

CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN RELIGION & SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

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The Monk Who Spoke with Trees

Chris Goto-Jones
Faculty Fellow

I'm not sure whether this is true for everyone, but I have a list of my favourite monks. I don't apply the category with very much technical rigor: for me, it has no gender requirements; the person in question doesn't need to observe a specific religion; they could be a monk, a nun, a priest, a cleric, or a mystic of some kind. So, my list has about 38 names on it as I write this. But the number fluctuates with new discoveries, personal growth/decline, and probably the weather. How about your list?

For the last several years, the very top of my list has been the 13th century Japanese Buddhist monk, Myōe Shōnin. He wasn't a Zen monk, so he's not very fashionable these days. And he tried very hard not to have disciples or start a new school, so nobody can really claim him as their patriarch. There's pretty good evidence (including his own admission) that people thought he was a



The Dharma of Trees. Image: Chris Goto-Jones.

little bit ... odd. In polite society (if we can find such a thing these days), we might call him an eccentric.

So, you might ask, why is he my favourite monk? Great question - thanks for asking. He's my favourite monk because he had a pet dog (who was made out of wood), a stone (that was his confidant), a tree (that was his meditation companion), and an island (to whom he wrote at least one delightful letter). He grew tea. He had visions of various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and he kept a meticulous diary of his dreams for years. In one poignant letter (to an island), he laments that people think he's crazy, but then he reassures his reader (ie. the island) that anyone who thinks he's crazy for writing to an island is not really worthy of his friendship anyway. Indeed, the fact that he seems crazy is actually a sign that society has lost its way, that people have become obsessed with money, fame, and material nonsense. Really, writing to an island is the sanest thing for us to do with our time.

I wonder if that sounds familiar?

So, during my time at CSRS, I'm going to be working on a book about Myōe, Buddhist environmental philosophy, and how to live sanely in a crazy world. Maybe I can convince you that Myōe should make your list too?

Myōe Kōben, *Dream Record (Yume no ki)*, early 13th c., ink on paper. National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution.

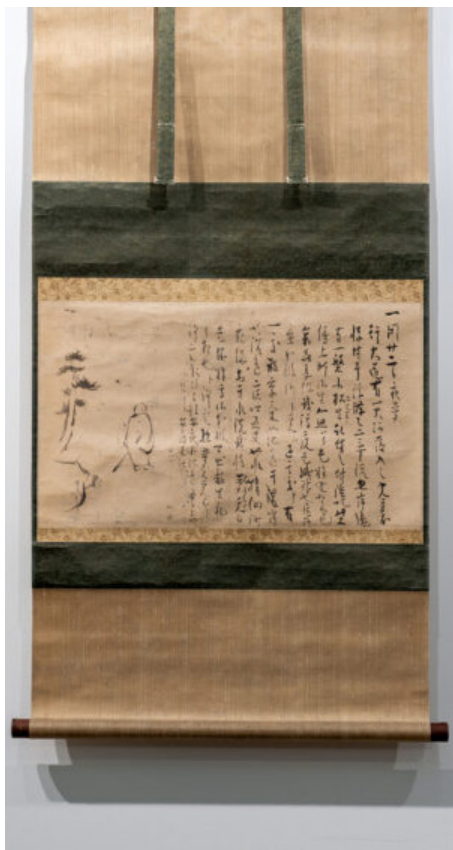
God's Violent Love: Christian Nationalist Congregations and Political Violence

Ish Green
Graduate Student Fellow

Christian nationalism in the United States poses real threats to American democracy. Polling data consistently finds correlations between those who espouse Christian nationalist beliefs—i.e., a political and cultural ideology that seeks to elide Christian and national identities—and support for political violence. The relationship between Christian nationalism and violence became explicit, for instance, when Christian symbols and slogans were foregrounded in the January 6th, 2021 attack on the US Capitol. In one chilling example, Christian prayers were inscribed on the gallows erected outside the Capitol, praying to Jesus to help them successfully block the election results. But if Christian nationalism has a long history in the US, why has this movement reached such a fever pitch and inspired such violence now?

To explore this and other questions, I collected ethnographic data on a Christian nationalist church representative of the extreme ends of the movement to dismantle democracy in the United States and replace it with authoritarian theocracy. Led by a politician-turned-pastor accused of multiple acts of domestic terrorism, the church has

[CONTINUED ON P. 5]



CSRS UPDATES



Message from the Director

Rachel Brown

What a wonder to look back at my first year in the Director's chair and see that not only did I not burn the place down, but our scholarly community grew and our foundation became even stronger. None of us could have anticipated how this major transition in the Centre's life would unfold, but I am proud to say that the interdisciplinary, international, and intergenerational community at the heart of the CSRS is as vibrant as ever. This was only possible because of the stellar team that I have the privilege of working with. Todd, Scott and Jess are the backbone of this place, and our work together this year reminded me what a gift it is to love what you do. Thanks, team. I could not have made it to year two without you.

If year one was about strengthening our community and finding our footing, year two is about turning things up to 11 with exciting new research initiatives and programming.

Looking ahead to my second year, I am excited to build on the work we began last year through our three new research Hubs at the CSRS: The Critical Muslim Studies Hub (CMS), the Jewish Academic Hub (JAH) and the Teaching Religion in Canada Hub (TRiC). Over the coming year, we will continue to

strengthen these Hubs by expanding their programming and developing the research networks that they support.

Alongside building momentum in these established research Hubs, I will also launch a new Food Studies Hub at the CSRS in collaboration with the Dean's Office in the Faculty of Social Sciences. In addition to providing an academic home for UVic researchers working on food-related topics across disciplines and faculties, the Hub will serve as a base for a range of collaborative research initiatives. At the core of the Hub's work will be a major new research project (described below), which will bring international collaborators to UVic for workshops and conferences while supporting UVic researchers in conducting research abroad, delivering invited lectures, building international networks, and engaging with policymakers and legal professionals.

This next year, we will also begin a new multi-year, international, and interdisciplinary research project exploring religion, food, power, and politics. Throughout the summer and early fall, we will be preparing an application to the SSHRC Insight Grant program. If successful, the grant will support research in Canada, France, Spain, Australia, and New Zealand, expanding our international partnerships and serving as the first step in building our research teams across the world. This project will generate multiple scholarly articles and conference presentations and will culminate in an international workshop at UVic, where researchers from across the project will come together to share knowledge and strengthen collaborations across Religious Studies, Law and Political Science.

Alongside these major research initiatives, we will continue to offer engaging publicly accessible programming through our *Scholars in the Square* lecture series, collaborative events with the JAH and CMS, and co-sponsored events with colleagues across campus, including a Lansdowne Lecture, Distinguished Lecture in Islam, and various special lectures. Our daily coffee talks will also continue to drive the momentum of our work, creating a space for creative thinking and risk-taking where our research fellows can expand their perspectives and test new ideas.

I am excited to see what these initiatives will bring in the coming year, and I continue to be grateful for the opportunity to lead this amazing community.

To Brighten Your Day: The CSRS Community Celebrates Administrative Assistant Jessica Ziakin-Cook

I am a doctoral candidate in Art History and Visual Studies writing a dissertation on the impact of Catholic teachings on the arts in the 20th and 21st Centuries. In December 2025, I joined the Centre's staff as Administrative Assistant. Here are a few thoughts spurred by my view from the front desk.



Top ten reasons it's good to be at the front desk, by Jessica Ziakin-Cook:

- 10) Free coffee (and cream!)
- 9) Post-lecture meals at the Grad House
- 8) Great Benefits
- 7) Someone has to teach Todd about the 21st Century!
- 6) The opportunity to support and get to know fascinating researchers from around the world
- 5) The Master Key!!! Mua-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha
- 4) Inside view of academic juries and organizational management
- 3) Overhearing laughter in the kitchen
- 2) Direct access to cutting edge opinions on the state of the NBA from leading scholars of religion
- 1) Baby fawns



The CSRS will launch a Food Studies Hub with the support of the Faculty of Social Sciences.

Partnerships and Publications

Todd Klaiman

Over the past year, our team at the CSRS has continued to expand national and international partnerships while strengthening the Centre's profile as a hub for collaborative, interdisciplinary scholarship. Building on longstanding relationships and new initiatives launched in recent years, we have advanced major research projects, publications, and public programming that extend the Centre's scholarly impact across Canada and globally.

The growing network of research hubs at the Centre continues to provide a strong foundation for collaboration and knowledge mobilization. We have worked closely with colleagues through the Critical Muslim Studies Hub, Jewish Academic Hub, and Teaching Religion in Canada Hub to expand programming and research networks, fostering new connections across campus and beyond. This work will soon be complemented by the launch of the Food Studies Hub, developed with the support of the Dean's Office in the Faculty of Social Sciences. The hub will provide an interdisciplinary home for food-related research while serving as the base for a new international research initiative examining religion, food, power, and politics. We are currently preparing a SSHRC Insight Grant application to support collaborative research in Canada, France, Spain, Australia, and New Zealand, bringing international scholars to UVic while creating new opportunities for UVic researchers to conduct research abroad and engage with policymakers.

We are also pleased to celebrate significant scholarly achievements at the Centre. The edited volume *We Should Know Better: Western-Trained Scholars of Religion Reflect on Crises of Conscience* is currently under review with McGill-Queen's University Press. Another major publication, *Opening and Closing Relations: Indigenous Spiritualities in Canada*, edited by Paul Bramadat, John Borrows, and David Seljak, has successfully completed peer review and is forthcoming with the University of Toronto Press.

Collaborative research remains central to the Centre's mission. Alongside continuing partnerships with colleagues in Australia, the Université de Montréal, and institutions across Canada, we have continued to contribute to projects exploring spirituality and health, religion and pedagogy, and the role of religion in climate disaster experiences through our collaboration with the Climate Disaster Project.

We are also pleased to be developing a new partnership with the Krishnamurti Educational Centre of Canada (KECC) and the Kapoor Singh Siddoo Foundation. This collaboration will establish an annual distinguished lecture series dedicated to fostering dialogue between academic scholarship and public life through conversations on religion, philosophy, education, contemplative traditions, and contemporary social issues. Planning is underway for an inaugural lecture in October 2027, with further details to be announced as the partnership develops.

These initiatives are complemented by our ongoing commitment to public engagement

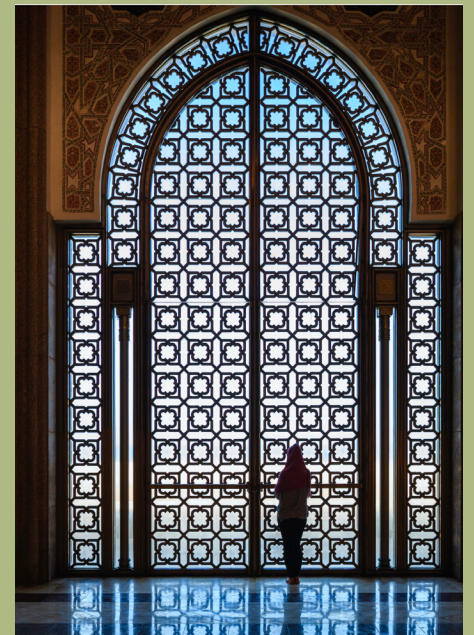
through the *Scholars in the Square* lecture series, workshops, conferences, and coffee talks, ensuring that research supported by the Centre continues to foster dialogue across disciplines, institutions, and communities.

The Critical Muslim Studies Hub Expands the Conversation

Zaheera Jinnah and Shemine Gulamhusein

Building on the launch of the Critical Muslim Studies Hub at UVic (Fall 2025), we look forward to deepening our regular *Critique and Care* gatherings as a vibrant space for exploring emerging scholarship on Islam, Muslim lives, and Muslim futures. The Hub offers an intellectual home where researchers, students, educators, and community members can come together to engage critical questions, cultivate relationships, and imagine new possibilities for knowledge and practice.

In the coming year, we hope to host a keynote lecture with a prominent scholar in Critical Muslim Studies and support collaborative initiatives across hubs, research projects, and community partnerships at UVic and beyond. By nurturing dialogue, mentorship, and interdisciplinary collaboration, the Hub seeks to strengthen the visibility and impact of Critical Muslim Studies while fostering connections that extend across campuses, communities, and generations.



RESEARCH



Original Tiger Balm advertisement. Money from the rubber plantation in Siam and from the Tiger Balm founders helped to build the Pagoda at Kek Lok Si Temple.

Geomancy, Rubber, Tiger Balm, and Monastic Economies: Sustaining Buddhism Across Borders

Todd Klaiman

CSRS Program and Research Coordinator

The expansion of Chinese Buddhism across the ecological and political borders of colonial Southeast Asia has depended on more than the movement of monks, texts, and rituals. It has required Buddhist communities to develop resilient strategies for mobilizing the material, financial, ecological, and cosmological resources that sustain religious life in new social and political landscapes. My current research focuses on Kek Lok Monastery in Penang during the early twentieth century to examine how a Chinese Buddhist community navigated the uncertainties of the imperial-colonial-nation-state transition through a constellation of 'technologies of sustainability,' including rubber cultivation, royal patronage, geomancy, philanthro-capitalism, and transregional networks.

Rather than treating sustainability as merely an environmental or economic concern, I argue that Kek Lok Monastery functioned as a border institution, transforming resources that crossed ecological, political, cultural, and sacred boundaries into enduring forms of religious authority and institutional resilience. Through networks linking British Malaya, Siam, and China, the monastery converted forests into rubber plantations, commodity wealth into monumental architecture, royal patronage into religious legitimacy, and geomantic understandings of landscape and the elemental forces into strategies for institutional renewal. These intersecting border infrastructures became productive sites of transformation,

sustaining not only the monastery's finances and built environment but also the cultural imaginaries that bound together humans, Buddhas, landscapes, and the material world.



Kek Lok Si Temple, Penang.

The Saint John's Bible in Context

Jessica Ziakin-Cook

Associate Fellow

When a secular research center focused on religion and society receives a \$170,000 hand-illuminated Catholic Bible, it raises compelling questions about the intersection of faith, art, and public scholarship. The journey of such a Bible—from its creation to its display in over 100 public locations across North America—serves as a fascinating case study for understanding the mutual influence between Catholic teachings and the visual arts in the 20th century. My

doctoral research explores how Catholic doctrine, especially from 1891 through the era of Vatican II, began to emphasize the importance of creativity, dignity, and human labor in response to technological change. These teachings were eventually integrated into parish life and the catechism, yet were often overlooked by the broader modern art world. Notably, some Catholic artists who earnestly embraced these teachings faced criticism from the Church, though some are now being reconsidered and even celebrated.

Focusing on the *Saint John's Bible* as my primary example, I examine how such works construct value and visual meaning within contemporary contexts. The story of Bishop Remi De Roo, a pivotal figure in the founding of the Center for Studies in Religion and Society (CSRS), illustrates this dynamic. Rather than gifting the Bible to the diocese or a university collection, Bishop De Roo chose to donate it to the CSRS, highlighting the Bible's role as both a religious artifact and a catalyst for interdisciplinary inquiry. My research sits at the crossroads of religious studies, art history, and visual studies, asking how modern illuminated manuscripts like the *Saint John's Bible* differ from their medieval predecessors, what cultural work they perform today, and what their presence signifies within secular academic spaces.



Donald Jackson, detail of "The Luke Anthology" in Gospels and Acts; tempera paint, sumi ink and gold leaf on vellum, 2002.

[CONTINUED FROM P.1]

ties to the Make America Great Again, Patriot, and militia movements. In particular, my research explores the role of apocalyptic religious narrative and emotional activation in justifying and motivating political violence.



A crowd-erected gallows hangs in Washington, DC, during the 2021 storming of the United States Capitol. Image: Tyler Merbler. Wikimedia Commons.

Memory, Ritual & Mezuzot : Cultural Connection Through Material Culture

Pascalie Ricard
Graduate Student Fellow

My research is centered on a prolific, small but ritually powerful object in Judaism and Jewish culture called the *Mezuzah* (Meh-zoo-zah; plural: *Mezuzot*), which also contains an inscribed parchment called a *Klaf* (klah-f; plural: *Klafim*). A *Mezuzah* is an ancient biblical commandment; it is a tool of connection with God and seen as a protective house amulet. *Mezuzot* are found on the exterior entrance doorframes of Jewish homes making them a strong cultural symbol. Together a *Mezuzah* and *Klaf* are both visual art and sacred domestic Jewish material culture.

I am utilizing the Oregon Jewish Museum and Holocaust Education Center's Winik *Mezuzot* collection. The collection has 169



Hirz amulet case pendant, Haidan, Yemen, early 20th c., filigree, corals, amber. Israel Museum.

Mezuzot from around the world and includes a unique traveling exhibit of 72 *Mezuzot* called *Upon Thy Gates*. I am analyzing the 11 Yemenite *Mezuzot* from this collection for their similarities to Yemeni wearable amulet pendants, sometimes known as *Hirz*



Mezuzah, Yemen, late 19th c., silver and stones. Oregon Jewish Museum and Centre for Holocaust Education.

pendants. Within many diasporic Jewish communities like Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Mizrahi there is also the use of amulet-like devices that share similarities with *Mezuzot*. These physical and visual similarities between *Mezuzot* and amulets suggest an interesting permeability between Jewish religious beliefs and Jewish magical practice. Depending on what aspect of a culturally complex object like a *Mezuzah* is presented, history and culture can be appreciated or can be tragically lost. *Mezuzot* are religiously and culturally meaningful; they are a material representation of the Jewish covenant with God, but also an important instance of Jewish folk tradition.

A Message and Personalized Welcome from the Donors

Heather Lindstedt and Brian Pollick

We are excited to welcome Pascalie Ricard as this year's Rev. Heather Lindstedt and Dr. Brian Pollick Graduate Fellow. Her study of Jewish *Mezuzot* as religious, amuletic, and artistic objects, is a fascinating look at how a supposedly fixed ritualistic object can respond to local cultures in form and meaning.

We are pleased to help sponsor graduate students at the Centre, because we believe fellowships provide students with an opportunity to become part of a truly unique community of scholars. The CSRS attracts fellows at all stages of the academic journey and across every field of research and creative output. Fellowships not only provide a foundational experience for their recipients, but also enable work that can have profound societal impacts.



Heather and Brian sponsor a fellowship that supports a graduate student in Art History and Visual Studies.

RESEARCH



Members of the Vai-Vai samba school carry its flag during the São Paulo Carnival parade, surrounded by vibrant costumes, elaborate floats, and the energy of the samba avenue. Image: Felipe Araújo / Liga-SP.

Carnival in Brazil: Where Samba Becomes Sacred

Bruna Brito
Graduate Student Fellow

Every year, Carnival fills Brazilian streets with music, colour, and celebration. But behind the spectacle lies a deeper history. For Afro-Brazilian communities, this collective performance has long been a way of preserving traditions that were once criminalized and pushed to the margins. My research follows Vai-Vai, a samba school founded in 1930 and rooted in São Paulo's Black cultural history. Through six months of ethnographic fieldwork, I observed the intense preparation a samba school engages for Carnival. One of my observations is that Carnival rehearsals are not simply artistic or practical work. It is also ritual work. For these organizations, the *bateria's* (drums) rhythms, dancers' movements, reverence for the *pavilhão* (sacred flag), and visual symbols in costumes and floats all echo Afro-Brazilian religious traditions such as Candomblé and Umbanda. Although these traditions remain stigmatized in broader society, they do not disappear when Carnival enters the public sphere. They are transformed into performances of belonging, memory, and resistance. Vai-Vai shows how marginalized communities organize through ritual,

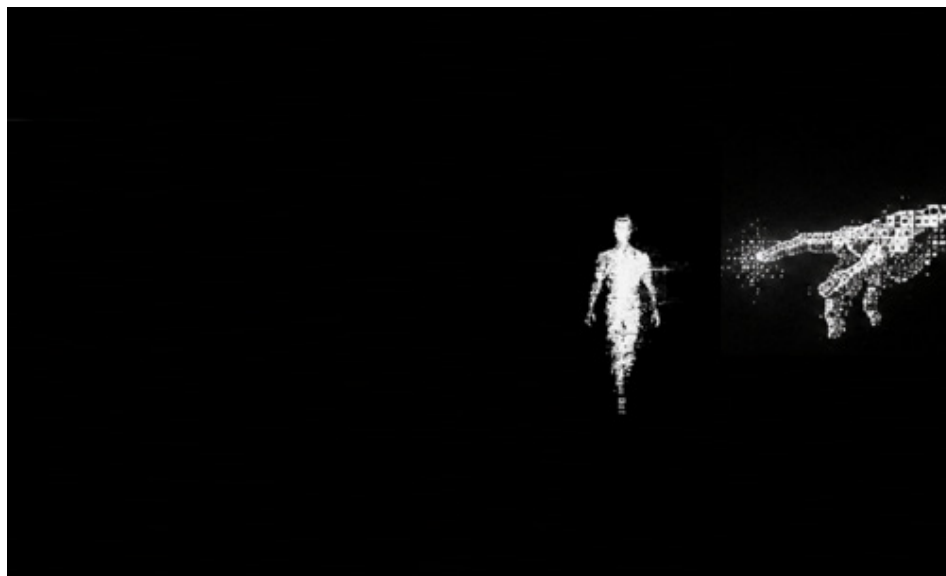
carrying histories of repression into public moments of pride and collective endurance.

Techno-Divinity: The Emerging Divine Position of Artificial Intelligence

Iman Fadaei
Graduate Student Fellow

Modernity is often understood through the growing power of science, rationalization, and technology. Yet modern technology cannot be reduced to equipment or tools. It (re)shapes how the world and human beings appear, and what becomes possible. In my project, I argue that Artificial Intelligence may mark a new threshold within this technological age.

While debates about singularity, superintelligence, and generative AI often focus on whether machines are truly conscious, genuinely intelligent, or sufficiently accurate, my project begins elsewhere. Its central question concerns the historical position AI is beginning to occupy: not simply what AI can do, but what it is becoming for us. AI increasingly presents itself as a source capable of generating claims, meanings, and interpretations, while the processes behind these outputs remain largely black-boxed. In this sense, it bears an ironic resemblance to older forms of the sacred, where mystery, authority, universality, and power gather around a seemingly transcendent point of reference. Seen in this way, AI may signal a rupture within the technological epoch: the emergence of an increasingly self-referential point of authority with affinities to the sacred. At the same time, the universalizing claims surrounding this authority raise a further question: how might such a technological divinity reproduce, transform, or intensify older relations of domination, including those historically associated with colonialism?



Source: the author, ironically assisted by AI.



Patsy Gessey and Owen Collins look out towards Lytton where they lost their home during the 2021 Lytton Creek Fire. The next year, they faced fires again. Image: CDP/Jen Osborne.

The Climate Disaster Project Amplifies Survivor Voices

Aldyn Chwelos

Climate Disaster Managing Editor

The Climate Disaster Project is an international teaching newsroom that works with people affected by climate change to share and investigate their stories.

This year marks the five-year anniversary of the deadly flood, fire, and heat that devastated the province of British Columbia. Appropriately, the Climate Disaster Project — a newsroom built on care and collaboration — is stepping into our most public year yet. Our verbatim theatre production, *Eyes of the Beast*, which captures stories of 2021, will be presented at the Union of BC Municipalities conference, bringing survivor voices to policy makers. In 2027, a national anthology of survivor testimonies will be published with UBC Press. And we just concluded our inaugural UN-certified Climate Recovery Reporting training, in which journalists around the world share the voices of those living through this changing world—work that we’re preparing to do with the CSRS community. All this feeds into our SSHRC-partnered travelling museum exhibit, the first stage of which arrives this fall as the Royal BC Museum installs five micro-documentaries of that fire, flood, and heat in its refreshed climate gallery.

Theodicy in Contemporary American Fiction

Christopher Douglas

Faculty Fellow

At the intersection of literature and religion today is a broad interest in theodicy – that is, the problems of evil and suffering under a good and powerful God. My research investigates serious literary fiction alongside popular evangelical fiction, mapping an unlikely pattern across both: how themes of theodicy in contemporary American fiction are deeply entangled with surprising questions about the number and moral character of the gods.

These novels grapple with the hardest problems of theodicy in the face of human suffering and human evil – African American enslavement, the Holocaust, colonialism, genocide, sexualized violence, murder – from a wide range of authorial perspectives, including Jewish, Black, gnostic, liberal evangelical and Christian Right. I analyze four of the most famous examples of evangelical fiction beside four religiously-interested, literary, non-evangelical novels.

In investigating God’s moral character, writers often find themselves dwelling on the particulars of what Bible scholars call God’s “repertoires”: recurrent imagery, language, and plots from Biblical literary tradition. That many contemporary novelists find recourse

to divine plurality to solve theodicy problems is striking, given that in the last four decades historical Bible scholarship has formed a consensus that God was literarily composed of other gods from an ancient Israelite pantheon – making Him a “pagan amalgam,” as Marilynne Robinson has protested with alarm.

My methodological innovation is to use critical Bible scholarship and research on Ancient Southwest Asia to pursue a “deep time” approach to American literature, which tends not to see itself as burdened by a chronology or geography outside itself. This approach allows us to see continuities and transformations not just in religious questions about God’s (or the gods’) silence and the problem of suffering, but in literary traditions, including genres like apocalypse, plots about divine justice, and divine characters.



Stèle du Baal au foudre, artist unknown, 15th c. BCE, sculpture, bas relief. Musée du Louvre.

A wide-angle photograph of a serene landscape. In the foreground, a calm body of water reflects the sky. A small, dark structure, possibly a boat or a dock, is visible on the left. The middle ground features a lush green hillside with dense vegetation. In the background, a large, forested mountain rises against a clear blue sky. The word "RESEARCH" is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters on the left side of the image.

RESEARCH



Reading Romance, Writing Faith: Theology in the Evangelical Romance Novel

Rebekah Stuive
Graduate Student Fellow

Evangelical romance novels regularly top the New York Times bestsellers list. They grace the shelves of many a second-hand store, and the most popular ones have sold millions of copies. Yet, few outside of the evangelical cultural sphere have ever heard



of them, and there remains a lack of critical attention to the genre and its influence.

Looking at the literature that evangelical women produce and read provides us insight into the lived experience of evangelicalism. Evangelical romance novels, with their focus on the romantic and religious lives of women, offer a glimpse into the struggles, ideas, and dreams that occupy the minds of writers and readers. They also illuminate the way these women interrogate, incorporate, and create evangelical faith, functioning as active sites of theological discussion and cultural production. Thus, they become a vernacular theology written for and by women.

My research traces the evangelical romance novel's engagement with evangelicalism over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, arguing that this understudied subgenre of evangelical fiction reveals evangelical women as active agents and co-creators of an evangelicalism that can balance adherence to a conservative—often patriarchal, often hypermasculine—faith while prioritizing the power, agency, and lived experience of women.

Prophet Elijah in the Ethiopic Tradition: Extra-Biblical Narratives and Their Reception

Senkoris Kassa
Visiting Research Fellow

Most people recognize the biblical Prophet Elijah as a fiery figure who

ascended to heaven in a whirlwind. However, hidden within ancient Ge'ez manuscripts preserved in the monastic schools of Ethiopia lies a completely different, richly detailed side to his story. By looking at sources like the *Homily of Elijah*, the *Book of Antiphony*, the Ethiopian commentary, *Zena Nabiyyat* (The Lives of the Prophets) and the *Gädlä Eläyas* (Acts of Elijah), my research uncovers a unique tapestry of extra-biblical traditions.

These local texts name his parents, Eyyasennāyu and Tona, and recount a remarkable childhood event where his father witnessed men in white wrap the newborn baby in a blanket of literal flames. Far from a passive figure, Elijah is depicted wielding immense authority over both heaven and earth. In these manuscripts, he boldly commands an angel that a prophet's human spirit can surpass a celestial one, while in another text, the personified Earth itself begs Elijah to show mercy and release his spiritual constraints. Ultimately, this project shows how an ancient society took a universal biblical figure and expanded his narrative to explore deep questions about divine authority, human power, and nature, showing how sacred literature continues to build our moral imagination.



Unknown Ethiopian artist. *Elijah, Enoch, Ezra, and Elisha*, 15th or 16th century, Ink on parchment, Gunda Gundē Monastery, Tegrāy. Akq-images / Fototeca Gilardi.

Saints, Suicide, and Sacrifice: The Spectre of Paganism in Donatist North Africa

Max Harris

Graduate Student Fellow

During the 4th and 5th centuries CE, Roman North Africa was overwhelmed with a surge of religious violence and discord which emerged out of an ecclesiastical dispute known as the Donatist Schism. The Donatist faction broke communion with the imperially backed Catholic Church in 311 CE, arguing that their opponents' sacraments were not valid because they accepted clerics who had evaded martyrdom by collaborating with pagan authorities during the Great Persecution of 303-311 CE. Catholic rhetoric, in return, sought to reinterpret Donatist claims to martyrdom as instances of diabolically inspired suicide, and even went so far as to say that their opponents' deaths at the hands of the pagans equated to pagan sacrifice.

My research is concerned with these rhetorical clashes. Both parties invoke and weaponize the collective memory of the region's pagan past in disputes surrounding the definition of martyrdom, sacramental theology, and ecclesiastical authority. I contend that the intertwined memory of pagan cult and pagan persecution served as a contested source of collective identity for Catholics and Donatists alike. This shared history furnished the authors from both traditions with rhetorical material with which they could tarnish their opponents. Each argued that the other was contaminated by association with paganism, capitalizing on past traumas of persecution, and contemporary anxieties surrounding ritual pollution.

The Revolution and the Messiah? Understanding and Applying Walter Benjamin's Theological Marxism

Cameron Thiessen

Graduate Student Fellow

What do you think of when you hear the word "messiah?" For Walter Benjamin, a German-Jewish intellectual whose writing served as a spiritual precursor to the post-war current of "Western Marxist" political philosophy, the messianic idea had



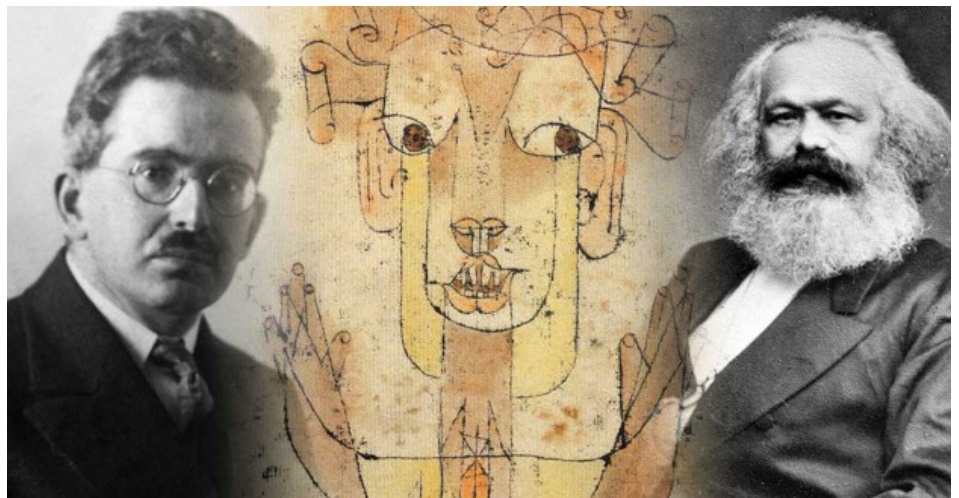
Pablo Vergos, *Augustine Disputing with the Heretics*, ca. 1470, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya. Wikimedia Commons.

layers of meaning: anticipation, redemption, and salvation—yes. But rather than a singular prophet bringing spiritual salvation, Benjamin conceived of the messiah as an era, marked by social and political revolution, human emancipation, and the emergence of classless society.

Confounded by this theological articulation of revolution, my project serves as an investigation of Benjamin's use of the term "messianic time" in his final literary work, "Theses 'On the Concept of History.'" For Benjamin, messianic time is a way to articulate the temporal paradox of trying to

imagine life after revolution, while confined in the struggle towards it.

I apply this theory to a critique of the international community's response to Israel's reinvigorated siege on Gaza following October 7, 2023. How do and how should we respond to settler-colonial violence and genocide as historical phenomena that impose themselves on the present? And how might "messianic time" serve as a way to envision the power over time (and over positive revolutionary change) that humanity possesses?



Left to right: Walter Benjamin, Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, and Karl Marx. Image sourced from <https://www.thecollector.com/walter-benjamin-philosophy-of-history/>.

RESEARCH

Yagwa Peentu Ha'lidzogm: Painting Our Universe

Mike Dangeli
Artist-in-Residence

I'm a fourth-generation artist from Nisga'a, Ts'msyen, Tsetsaut, and Tlingit Nations. My family's territory is along the Liism (Nass River) and Ks'yen (Skeena River) in BC, as far north as the territory of the Taantakwáan Xoots Takweidi (Brown Bear House of the Tongass Tribe) in Southeast Alaska. My primary modes of creation are carving, designing, painting, and ceremonial singing and dancing. I've carved over thirty totem poles; made, designed, and painted several thousand hide hand drums; cut, sewn, and designed hundreds of sets of ceremonial hide clothing. I'm a mangiyet (chief in training). My practice draws upon the teachings passed down to me through the Sigidm Hanaa'nax (matriarchs) of my matrilineal line, as well as the mentorships of many other First Nations artists. I lead an internationally renowned dance group, the Git Hayetsk, with my wife, Dr. Mique'l Dangeli, who is an Assistant Professor in AHVS at UVIC. She is a dancer and choreographer and I'm a composer and singer. I specialize in carving masks danced by our people in ceremonies and public performances by Git Hayetsk. It's my honour to carry forward the art practices of my Nations and build upon them to reflect our ways of being today.

I view this fellowship as an opportunity to



CSRS Artist-in-Residence, Mike Dangeli.

expand upon my design and painting practices through deepening my understanding of their connection to our ha'lidzox (universe). As a First Nations man who is a descendant of four generations of residential school survivors, who was at one time an altar boy in the Anglican church, and who turned back to my people's spiritual beliefs while serving nearly 10 years in the US army, I have come to the understanding of the connection between my peoples design and painting practices to our ancient ways of knowing and being. This has been a healing process for me. As a veteran, I considered the art to have

saved my life while I was dealing with the darkest times of my PTSD. Before the word "decolonialization" became commonplace in society, I was actively working to undo the damage of colonialization on myself and my family by seeking and applying knowledge from our chiefs, matriarch, elders, adaawx (oral history), ayaawx (laws) about our ancient beliefs and practices. Our people's ways of knowing, being, and doing realigned my sense of self and connection to all things, including our ha'lidzox. This decolonial work was intensified through efforts to revive my family's hereditary right as Gitsonk (specialized carvers who create dance masks used in ceremony). For this fellowship, I plan to create a series of paintings on canvas and hide that speak to my journey of self-decolonization. The final products of this fellowship will result in an art installation that will open with a performance by my dance group, Git Hayetsk.



The Jewish Belonging Research Project: New Study, New Space, Belonging in Place

Erika Finestone
Post-Doctoral Fellow

In a time of great political upheaval and polarization in and around the Jewish community, it is necessary to continue to identify the values, beliefs, and experiences of Jewish people as they are expressed and lived in different institutional spaces (the university being no exception). My current research at UVic aims to create an environment in which

Jewish students, staff, and faculty who hold diverse lineages, politics, and identities can feel seen, heard, and considered, and to think collaboratively, critically, and reflexively about what is and what could be as it pertains to Jewish inclusion on campus.



Bringing to light what is often obscured in black-and-white narratives that favor uniformity over complexity, this study creates safe spaces for dialogue, critical thought, and communal healing. Though my focus is on Jewish people's experiences, the research engages curiously and openly with issues of free speech and academic freedom, religious minority rights and protections, identity politics, and the possibilities and



pitfalls of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) frameworks in progressive institutions. Taken together, this study will benefit scholars of religion and society and aims to direct universities in their efforts to better support Jewish members of campus communities.

I feel lucky to have been welcomed into the CSRS community to conduct this research. This place has provided (among other things) a cozy office, an endless flow of coffee and tea, and regular thoughtful exchanges with interesting people accompanied by uproarious hallway hangouts. I'm very grateful for this place and the people in it.

In the coming months I will be transitioning from data gathering to analysis and mobilization. I would be pleased to share more about my personal and professional journey towards this post-doctoral work and chin-wag about kinship, anthropology, community-based research, Jewishness, etc., so don't be shy! If you want to know more about the Jewish Belonging Research Project, contact me at erikafinestone@uvic.ca.

Closet Devotions: Faith, Friendship and Same-Sex Desire in the English Civil War

Gary Kuchar

In early 1644, the Church of England minister Joseph Beaumont was expelled from Cambridge University for his "High Church" practices, a consequence of the breakout of the English Civil War two years earlier. In response, Beaumont returned to his family home in Suffolk where he composed a manuscript collection of 177 religious lyrics which possesses something unique in the history of English Renaissance literature. In it, he composes a handful of poems in which he confesses that "his lavish Breast [has] / Embrac'd my Friend too close" ("The



Christ and Saint John the Evangelist, 1300-1320, Polychromed and gilded oak, near Bodensee, Germany. Cleveland Museum of Art.

Relapse"). While expressions of same-sex desire were not uncommon in early modern England, this is the only known example of a seventeenth-century poet-priest expressing such desire in the context of a collection of religious lyrics.



Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, ca.1490-95. Tommaso di Piero. Fitzwilliam Museum.

Even more remarkably, Beaumont's poems about his illicit attraction for another man stand alongside idealized accounts of "ritual brotherhood" or the ceremonially formalized life-long commitments made between men that he associates with, for example, Christ and John. In turn, all of these poems occur against the scandalous backdrop of the growing cultural association of "High Church" spirituality and sodomy that resulted from accusations levelled against Archbishop Laud and other church leaders in the buildup to the war. The result is a highly consequential, but until now almost wholly obscure, document in the overlapping histories of English literature and same-sex desire.

Have a project related to religion and society? In need of a 'scholarly spa'?

Join us as a fellow!

uvic.ca/csrs/fellowships

2026-27 FELLOWS

REV. HEATHER J. LINDSTEDT & DR. BRIAN A. POLLOCK GRADUATE STUDENT FELLOW



Pascale Ricard

(University of Victoria)

*Memory, Ritual & Mezuzot:
Understanding Display Practice of
Jewish Material Culture*

WINNIFRED LONSDALE GRADUATE STUDENT FELLOW



Cameron Thiessen

(University of Victoria)

Revolution as Messiah?

IAN H. STEWART GRADUATE STUDENT FELLOWS



Iman Fadaei

(University of Victoria)

*Techno-Divinity: On the "Divine"
Nature of Artificial Intelligence*



Ish Green

(Washington State University)

*Apocalypse Now: A Case Study of
American Christian Nationalism*



Maxwell Harris

(University of Victoria)

*Sainthood, Suicide, and Sacrifice:
North African Martyrial Discourse
during the Donatist Schism*

CSRS GRADUATE STUDENT FELLOWS



Bruna Brito

(University of Victoria)

*Rhythms of Resistance: Carnival
Organizations as Catalysts for
Social Change in Brazil*



Rebekah Stuiwe

(University of Victoria)

*For The Love of God: Evangelical
Romance Novels as Vernacular
Theology*

ARTISTS IN RESIDENCE



Mike Dangeli

*Yagwa Peentu Ha'lidzogm: Painting
Our Universe*



Terry Marner

CentreCine Season 11

FACULTY FELLOWS



Christopher Douglas

(University of Victoria)

*Divine Plurality and the Problem
of Evil in the Literatures of
Contemporary America and Ancient
Israel*



Chris Goto-Jones

(University of Victoria)

*People will say I'm crazy for writing
a letter to a tree*

VISITING RESEARCH FELLOWS



Senkoris Kassa

(University of Gondar)

*Prophet Elijah in the Ethiopic
Tradition: Extra-Biblical Narratives
and Their Reception*



Matt Sheedy

(University of Manitoba)

*Islam According to Google News:
How Media Shape the Way We Talk
About Religion*

DIRECTOR EMERITUS



Paul Bramadat

(University of Victoria)

We Should Know Better

ASSOCIATE FELLOWS



Angela Andersen

*Islamic Architectures: Muslim
Spaces of Prayer, Ceremony and
Learning Beyond the Mosque*



Mohammad Badamchi

*Surveilling Female Body: Revisiting
Hijab as Patriarchal Technology in
Contemporary Iran*



Amelia Brownridge

*The Female Body and the
Sectarian Imagination: Metaphors
of Crisis in the Thanksgiving
Scrolls*



William Campbell

*Revelatory Economics: Discerning
Prudence and Realizing Theosis in
Latter-day Saint Southern Alberta*



Harold Coward

*Word, Chant and Song in the Major
Religions: Spiritual Transformation*



Michel Desjardins

*Food: Connector to People's
Spiritual Worlds*



Erica Dodd

*Treasures of the Early Christian
Church*

CLIMATE DISASTER PROJECT



Aldyn Chwelos

(University of Victoria)

From Catastrophe to Community

POST-DOCTORAL FELLOW



Erika Finestone

(University of Victoria)

*Jewish Peoples Experiences on UVic
Campus*

2026-27 FELLOWS

ASSOCIATE FELLOWS - CONT'D



Azra Fanoos

Women, Faith, and Leadership: A Cross-Context Study of Religion's Impact on Higher Education Leadership



Robert Florida

Ethical Issues in Modern Buddhism



Nicola Hayward

The Reception of New Testament Stories in Late Antique and Renaissance Art



Victor Hori

The Modernization of Buddhism in Global Perspective



Ambreen Hussaini

Art of Qur'anic Calligraphy and Material Culture in Contemporary Pakistan



Lesley Jessop

Courtyard Spaces around the Cathedral of Notre Dame in the Middle Ages



Françoise Keating

Innovative Aesthetics and "Unusual Christianity": The Re-Imagined Society of King René d'Anjou.



Tim Knowlton

The Languages of Ritual Healing in Indigenous Mesoamerica



Arvind Kumar

Dalit and Adivasi Indigenous Religious Traditions and Epistemologies in India



Francis Landy

Metaphor and Imagination in the Hebrew Bible



Robin Mazumder

How the Urban Landscape influences Both Individual and Collective Psychology



Lytton McDonnell

Tuneful Trances: Music, Mysticism and Re-enchantment in Modern America



Graham McDonough

Catholic Schooling and Religious Pluralism



Leah Mernaugh Bergman

Reposturing the Self: Christianity and Yoga in British Columbia



Bouchra Mossmann

Muslim-Indigenous Interactions in the Canadian North



Catherine Nutting

Rubens and the Stoic Baroque: Stoic Ethics, Rhetoric, and Natural Philosophy in Rubens's Style



Kikila Perrin

Learning to Listen



Brian Pollick

Art and Moral Identity in the Global Middle Ages



Justine Semmens

Dangerous Liaisons: Sex Crimes and the Courts in Catholic Reformation France, 1500-1700



Devyani Tewari

The 'Other' in the Matrimonial Context: Women with Invisible Disabilities in India



Paige Thombs

Religious Lawyers in the Secular Practice of Canadian Law



Reeta Tremblay

Missionaries, Colonial Imageries and Modern Kashmiri Muslim Identity



Carolyn Whitney-Brown

Hope: Comics from a Live Edge



Grace Wong Sneddon

Chinese Canadian Spirituality in the 21st Century



Katherine Young

The Divyaprabandham, Canonization, and Śrīvaisnava Formation: Musical Tropes and Identity Negotiations



Kefen Zhou

The Empowerment of Chinese Christian Women through Education: The Mission of Wu Yifang, 1893-1951



Jessica Ziakin-Cook

Illuminating Contradictions: The Saint John's Bible and Post-Conciliar Catholic Art

EVENTS

Thursday Public Lecture Series

The CSRS lecture series features our fellows and special guests in our exciting Scholars in the Square format. They are held from 5:00-6:00pm Pacific Time on Thursdays during the academic year, with the exception of certain special lectures (see dates below with an **asterisk*** for exceptions). For further lecture details, links and registration information, visit our website at: uvic.ca/csrs/events/.

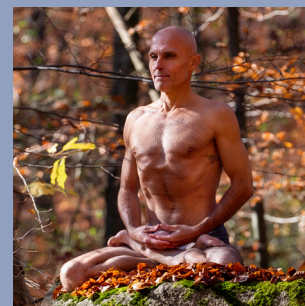
September 17, 2026	Christopher Douglas	Jesus as Baal in Contemporary Christian Fiction
September 24, 2026 (Royal BC Museum)*	Rachel Greening and Spencer Greening	Gyetk: Coastal Fusion and Ancestral Knowledge from a Ts'msyen Kitchen
October 1, 2026	Andrew Preston	Religion and US Foreign Policy in the Age of Trump
October 7, 2026 (Wed., 12:00pm)*	Rastislav Nemec	Spirituality and Well-being Among Young People as a Path to Resilient Relationships
October 8, 2026	Martin Dojčár	What Is Spiritual in Yoga?
October 15, 2026	Jessica Ziakin-Cook	Illuminating Post-Modernism: Contemporary Catholic Art in North America
October 22, 2026	Todd Klaiman	When the Rubber Becomes the Road: Buddhist Enterprise and Economic Power
October 29, 2026 (6:30pm)*	Erika Finestone	(Be)longing on Campus: Jewish Experiences and Desired Futures in Higher Education
November 5, 2026	Senkoris Kassa	The Hidden Code of Ethiopic Poetry
November 19, 2026 (6:00pm)*	Bruna Brito	Carnival in Brazil: Where Samba Becomes Sacred
November 26, 2026 (6:30pm)*	Carmen Celestini	Divine Fury: God's Angry Men and Their Political Playbook
January 14, 2027	Chris Goto-Jones	Is it crazy to write a letter to a tree?
January 21, 2027	Ish Green	The Fascist Creep of Christian Nationalism
January 28, 2027	Gary Kuchar	Closet Devotions: Faith, Friendship and Same-Sex Desire in the English Civil War
February 4, 2027	Rebekah Stuive	Reading Romance, Writing Faith: Theology in the Evangelical Romance Novel
February 11, 2027	Maxwell Harris	Saints, Suicide, and Sacrifice: The Spectre of Paganism in Donatist North Africa
February 25, 2027	Pascalie Ricard	Memory, Ritual & Mezuzot: Cultural Connection Through Material Culture
March 4, 2027	Iman Fadaei	Techno-Divinity: Artificial Intelligence and the Sacred
March 11, 2027	Cameron Thiessen	Revolution as Messiah?
March 18, 2027 (Dist. Lecture in Islam)*	Salman Sayyid	What's Islam Got to Do with It?
March 23, 2027 (Tuesday)*	Michael Dangeli	Artist-in-Residence Gala



Is there a religious logic behind the US foreign policy mayhem? UVA's **Andrew Preston** offers insight



Tsimshian (Ts'msyen)-Coastal Cuisine? **Rachel and Spencer Greening** debut a new cultural [cookbook](#).



Is there more to yoga than Lululemon and being bendy? **Martin Dojčár** considers the possibilities.

The Jewish Academic Hub (JAH) Launches at the CSRS

Lincoln Z. Shlensky

This is the inaugural year of the Jewish Academic Hub (JAH), a new initiative housed at the CSRS — though its roots go back to the Working Group to Address Antisemitism (WGAA), which has been part of the CSRS community since fall 2025. The Hub brings together students, faculty, staff, and community members to explore Jewish life, culture, history, and contemporary experience through research, public programming, and open conversation.

Programming will engage questions of identity, belonging, memory, and pluralism — including new research on Jewish life at

UVic and broader conversations about Jewish experience in Canada and beyond. JAH will host a public screening of *Holding Liat* and welcome Stanford historian Joel Beinin to UVic for a series of discussions and events October 20–22. The Hub is also developing a Jewish Student Commons, bringing together academic inquiry and community support in one place.

Our aim is straightforward: to build a welcoming and intellectually serious home for Jewish studies, culture, and dialogue at UVic, and to strengthen the connections that make that possible.



Pharaoh and the Midwives, miniature on vellum from the Golden Haggadah, Catalonia, early 14th c., at the British Library, London. Wikimedia Commons.



Distinguished Lecturer in Islam - "What's Islam Got to Do with It?"

The 2026-27 Distinguished Lecture in Islam, "What's Islam Got to Do with It?", will be delivered by **Salman Sayyid**, Professor of Social Theory and Decolonial Thought at Leeds University. Professor Sayyid is a pioneer in the field of Critical Muslim Studies and founding editor of *ReOrient*. He will be welcomed into discussions hosted by the Critical Muslim Studies hub, in addition to offering a public lecture and discussions with the wider community.

Salman Sayyid is Professor of Social Theory and Decolonial Thought at Leeds University in England.

Teaching Religion in Canada (TRiC): Imagining New Futures

Rachel Brown

After a successful and vibrant first year of the Teaching Religion in Canada (TRiC) hub, we are looking forward to another year of discussion, growth, and learning with colleagues across the country (and the world). This year we will meet for another series of 4 workshops on **Oct 5th, Nov 26th, Jan 20th** and **Mar 18th**. Workshop topics will be informed by a wide-ranging discussion during the October session. Potential topics raised last year include: building reading skills in the classroom, keeping students engaged in the study of religion in the face of their overall disengagement from the academy, religion and disability in the RS classroom, among others. Join us and help shape the conversation on teaching about religion in Canada.



GOD'S ANGRY MEN

The Political Legacy of the John Birch Society

CARMEN CELESTINI



Carmen Celestini explores a key cog in the propaganda machine behind the contemporary culture wars.

GOVERNANCE AND STAFF



Our People

Rachel Brown (Director)
Todd Klaiman (Program & Research Coord)
Scott Dolff (Program & Comms Associate)
Jessica Ziakin-Cook (Admin Assistant)

Program Committee

Rachel Brown, Chair (Anthropology/CSRS)
Martin Adam (Pacific and Asian Studies)
Evanthia Baboula (Art History and Visual St.)
Shamma Boyarin (Religion, Culture and Soc.)
Patrick Boyle (Music)
Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly (Public Admin.)
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Ex officio:

Fraser Hof (Associate VP Research)
Peter Scales (Chair, CSRS Advisory Council)
Cynthia Milton (History/CFGS)

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Peter Beyer (University of Ottawa)
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Kate Newman (Anglican Diocese of BC)
Jennifer Selby (Memorial University)
Lincoln Z. Shlensky (University of Victoria)
Jindi Singh (Khalsa Aid Canada)
Kefen Zhou (University of Victoria)

Fellowships

The 2027-2028 fellowship deadline is **Monday, November 9, 2026**. For more info please visit: uvic.ca/csrs/fellowships. Fellows become full members of our dynamic, interdisciplinary research environment. Most fellowships include office space.

UVic Faculty Fellowships

For UVic faculty working on scholarly research projects related to some aspect of religion and society. Includes course-release.

Visiting Research Fellowships

The CSRS offers research space for scholars working on projects related to our mandate.

Graduate Student Fellowships

Includes research space and an award of \$6500.

Scales Family Fellowship

An award of \$6500 for research related to religion in British Columbia.

Rev. Heather J. Lindstedt & Dr. Brian A. Pollick Graduate Student Fellowship

An award of \$6500 given to a graduate student in Art History and Visual Studies.

Artist-in-Residence Fellowship

The Chih-Chuang and Yien-Ying Wang Hsieh Award for Art and Spirituality is valued at approximately \$7000. The deadline is **Wednesday, April 27, 2027**.

Community Fellowships

For members of the broader public to join our research community for a limited time. Applications accepted on an **ongoing basis**.

Indigenous Arts and Research Fellowships

Fellowships include support for faculty, graduate students, and artists working on projects related to religion/spirituality and reconciliation.

Harold Coward India Research Fellowship

Support for faculty, senior doctoral and post-doctoral students at Indian universities to pursue research at the CSRS.

Associate Fellowships

For local scholars who are actively engaged in research and interested in scholarly community, but do not need office space. Applications taken on an **on-going basis**.

Giving to the CSRS

The CSRS is supported by the generosity of individuals and groups. The charitable giving of our donors helps fund young scholars, provides a productive intellectual home for established scholars from around the world, advances public dialogue that furthers critical understanding of the role of religion in society, and assists in the creation of scholarly publications that inform public policy. Anyone interested in making a donation can visit uvic.ca/csrs.

A charitable bequest to the CSRS is a tangible way to contribute to the success of the Centre. Given through your will, a bequest can include gifts of cash, real estate, art work, or other property. Designating the centre as the beneficiary of your RRSP, RRIF, or insurance policy can also have significant tax advantages for your estate. To discuss how you could leave a legacy for future generations, please contact Leitha Cosentino, Director of Faculty Development, at lconsentino@uvic.ca, or **250-415-8304** for a confidential conversation.

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