



Edited by Dani Rader '21

Interview with New Faculty of Judaism, Professor Nechama Juni



We are excited to welcome new tenure track professor of Judaism Nechama (Chumie) Juni to the Religion Department this coming Fall. Professor Juni will be joining us from Brown University. I sat down with Professor Juni to hear more about her background, research interests, and what she is most looking forward to at Carleton.

Tell me a little bit more about you and your background! Where are you from and where did you go to school?

Chumie: I started college at the University of Maryland and completed undergrad at Stern College for Women at Yeshiva University in New York City, where I double majored in Biology and Philosophy. After undergrad, I did a Masters in

Jewish Philosophy at Yeshiva University, and then my PhD in Religious Studies at Brown University.

As a child, I lived in a bunch of different places in the US and Canada, from Maine, to Montreal, to Memphis. Being an observant Jew is an important part of my identity. Growing up as an observant Jew and as someone who moved around a lot, I was conscious of being an outsider in many ways. Studying religion has really complicated some of the understandings and worldviews that I was raised with and has introduced me to new perspectives, and allows me to appreciate many forms of difference that exist.

How did you come to study religion? What do you love most about it?

Chumie: As an undergraduate, I was torn between Biology and Philosophy as future career paths. Ultimately, I decided on Philosophy and pursued a Masters in Jewish Philosophy at Yeshiva University. I ended up in religious studies after applying to some Religion and Philosophy PhD programs. What really drew me into the field of religion was being able to study theory and philosophy in their historical contexts. Something that I continue to delight in is discovering how religion is an invisible or unmarked thread that runs through the world and explains where people are coming from and how they see things. There is a common assumption in secular settings that religion is a thing that most people no longer care about, or if they do, it is a private commitment. Once I started studying it in depth, I realized how prevalent religion is as a driving force in people's lives, and

also how much of a driving force it is in the world, impacting a range of areas like public policy, ethics, culture, race, and gender, and sexuality.

Another thing that I love about studying religion is encountering different truths, and allowing texts and cultures to speak to you on their own terms. In religious studies, we can problematize our shared or normative assumptions and truly conceptualize different ideas. When studying religion, I know that I will always encounter something different that forces me to suspend my own assumptions about how other people see things or how the world works. This has helped me reflect on how my perspective both helps me see certain things and may occlude other things due to my positionality.

What are your main research interests and areas of study? What are some of your current projects?

Chumie: My areas of interest in the study of Judaism are theories of religion, tradition and practice, religious law, and gender. Contemporary Orthodox Judaism really brings together all of these ideas because it is a highly gendered form of Jewish practice where questions about tradition and change and concerns over the correctness of practice are crucial to contemporary Orthodox communities. I use theory of religion as a set of analytical tools to understand how concerns around tradition, change, and law impact gendered modes of practice in contemporary Orthodox Judaism. My current project, called “Halakhic Women,” shows how the subjecthood of women who observe gendered *halakhah* or Jewish law is malleable and unstable, from both gender and theological perspectives. This fluidity and instability helps challenge the nature of religious obligation and broadens scholarly understandings of the ways in which gender-traditional women participate in patriarchal law and exhibit multiple gendered ways of being, while affirming gender traditionalism in other areas of their lives.

What excites you most about teaching at Carleton? What are you hoping to bring to the Religion Department?

Chumie: What draws me to Carleton is its emphasis on teaching, how invested students are in their studies, the intellectualism of the classroom, and the overall supportive, warm, and loving environment that it fosters. Carleton students are all in, and willing to have their minds open, and I think that teaching is where I can have the greatest impact by thinking with the next generation. Also, the fact that professors can teach what they are interested in at Carleton is incredibly exciting to me and I hope will translate into a shared passion for course material.

As a professor of Judaism in the Religion Department, I hope to help students see broader trends in contemporary life and explore concepts of law, gender, the evolution of tradition and practice by thinking with Judaism; its peculiarities, its history, its texts and practices, and the various positionalities that Jews occupy. Something I hope to contribute to the department is my enthusiasm for cultivating openness to difference and other peoples’ truths. I plan to draw from my own experiences of being an outsider as an observant Jew which have ultimately helped broaden my own world view. As I continue to learn with my students, placing positionality at the center of my classes is integral to my goal of learning with my students and continuing to grow. I am looking forward to joining the small and close-knit community.

What classes are you most excited to teach next year?

Chumie: I am really looking forward to Introduction to Judaism in the Fall! The class will be structured so that one of our weekly meetings will be spent doing paired study (*havrutah*) like in a Talmudic study hall, where students will study Jewish texts in an immersive and collaborative setting. We will be discussing the philosophy of paired study and incorporate those conversations into our lessons. Another class that I am really looking forward to is a course on religion and law called “Religious Law, II/Legal Religions.” We will be thinking about

law comparatively, looking at both religious law and state law and putting the two in conversation in order to understand both better on their own terms and in relation to each other, along with their respective authority, enforcement, and motivations.

Do you have an all-time favorite religion class?

Chumie: Hands down, my favorite religion class was a graduate seminar on religion, law, and internationalism. The class explored influential legal decisions from different countries and discussed the role that different definitions of religion have for people in positions of power and how implicit theories of religion operate within legal processes. One thing that I like about studying law is how it often concretizes implicit cultural assumptions that are otherwise hard to trace.

Professor Michael McNally Lectures on Dakota Presence in Minnesota

On March 30, Professor Michael McNally led a group of Carleton faculty and students in a study group “Mni Sota Makoce” to explore the connections of the Dakota people to their traditional homelands in Minnesota and the implications of Dakota presence for the Carleton community. Professor McNally’s talk was part of a lecture series, “Carleton, The Dakota, and Dakota Homelands,” an initiative to educate the Carleton community about Dakota and indigenous histories. Well over 100 students and faculty-members were in attendance at the event which was held over Zoom.

Professor McNally’s lecture discussed important historical developments and legal treaties that have informed contemporary Dakota presence in Minnesota, along with the importance of Minnesota lands to the Dakota people. In preparation for the lecture, participants read selections from *Mni Sota Makoce: The Land of the Dakota* by Gwen Westerman and Bruce White. He discussed the different indigenous tribes that lived on the land prior to 1851. Mni Sota Makoce, which translates as “The land where the waters reflect the clouds” is the Dakota name for the land of Minnesota. Mni Sota Makoce is a sacred place for the Dakota, the origin of their genesis and the land of their ancestors. His presentation emphasized the importance of the Dakota relationship with their ancestral lands, and that these bonds are enduring.

The series will culminate in the enactment of Carleton’s Land Acknowledgement. The two subsequent lectures were delivered by Kim Smith, Professor of Environmental Studies and Political Science, and Meredith McCoy, Assistant Professor and Andersen Fellow of American Studies and History.

Most recently, Professor McNally was awarded a fellowship from the Luce/ACLS Program in Religion, Journalism & International Affairs, an initiative that seeks to enhance public understanding of religion by giving scholars the tools to translate their work beyond the academy. This fellowship supported Professor McNally in



his new book, *Defend The Sacred: Native American Religious Freedom Beyond the First Amendment* (Princeton University Press, 2020) which explores Native American religions' engagement with, and ongoing contestation over sacred land and other issues under the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Professor McNally's book has already garnered substantial attention; *Defend The Sacred* was recently reviewed in the April 2021 edition of the widely acclaimed journal *The Harvard Law Review* in an [article](#) by Kristen A. Carpenter.

Reflections from Senior Natalie Marsh '21



As I complete my final Carleton Religion course and look ahead to life after graduation, I find myself reflecting on what the Religion major has meant to me over the past several years. While I mourn the loss of the collective remembering that might be going on amongst the senior Religion majors this term were we not in pandemic times, the Covid lifestyle has also brought some stillness and space for reflection that may not have otherwise existed in my final term here. With this spirit in mind, I want to put into words some parts of the Carleton Religion major for which I have been most grateful—at the risk of sounding like a broken record.

I am sure that leaving Carleton will make it even clearer than it already is: the spirit of mentorship cultivated by Carleton's Religion professors is hard to come by. I've heard it said that true learning happens in relationships, rather than alone in front of a dense book. While I've learned in both contexts during my time as a Religion major, I think a unique kind of learning emerges in interpersonal contexts, when a professor shows deep interest in a student. I cherish pre-pandemic memories of sitting in Lori Pearson or Sonja Anderson's office, feeling unafraid to ask questions that I might not have brought up in class. Those one-on-one encounters taught me much about how to approach religious texts—my professors' thoughtful questions—helped me understand the importance of trusting what I noticed and felt curious about in a religious text, and then starting conversations with others about these observations. As I took more Religion courses, this grew into a sense of confidence in the classroom which I had never felt before Carleton, and which enabled me to engage with my peers in discussions which were much more genuine and creative than they would have been if we were all preoccupied with asking the right questions. I'm not sure that I would have found the confidence to engage in these kinds of conversations if it hadn't been for the mentorship relationships I was able to establish with my Religion professors.

This brings me to the second piece of my time as a Religion major that I will carry with me—the sense of joy about learning in the Religion Department, and the unique intellectual community that grows out of this. One memory stands out: my first day in “Monks and Mystics” with Sonja Anderson my sophomore fall, a class with a strong cohort of senior Religion majors. I remember the way they laughed and spoke freely with each other during that class, and the way it produced a kind of intellectual exchange that I hadn't seen before. Now, in my last term, I have those same kinds of conversations with other majors—in which there's a respect for and a seriousness about the material, and yet a sense of delight taken in each other's company and ideas. How lucky I am! I don't know that I'll ever find a comparable group.

Epiphanies Project

When did you decide to study religion and why? Carleton students and faculty discussed the moment when they decided to study religion in an initiative called the [Epiphanies Project](#). The video, shared with current and prospective students, was produced by Professor Asuka Sango and SDAs Carly Bell and Tegan Carlson in March, 2021. Several students and faculty shared their stories in video submissions. Below are quotes from Claire Neid '22 and Professor Sonja Anderson about when they discovered a passion for studying religion.

Claire Neid '22



“I knew I wanted to be a religion major after my first religion class... I remember the first week I didn’t want to take any notes in class because I was so absorbed in the material... I felt immediately at home in the Religion Department.”

“I found some of my best friends in the Religion Department and the professors have become my most admired mentors.”

Professor Sonja Anderson



“I had an epiphany Sophomore year. I looked at my bookshelf... and there on the left hand side, still in the shrink wrap, were my chemistry and biology textbooks and the whole rest of the shelf was filled with religion books that I had bought from the campus bookstore with my own money. That was a pretty clear sign.”

Alumni Features



Rachel Foran (Class of 2012)

◆ Criminal Justice ◆

Tactical Organizing Director, The Community Justice Exchange

Rachel Foran currently works in the field of criminal justice reform. After graduating from Carleton in 2012, Rachel attended Harvard Divinity School where she earned a Master of Theological Studies. During the Comps process, Rachel discovered a love for academic writing and research, eventually deciding to pursue further study of Religion.

While at Harvard, Rachel got involved in prison education and gradually was exposed to Black radical abolitionist thinkers and organizers. These influences brought Rachel first to the Brooklyn Community Bail Fund, and eventually to the Community Justice Exchange. As a tactical organizing director, Rachel writes practical materials for organizers in the abolitionist and criminal justice reform movements.

Rachel says that her current work is deeply connected to her Carleton education, especially classes in the Religion major. In RELG 289: Global Religions in Minnesota with Professor Shana Sippy, she was able to study lived religion, applying theoretical frameworks to lived experienced and real communities. One of the most important things that she gained from her studies at Carleton that continues to inform her work in criminal justice reform was learning how to connect theory and practice.



Meera Sury (Class of 2014)

◆ Medicine ◆

Resident Physician, Brigham and Women's Hospital

Meera Sury graduated from Carleton in 2014 with a double major in Religion and Biology. She currently works as a Resident Physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. After Carleton, Meera attended Harvard Divinity School for a Master of Theological Studies and then went to medical school at the University of Minnesota.

Meera believes that Carleton's liberal arts education highly informed her non-traditional path into clinical ethics and her approaches to patient care.

Meera has forged a unique career path by approaching her clinical practice from a holistic, interdisciplinary perspective. Similar to Rachel, Meera discussed how she gained the ability to translate theory into practice while taking religion classes at Carleton.

After Divinity School and with her background in religious studies, Meera realized: "thinking about clinical ethics needed to be a conversation I was having with patients and myself at the bedside." While working in the ICU, Meera applied clinical ethics to her daily work as a physician working with patients.

Reflecting on her time at Carleton, Meera recalls the openness and intellectual curiosity fostered in religion classes at Carleton that have guided her into a unique career path.

***NEW* Religion Courses for 2021-2022**

Fall

RELG 120 - Introduction to Judaism, Nechama Juni

What is Judaism? Who are Jewish people? What are Jewish texts, practices, ideas? What ripples have Jewish people, texts, practices, and ideas caused beyond their sphere? These questions will animate our study as we touch on specific points in over three millennia of history while we are immersed in Jewish texts, historic events, and cultural moments. We will also analyze these questions with concepts such as 'tradition,' 'culture,' 'power,' and 'diaspora,' exploring how 'Jewishness' has been constructed by different stakeholders, each claiming the authority to define it.

Winter

RELG 218 - The Body in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Nechama Juni

How does the body direct the mind? How do religious practices discipline the body and the mind, and how do habits of body and mind change the forms and meanings of these practices? How can we understand the

racialized and the gendered religious body? Mind and body are often considered separate but not equal; the mind gives commands to the body and the body complies. Exploring the ways the three religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam think about the body will deepen our understanding of the mind-body relationship.

RELG 221 - Judaism and Gender, Nechama Juni

How does gender shape the Jewish tradition, and how have Jewish history, texts, and practices shaped Jewish notions of gender? Taking Judaism as a test case, this course will explore the relationship between historical circumstance, positionality, and the religious imaginary. We will examine the ways that Jewish gender and theology inform each other and how gender was at play in Jewish negotiations of economic and social class, racial and ethnic status, even citizenship. Following practice and narrative, we will consider how intersectional gender has shaped the stories Jews tell, and stories told about the Jewish people.

Spring

RELG 213 - Religion, Medicine and Healing, Sonja Anderson

How do religion and medicine approach healing? This course explores religious and cultural models of health, from ancient Greece to Christian monasteries to modern mindfulness and self-care programs. We will consider ethical quandaries about death, bodily suffering, mental illness, miraculous cures, and individual agency, avoiding simplistic narratives of rationality and irrationality.

RELG 219 - Religious Law, II/Legal Religions, Nechama Juni

Law plays a central role in religion, and the concept of religion plays a central role in law. We often use the word 'law' to describe obligatory religious practices. But is that 'law,' as compared with state law? Legal systems in the U.S. and Europe make laws that protect religious people, and that protect governments from religion. But what does 'religion' mean in a legal context? And how do implicit notions of religious law affect how judges deal with religion? We will explore these questions using sources from contemporary religions and legal disputes.

RELG 285 - Islam in America: Race, Religion and Politics, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri

Examining the history of Islam in America from the colonial period to the present, this course contextualizes American Islam within American religious history and modern Islamic history. Focusing on the politics of race and religion in America, we will also explore ideas of religious diversity; the relationship between race, religion and 'progress;' Islam's role in the civil rights movement and in nationalist movements; and the rise of militant Islam.

Senior Comps Titles 2020-2021

❖ = *Distinction in comps* ➤ = *Bardwell Smith Prize for Excellence in the Study of Religion*

Secularization and Discourse in the Public Sphere: An Examination of Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy & Tradition* || Ella Barzel

Drawing on Jeffrey Stout's work, *Democracy and Tradition*, Ella examines the impact of secularization on contemporary American democratic and challenges Stout's characterization of the secularized public sphere, which he sees as unaffiliated with a dominant set of theological premises. Grounded in a case study surrounding same-sex marriage, Ella argues that the American public sphere, and the discourse which occurs within it, remains firmly entrenched in distinct religious presumptions.

❖ **Sexual Regulation: Blurring the Line Between 'the Religious and 'the Secular'** || Carly Bell

How did the norms of heterosexuality, monogamy, and endogamy become a unifying moral standard in the United States, and why are they misread as religiously unmarked? Through an examination of *Reynolds v. United States* (1879) and *Bob Jones University v. United States* (1983), Carly explores how marriage and sex have been used as tools for state-building and social control in the United States and the ways in which secularism has been instrumental in obscuring the presence of religion in American public life.

Stories of Identity: Devadasis and Bharata Natyam || Ella Boyer

Ella explores the devadasi dance of South India as a lived tradition, critically examining the dynamic tensions found throughout devadasi history and its global counterpart — the Bharata Natyam movement. Drawing on Catherine Bell's theory of ritualization, Ella argues that devadasi identity is subjectively shaped by ritual, reform, oppression, and resistance intimately intertwined with the social and political circumstances which surround it.

¿*Cristo al Servicio de Quién?*: **Evangelicalism, Liberation Theology, and Freedom** || Henry Brown

Challenging commonplace notions regarding the rise of evangelical churches in Latin America, Henry examines the speeches, songs, essays, and interviews of prominent theologians in Ecuador, Venezuela, and Brazil in light of Catholic theologies of liberation. In an attempt to deviate from US-sourced stereotypes surrounding the social and political character of these new evangelical movements, Henry relates them to historical events, revolutionaries, cultural figures, and draws connections between movements to better understand each on their *own terms* rather than an extension of preexisting scholarship.

► **Mental Health Wellness: Examining the Intersections of Buddhism and Mental Health Treatments in the United States and Tibet** || Tegan Carlson

What is the relationship between Buddhism and modern mental health treatment? How do ideological tenets of Tibetan Buddhism influence the Western, scientific framework? Drawing on a select set of scholarship, Tegan considers the myriad ways in which Buddhist conceptions of emotions intersect with the Cartesian dualistic worldview inherent to American society, and how they in turn influence modern medical treatment.

❖ **Giving Words to the Wordless: A Philosophical-Theological Approach to Anxiety and Depression** || Natalie Marsh

Through a close reading of two prominent existentialist thinkers, Paul Tillich and Søren Kierkegaard, Natalie explores the interrelationship between power structures, language, and individual experience in conversations about anxiety and depression. By bringing theological texts and linguistic insights into dialogue with contemporary psychological discourse, Natalie aims to expand our normative understanding of suffering and healing.

❖ **Dangerous Devotees: Women and the Battle for Sabarimala** || Dani Rader

In her paper, Dani examines the disputed entry of girls and women between the ages of 10-50 to Lord Ayyappan's Sabarimala shrine in Kerala, India and highlights female devotees' strategies of ritualization following the 2018 Supreme Court decision to overturn the controversial ban. She argues that these women's displays of activism, both in favor of and against the ban, proliferate multiple models of womanhood, nation, and devotion which ultimately work to renegotiate the gendered sacred geography around Sabarimala.

Healing Suffering with Actionable Love and Compassion in Christianity and Buddhism: A Comparison of Contemporary Thinkers Rita Nakashima Brock and Thich Nhat Hanh's Theologies || Ruby Wu

By comparing the approaches of two prominent religious thinkers on actionable love and compassion in Buddhism and Christianity, Ruby argues for such concepts' roles in practices of healing and suffering. While traditional texts in Christianity and Buddhism are often interpreted in ways that encourage passivity towards systems of suffering, Brock and Nhat Hanh's accounts of erotic love and radical compassion challenge this narrative.

❖ **Climate Change and the Battle to Save American Christianity: Religious Motivations of Climate Skepticism among Evangelicals** || Ellie Zimmerman

For evangelical climate skeptics, environmentalism is not just a plan to stop climate change — it is an ideology that directly competes with Christianity. In her paper, Ellie explores the ways in which climate action presents an existential threat to Christianity in the eyes of many evangelicals, examining the parallels they often draw between Satan aims and that of "secular elites" pushing an environmentalist platform.