UNI Freethinkers and Inquirers).

Some of my best experiences in the department have been discussions and social events attended by both students and professors. As the department restructured the major this year, the discussions that involved students helped us evaluate what we have learned and how the major can attract more people who don't know about philosophy. The end-of-semester celebrations of the graduating seniors and their accomplishments have been a great opportunity to socialize with professors. The part I most enjoy is the way each senior receives a card from the professors and staff. It was especially touching this year as I received mine and read all the encouraging comments from the professors who have supported and encouraged me, particularly in this last year as I completed my Honors thesis and searched for a job.

After I graduate, I will be taking a position as the Assistant Director of the Parker Historical Society of Clay County, which is based in Spencer, Iowa. My courses in philosophy have helped prepare me for the work I will do creating exhibits and managing the collections. Creating an exhibit requires being able to convey information in a concise and entertaining manner, which often means considering how various people might read the material. Managing the collections requires a strong attention to detail and an ethical outlook, as people have entrusted their objects to the care of the museum for posterity and whatever is done with an object must take that duty of care under consideration. Most of all, the ability to consider things from multiple points of view will be invaluable as I work with volunteers, fellow staff, and other organizations in Spencer for the Historical Society.

- Emily O'Loughlin



If you would like to start your own scholarship or lecture series, contact Debra Umbdenstock at [debra.umbdenstock@uni.edu](mailto:debra.umbdenstock@uni.edu) or (319) 273-7727.

# STEF MCGRAW

## PHILOSOPHY

# STUDENT INTERVIEW



YEAR:

senior

HOMETOWN:

Cedar Rapids

MAJORS:

Philosophy and Spanish

FAVORITE BOOKS:

*On Liberty*

- John Stewart Mill

*Borderlands/La Frontera:*

*The New Mestiza*

- Gloria Anzaldúa

“Though philosophy as a whole has planted more seeds of doubt than certainty in my mind, it has also reinforced the idea that we each have to search for our own meaning in life. I don’t know what mine is exactly, but I know that it includes making other people’s lives better.”

“I was majoring in political science while taking an honors Humanities III class with Dr. Soneson,” says Stef McGraw, a senior. “He told me I should consider becoming a philosophy major, but I was hesitant.” Yet she was intrigued enough to take “Philosophy: The Art of Thinking,” and enjoyed it so much that she dropped political science and picked up a philosophy major. Drawn to the high level of critical thinking, she finds that this major has opened many doors, enabling her to apply skills learned in the major to anything she decides to do.

Stef cites her involvement in campus groups as one of the most significant and rewarding experiences of her college career. In previous years, she was an opinion writer for the Northern Iowan. Now, Stef is a senator for the Northern Iowa Student Government, a member of the LGBT equality group One Iowa at UNI, and vice president of the UNI Freethinkers and Inquirers (UNIFI). “Though all these organizations have impacted me significantly,” Stef says, “I owe much of who I’ve become to this latter group; I’ve had the opportunity to become a strong leader and surround myself with people who challenge me intellectually.” With regards to her major, she believes that the discussions she has had in UNIFI encouraged her to follow the path of the philosophy major, and that her philosophy classes aid in discussions with the group today.

Stef says that the critical thinking skills learned in philosophy classes are applicable in every class as well as in daily life. Though it is early in the semester, she is very interested in her class on The Human Person because the topics intersect with scientific questions as well as questions of human purpose and meaning. Other classes that have inspired her throughout her time at UNI include Philosophy of Art, Philosophy of Science, and Humanities III.

After graduating in 2014, Stef hopes to move to a city and work for a nonprofit organization. The writing and critical thinking skills developed through a philosophy major will help her in this plan because, as she says, very few positions won’t require writing and decision making.

Because of her major in philosophy, Stef has learned that this study is far more applicable to everyday life than she had previously imagined. “I don’t know if philosophy has transformed me,” Stef says, “but it has definitely caused me to examine my future plans and make sure that I’m going down a path where I can actually make a positive impact on society.” To future philosophy students, she says not to get discouraged, to keep going even if they do not understand what is going on right away. The skills learned are important, and will be worth it in the end.

## YU SASAKI

## STUDY OF RELIGION



Yu wears the traditional Japanese summer clothes, yukata.

## HOMETOWN:

Sendai City, Japan

## FAVORITE BOOKS AT UNI :

*Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction*

- Richard Lyman Bushman

*The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*

- Bart Ehrman

Photographs courtesy of Yu Sasaki.

Yu Sasaki is not the typical UNI student. She has come to Iowa as an exchange student from Japan this year, taking classes in the Department of Philosophy and World Religions.

Yu is from the Miyagi prefecture in the northern part of Japan and attends the Akita International University in Akita, which is farther north from her hometown.

Now in her third year of college, Yu has always had an interest in the study of religion. A professor

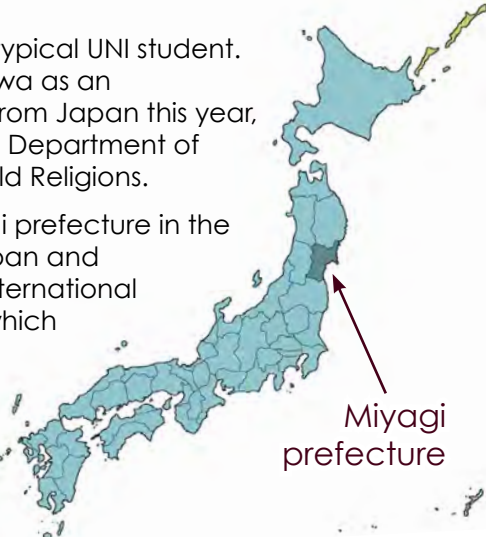
in Japan suggested she study in the United States and, after doing research on the Religion programs of American schools partnered with her university, Yu chose to come to UNI.

Here, Yu sometimes volunteers for the Study Abroad Center, talking with students interested in studying in Japan. She has even met some Japanese students here, including one from her own university, and says that it is great to have someone who understands the cultural differences she faces. Even so, Yu also says that it is great to have American friends, to know the American culture of the current generation, and to see other International students and the diversity that they bring to the school.



**A small shrine in a residential area.** Small shrines like this are common in residential or downtown areas. This shrine worships fox spirits.

At home, Yu's major is Global Studies, which covers topics such as media and law. She feels that this gives her a chance to earn a wide range of knowledge, something which easily relates back to the study of religion. Both involve learning and understanding other cultures. Yu believes that because religion is the basis of many cultures, understanding religion is therefore the key to understanding culture. "It is important for us to learn," she says, "because we have more



Miyagi prefecture

chances to encounter other cultures in the future, and we need to understand them."

This semester, Yu is taking "New Testament and Early Christian Writing" and "Judaism and Islam" with Dr. John Burnight, "New Religious Movements" with Dr. Betty DeBerg, and "Culture and Philosophy of African Americans" with Dr. Scharron Clayton. She cannot choose a favorite class, because every one is interesting and enjoyable, and each gives her new knowledge and ideas not previously considered. Professor DeBerg's "New Religious Movements," however, is possibly the closest to Yu's own interest in the relationship between religion and society.



**Namahage.** Mountain gods worshiped in Akita, who come down to the village on New Year's Eve to make sure people are not lazy.

she will invariably meet. "Even if I change my mind," she says, "[my major] will help me in any job field."

Yu believes that it is always important to keep an objective point of view in the study of religion. It is difficult, she says, because sometimes this field teaches concepts and ideas completely different from or counter to our personal beliefs. However, she has learned to keep an objective perspective in order to fully understand a religion's development or creed.

Yu encourages other students to take courses in the study of religion, saying that it will help open their mind to other cultures and help erase stereotypes. Such a study helps create a "generous" mind, one that is not full of stereotypes, and one that will be a great asset in any field.



Zao temple at Sainokawara, Miyagi

After graduation, Yu hopes to work in a service industry, such as the hotel business. Having worked similar jobs part time, Yu found that she truly enjoyed this sort of experience, and hopes that her major will help her understand and relate to people from various backgrounds whom she



**Asakusa Temple (Sensoji) in Tokyo.** A Buddhist temple and popular tourist attraction.

The most important thing Yu has learned from her time at UNI is to take every chance available to her, because another opportunity might not come around. Because she is only here for a limited time, she feels that it is important not to wait, but to use her time to the best advantage. For example, Yu truly enjoys and is impressed with UNI lectures outside of the study of religion program. By attending a lecture by, say, a history professor, students at UNI have the great opportunity to help connect different fields and widen their pool of knowledge.

To students considering studying in Japan, Yu points out the excellent business major and language courses available at her university in Akita. Although her school does not have a major in religion, the surrounding area is full of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, which may be a draw for American religion students. Conversely, for Japanese students studying in America, Yu suggests not sticking with their traditionally Japanese views. The point of studying abroad, she posits, is to be shocked by the cultural differences. For herself, Yu finds the most challenging part of studying abroad is participation in class discussion. However, she is certain that she will overcome this difficulty by the time she must leave UNI.



**Shinzan Shrine,** a Shinto Shrine in Akita.



**Ema at Shinzan Shrine.** Visitors write wishes on the wooden board and hang them up.

When Yu does return to Japan, she is sure to push for the inclusion of more courses in the study of religion. The goal of Akita International University is to provide knowledge of various cultures and their views and insights. Yu does not see how this goal can be achieved without education in the academic study of religion.





# BIANNUAL BOOK SALE

HOSTED BY THE PHILOSOPHY CLUB AND EXPLORERS OF RELIGION

Do you remember those old philosophy or religion textbooks, once so important to you, that are now hiding out in the back of your closet? How about the fun—but unread—books that stay on the top shelf?

In the past couple of years, the Philosophy Club has really taken off, and under new leadership, it works hard to support the ongoing and growing community of inquirers at UNI. The club brings in a guest lecturer each semester, which helps to get the names of the department and the club out into the community. All this is achieved through the fundraising done at the biannual book sale.

The book sale also goes to support our new Explorers of Religion Club. This Club is also growing in an amazing way. In the recent past, it has sponsored a film series on campus and trips to local religious sites for interesting lectures and other activities – all supported in part from the proceeds of our book sale.

In the past, the faculty has done a fantastic job of donating interesting books, journals, and the like to help put on this book sale, but we cannot do it alone. We need your help. **The Philosophy Club needs donations of books from alumni and friends. All books are accepted and welcome. We can find them a loving home.** If you live too far away, where sending in your unwanted books would not be feasible, we will be very happy to receive any other donation you wish to make. All proceeds go to funding the Philosophy Club and the Explorers of Religion Club.

If you would like to make a donation, and we sincerely hope that you do, contact Corey Cooling, vice president of the Philosophy Club for the 2013-2014 school year, at [coolingc@uni.edu](mailto:coolingc@uni.edu).

Look for UNI Department of Philosophy & World Religions  
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[www.facebook.com/UNlphilrel](http://www.facebook.com/UNlphilrel)



# DR. MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI:

## “REVISITING THE DEMARCATION PROBLEM”

The lecture hall was full on the evening of April 26th as internationally respected biologist and philosopher of science Dr. Massimo Pigliucci prepared to speak. Dr. Pigliucci is the chair of the philosophy department at CUNY-Lehman College and the editor-in-chief for the journal *Philosophy & Theory in Biology*. He has a doctorate in genetics from the University of Ferrara, Italy, a Ph.D. in biology from the University of Connecticut, and a Ph.D. in philosophy of science from the University of Tennessee.

The spring lecture centered around the idea of “demarcation,” the attempt to logically separate science from pseudoscience. While we all know that astrology and homeopathy are not as valid forms of science as particle physics and evolutionary biology, the criteria for this distinction are much hazier. Does a set of criteria even exist? Is there a logical way to look at a field and decide which category it should go into? These are the sorts of questions that Dr. Pigliucci proposed and attempted to answer.

In tracing the roots of discussion of this problem back to the early 20th century with Sir Karl Popper, Dr. Pigliucci made sure to touch on why we even care about this problem. First, from an epistemological standpoint, we know that there is worth in pure knowledge, and therefore this point is going to be worthwhile to philosophy. Even more important, however, is that money is involved, as governments are going to fund the legitimate sciences and gloss over the pseudosciences. Therefore, this question of demarcation is exceedingly important.

Dr. Pigliucci eventually settled on the arguments of Larry Laundan before countering them with his own. After Laundan's article premiered in 1987, in which he essentially tore down the problem itself,

discussion on this topic essentially ceased. Dr. Pigliucci seeks to reopen the floor to further discussion, addressing three questions with regards to the problem.

First, what conditions of adequacy should a proposed demarcation criterion satisfy? While Laundan believed that philosophers should agree with whatever separation the scientists themselves came up with, Dr. Pigliucci believes there is no point in doing philosophy if the philosophers just roll over and let the scientists do all the work.

The second question is whether or not the criterion under consideration offers necessary and sufficient conditions for scientific status. In answering this question, Dr. Pigliucci brings up Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblance and “fuzzy” distinctions. He draws up a spectrum of “multidimensional continuous concepts” applied to the demarcation problem with variable levels of empirical knowledge and theoretical understanding. Those areas low in each category are labeled as pseudoscience.

Finally is the question of what judgments are implied by the claim that a belief or activity is scientific or unscientific. Laundan essentially said that we should not touch this problem because of its potential social and political consequences, but Dr. Pigliucci says that that is exactly why we should. This problem gives philosophers a chance to make a difference in the real world, such as it did in Dr. Pigliucci's example of philosophers providing key testimony in a court case deciding whether or not to teach intelligent design in schools.

For those interested in pursuing this subject, *Philosophy of Pseudoscience: Reconsidering the Demarcation Problem*, edited by Massimo Pigliucci and Maarten Boudry, will be published in July, compiling essays from philosophers around the world that address precisely this problem of demarcation.



## ALISON SUEN

## PHILOSOPHY

Alison Suen, a 2006 UNI graduate, grew up in Hong Kong before coming to the United States for her undergraduate degree. After taking high school (and a few college) courses in philosophy, she knew that she wanted to pursue the major. Not knowing much about UNI when she got to campus, she was glad to see that the university offered a major in this field.

Alison describes herself as being “pretty nerdy” while at UNI. “I didn’t join any clubs. I lived in a dorm for two years and mostly just hung out with my roommates,” she said. Nevertheless, she met her future husband, Trevor Bibler, in the department. He also graduated in 2006 with a degree in philosophy.

Three books stand out in Alison’s mind as being important to her development during her time at UNI. De Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* was the first text written by a woman philosopher that Alison read as an undergrad. Montaigne’s *The Apology of Raymond Sebond* truly got her interested in Pyrrhonian skepticism. Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* was “so interesting and exciting” and was one of the few books that made her feel truly exhilarated.

During her time at UNI, Alison learned to take her writings seriously and to analyze difficult texts, two things which helped her succeed after graduation. She attended graduate school at Vanderbilt, where it took her six years to complete her PhD. “I needed to learn how to think of philosophy in a professionalized way in graduate school,” she says, “because having passion alone wouldn’t necessarily get me a job... It’s easy to get cynical and frustrated when we focus so much on professionalization rather than doing philosophy simply for its intellectual enrichment.”

Alison now lectures in the philosophy department at Vanderbilt and is currently teaching three sections of logic, a subject she loves. She often thinks back to her UNI experiences to remind her what drew her to philosophy in the first place, and to help figure out how to instill the same excitement about the subject that she had at UNI into her Vanderbilt students.

“The faculty [at UNI] was really committed to the majors [and were] knowledgeable, friendly, and great teachers.” Alison believes that they set a high standard and a good example for what she aspires to be as a teacher. She tries every day to create a “democratic and intellectual environment” in her classroom, like the one she enjoyed at UNI.

For philosophy majors, Alison has the following advice: “Think carefully about the reality of the job market before you apply for graduate schools.” As for non-majors, her advice is to do a double major, “so that you can enjoy philosophy without having to worry about its ‘utility.’”

Alison truly enjoys teaching, especially because Vanderbilt students are typically very motivated. She says, “It’s a huge satisfaction to see my students succeed in my class, and I try my best to make philosophy interesting and enriching for them.”




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HOMETOWN:

Hong Kong

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FAVORITE CLASSES:

Introduction to Logic  
with Mr. Morgan

Introduction to Astronomy  
with Dr. Siobahn Morgan

Environmental Ethics  
with Dr. Soneson

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FAVORITE MEMORY AT UNI:

“Reading philosophy and going to classes with my husband, Trevor Bibler.”

# AMY HOYER

## STUDY OF RELIGION



### HOMETOWN:

Bethlehem, PA

### FAVORITE BOOKS:

*Religion and Its Monsters*

- Timothy Beal

*Undoing Gender*

- Judith Butler

*World Religions*

- "It was kind of a 'coffee table' book about world religions, and it did a very good job explaining world religions in very understandable ways. I still use it."

“Religion has a huge influence on all aspects of our human existence and shapes our world view. Studying religion means studying art, history, ethics, sociology, philosophy, and so much more.”

A native of Pennsylvania, Amy Hoyer moved to Iowa after she married her husband Todd. A UNI alum himself, Todd encouraged Amy to go back to school in Cedar Falls even while starting a family and working full-time. "It was absolutely the right choice," Amy says. "My instructors were great, class sizes were manageable, and the courses I took, especially in my major, were interesting. The faculty really seemed to take an interest in my success as a student and they were very supportive of my time at UNI."

Originally planning on an English Teaching major, Amy switched to majoring in the Study of Religion after taking Religions of the World.

During her time at UNI, Amy learned that she truly loves learning. She learned the value of persistence as a non-traditional student, and the value of being well-prepared for any given situation, "because flying by the seat of your pants doesn't always work." With working full time and raising a large family while taking classes at UNI, Amy did not have much free time to get involved with clubs or organizations on campus. However, she says that she did develop good relationships with other students as well as the faculty.

After graduating UNI in December, 2007, Amy now serves the Catholic church as the Parish Life Coordinator at St. Mary Church in Waverly. She is the pastoral and administrative leader of the local parish of about 800 households. She works closely with priests because there are aspects of parish ministry that Amy cannot perform as a layperson. For example, Amy cannot preside at mass, witness marriages or anoint the sick. She has the help of several area priests who attend to the sacramental needs of the community.

Amy also continues to participate in ongoing formation and education in order to stay well informed in her position. Much of this formation is rooted in the Benedictine tradition: she participated in a program called "Illuminare" at St. Paul's Monastery in Minnesota for eight years and is now continuing with ArtiSon Ministry Designs, a new pastoral ministry formation program. "I hope to never stop learning," she says.

"The study of religion is a discipline that serves me well because of the importance religion plays in our lives. Religion brings order and meaning into the lives of believers and societies, so it is important to understand the why's and how's of that," Amy states.

Amy encourages current and potential Study of Religion majors to take advantage of UNI's department. "Understanding what shaped our past is important to help us shape our future. Each one of us has the ability to make the world a better place and we need to do just that. Each of us can change the world. If you change a part, you change the whole."

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



DEPARTMENT OF  
PHILOSOPHY & WORLD RELIGIONS  
CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50614-0501

ALUMNI RESPONSE FORM

In order to keep us and your UNI colleagues informed of your activities, please complete the form below and return to "Department of Philosophy & World Religions," UNI, Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0501, or send an e-mail to pwr-newsletter@uni.edu. We are particularly interested in the current career paths of our alumni.

Last name First name Middle/Maiden name

UNI degree(s)-years

Address

City State Zip-code

Is this a new address?  Yes  No

E-mail address

Spouse's name Is spouse a UNI alum?  Yes  No

Your position and employer

New items of interest:

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This update can be printed in the next newsletter!

Please do not print this update.

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY &  
WORLD RELIGIONS NEWSLETTER

Volume 6, Spring 2013

Published by the UNI Department of  
Philosophy & World Religions for its  
alumni and friends

Kelly Cunningham, executive editor  
Jerry Soneson, director

The Department of Philosophy &  
World Religions resides within the  
College of Humanities, Arts, and  
Sciences  
Joel Haack, Dean

The University of Northern Iowa is  
an equal opportunity educator and  
employer with a comprehensive  
plan for affirmative action.