

Summaries of Doctoral Dissertations

■ Chance Everett Bonar [PhD]

Enslaved to God: Slavery and Divine Despotics in the Shepherd of Hermas

Early Christians were not only among the enslaved and enslavers in the ancient Mediterranean world, but some also used the ancient discourse of enslavement to conceptualize believers as enslaved to God and God as an enslaver. This dissertation examines how some Christians crafted the ideal subject through the discursive context of ancient Mediterranean enslavement. I focus my analysis primarily on the Shepherd of Hermas, a first- or second-century CE text. It is attributed to a Roman man named Hermas who records the visions, mandates, and parables he is given through encounters with divine interlocutors. I argue that through participation in the language, practices, and logics of ancient Mediterranean enslavement discourse, the Shepherd both exhorts believers to be obedient enslaved subjects and portrays God as an enslaver capable of possessing, surveilling, punishing, and rewarding the enslaved.

The analysis consists of four parts. In order to demonstrate that the Shepherd participates in a broader Mediterranean discourse of enslavement, I first examine how God's enslaved are encouraged to be useful, loyal, and commodifiable for their enslaver. I then turn to the figure of Hermas himself, who is portrayed in the Shepherd as an enslaved literary laborer. The textual composition, dissemination, and reading of the Shepherd itself is framed by enslavement insofar as Hermas textually produces and copies revelatory material with the express purpose of circulating the Shepherd among God's enslaved. Third, I demonstrate that a central aspect of the Shepherd's presentation of God as an enslaver is spirit possession. The anthropology and pneumatology of the Shepherd depict the holy spirit as the presence of the indwelling enslaver, capable of entering the bodies of God's enslaved in order to surveil them and affect their cognition, behaviors, and actions. Finally, I take up the issue of agency and explore how God's enslaved are treated as God's instrumental agents in the Shepherd. God's enslaved who fail to be used as effective instrumental agents and conform to God's will are encouraged to repent or suffer death through separation from God. The significance of the dissertation lies in

HTR 116:4 (2023) 626–631

showing that slavery shapes the ways that some believers constructed themselves as ethical, loyal, and pious subjects so as to be in right relationship to God. My reading of how the Shepherd crafts such subjectivities and relations of believers to God in light of enslavement exposes how deeply entrenched some early Christian literature and practices were in ancient Mediterranean discourses of enslavement.

Adviser: Karen L. King

■ Bennett Comerford [ThD]

Is This What is Called Civilization?: *Religion and Race in the Writings of Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824–1873)*

This dissertation examines the critical and literary writings of Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824–1873), an influential Bengali intellectual, littérateur, and Hindu-Christian convert. I study selections of Madhusudan's texts that straddle his 1856 transition from writing exclusively in English to almost exclusively in Bangla. To better understand this shift, one which Madhusudan never outright explains, my textual analysis begins with his three English-language essays, "On Poetry, Etc.," (date unknown) "On the Importance of Education for Hindu Females" (1842), and "The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu" (1854). Drawing on the theoretical frameworks articulated and insinuated in these texts, I then turn to Madhusudan's two previously untranslated Bangla-language satirical dramas, *Ekei Ki Bole Shabhyatā?* (1860) and *Burō Śālikēra Ghārē Rōm* (1860). Finally, I revisit scholarly conversations on Madhusudan's *Meghnādbadh Kabya* in light of his essays and satires to demonstrate the relevance of reflection on religion to his magnum opus and his literary legacy.

This project is concerned with two primary questions. First, how can we utilize the lens of religion to better understand Madhusudan's literary works? Many of Madhusudan's references to religion are clear reflections of his contemporary context, and we find tendencies in his writings that make it difficult to neatly distinguish conceptions of religion from concerns about race, gender, the meaning of civilization, and the impacts of British colonial rule. Reading Madhusudan through the lens of religion enables us to better understand such entanglements.

Second, what do his writings, read in light of his biography, indicate about Madhusudan's personal relationship with religion, especially after his conversion to Christianity in 1843? Although he leaves us with few direct professions of faith, we find little reason to question the authenticity of his conversion and his embrace of Christianity. This line of inquiry also reveals possibilities for interpreting Madhusudan in theological terms, especially in light of resources from comparative theology, due to his often empathetic interreligious literary engagements.

While Madhusudan's earlier English-language works include direct averments of colonial ideologies, such as his explicit affirmation of the Anglo-Saxon mission "to civilize" and "to Christianize" the Hindu, his later Bangla-language writings cast penetrating light on persistently oppressive social norms and institutions, centered on the interplay of race, religion, and gender in colonial Bengali society.

I argue that reading these texts together elucidates a marked shift in Madhusudan's oeuvre toward a position of resistance, exemplified by his critical portrayals of British influence on Bengali society and his depictions of the blatant racism that accompanied colonial rule. When we turn to Madhusudan's *Meghnādbadh Kābya* after close consideration of his essays and satires, we are better equipped to notice subtle extensions of the socio-theoretical concerns first addressed in the earlier texts.

This dissertation looks to Madhusudan's writings as a source of interreligious insight. I draw upon resources from comparative religious studies to demonstrate how attention to religion helps enrich and expand our understanding of Madhusudan. As a study of nineteenth-century Bengali literary and religious history, this project also contributes to conversations in the fields of Bengal studies, and South Asian religions.

Adviser: Francis X. Clooney

■ Johnson Danube [PhD]

The Invention of Necessity: Hobbes on Preservation

This dissertation is a study of Hobbes's natural philosophy in the context of seventeenth-century post-Reformation England, focusing in particular on the connections between his theory of social contract and colonial expansion. I contend that Hobbes's theory of social contract is also a theory of colonial domination and management, and that this simultaneity is particularly intelligible when due attention is given to Hobbes's negotiations with and naturalizations of certain theological principles, especially salvation.

Adviser: Amy Hollywood

■ Joseph Kimmel [PhD]

Power in the Name: Towards A Theological Posthumanism

This dissertation examines ancient Mediterranean conceptions of proper names as powerful tools: under certain conditions, names like "Jesus" or "Aphrodite" were believed to channel power effective for healing, cursing, protecting, and related objectives. This study analyzes presentations of such onomastic power, including both texts which depict the power of spoken names, as well as particular objects (e.g., amulets), which feature inscribed names. In exploring this association between spoken/inscribed names and power, this project also considers comparative examples from a very different context, tenth-century Tibet. This comparative analysis enables critical reflection on the significant similarities (and differences) in the presentation of onomastic power across time and space, and thus illuminates potentially overlooked areas of resonance (and dissonance) among artifacts from very different contexts. Finally, a central contribution of this dissertation occurs in its application of ancient onomastic artifacts to contemporary conversations in posthumanist and neo-materialist philosophies.

The dissertation shows how early Christian (and medieval Tibetan) texts and objects may be profitably examined in light of posthumanist and neo-materialist arguments (and vice versa). Such analysis in turn pushes these contemporary fields to consider the ontological and agentic implications of onomastic invocations that thus far have been overlooked. In addition, this analysis argues that such invocations represent a powerful but underutilized and underappreciated way of acting—“doing things”—both historically and in the world today.

Adviser: Giovanni B. Bazzana

■ Munjed Majdi Murad [ThD]

A Tale of Two Trees: Unveiling the Sacred Life of Nature in Islamic and Christian Traditions

This dissertation compares the ancient *ṣahābī* (“companion”) tree that still stands today in northeastern Jordan and the tree that became the Cross, memorialized where it once stood in Jerusalem. The former, by virtue of lowering its branches to give shade to the Prophet Muhammad when he was a child, has been venerated as his last living terrestrial companion. The tree of the Cross has a religious history as a participant in the Crucifixion, displaying piety, agency, and voice. The presence of these trees in religions perceived largely as being “non-animist” or even “anti-animist” forms this dissertation’s central line of inquiry: what within these traditions affirms the religious agency of these two trees? What does their consciousness signify about other trees and about the rest of the cosmos within Islamic and Christian traditions?

Significant strands of Islam and Christianity suggest that the agency that these two trees display is not only miraculous. After a study of trees within scripture, the dissertation branches out to a study of religious views of nonhuman consciousness in the natural world. Islamic and Christian scriptural portrayals of nature include the religious life of others within the cosmos. Notwithstanding intra-religious contestations, each religious tradition includes a metaphysics that accounts for and explains the consciousness of nonhuman beings. According to the exegetical and metaphysical expositions of the Sufi author of primarily Persian poetry Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) and the patristic theologian Origen of Alexandria (d. 253/4), many nonhuman others are alive and also religious. The consciousness of the two trees is exceptional but also universal; both thinkers unveil the inner animateness of the natural world.

In this work I also explore the ethical implications of being in relationship with living nonhuman others. I engage the present global ecological crisis as a problem rooted in ignorance of the spiritual integrity that is inherent in all beings in the cosmos, highlighting the urgent need to engage religious environmental views.

Not only are the two trees alive and devotional, but, according to many of the sources of this study, so too is the cosmos teeming with life, consciousness, and inherent spirituality.

Adviser: Kimberley C. Patton

■ Justina Torrance [PhD]

“A Sick Philosopher is Incurable”: Herman Melville and William James on Hope

This dissertation is about hope. It examines works by two nineteenth-century Americans, Herman Melville and William James—*Benito Cereno*, *Principles of Psychology*, and *Varieties of Religious Experience*, in particular—to make a case for the importance of exercising this religious virtue well, not just in our individual lives but in our national political life. With Melville and James, it treats hope as both a powerful force of human psychology and a religious virtue of civic consequence. Hope is a prominent theme in American public life, or at least in the national mythos; yet, as both of these American thinkers diagnose, bad or corrupt relationships to hope can be dangerous, even destructive. So before it makes the case for hope’s positive importance, this dissertation, with the help of Melville and James, addresses ways distorted relationships to hope can have far-reaching negative effects, supporting other pernicious attitudes and behaviors like racism and self-deception.

By extending and applying the insights of Melville and James, this dissertation identifies ways hope can go wrong, ways to cultivate a hopeful disposition, and ways our disposition to hope impacts our perception and action in the world. The first and longest chapter studies a problematic brand of optimism, or how people become adept at *not* seeing signs they do not want to see, and how this practice of unconscious (im)perception is entangled with race and religion in America. The next chapter considers despair as another possible dysfunction of hope connected to perception and highlights the importance of hope as a social virtue. The third chapter considers hope itself; hope as a form of energy that can drive us to act in accordance with our visions of the good, even in the face of what is, on rational calculation, assured failure. This kind of hope, which has much in common with Christian theological understandings of the virtue, will spur one to transformative action, and it can persist despite the knowledge that its bearer may not live to see its success or fruition. Ultimately, this dissertation treats literature as a site where religious or spiritual formation can occur, beginning to draw out possibilities for fiction to transform our perception and help us become better hopers.

Adviser: Matthew Ichihashi Potts

■ Joshua Wright [PhD]*Comic Belief: Religious Irreverence and Irreverent Religion in Cold War America*

“Comic Belief” identifies evolving standards of humor as both reflections and engines of the cultural changes that reconfigured American institutional Christianity in the half-century following World War II. It contends that both traditionally religious and religiously unaffiliated Americans increasingly turned to comedy to critique and offer alternatives to the midcentury denominational system and the constructions of Judeo-Christian civil religion that supported it. To make this case, this dissertation follows two parallel, and often intersecting, threads. First, in the 1950s, iconoclastic comedians, artists, and publishers began deploying parody and satire in a variety of mediums to castigate organized religion for authoritarianism and moral hypocrisy. Although such efforts encountered religious protest and censorship, these post-denominational figures expanded the cultural and legal space for irreverent treatments of religion. Meanwhile, recognizing the growing American valorization of authenticity, American Protestants and Catholics reevaluated a longstanding Christian ambivalence toward laughter and came to see humor as the antidote to a pervasive religious formalism that threatened the vibrancy of Christianity in an age of secularism, commercialism, and pluralism. “Comic Belief” shows that both comic strands—those operating within organized Christianity and those outside of it—helped propel a process of religious deformalization, characterized by the decentering of the institutional structures and symbols of organized religion in favor of more personalized, and often eclectic, modes of spiritual belief and practice.

Adviser: David F. Holland