

Religion and Public Life Program

Social Sciences Research Institute at Rice University

A Letter from the Director

The Religion and Public Life Program, recently launched in the fall of 2010, has grown out of work being done at Rice in the sociology of religion. The vision of the program is to bridge the gap between the best research on religion and the various constituencies that might benefit from that research, including academics, religious and community leaders. We hope to create interdisciplinary and interreligious dialogue and intellectual discussion, both within the academic world as well as between the academy and the general public. Whether they are debates about evolution and embryonic stem-cell research, American foreign policy in the Middle East, immigrant rights, or religious expression in the political and business world, issues involving religion and the public often become divisive in language and rhetoric, as groups on different sides of an issues often create myths about one another. Yet, the hope of the Religion and Public Life Program is to help different constituencies fully understand the perspective of the other. The Religion and Public Life Program is currently focusing on the theme of religion and medicine.

On March 14th at 6:30 p.m. in Rice University's Baker Institute Dore Commons, a panel of scholars will speak on the "The Meaning of Being Human in an Age of Bioethics and Reproductive Technologies." If you are in Houston, we invite you to join us or to check out our webstream on our website after the event.

Sincerely,

Elaine Howard Ecklund
Associate Professor of Sociology
Director, Religion and Public Life Program
Rice University

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"The vision of the program is to help bridge the gap between the best research on religion and the various constituencies that might benefit from that research"

Faith in the Corridors of Medicine

by David Liou, Rice University '12

Even before he stepped into the room to take care of the dying young woman, Dr. Farr Curlin could feel the raw emotions and powerful tension radiating down the corridors. "The mother and the husband of the patient were in an extremely heated argument," Curlin recalled, "They were arguing about what God's will was for that patient, about trusting God's sovereignty, and how they were to understand that."

As an active clinician caring for patients with advanced illness, Curlin often finds himself at the forefront of explicit crossings between religion and the practice of medicine. A strong proponent for "inviting and creating spaces where we can discuss issues in religion and medicine," he was featured as a guest panelist as part of the inaugural event of the Religion and Public Life Program at Rice University, titled Faith in the Corridors of Medicine. Along with Curlin, the inaugural panel event on December 3rd featured Dr. Wendy Cadge, an Associate Professor of Sociology at Brandeis University studying the formal and informal presence of religion and spirituality in hospitals.



"You just have to keep showing that religion is an issue that's on the table or just below the surface"
-Dr. Farr Curlin

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Dr. John Evans of the University of California, San Diego and Baruch Brody of Rice University will join Elaine Howard Ecklund, director of the Religion and Public Life Program, for a lively discussion of how different religious communities approach emerging topics on the medical ethics horizon, including reproductive genetic technologies.

Upcoming Events

Religion and Medical Ethics: The Meaning of Being Human

March 14th, 6:30 pm

The Baker Institute for Public Policy, Dore Commons

RSVP to bipprsvp@rice.edu

Reading Religion at Rice Paper Workshop

March 14th, 12 pm

Sewell Hall, Sociology Department Lounge

RSVP to kls4@rice.edu

Lunch with Religious Leaders and Students

March 15th, 12 pm

Cohen House, President's Dining Room

RSVP to kls4@rice.edu

Meet Our Student Fellows

by Sarah James, Rice University '12 and Molly Goldstein, Rice University '11

One of the first Religion and Public Life Undergraduate Fellows, Cassandra Tansey is a senior from Fort Worth, Texas. The highlight of Cassandra's involvement in Religion and Public Life programming was her participation in the December 2010 Reading Religion at Rice event. At these workshops, scholars gather to review drafts of academic articles about issues related to religion and public life that are highly relevant to particular constituencies. This seminar afforded a firsthand view of interdisciplinary collaboration between faculty members from several Rice departments, as they worked to revise a research article about religion and public life. Cassandra enjoyed seeing "interdisciplinary collaboration that included professors from fields as diverse as sociology, economics, religious studies, and psychology."

Cassandra is also a research assistant for the Perceptions of Women in Academic Science study (PWAS), funded by the National Science Foundation and directed by Dr. Elaine Howard Ecklund and Southern Methodist University's Dr. Anne Lincoln. Cassandra finds scholarly analysis to be an enjoyable and intellectually stimulating experience that has given her a deeper appreciation of the complexity of sociological research. In her words, the data gleaned from the PWAS study is "absolutely fascinating."

One goal of the Religion and Public Life Program is to involve students with a variety of academic and extracurricular interests. Cassandra is currently completing a major in Sociology and a minor in Biochemistry, as well as Pre-Veterinary requirements. After graduating in May 2011, she hopes to attend graduate school in Veterinary Medicine in the fall of 2011. In her free time, Cassandra is a member of the Rice Women's Rugby Team, a volunteer with local animal groups including the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Houston Zoo, and a teaching assistant in Dr. Holly Heard's Sociology of the Family course.

A second Religion and Public Life Fellow is deeply engaged with the natural sciences and sees medicine as "one aspect of public life where religion is extremely influential but rarely recognized." David Liou is a third



year undergraduate at Rice University double majoring in Biochemistry and Policy Studies with an emphasis on science policy, and is enthusiastic about the new dialogues the Religion and Public Life Program brings to campus. David comes from a family of scientists and sees the program events as a good source of new ways to think about medical and social policy.

David first met Dr. Elaine Howard Ecklund in the spring of 2010 as a student in her Science at Risk course. This elective in the Department of Sociology is one way that the Religion and Public Life Program relates to other academic experiences at Rice. Through this course David began to explore "what 'science' means and where the cultural authority of science derives from." He also commented that the course gave an "introduction to religion and science where Dr. Ecklund was able to show us that contrary to a lot of popular belief, when you look at the lives of actual scientists, there isn't as much conflict between science and religion as people make it seem." David has since served as a teaching assistant for Science at Risk and is in his second semester as a research assistant with Dr. Ecklund's team.

A native of Albuquerque, New Mexico, David began his college studies at the University of Washington and is very glad to be in sunnier weather. He stays active on campus as a member of the Rice Honor Council, a teaching assistant in an introductory biology course, and a campus representative for fellow transfer students. This past summer, David worked with the Board on Global Health at the Institute of Medicine of the U.S. National Academies as a participant in the Rice University Baker Institute's Policy Research Internship Program.

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The panel discussion was designed to exchange ideas about the interactions between religion and medicine, including the role that a patient's spiritual and religious beliefs and practices may play in coping with disease, medical decision making, and other health-related processes. Set at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University, the unique setting attracted a wide public audience, including scholars of religion, medical professionals, policymakers, students, and lay people. Cadge remarked following the event how impressed she was by the range of attendees "from so many different disciplines gathering around areas of shared concern."

The panel event was followed by the subsequent Books in Public Scholarship event on December 4th, during which Cadge met with a small group of scholars and religious leaders to discuss her upcoming book, "Paging God: Religion in the Halls of Medicine," focusing in particular on the presence of religion in neonatal intensive care units. Cadge remarked, "The Books in Public Scholarship event was a privilege. The commentators who provided feedback on my manuscript were excellent and the book will be stronger thanks to their input." Dr. Helen Rose Ebaugh, a Professor of Sociology from the University of Houston who gave feedback on the manuscript, felt that the Program "demonstrated ways in which Rice University and the University of Houston can work together to study religion in our city." The Religion and Public Life Program ultimately has broader goals of translating important scholarly work about religion to relevant public audiences. "The event really showed how the Program can foster dialogue between religion and public life," Curlin remarked. "You just have to keep showing that religion is an issue that's on the table or just below the surface."

Interested in becoming a Religion and Public Life Fellow?

The Religion and Public Life Program is now accepting applications for undergraduate Fellow positions. This is your chance to work directly with Rice faculty on exciting areas of research. The Fellowship program is designed to provide Rice University undergraduate students with experience working in issues related to religion and public life. The Fellowships are oriented towards providing students with research experience, writing and editing opportunities, project management, and experience planning events.

For more information, please contact Katherine Sorrell at kls4@rice.edu.

A Scholar's Perspective

"When Elaine first invited me to participate in the Books in Public Scholarship on Religion workshop, I considered it an honor to have the opportunity to comment on Wendy Cadge's manuscript. After spending a day and a half at Rice, it became clear that the experience was a great privilege as well. This sort of event is all too rare in academia-consider that the typical academic conference session affords a scant 12 minutes or so to present new work. Here, we had a full day to talk in depth and at length about a work in progress, to influence its shape and direction, to interact with leading scholars in the field, to learn from each other's perspectives. It was especially exciting for me, as a sociologist of medicine, who read Wendy's book through that lens, to learn how my colleagues in the sociology of religion interpreted Wendy's findings. This is a model innovation that should be replicated far and wide."

Dr. Elizabeth Armstrong
Associate Professor of Sociology
Princeton University



Dr. Elizabeth Armstrong of Princeton University

Lorem Ipsum Dolor

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