



## Up Close and Personal with Dr. Christopher Bell

The department felt that it would be an interest to our readers to profile our newest faculty member, Dr. Bell.

### A Dialogue with Dr. Phillip Lucas

#### What kinds of research are you currently engaged in?

Currently I am finishing up two research articles related to the Tibetan Buddhist protector deity Pehar, who has important ties to the lineage of the Dalai Lamas. The first article is a complete translation of a wall inscription at Pehar's main monastery, Nechung Monastery, which outlines the deity's mythic origins and the institution's growth. The second article takes an art historical approach to a series of murals detailing Pehar's past lives, which are found at another Tibetan monastery called Meru Sarpa.

#### How have you improved the department's class offerings during your first two years?

While most of the classes I have taught over the last two years have already been on record, in terms of content I have made them my own. Having had extensive experience with the cultures I discuss in my classes, I draw on personal anecdotes and interviews to convey how the religious traditions I teach are viewed and understood on the ground. I have also created a new class entitled "Society and the Supernatural in Asia," which was quite successful during its first run. This course allows me to apply my personal research interests directly to class content and assignments.

#### What has surprised you the most about Stetson and the Department of Religious Studies?

I have been pleasantly surprised at just how supportive and engaging everyone in the University and the Religious Studies department have been since I joined Stetson. My colleagues and friends in the department are incredibly generous with their time and are always willing to share their experience and advice. I've also made wonderful friends outside the department, which has contributed to an even greater sense of community across the university.

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### A Student's Perspective

By Abigail Bush

Dr. Bell may be a new face in the religious studies department, but his courses are arousing interest. He's introduced classes like "Society and the Supernatural in Asia" to other well-known and well-loved Eastern religion courses the department has to offer. For those who have never experienced a class with Dr. Bell they may be wondering just what those fifty minutes are like. "My class structure is predominately lecture-based," Dr. Bell explains, adding that he likes to combine student discussion and debate to encourage students to work through the material and ideas together before moving onto a new lesson. What really makes Dr. Bell's classes rewarding, however, goes beyond content. His passion for the subject he studies brings an infectious enthusiasm with each lesson. "I teach because I'm obsessed with the religious traditions I study. I think they're just so interesting and speak to something deep in the human experience," Dr. Bell reflects. "I can't help but want to instill that same passion in others." It's this desire that inspires curiosity and questioning in students during the course.

Along with lectures, slideshows, and videos, Dr. Bell incorporates items into his classes that he's picked up during his studies. Things like ghost money, Tibetan books, and at one point a prayer wheel have all passed through his classroom. "I also like to include case studies and anecdotes about spirit possession, wrathful gods, and controversial ritual practices," Dr. Bell adds. "I believe this helps to show students that religions are living and changing traditions, not static teachings only found in books." To take one of Dr. Bell's courses is to be immersed in these evolving religions, all while discussing just

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**What kinds of innovative teaching methods have you been able to incorporate into your classes thus far?**

I have tried to make all of my classes as interactive as possible, with slide images, videos, material items, debates, and discussions. When possible, I also bring in guest speakers to provide a practitioner's perspective, and take students on field trips to religious centers connected to the traditions we explore in class. Small group discussions and review sessions have also been fruitful as a way to reinforce the material that students are learning in their readings and in class lectures.

**What direction would you like to see the department take in the coming years?**

I think enhancing our involvement with other departments, programs, and student groups would be a positive direction for Religious Studies to take. Members of the department have already done a great job of engaging with the larger campus community through lecture series, student-led talks, and university-wide events. I think there's a lot to be gained by continuing to expand engagement with the university, whether through interdisciplinary team-taught courses, regular student activities, or sharing workshops and events with other programs. This would not only broaden our scope as a department but increase awareness of our department across Stetson.

what makes the practices and beliefs important to the practitioners. And what does Dr. Bell wish students take from his class? "I hope that students come away from my classes not only with fresh new knowledge of traditions they likely had stereotypical ideas about," he shares, "but with a critical awareness of how arbitrary our definitions are."

"If I'm lucky, they'll continue to explore religions and interpret religious conflict with a greater understanding that challenges any attempts to simplify or pigeonhole them."

## Alumni News

**Jennifer Brann '15** is employed at ABT Associates, Inc., Bethesda, Maryland as a Research Assistant. — **Robert Pruett '15** will be teaching secondary math for the Peace Corps in Mozambique, Africa. — **Natalie Faria '14** is pursuing a Masters of Divinity degree at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, Atlanta, GA. — **Deana Carr '14** currently is employed at Solstice East in Weaverville, NC. — **Alexis Kinzer '14** attended the Human Factors and Applied Psychology Student Conference at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University on April 4, 2015 and received the Outstanding Overall Research Award for her paper "Implicit and Explicit Prejudice in Deployed Veterans". — **Michael Wolodkowicz '13** currently is employed at Alabai Defense Systems as a Software Engineer. — **Kaitlin Feldman '12** is currently working for Florida League of Cities, Inc. — **Will Livingston '12** received his Masters in Theological Studies at Vanderbilt University in April 2014 and is pursuing his Ph.D. at Florida State University. — **James Shenko '12** graduated with a Masters of Divinity from Vanderbilt Divinity School, May 2015. James was the recipient of the Disciples Divinity House Scholar Award for academic distinction by students representing the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ. He is now Associate Pastor for the First Christian Church, Livingston, TN. — **Robert Echevarria '10** is a writer who recently had an article published in *The Daily Dot*, "How Robots Choose to Kill". — **Janie (Stewart) Osborne '10** married Matt Osborne on Sunday, June 1, 2014. — **Sarah Bunton-Lauer '09** writes for The Huffington Post and has a blog, Bump Birth and Beyond—which focuses on her journey as a chronically ill, feminist, and working mother. — **Stephanie (Champagne) Parks '09** is currently employed at the Volusia Flagler YMCA and runs a Youth Development Program called Project 396. **Ryan Rogers '09** married Daniela Regalado on Saturday, March 7, 2015 in Laguna Niguel, in southern California. — **Adam Darragh '08** is director of the LSU Wesley Foundation, Baton Rouge, LA. — **Lori-Jene (Brazier) Ephraim '08** married Matthew Ephraim on Saturday, June 27, 2015. — **Alicia Hickman '08** is attending Indiana University-Bloomington seeking a Master in Library and Informative Science. — **Tina Mixon '08** graduated with a Masters of Science in Information Technology from the Florida Institute of Technology, May 2015. — **Ansley (Faulkner) Alfano '07** and her husband, Michael welcome their new daughter, Audrey Catherine Alfano, born Monday, January 19, 2015. — **Emily (Snyder) Fulmer '04** and her husband, James welcome their new daughter, Ruby Irene Fulmer, born Sunday, April 6, 2014. — **John Mills '04** and his wife, Shereen welcome their new daughter, Leila Raji Katrak Mills, born Saturday, May 16, 2015. — **Jonathan Bailey '03** and his wife, Stacy, welcome their new daughter, Emma Catherine Bailey, born Friday, August 8, 2014. — **Tim Reddish '02** and his wife, Naomi, welcome their new daughter, Adah Joy Reddish, born August 9, 2014. — **Kevin Boyd '01** and his wife, Erika, welcome their new son, Milo Boyd, born Monday, December 16, 2014. — **Erica (Bilsky) Hruby '95** recently returned to central Florida and is Assistant Director for the Central Florida Hillel. — **Carrie Veal '99** is currently working at The Myers Park Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina as a Children's Minister. — **Jeff Tyson '81** was elected to a three year term on the Board of Trustees at the University of Chicago Divinity School.