



CURA
JEREMY MENCHIK
BECOMES DIRECTOR



UNLOCKING BOOKS
CHINA'S BANNED
BOOK PROJECT



BU AT ASCH
DANA L. ROBERT
HEADLINES MEETING

CGCM NEWS



Building Understanding During Times of Crisis

Recently, CGCM Faculty Associate, Jeremy Menchik at the Pardee School of Global Studies, became the Director of Boston University's Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs (CURA). It is a highly visible role, and Professor Menchik has led with wisdom, asking scholarship to make a real difference in the world. Daryl Ireland, Associate Director of the CGCM, interviewed him about where CURA is going.

DI: For those who may not know, can you explain what CURA is?

JM: CURA is the abbreviation for the Institute on Culture, Religion, and

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World Affairs, the oldest academic research center on religion and international affairs in the United States. CURA has helped gestate hundreds of influential books, articles, and public essays about religion and global affairs, on topics as far ranging as the Iranian Revolution, Christian Evangelicals, secularization, Islam and democracy, genocide and faith, religion and nationalism, and beyond. At its most basic, CURA is an incubator for great research and big ideas.

DI: Your first semester as the Director was in the fall of 2023. October 7th and the months afterward gave rise to heated debates about Israel-Palestine, culture, religion, and world affairs. How did CURA respond?

JM: CURA was created for moments like October 7 and the aftermath. We're not afraid to talk about hard issues like Islam and violence, or Zionism and settler colonialism. We have always known that the answer to public anxiety is education.

So we responded by educating the BU community about the origins of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and how it might end. We organized public lectures on the conflict, Israeli politics, Hamas and the Palestinian nationalist movement, and U.S. diplomacy. Instead of taking sides, we highlighted the multidimensional aspects of the conflict.

And as we have done in Indonesia and Rwanda, we lifted up the peacemakers, those actors calling for understanding and cooperation rather than violence. That has meant lifting up Jewish and Palestinian organizations that are often bullied by Christian, Islamic, and Jewish nationalists. We organized a massive "Conference on the Jewish Left" in Spring 2024, and we're hosting the second one in February 2025.

DI: CURA is fast-approaching its 40th anniversary. As you look back, what are strengths that you hope CURA can build on?

JM: Our most important strength is our global network of faculty and graduate students. We will continue to develop their research through our fellows programs, bimonthly seminars, book talks, and high profile lectures. We will continue to be the place where leading scholars come for help moving their research toward publication and into public debates.

Those networks don't build themselves. In the coming years we will be hosting 40th Anniversary Lectures, each one pairing one of the founders of CURA with emerging scholars, so that CURA will continue to grow and thrive for the next 40 years.

CURA in Images



Dr. Jeremy Menchik,
Associate Professor of
International Relations and
Political Science



Every year, CURA creates a program for Fellows to share their research and deepen their reflections in dialogue with Fellows. This year, Morgan Crago Melkonian, a PhD student in the CGCM presented, "Both Brazilian and Protestant: Ecumenical Brazilian Protestants' Case for Political Legitimacy and Patriotism, 1934-1964."



CURA began the year with a cruise on the Charles River.



The intersections between CURA and the CGCM are many and frequent. Dana Robert, Director of the CGCM, for instance, is a member of the CURA executive and spoke during an event on religion's role in nationalism and internationalism.



CURA has the capacity to convene people to address critical questions, such as the asking Justice Mansoor Ali Shah, of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, What is the Role of the Court in Safeguarding and Advancing Fundamental Rights?

DI: As you look ahead, what are one or two of your priorities?

JM: We are trying to update CURA's communication system and find new ways to get academic research into the public domain. We are helping our fellows craft short videos, training them to write for the public audience, and expanding the reach of our newsletter. Intervening in a crowded public sphere remains an uphill struggle but we've learned a lot from our peer institutes.

I'd also like us to tackle some neglected research topics. I'd like to do research on proselytizing beyond Christianity: there are big proselytizing projects in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, but they have received a fraction of the attention of Christian missions. This is an area for collaboration and comparison, hopefully with the Center on Global Christianity and Mission. I also think folk and indigenous traditions need more attention. Instead of disappearing with secularization and the expansion of world religion, we're seeing a revival of folk traditions around the world, but because they are primarily local and regional, we lack systematic research. So while we will continue to educate our community about pressing issues like religion and nationalism, there are some big projects that are a priority for collaborative research.

DI: BU has been encouraging Centers and Institutes to become spaces where silos between disciplines are broken down. What might that look like at CURA over the next decade?

The first director of CURA was a sociologist, the second a cultural anthropologist, and the third a political scientist. We've never been siloed in a specific discipline, and I hope we never do.

That said, I think we could do more to collaborate with public health, law, computer science, and other fields. In an age of climate catastrophe, I would like to see more work on religion and public health, understanding the ways that religious actors can ameliorate the massive suffering in our world. We also live in an age of resurgent fascism, and I'd like to see more collaboration between scholars of law, religion, and social movements in order to expand zones of resilience and resistance. Recently, I've been doing collaborative research with computer scientists. I think big data and text analysis paired with an ethnographic sensibility can be powerful, and there's tremendous possibilities for research on religion in global affairs that marries seemingly disparate research methods.

DI: This is exciting and important work! Thank you.

Unlocking Books: CGCM Makes China's Banned Books Available

When Yan Wang traveled to Hong Kong a decade ago, the first thing he did was search for the books that he could not find in the Mainland. Although he was a professor, the range of ideas available at the university were limited. Now, as a Visiting Researcher at the CGCM, Dr. Wang has helped the Center, the School of Theology Library, the BU Libraries, and private donors create a collection of books that are being banned in Mainland China. These new Chinese-language books, shelved in the School of Theology Library, are the first in the BU catalogue to be entered in Chinese. They cover religion, the state, economics, and other politically sensitive topics. Collected from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and private book sellers, this new library offers visiting scholars and students at BU the full range of ideas and opinions about China.

Celebrating a Living Legend



BU students celebrating Dana Robert at ASCH (L to R): Nathan and Greer Cordner, Tom Whitaker, Alex Mayfield, Daryl Ireland, Luke Donner, Cassie Forry, Morgan Melkonian, Starla Gooch, Aixin Yi, Tyler Lenocker, Dana Robert, Ben Hartley, Soojin Chung

The theme of the American Society of Church History's annual meeting in January of 2025 was "Legends." Several historians were honored as "Living Legends." Among them was Dana L. Robert, the Director of the CGCM, who gave the opening plenary address. Over a dozen historians connected with BU, among them scholars of World Christianity, mission history, American religion, and practical theology, attended and enjoyed a celebratory meal together. Half a dozen BU-related scholars organized panels and gave papers on their current research.

Robert spoke on "World Christianity and the Challenge of Sacred Charters." In her provocative address, she drew upon her personal experience among indigenous churches in Zimbabwe, as well as the work of pioneer African Christian national historians, to argue that new Christian communities, immigrant congregations, and Christian movements in transition seek a divine charter, a history that shows they are created by God and are anchored in a divine purpose. Historians trained in the West are wary of providential histories, she acknowledged. They prefer verifiable data, the kind imagined to be stored in archive boxes and discoverable through scientific methods. But, challenged Robert, historians cannot proceed in the age of World Christianity as if their work is morally neutral. The growth of Christianity around the world today means that historians cannot hide under their presumed secular objectivity and pretend that sacred charters do not exist. Rather, historians of World Christianity must engage in partnership with ecclesial and ethnic communities who are forming their own identities through constructing sacred charters.

Lively discussion ensued for half an hour after the address, as Robert fielded questions from a wide range of historians. The address was extremely well received and created ongoing conversations during the coffee breaks. Probably the greatest compliment she received came from a younger scholar when he called her a "bad ass."