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A vehicle for ferrying news and views among members and contacts of the New Zealand Association for the Study of Religions

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New Faculty

Erica Baffelli

Erica Baffelli was born in a small mountain village in the north of Italy named Bienna, known as “The ancient village of Hammers”. She studied at Ca’ Foscari university in Venice, taking a Laurea degree summa cum laude in East-Asian Languages and cultures (major language: Japanese). Her life in Venice was like a dream, especially for a 19-year-old girl from the country. Her first “encounter” with a big city and, at the same time, with new Japanese religious movements was in Paris, where in 1997-1998 she spent a year as Socrates-Erasmus exchange student and she attended some seminars at the University Paris VII and the Section des Sciences Religieuses of Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE). Her laurea thesis was related to the relationship between new Japanese religions movements and the Internet.



After graduation she enrolled in the doctoral course at Ca’ Foscari University, in the Department of East-Asian studies. In 2003-2004 Erica spent a year in Tokyo, as a visiting researcher at Keio University and fellow of the Canon Foundation in Europe. In Japan, Erica started her fieldwork on Kōfuku no kagaku (‘Science of Happiness’) and interviewed media representatives of some religious groups (Tenrikyō, Seichō no Ie, Ōmoto, Risshō kōseikai). She also enjoyed traveling around the Japanese archipelago and she became an expert on “how to travel cheap in Japan”.

Her doctoral thesis titled “Selling Happiness, Media, Marketing and New Japanese Religions. The Case of Kōfuku no kagaku” (2005), investigated the relationship between the media and image construction of new religious movements in Japan. Specifically, she analyzed the marketing strategy of a religious group founded in 1986 called Kōfuku no kagaku through the mass-media.

In 2005-2007 Erica worked as a Post-Doctoral Fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) at Hosei University (Tokyo). The title of her post-doctoral research is “The marketing strategy of Japanese New Religions by the mass-media”, and it focuses both on theoretical and practical aspects of the relationship between media, marketing and new religious movements in Japan. This research, based mainly on fieldwork, continues the work started during her doctoral research.

During post-doctoral research Erica worked also on satellite broadcastings of a Buddhist group called Agonshū and on manga (Japanese comics) published by new religious movements. In June 2006 she started fieldwork on a small group called Tamamitsu jinja, attending ceremonies, members meeting, festivals and annual pilgrimage. At the same time Erica attended a research group at National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka and a research group on Japanese pop culture(s) at Hosei University, in Tokyo.

Erica will join Otago University in June as Lecturer in Asian Religions. In the second semester she will teach papers on “Religion and magic” (focusing on shamanism in Asia) and on ideas of world-destruction and world-renewal in some new religious movements. When not working Erica enjoys watching movies and reading Japanese manga. She also likes going trekking, but she couldn’t enjoy it in Tokyo and she really looks forward to enjoying NZ mountains.

Anna Gade

Before coming to Victoria University, Anna Gade spent over seven years at Oberlin College in Ohio, U.S.A., where she taught Islamic Studies. Her training is in the History of Religions, while her research is person-centered and ethnographic. Her work explains trends in religious revitalization in Southeast Asia. Gade's first book, *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion and the Recited Qur'an in Indonesia* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), analyzed a widespread movement in religious reading, which promoted Islamic aesthetics and piety along with practical skill in Qur'an recitation and memorization. Her most recent fieldwork has been in mainland Southeast Asia, among the Cham Muslim minority of Cambodia. Gade is now working on a book manuscript on the Qur'an as well as a project on religion and development in Southeast Asia. Originally from the San Francisco Bay Area, Anna has felt very much at home since her arrival in Wellington at the start of 2007. She is thrilled to be living, teaching and researching in New Zealand – a dream come true!



News

Canterbury

RELS at Canterbury is so far resisting the pressure to buckle under despite now being reduced to two staff. Understanding that in an EFTS-driven environment 'bums on seats' count (especially in a school that thrives on EFTS bar-charts for each individual staff member) we are attempting to teach our way out of the mire. While this does mean we are teaching more than 7 courses each it also means we can offer a full programme through to honours. Our postgrad numbers are very encouraging at Hons. and Masters level and we are even getting some research done. On top of all this, Conferences have been attended and papers presented, articles and manuscripts submitted and Aditya even got off to India for a well-deserved and necessary 6 weeks research at the end of 2006. Canterbury is currently undertaking a review of the College of Arts and a component of this is a review of the BA. What all this may mean for smaller programmes like Religious Studies is unclear, but come what may we are determined to survive and hopefully in the future look to recover lost positions.

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Otago

The process of replacing Elizabeth Isichei (reported in the last issue of *YANA*) was protracted, but eventually had a successful result in the appointment of Erica Baffelli. With Erica, the department will have a staff of 2.25 and an Italian-speaking majority. Although the interim period has been difficult for the department, it did provide the opportunity for other scholars to gain teaching experience, notably Elizabeth Guthrie, who taught papers on Religions of South-East Asia and NRMs (twice), as well as Eric Repphun (Spirituality and Film) and Donna Hendry (Religion and Politics in Asia).

Despite being only quarter time in RELS, Greg Dawes not only taught two full papers in Religious Studies but also gained a second PhD, in Philosophy. Although he now answers only to Herr Dr Dr Dawes, the real doctor in the Dawes household remains his long-suffering wife Dr Kristin Kenrick, and the real philosopher is undoubtedly Anna (age 5).

In 2006 Will Sweetman gained a substantial research grant from the University which enabled him to employ a research assistant in India (the superb R. Ilakkuvan) and to make three trips there in search of a Tamil manuscript (the *Tirikalaccakkaram*), the only evidence for which was an entry in a 300-year-old catalogue. This particular wild goose was found after only ten months' looking. In 2007 Will has a sabbatical and will spend two months working in Jesuit archives in Paris, and a further four months in India, working on the *Tirikalaccakkaram*. An administrative error saw Will promoted to Senior Lecturer.

2006 was the 40th year of Religious Studies at Otago and while the year was not easy, we believe a difficult transitional period lies behind us, and a period of development and consolidation lies ahead. 2007 will see two new developments in the curriculum: the department will offer papers in Religious Studies by distance for the first time, and James Harding, a lecturer in Biblical Studies, will teach a paper on the Dead Sea Scrolls under a RELS code. This reflects not only James's own approach to teaching the Hebrew Bible, but also continuing efforts to make links with Theology at Otago.

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Waikato

Douglas Pratt returned in the middle of 2006 following a sabbatical year at Oxford where he held a research fellowship. While there he completed work on a project investigating the role of the Vatican and the World Council of Churches in interreligious dialogue, and gave a series of lectures and a clutch of seminars on issues in inter-faith engagement. During his time in the UK Douglas was invited to a Christian-Muslim dialogue conference in Tehran, then invited to edit the edition of the journal *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* (University of Birmingham, UK; Georgetown University, Washington, DC) which is to carry a selection of papers from that conference - this will appear later in 2007.

At the beginning of 2006 Douglas received news of promotion to Associate Professor. However, during his absence the Religious Studies programme suffered the loss of Dr Dennis Green whose position was disestablished. The teaching staff in RS is now down to 1.5 (Pratt and Margaret Coldham-Fussell, on a half-time continuing appointment and currently working on her PhD). The major is sustainable only because of cross-listing adjunct courses taught in other departments and programmes. Survival seems ever the name of the game - indeed, it conjures up the prospect of a new Reality TV show: "Academic Survivor"!

Unfortunately the perception given during the protracted redundancy/disestablishment process that lasted at Waikato for most of 2005 and into 2006, has resulted in a widespread perception - or so it seems - that Religious Studies, along with some other Humanities programmes, is on the way out. This perception has surfaced in terms of anecdotal comment both on and off campus, and has perhaps contributed to an even lower-than-usual enrolment for this year. Everyone agrees religion is currently a hot topic - but few make the commitment to engaging in its study, and certainly they are not encouraged to do so in the continuing neo-liberal climate of education where expectations of economic return predominate over advocacy of the inherent value of knowledge and learning. Nevertheless, academic activities continue and research interest remains high. We have currently three PhD candidates in Religious Studies and supervisory roles with two others (Philosophy & Politics).

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