

### DSR Reading Groups, continued

*Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (U Chicago Press 2010).

The Seminar for Culture and Religion in Antiquity (SCRA) had a full slate of speakers in 2010-11 (see pgs 16-17), and it hosted a symposium (see story on pg 12). Speakers gave engaging papers and also had lunch with DSR graduate students. These lunches are particularly rewarding for DSR graduate students, who can discuss their own work and aspirations with major figures in the field. Both the SCRA lectures and student lunches were generously co-sponsored by the Centre of Jewish Studies. SCRA events are organized by Profs. John Kloppenborg, John Marshall, Hindy Najman, and Judith Newman, with help from students Nathalie LaCoste, Tim Langille, Sarah Rollens and Erin Vearncombe.

The Religion, Culture, Politics (RCP) working group, founded in 2009 by Pamela Klassen and Ruth Marshall, brings together faculty and students from a range of departments, including Religion, Diaspora and Transnational Studies, History, Political Science, Anthropology, Art, Law, and the Centre for Ethics. Members meet four times a semester to discuss a member's readable first draft essay. At each session, the presenter provides a brief context for the essay, and then a respondent comments briefly. Next, the audience offers comments for the next half hour, during which time the presenter is not allowed to respond. Finally, the presenter responds to comments, and conversation progresses from there. On a few occasions RCP has welcomed guest speakers, including U of T historian Natalie Zemon Davis and UCSD anthropologist Joel Robbins. DSR PhD candidate and RCP member Nicholas Dion writes, "My own experience with RCP has been very positive. I received truly interdisciplinary feedback on my paper and could better see how scholars of religion outside of my narrow sub-discipline might view my work."

Since 2008, DSR faculty have also led a Foucault working group, made up of graduate students and faculty aiming to read and discuss the complete work of Foucault over a three-year period. The group's goal is to assess the Foucauldian legacy from a transdisciplinary perspective, creating a space at the U of T that allows for an in-depth reading and discussion of Foucault's writings across and beyond disciplinary boundaries.

## Research Teams in the DSR: Islam and Muslim Civilizations

By Shanifa Nasser-Sunderji

Adjusting volume controls in a recording studio, layering geospatial data on digital maps, editing raw footage for a documentary film - one may not expect to find these activities on the to-do list of the typical student of Religion, but they are only a handful of the tasks undertaken by students on Prof. Shafique Virani's research team. Last spring, I was invited to be Research Coordinator for this diverse and growing group, to mentor a broad range of students from across the U of T and beyond in carrying out work on various projects related to Islam and Muslim Civilizations. This position was created through the U of T Mississauga inaugural "Research and Teaching Hand-in-Hand Fellowship," funded by Graduate Expansion Funds and the Office of the Dean. The experience transformed my understanding of what can be involved in research and how fruitful such innovative methods could be. With one of its aims to make humanities research more accessible both within academia and outside, Virani's research team is comprised of nearly forty students. Undergraduates enroll through the University's Research Opportunity Program and independent studies classes, while MA and PhD students pursue reading courses or paid internships funded by the work-study program and grants from SSHRC, as do a few post-doctoral fellows. In 2010, the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation awarded Virani an Early Researcher Award, making it possible to fund additional internships for graduate students to gain hands-on research experience. In recent years, students from other universities such as McGill and York, excited about working in such a collaborative setting, have also joined the team. So enthusiastic are its members that many continue in a voluntary capacity, even after the completion of their terms.

Currently, the team's projects include the creation of the iBrary Online, a digital repository and library of academic sources pertaining to Islamic studies, the production of educational podcasts, designing a font to preserve primary sources in a near-extinct Indic script, and using GIS technology to map the expeditions of a 20th-c. Muslim traveller. These are accompanied by the cataloguing and analysis of numerous religious texts and manuscripts spanning Arabic, Persian, Gujarati, Hindi, Tajik, and Urdu, as well as translation work in English, French, Russian, and this year, Indonesian, Malaysian, Portuguese, and Spanish. One of the team's recent projects involves the study of a 1923 expedition through remote mountainous regions ranging from the Pamirs all the way to present-day China, requiring students to draw from former Soviet military maps of the region in order to chart the course of the journey. This assignment saw one student travel to London's British Library to consult rare books and gazetteers detailing uncharted locations encountered along the way. Many of these projects culminate in presentations at the

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Mittermaier, who applied for the DAAD grant together with me, was not able to attend because she had broken her foot only a few weeks before our departure.

The trip was made possible by the generosity of the DAAD, as well as the hospitality of our hosts. The Dean's Office of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences also offered support, as did the DSR. I would also like to thank the students, who paid their own way over the ocean, and who took the time to engage in this cross-cultural intellectual encounter. They were all excellent representatives of the University, and our hosts commented often on their impressively articulate (and just plain smart) contributions to the conversation. I hope that the Department will be able to host similar groups of students from German institutions in the near future.

## The Force of Laws

A project entitled "The Force of Laws: Negotiating Code and Commandment in Liberal Democracies" is in the planning stages of two workshops, the compilation of a cooperative bibliography, and the development of new approaches to key methodological concerns in the study of religion and law. This year three Ph.D. candidates, Paul Nahme, Shari Golberg, and Amy Fisher, have been canvassing members of the "Religion and Diversity" SSHRC Major Collaborative Research Initiative (MCRI), based out of the U of Ottawa. Their goal has been to amass a collective bibliography of theoretical approaches to the question of how religious conceptions of duty, law and obligation are at play under civil and legal authority. Paul Nahme has also helped MCRI member Prof. Pamela Klassen organize a "Force of Laws" workshop, in conjunction with Prof. Ruth Marshall and the RCP Working Group (see pg. 5). The May 2011 workshop will bring faculty and students at the U of T together with legal anthropologists and political theorists from the U.S. and Canada to examine the challenges and possibilities of studying religion and law from diverse disciplinary starting points. Through critical discussion of various methods of conceptualizing the parameters and meaning of "law," the "State" and the ideal of "duty," this workshop will illuminate some of the pre-suppositions of the study of law and religion. Eventually, a second larger gathering will ask: what does the "law" of the state have to do with religious "law" in the lives of those who live with both? How do different religious traditions negotiate this overlap or conflict in particular nation-states? For more information on the Religion and Diversity MCRI see [religionanddiversity.ca](http://religionanddiversity.ca)

**Research Collaboration on Islam and Muslim Civilizations,  
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Undergraduate Research Fair, where students gain their first exposure to an academic conference and a taste of the professional side of research. This year, presentations by the team included an investigation into the ancestry of Muhammad, an examination of the performance of the *bay'ah* or oath of allegiance in the Islamic tradition, and a study of the origins and practices surrounding the Persian festival of Nawruz.

The team brings together a spectrum of talent from across multiple disciplines ranging from textual studies to information science, fostering a sense of teamwork and cooperation and pushing the boundaries traditionally thought to divide the academic arena. The group's cohesion can be seen in its numerous social events attended by active and past members, the most recent of which took place in the newly-renovated departmental conference room, where students engaged in an evening of lively and spirited team-building exercises. Having forged lasting friendships, members continue to remain in close contact through an active alumni group on Facebook.

My own experience with the research team began when I joined as an undergraduate student through the Research Opportunity Program, through which I acquired first-hand knowledge of how to work with translations, critical editions and annotated bibliographies, an opportunity I otherwise may not have had before graduate school. Similarly, coordinating the team and its diverse projects this year has armed me with important skills in planning and collaboration, not usually taught in a graduate program. Not only was it a lesson in project management, but it's also given me a look inside the emerging world of digital humanities and new media. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the team is that through interacting with researchers from such a vast range of disciplines, students learn to apply multiple perspectives in their own fields of study. In turn, they find that these methodologies converge in a way that allow them to better examine the intricacies of complex questions surrounding religion in particular and the humanities in general. The team's collaborative nature underscores how traditional forms of humanities research can harness innovative technologies ubiquitous in the world today to propel the fruits of their inquiries to new heights. Through their diverse projects, students learn how seemingly-obscure details can form the basis of their inquiry, that age-old assumptions can be challenged through re-examination from new angles, the satisfaction of accidental discovery, and as with all research, that often the biggest leaps begin with the smallest steps.

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