

UF RELIGION

NEWSLETTER



NEWS

- **Dr. Yaniv Feller** was recently awarded a fellowship at the **Ludwig-Maximilian-University in Munich**. *Refer to Page 2 for more details.*
- **Dr. Rachel Gordan** has been invited to serve on the Executive Committee for the **Academic Council of the American Jewish Historical Society**. *Refer to Page 2 for more details.*
- Graduate student **Prea Persaud** has successfully defended her dissertation. *Refer to Page 2 for more details.*

EVENTS

- From **October 15th to 29th**, UF Religion hosted a series of tabling events aimed at promoting Spring 2026 courses. *Refer to Page 5 for more details and photos.*



- On **October 29th**, UF Religion and UF Bud Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies hosted a Pizza Study Break event focusing on promoting Spring 2026 courses. *Refer to Page 5 for more details and photos.*

NEWS

- **Dr. Yaniv Feller** has recently been awarded an Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship for returning fellows at the Ludwig-Maximilian-University of Munich. He will be spending his summer with their History Department whilst working on his current book project, *Jew in a Box: A Comparative History of Jewish Museums*.
- **Dr. Rachel Gordan** has been invited to serve on the Executive Committee of the Academic Council of the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS). Within AJHS, the Academic Council directs and supports the organization's academic programs and research activities. Founded in 1892, the AJHS is the oldest ethnic and cultural archive in the United States. Its mission is to promote awareness and appreciation of American Jewish heritage while serving as a premier national resource for scholars. The Society collects, preserves, and shares materials that illuminate the richness and diversity of Jewish life in America. Today, AJHS houses more than 30 million documents, 50,000 books, as well as photographs, artworks, and artifacts that trace the history of Jewish presence in the United States from 1654 to the present.
- Graduate student **Prea Persaud** defended her dissertation, *God Must Be a Trini: Hinduism as a Caribbean Religion*, with the support of Dr. Mario Poceski and her committee members: Dr. Vasudha Narayanan, Dr. Anna Peterson, Dr. Terje Ostebo, and Dr. Leah Rosenberg. Congratulations Prea!



PUBLICATIONS

Dr. Vasudha Narayanan's article, "*Anantaśāyī Viṣṇu, the Ocean of Milk, and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa*" was published in the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1, pp. 193-208.

Dr. Vasudha Narayanan traces the evolution of the image of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa reclining on the serpent Ananta over the Ocean of Milk through Sanskrit and Tamil sources and its portrayal in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

Early texts depict Viṣṇu on waters or a serpent, but not with all three elements combined. The complete triune image, Viṣṇu, Ananta, and the Ocean of Milk, appears later, in 6th-century Cambodian inscriptions and Tamil Ālvār poetry (6th–9th c. CE), where it becomes a key devotional motif.



A depiction of Vishnu asleep on the serpent in the cosmic ocean, *Asian Art Museum*

In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Viṣṇu reclines on Śeṣa over primordial waters, but the Ocean of Milk is not explicitly linked to this scene. The text emphasizes his yogic sleep, Brahmā's emergence, and cosmic dissolution, while the Ocean of Milk appears separately in churning and symbolic contexts.

Narayanan argues that this separation marks an earlier stage of Vaiṣṇava theology, preceding the fusion seen in later pan-Indian imagery and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava systematizations. She suggests this supports an early (Gupta-period, pre-7th century CE), likely non-South Indian origin for the Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

Her study concludes that the Bhāgavata Purāṇa shaped later devotion but that the fully developed Anantaśāyī Viṣṇu on the Ocean of Milk emerged only afterward, signaling a key shift in Vaiṣṇava iconography and theology.

PRESENTATIONS

- From October 20th to 22nd, **Dr. Yaniv Feller** participated in the Forum on Jewish-Muslim Thought and Theology's annual conference at the **University of Vienna**, whose topic was "[Crisis, Critique, and Self-Criticism](#)." Feller's paper was titled "*Museums as Sites of Critique and Self-Critique*."

In his presentation, Dr. Feller examined how museum exhibitions have faced criticism both from external observers and from within the institutions themselves. He argued that this reflexive approach represents a growing trend, as museums increasingly engage in self-critique through their exhibition and collection practices—for instance, by incorporating artistic interventions that challenge and reinterpret their own narratives.



- On October 22nd, **Dr. Jeyoul Choi** delivered a promotional presentation titled "UF Religion: More Than Just Religion" at **Santa Fe College**. The event, called "Cookies & Conversation," was organized by Adrienne Provost, Assistant Dean of the UF College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, aimed to highlight a variety of UF departments and programs, with approximately 15 departments participating in the showcase that day.



- On October 31st, **Dr. Jeyoul Choi** presented a paper titled "*Intricate Modernity: The South Korean Experience*" in the "Comparative Migration Experiences" panel at the annual **Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR)** meeting, held from October 31st to November 2nd in Minneapolis, MN.



EVENTS

- From October 15th - 29th, the Department of Religion hosted tabling events to promote Spring 2026 Religion course registration under the Library West breezeway. **Dr. Jeyoul Choi** and department student assistants spoke to passerby students about the professional and academic benefits of registering for courses as well as completing a major or minor in religion.



Pictured (left to right): Ashley Tisher, Kaitlin Edmonds, & an undergraduate senior interested in religion.



Dr. Choi smiles for the camera while tabling

- On October 29th, the Department of Religion and the UF Bud Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies hosted a **Pizza Study Break** event in Pugh Hall aimed at meeting with students in a relaxed environment while discussing Spring course offerings. Many students showed interest, confirmed by all the empty pizza boxes!



Dr. Choi becomes intrigued by a student's remark at the Pizza Study Break.

Alumni Spotlight: Dr. Ken Chitwood



Dr. Ken Chitwood graduated with a Ph.D. in Religion from the **University of Florida** in 2019, where he studied **Religion in the Americas** and earned a certificate in **Global Islamic Studies**.

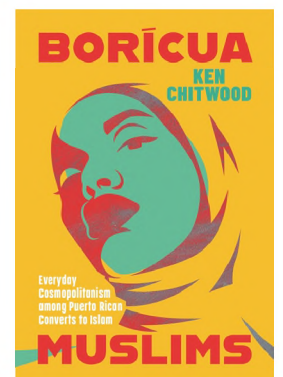
After completing his Ph.D., Dr. Chitwood moved to Germany, where he held a postdoctoral fellowship at the Graduate School of Muslim Cultures and Societies at **Freie Universität Berlin**.

He later served as a Research Fellow with the Muslim Philanthropy Initiative at **Indiana University** and as an affiliate researcher at the **University of Southern California's** Center for Religion and Civic Culture. During this period, Dr. Chitwood continued his research and published two books, *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Lynne Rienner, 2021) and *Boricua Muslims: Everyday Cosmopolitanism Among Puerto Rican Converts to Islam* (University of Texas Press, 2025) and an edited volume forthcoming in early 2026: *Engaged Spirituality: Stories of Religious Resilience, Inspiration, and Pursuing the Common Good* (Bloomsbury, 2026).

Now out of his post-doctoral phase, Ken Chitwood is working on the Habilitation, the highest academic degree in Germany, as he works his way towards a University Professorship at the **Universität Bayreuth** where he continues his research in religion and its global futures. After he obtains his Habilitation Degree, Chitwood has expressed his interest in continuing his work with religion, either through teaching or writing.

"I am humbled to have had the privilege and opportunity to study and write for almost two decades. Those who taught me along the way, especially at UF, shaped me into the scholar and writer I am. I would be immensely pleased to do the same or other students of religion," said Chitwood.

Chitwood's most recent publication: ***Boricua Muslims (2025)*** examines Islam's presence in Puerto Rican contexts in the archipelago and diaspora in the form of several stories. The book describes stories of Puerto Rican Muslims and the complex dynamics of their personal identities as Boricua, Muslim, and American. He emphasizes the marginalization Boricua Muslims experience on a daily basis as a result of these dynamics.



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We look forward to hearing from you!