

## Reading Religion at Rice

by Alexandra Espinoza, Rice University '11

Visiting scholar John Evans critiques a scholarly work in progress.

One goal of the Religion and Public Life Program (RPLP) is to draw upon the resources of the diverse academic departments at Rice and engage scholars and community leaders in interdisciplinary dialogue, addressing the intersection of various facets of public life and religion. John Evans was a guest critic who commented on a paper on hospital chaplains, written by Wilson Will, the medical humanities Postdoctoral Fellow at the Humanities Research Center at Rice University. For two years, Will conducted research shadowing chaplains in a hospital in order to collect the copious amounts of data he presents in a paper challenging the assumptions scholars hold about the role of religion and healing in medical settings.

The event drew a range of scholars, including undergraduate and graduate students, and the chairs of the Sociology and Religious Studies departments. The diversity of participants is what makes Reading Religion at Rice a unique and productive scholarly endeavor. Asked how beneficial he believed the event to be for his paper, Will responded, "The feedback was particularly important because it gave me a sense of what I take for granted and what the different audiences want to hear more about, what people are going to latch onto in reading my paper."

Will had an opportunity to respond to comments from those gathered, in which he explained that his research covers new territory, as there is hardly any anthropological literature on chaplains. Bolstered by a variety of delicious hors d'oeuvres, participants chimed in with their observations and expressed



Dr. Wilson Will, Rice University

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-Wilson Will

genuine enthusiasm to contribute to Will's paper. Participants mused that this type of collaboration and open dialogue is an exceptional opportunity for a variety of great academics and community members to come together and support fellow scholars. For Will, the interdisciplinary focus of the event was "totally critical, especially for me since I am trying to straddle different academic disciplines." Furthermore, with increasing immigration leading to religious diversity in the United States, Will strongly believes that the study of hospital chaplains will become progressively more important as chaplains must fulfill the spiritual needs of patients of religious backgrounds other than Christianity. According to Will, "Nowadays, you can have a Hassidic Jew, a Buddhist, and a Baptist in the same medical unit receiving treatment, so chaplains have to be aware of these different worldviews. Anywhere else in the world, reactions to some of these religions might be different, volatile even."