



GORDON
COLLEGE

Department of History

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Alumni View: Teaching World Religion in the Middle East

by Christine B. Lindner '02

Roughly 10 years after my parents escorted me down the winding path of Route 128, a taxi driver carefully maneuvered the dimly lit, cliff side track that brought me to the next phase of my life's adventure. The blue-gray of the North Shore Atlantic was replaced by the turquoise of the eastern Mediterranean.

In 2009 I commenced my academic career as Assistant Professor at the University of Balamand, in north Lebanon. Established by the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch in 1988, during the height of the Lebanese Civil War, the university promotes itself as a secular institution, open to students and staff from different religious backgrounds. The university arose from the still active Dayr al-Balamand (the Balamand Monastery), founded by Cistercian monks in 1175, but was inherited by the Greek Orthodox Church in the fourteenth century. It is situated in the Koura region of Lebanon, famous for its olive groves, which serves as a retreat from the bustle of Lebanon's capital, Beirut, and nearby Tripoli.

My position is affiliated with the Civilization Sequence Program, a grouping of core Humanities courses often found in Middle Eastern universities. One course explores Ancient Cultures: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome. Watching the winter storms over the Mediterranean, it is not too difficult to identify with Odysseus's troubles returning home after battling Troy. The Phoenician and Roman ruins in nearby Jbeil (Ancient Byblos) make perfect backdrops to reading Greek dramas. Visiting the Cedars near Bcharri helps one understand why these great trees were coveted by both Gilgamesh and Solomon.

Religion in Lebanon is a central part of one's political and familial identity, with each citizen's affiliation to one of 18 recognized religious sects marked on personal papers. The majority of my students come from

Sunni Muslim or Greek Orthodox Christian backgrounds, but some are Alewite, Shia Muslim, Maronite and Armenian Christian. This diversity contributes to interesting class discussions on the role of prophets, the nature of scripture, interpretations of Jesus, etc. My course on Religious Experiences asks students to conduct oral histories about religious festivals, in an effort to document and analyze the interpretations of religious celebrations in this region. While Lebanon's history of religiously affiliated violence is still a concern, I hope courses like this will mitigate future tensions and allow the students to recognize commonalities of faith, grant them an opportunity to meet and interact with students from other religions, and develop a respect for different confessions and embodiments of faith.



Our Lady of Balamand Monastery



Koura, Lebanon

7th Annual JAF Debate: Christianity and Capitalism

Every year students look forward to the Jerusalem and Athens Forum Debate, where students are divided into affirmative and negative cases supporting or refuting a given resolution. In the past, they have covered topics such as bioethics and the emergent church. This year, a free market economy, and its compatibility with Christian ethics and the alleviation of poverty, formed the debate. Drawing from history, current socio-political issues, and philosophy, the subject was little-known by the cohort as a whole, and especially by the three ancient history/early medieval history majors: Abigail Sargent '13, Laura Farnham '11, and Laz Mancilla '13. However, using research skills, public speaking skills, and seminar discussion, they were each able to deliver crucial statements and rebuttals. One JAFer commented, "They're great life skills I got to practice, and you learn about something entirely new that you can take back with you."

by Laz Mancilla '13



History major Laura Farnham '11 responds to comments from an audience member. Also pictured: Rachel Plourde '12 and Laz Mancilla '13.

Photo: Dan Ebersole

Salem Museum Grand Pre-Opening

The anticipated Salem Museum has opened on the first floor of Old Town Hall in Derby Square. The preliminary opening featured eight of what will be thirty panels displaying themes of Salem's history. David Goss '74, Institute for Public History Director and member of the Museum Planning team, described the museum as an entry point for visitors: "Our goal is to heighten people's awareness of the richness and diversity of Salem's history through this...visitor center, and then send them on their way to real sites."



Photo: Salem Evening News

Summer at the Institute for Public History

by Thom Hunter '11



For history majors interested in working outside of the classroom, I wholeheartedly recommend spending a summer at Pioneer Village: Salem 1630.

The story of the English Puritans who arrived in Salem circa 1626 is an essential part of America's religious history. However, thanks to the Victorians and the dominance of the Wiccan religion in Salem, the Puritans often get painted as agents of a repressive theocracy. Nothing could be further from the truth: they were sincere men and women of God who, while not perfect, were faithful Christians who had a deep influence on American Protestantism. Working at Pioneer Village gives you the opportunity to tell the true story of these remarkable people.

In addition, you gain a valuable skill that cannot be learned in the classroom: working with a non-academic audience. This is sometimes rewarding and oftentimes frustrating, but it gives you insight into how the "man-on-the-street" interprets history and how we, as Christian historians, can best serve them.

History Students Explore Icons, Past and Present

by Abigail Sargent '13

I frowned at the greenish-brown mess of paint on my brush, and the blotches of color that would eventually become faces and hands. This semester our class on Eastern Europe, Byzantium, and the Caucasus mountains has stepped out of the realm of note-taking and paper writing to learn history more first-hand. We painted icons—or, to put it correctly, we wrote icons, since these pieces of art are meant to transmit truths reliably more than to express individual artists' styles. The use of icons is an integral part of the Eastern Orthodox church tradition, which is central to the time and place we are studying. The stylized images of Christ, saints, and scenes are quite foreign to low-church protestants. They serve to edify people, but also as “windows into heaven,” encouraging communication between the living church and those who have passed on.



Prof. Hevelone-Harper's Eastern Europe, Byzantium, and the Caucasus class wrote icons in the style of Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. They displayed their work at this year's Symposium in a presentation titled "Icons: Imaging Salvation." Above left: Georgian-inspired icon of Christ by Laz Mancilla '13. Above right: Sam Twidle '11 and Becca Reitmeyer '13 with their icons.



Painting icons was humbling for most of us, accustomed as we are to reading and writing. But even as some of us despaired of making our icons look anything like the originals, we benefitted spiritually from the long concentration on our chosen images. We had to focus on the ideas that we struggled to depict, and these ideas proved good food for our souls.

In the middle of this project, we took a trip to the Museum of Russian Icons, and got to see an extensive collection of icons, most centuries old. These were painted by people who spent long hours honing the technical and spiritual abilities to produce beautiful, powerful images. But icons on museum walls, however well-intended, imply something past. We took another trip that dispelled any sense of “dead” tradition—to Holy Resurrection Orthodox Church, where we worshipped with a very alive congregation (who use icons). They also sang the service (in English), using Byzantine music. In the church, the voices rose around us, swelling in an ancient pattern of praise. As with the icons, we joined in stumblingly at first, but with increasing confidence, and increasing joy.

Left: At the Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton, Massachusetts.

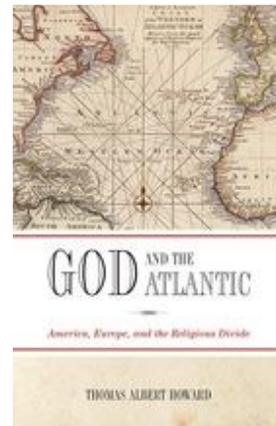
Tal Howard on the American Religious Experiment

by Natalie Ferjulian '10

In March of 2011, Oxford University Press published Professor Tal Howard's most recent book, *God and the Atlantic: America, Europe and the Religious Divide*, a study of transatlantic differences.

"God and the Atlantic looks at how and why Americans have maintained much friendlier ties with traditional forms of religion than their European counterparts," says Howard. "It's an historical exploration of what journalists and sociologists are calling 'the transatlantic religious divide'."

Though there are many polarizing issues in this complex debate, scholars such as Harmut Lehmann, former Director of the Max Planck Institute for History in Germany, praise Howard for giving historical depth to the topic. "Everyone interested in finding a way through the labyrinth of transatlantic comparisons and prejudice is well advised to read this book," says Lehmann.



Seniors Defend Honors Theses

On April 27, Paul Johnson '11 and Thomas Hunter '11 successfully defended their theses before an audience of faculty, students, family, and friends. Paul's thesis concerned "The *Mostellaria* of Plautus: A Case Study in Hellenization and Social Tensions in Roman Italy Following the Second Punic War", and Thom wrote on the topic "Looking Over the Horizon: Travel in Irish Monastic Literature". The theses will be bound, cataloged, and housed in Jenks Library.



The next generation of Gordon historians.

History Alumnus Awarded Tenure-Track Position at MIT

Congratulations to Hiromu Nagahara '03, Gordon alum and adjunct professor of history. He has just finished his dissertation at Harvard University and has been appointed assistant professor for Japanese history at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This tenure-track position is a well-deserved honor. Many on campus will be sad to see him leave us: History major Doug Barker '12 said, "Professor Nagahara's class on Modern Japan was quite honestly the best class I have ever been in. He managed to take a subject in which I had absolutely no prior knowledge and make it not only interesting, but also a lot of fun. Thanks to him, I'm now considering pursuing further East Asian studies. I'm thrilled that he's been appointed to a school as prestigious as MIT."



Alumni and Student Updates

We would love to hear from you! Please send contributions to: elisabeth.whittet@gordon.edu.