

Religion and Public Life Program

Social Sciences Research Institute at Rice University

Letter from the Director

Welcome to the October 2011 edition of The Religion and Public Life Program News! We are in our second year of the program and this fall are pleased to welcome ten new undergraduate student fellows along with a new post-baccalaureate fellow, affiliate postdoctoral fellow and graduate student to our program. For those of you who are just joining our newsletter list, let us tell you a little bit about the program. The Religion and Public Life Program is an interdisciplinary program that works to provide institutions, social groups, and individuals with the best scholarship on religion and an academic environment that is conducive to positive dialogue about the role of religion in our lives today. Through a series of initiatives, the RPLP trains and supports students and scholars who want to conduct cutting-edge research on religion and helps them use research findings to foster informed, productive dialogue with academic and public leaders. In this way, it is our hope that the RPLP will serve as a vehicle for disseminating and developing research that can dispel myths and resolve conflict. On Friday, November 4 at 630pm in Sewall Hall 301 on the Rice University campus there will be a public dialogue between George Marsden, University of Notre Dame historian and Julie Reuben, Harvard University Scholar of education. There will be a reception to follow. The dialogue will be mediated by Elaine Howard Ecklund, Rice University sociologist and director of the RPLP. Read on to hear more about the new student fellows who are contributing to our program this year as well as some recent workshops the RPLP held about conflict resolution. And please check out our new website: rplp.rice.edu.

Thank you for your support,
The Religion and Public Life Program



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RPLP Fellows' Conversation with Randy Butler

by Sarah James, Rice University '12

Randy Butler, Executive Director of the Institute for Sustainable Peace, joined the RPLP Fellows for a breakfast meeting on October 14, 2011. Previously a trial lawyer, Mr. Butler is now a trained mediator and the President of Butler Mediation Services, working full time on conflict resolution and peacemaking. The discussion was an informative and engaging means for discussing how researchers can move beyond crafting an intellectual understanding of religious conflicts to facilitating meaningful, productive dialogue between groups.

I was particularly moved when Mr. Butler shared one of his own experiences with conflict resolution. He described a situation in which religious leaders from two politically and socially opposed groups were in the initial stages of peace negotiations. Their meeting had made only minimal progress until the group took a short break. During the break, one of the religious leaders pulled out photos of his grandchildren and began showing them off. In response, the religious leader of the opposing religious group also took out photos of his grandchildren to share.

At the end of the break, the men had reached a point of common ground: after seeing their similarities as grandfathers, they realized that they both wanted their grandchildren to grow up in a different social climate than they were currently experiencing. The peace talks then proceeded with more success. It is conversations such as this one that the RPLP hopes to foster between religious leaders, community members, and academics - demonstrating that it is possible to bridge the gap between sometimes seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints.

As the RPLP expands its programming in the Houston community, a logical next step of our academic research on religion and public life is to teach our student fellows the tools they need to address religious conflict in the broader society. In an ongoing partnership of the RPLP, the Institute for Sustainable Peace will provide the models used in such discussions. And throughout the year, the RPLP will host monthly guest speakers to provide the RPLP student fellows with more exposure to different religious ideas and models of conflict resolution.

Upcoming Events

Dr. George Marsden,
University of Notre Dame



Our programming theme for next semester will be "Religion in Higher Education." We will have various events on the Rice University campus and in the greater Houston community that will discuss topics related to this theme from November 4-5, 2011.

Our guests will include George Marsden of Notre Dame, Julie Reuben of Harvard, John Schmalzbauer of Missouri State University, and Amy Binder of University of California, San Diego.



Dr. Julie Reuben
of Harvard
University

George Marsden is the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame. His primary academic interests have been in the history of the interaction of Christianity and American culture. His major areas of study have concerned American evangelicalism and the role of Christianity in American higher education. He teaches American Religious and Intellectual History along with other related subject matters.

Julie Reuben is a Professor of Education at Harvard. She is interested in the role of education in American society and culture. Her teaching and research address broad questions about the purposes of education; the relation between educational institutions and political and social concerns; and the forces that shape educational change.

Dr. Amy Binder
of University of
California, San
Diego



Dr. John
Schmalzbauer of
Missouri State
University

John Schmalzbauer is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Missouri State University. His teaching and research focus on the role of Protestantism in American society. He is especially interested in the role of religion in popular culture, Protestant evangelicalism, American Catholicism, and the place of religion in American higher education.

Amy Binder is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California, San Diego. Her work consistently centers on the meaning-making processes enacted in her research settings. Professor Binder's work concentrates on the effects that cultural beliefs have on human action, and how these beliefs contribute to various forms of power in society.



Meet the RPLP Fellows:

Jared Peifer: Post-Doctoral Fellow

by Cara Fullerton, Rice University '12

A recent Ph.D. graduate from Cornell University, Jared Peifer, a postdoctoral fellow in the Rice University sociology department, also works as an affiliate postdoctoral fellow with the Religion in Public Life Program (RPLP). From the RPLP, Jared has gained insight into what it takes to do research that draws on the talents and resources of undergraduates. Peifer conducts his own research (in part supported by the RPLP) that examines the connection between the economy and religion. He finds common ground between science and religion, one of the RPLP's special interests and his own research on religion and the economy as both investigate important "intersections of societal spheres."

A newcomer to Houston, Jared completed his undergraduate degree at Temple University in Philadelphia and his graduate work at Cornell University. He first learned about Dr. Elaine Howard Ecklund, a fellow Cornell alum, while completing his Ph.D. on religiously affiliated mutual funds. Jared needed someone with that expertise to serve on his dissertation committee, and since Dr. Ecklund is a specialist on the study of religion in society and a Cornell PhD it seemed like a good fit. Despite the long distance between Houston and Ithaca, the two communicated by email throughout his dissertation process. After graduation, Jared learned of an opening in the Sociology department's post-doctoral fellowship program. He applied, and now finds himself at Rice.

Jared has lived in Houston for three months, and says that he and his wife are enjoying living in a larger city. He finds the people friendly and the weather hot and notes that the huge houses and big trucks are notable differences from the "small hippy town" of Ithaca, where Cornell University is located. Coming from a graduate experience devoted mostly to his research, he still feels completely invested in his work but has enjoyed being able to meet undergraduates, interact with faculty, and see other researchers' projects. His day-to-day work in this two-year program is research-oriented, but Jared plans to teach a course in the spring of 2013. Thus far, he has enjoyed Rice, stating that he is "happy to be here, and it seems like a great fit."

In his free time, Jared enjoys watching baseball but finds that most of his extra energy is devoted to his 21 month-old daughter. After his fellowship's completion, Jared hopes to become a sociology professor somewhere that will allow him to best "find some kind of balance between research and teaching."



**Jared Peifer, Rice University
Post-Doctoral Fellow**

Meet the RPLP Fellows:

Samuel Kye: Post-Baccalaureate Fellow

by Henry Hancock, Rice University '12

Samuel Kye joins the RPLP team as a post-baccalaureate fellow after graduating in May 2011 with a degree in sociology from Wheaton College, where he played tight end for a year the Wheaton football team. He considers sociology to be a "passion." His role as post-baccalaureate fellow means that he is involved in every aspect of the RPLP, including doing administrative work to oversee RPLP projects and helping the RPLP maintain a visible profile on the Rice University campus, broader Houston community, and even nationally. Sam also helps mentor the undergraduate student fellows in their day-to-day tasks.



Samuel Kye, Rice University
Post-Baccalaureate Fellow

Because of his heavy involvement with RPLP planning, Sam is enthusiastic about the program's upcoming events, especially the rapidly approaching "Religion and the University" series of talks and workshops. He looks forward to learning from the "world-class scholarship" that will be on display when John Schmalzbauer, George Marsden, Julie Ruben, and Amy Binder come to Rice in early November. According to Sam, this will be an excellent chance to hear several unique perspectives on religion in American universities.

In a larger sense, Sam finds the RPLP's role as a "boundary pioneer" to be a fascinating one as it helps religious institutions and the academy better understand one another. As part of this program, he is deeply interested in the "idea of conflict resolution, about engaging in further dialogue." Because he comes from an evangelical undergraduate institution, Sam enjoys using his own experiences to help Rice University students engage with religious people.

In his free time, Sam enjoys reading American literature, such as the poems of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, and autobiographies of intellectuals like Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards. As a former college athlete, he still enjoys playing football and basketball whenever he can.



Interested in becoming a Religion and Public Life Student Fellow?

The Religion and Public Life Program is now accepting applications for student Fellow positions. The Fellowship program is designed to provide Rice University students with experience working in issues related to religion. The Fellowships are oriented towards providing students with research experience, writing and editing opportunities, project management, and experience planning events for RPLP.

For more information, please contact Dr. Elaine Howard Ecklund at eh@rice.edu.

Stacy Isidro: Undergraduate Fellow

by Parker Eudy, Rice University '14

Stacey Isidro, a senior undergraduate at Rice University, is active in the Student Admission Council as the Tour Guide Chair, performing in musicals like West Side Story and Rent, and is involved in sports, including power-lifting and fencing. A Houston native, Stacey is a pre-medical student majoring in kinesiology and minoring in sociology, and she has been involved in the Religion and Public Life Program since August 2011. She hopes to utilize her research to better understand how religious people interact with the medical and social spheres of science.

Last summer, Stacey assisted Dr. Julie Reuben (one of the guests for RPLP's upcoming Religion in the University event) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education with a focus on how universities promoted civic engagement in post-World War II education. Stacey learned about Dr. Reuben through an article in a previous RPLP newsletter and contacted Dr. Reuben about her research. After asking for an interview, Stacy ended up working with Dr. Reuben over the summer. This experience primed Stacey's interest in the social sciences, which she draws upon in her current RPLP research. A semester-long project she is doing with the RPLP explores religious views on genetic reproductive technologies, embryonic stem cell research, and cloning. Additionally, Stacy is working within the broader student body to promote the upcoming "Religion in the University" event on November 4th.

In her short time with the RPLP, Stacey has already found her experience with the program to be a valuable learning experience. She describes the program as "providing a peek into how religion plays an active role in an individual's opinion about issues like science." She already sees ways she will be able to incorporate the broader knowledge of religion and public life that she is gaining through the RPLP in her future work as a physician.



Stacy Isidro,
Rice University '12

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