



Written by Kate Hoeting '19 and Maya Collier '19

Getting to Know Professor Daniel Picus

Daniel Picus is the Robert A. Oden, Jr. Postdoctoral Fellow for Innovation in the Humanities and Judaism. His courses this year include RELG 221: Judaism and Gender (Fall); RELG 235: Power, Resistance, and Sacred Text (Winter); and RELG 120: Introduction to Judaism (Spring).

What's your nerdiest hobby/passion?

I have an unsurprisingly extensive Aramaic dictionary collection, but I'm a religion professor, so that only makes sense, right? I'm also a pretty serious baker, although I don't think of that as particularly nerdy. I'm currently cultivating an exquisite sourdough starter, so I guess that counts. (On a side note, let me know if anyone wants some! Sourdough starter is the *real* gift that keeps on giving.)



What's your favorite topic to discuss with students?

There's nothing I love more than when students make connections between class material and the modern world, and want to parse out why something looks the way it does. My degree is in ancient Judaism—that's a lot of texts written at least a thousand, and generally closer to two thousand, years ago, and I tend to skew towards older, more historical material for class readings, as well. When someone sees connections though, there's not a lot better than talking about them together.

I hear you went to Macalester. How has your return to Minnesota been so far?

I did go to Macalester! My return to Minnesota has been wonderful—although of course it's super different to be here as a faculty member than a student. I actually don't live that far from Mac now, so I'm back in my old stomping grounds, but of course I'm down in Northfield every day. I'm just constantly reminded of what a wonderful place to live this is, and how magnificent the people here are.

Meet Professor Matt Robertson

Joining us as a visiting professor, Matt Robertson specializes on the religions of South Asia. This year, he will teach the following courses: RELG 153: Introduction to Buddhism (Fall); RELG 273: Religious Approaches to Death (Fall); RELG 155: Hinduism: An Introduction (Winter); and RELG 222: Politics, Medicine, and the Self in Asian Religion (Winter).



What has surprised you about Carleton so far?

The pace, which seems to have benefits and drawbacks. On one hand, there’s always something new to engage with on the horizon. On the other, there’s precious little time to pause and reflect.

Do you think Carleton students would benefit from taking a post-college gap year?

A gap year gives you an opportunity to step back and put all the pieces of your education together into a whole. You learn a lot over four years of coursework; but the way it all hangs together—and how it fits into the world outside of Carleton—takes time to sink in.

What is a prevalent misconception you believe exists surrounding Western conceptions of South Asian religions?

Westerners tend to think of yoga poses, crossed-leg meditators, and peaceful Om chants—and to conceive these as ways of withdrawing into oneself to transcend the outside world. Against this, the history of South Asian religious traditions demonstrates a deep and broad engagement with the world, often in ways that many of us would not recognize as “religious” at all.

Introducing Professor Ahoo Najafian

Ahoo Najafian joins us as the Ira T. Wender Postdoctoral Scholar in Middle East Studies. Her courses this year include WGST 180: Power and Desire: Gender Relations in the Middle East (Fall); RELG 247: The Islamic Republic: Explorations in Religions and Nationalism (Winter); and MELA 125: Love in Persian Literature (Spring).



Why do you believe literature is an important tool for studying religion in the Middle East?

Literary texts can reflect the ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions that exist within any culture, and therefore, have the potential to paint a more nuanced and multi-faceted picture of the region.

How does your work seek to dismantle stigma and stereotypes surrounding Islam that pervade the Western discourse?

My main goal is to show the diversity of voices and different types of agency that exist in the vast geography of the Islamic world throughout history. I try to teach my students that there is no monolithic definition of “Islam” and, similar to any other religion, for every “negative” aspect (in our understanding) in its history, there are counter-examples of other types of interpretations.

What have you enjoyed the most about teaching at Carleton?

The Carleton community has been very welcoming and the message I get from the culture of this community is that we are all here to learn together. I find this tendency immensely enjoyable.

Welcome Back Professor Michael McNally

Professor Michael McNally has returned to Carleton after his year-long sabbatical working on his new book, for which he was granted the Guggenheim Fellowship.

How has the topic of your manuscript changed as you have written it?

Book-length writing (imagine writing a chapter every two months) involves a lot of change along the way. My title *Defend the Sacred: Native American Religious Freedom beyond the First Amendment* always has set out to understand the ways that Native peoples have strategically engaged other legal languages—environmental law, treaty law, property law, international human rights law—to protect sacred lands, practices, museum objects, and ancestral remains after their consistent losses under religious freedom law.

But I've come to believe even more strongly that "religion's" legal definition, even though it has excluded Native claims to, say sacred land, is not set in stone, and that religious freedom has gained, not lost, currency, amid the rightward turn in the courts.



How have the law courses you have taken better equipped you to work on this project?

I took the law courses on a previous leave back in 2008-9, many of them reading courses with prominent Native law scholars around the country. These perspectives have allowed me to draw on insights from the academic study of religion, but to remain somewhat restless with thinking the work is over once you have shown there is no such thing as religion. For religion is a powerful word in our society by virtue of its place in the constitution and national identity; Native peoples have always known that, and strategically engaged it to do new things with the term. Lawyers don't ask what does a given term mean; they ask "what can it mean?" What can religion mean? becomes my question.

What advice do you have for comps-ing seniors as they embark on their own epic projects?

Remember that it is a series of shorter projects, each of which should have its own internal deadline. Also keep a separate file of your meta-thinking about organizational decisions so you keep a sense of the "forest" you have chosen to see in the trees as you right about the various trees.

Co-Taught Class

During seventh week, Professor Daniel Picus and Professor Ahoon Najafian combined their classes to co-teach. The courses, "Judaism and Gender" and "Power and Desire: Gender Relations in the Middle East" are offered during the same period, so the professors organized for the students to all meet in the same room. During the class, students compared the erotic poetry that they had studied. Owen Yager '20, a religion major taking "Judaism and Gender," offers his thoughts on how combining the classes helped change his perceptions of Daniel Picus' class. He writes: "Meeting up with Ahoon's class gave, in my eyes, two primary benefits. Firstly, we were simply able to see a large section of the canon of erotic poetry created by schools centered theologically in the Middle East, and thereby got both extra context for the poems we had already seen, as well as new works to compare them to. Secondly, while working alongside the students in "Power and Desire," we had to consider our own poetry from a complete outsider's perspective. It's easy to forget to step back and look at the broad context of class material in the middle of seventh week, but this joint class spurred us to do so."

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Professor Shahzad Bashir Visits Carleton



In October, as part of Religion Department's "Religion Matters" series, former Carleton Religion professor Shahzad Bashir returned to campus for his talk *Should Muslims Get to Define the Study of Islam?* Since leaving Carleton, he has taught at Stanford University and now serves as Professor of Islamic Humanities at Brown University. He presented his research for his upcoming book *Islamic Pasts and Futures: Conceptual Explorations*. He opened his talk by discussing how he began teaching at Carleton in September of 2001. After 9/11, many non-Muslims (including George W. Bush) have attempted to levy their own definitions of Islam. Ultimately, Professor Bashir asked, "If Muslims are to define Islam, which Muslims have the social power to do so?" According to Professor Bashir, any "invocation of the word 'Islam' is nominal," so scholars must pay close attention to who is using the term and why. The multiplicity of Islams must lead to diverse scholarship. Scholars should not bend over backwards trying to formulate a contrived definition of Islam; there is no definable, monolithic "Islam" and any conception of Islam should be fundamentally incoherent. His work includes *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* and *Messianic Hopes and Mystical Visions: The Nūrbakhshīya between Medieval and Modern Islam*.