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Theta Alpha Kappa

The National Honor Society for Religious Studies and Theology

The President's Newsletter

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In this issue, you will find news about Theta Alpha Kappa's **awards programs**, including the **2020 Graduate Fellowship Awards** with an extended deadline this year (page 2), the 2019-2020 **Undergraduate Achievement Award program** (page 3) and an announcement of the **2020 Clark Award recipients** (page 3). Also in this issue, we celebrate **outgoing Board Member, Dr. Sharon Betsworth** (page 3) and **two outstanding members** who have also contributed to Theta Alpha Kappa as Chapter Representatives (page 5) and we welcome several **new chapters** (page 4). Finally, this issue offers reflection on **the value of honor societies** during times of economic challenges (page 4) and **guidance for Spring inductions** during the disruptions to higher education caused by the Coronavirus (page 5).

Appreciation from TAK's President and Farewell

It is with fondness and appreciation for Theta Alpha Kappa, that I write my last column as President of this fine honor society. Several years ago when I was approached by the Nominating Committee, I agreed to serve Theta Alpha Kappa in this role, but with a healthy respect for the myriad duties this position entails. Leading an all-volunteer Board of Directors was and is to me today an awesome responsibility: chapter representatives and board members know firsthand the many wonderful ways Theta Alpha Kappa celebrates student accomplishments in the study of religion and theology and provides opportunities for students to grow in their own professional development. It has been an honor for me to lead a society which does so much good and a privilege to work with such outstanding colleagues, including the past President, previous as well as current members of the Board of Directors, and Chapter Representatives. We have all worked together to do something extraordinary: encouraging the next generation of scholars of religious studies and theology. Though I was elected to a second term as President, my own institution needs now my time and energy; because the society will be in good hands with an able interim President and Board of Directors, I can bring to conclusion my second term earlier than anticipated. Thank you all for your service to Theta Alpha Kappa and for your mentoring of your students. Theta Alpha Kappa happens because of all of our efforts and generosity of spirit.

"It has been an honor for me to lead a society which does so much good and a privilege to work with such outstanding colleagues…"

Kelley Coblentz Bautch, President, Theta Alpha Kappa

2020 Graduate Fellowship Awards Competition

Chapter Representatives, your students and alumni (within the past 3 years) may be attending graduate programs in religious studies or theology in Fall 2020. Your chapter may nominate a senior or recent alumnus/a who will be entering their first year in a graduate program in religious studies or theology for the Graduate Fellowship Award. Nominees compete for three prizes – 1st of $3000, 2nd of $2000, and 3rd of $1000 – to be used for educational costs associated with matriculation in a graduate program (Masters level or PhD) in religious studies and theology. The awards support Theta Alpha Kappa's mission "to encourage, recognize, and maintain excellence" in "academic studies in Religion and Theology." Theta Alpha Kappa requests applications be submitted through our online application form. Because of the challenges students, faculty and institutions have faced due to the crisis caused by the Coronavirus, the **deadline for the applications and supporting letters has been extended to 11:59 pm EST, May 22, 2020**.

Please let your chapter's nominee know that they should submit the following information:

1. A formal letter of application from the applicant, detailing their academic achievements to date, and their long-term academic goals and intentions. The letter should explain how these goals align with Theta Alpha Kappa's mission of supporting excellence in academic studies in Religion and Theology.
2. scan of the official transcript from their undergraduate institution.
3. proof of acceptance and intent to matriculate into the first year of a relevant graduate program in the academic study of Religion or Theology.
4. two letters of recommendation from faculty members who are the familiar with the applicant and will speak in detail to the applicant's academic work in religion or theology. Applicants: it is your responsibility to ask faculty for letters of recommendation for the Graduate Fellowship Award, on institutional letterhead.
5. a separate letter from the TAK Chapter Representative of the applicant's undergraduate institution. The letter should confirm the student's membership in TAK and that the chapter supports the student's application. It should be written on institutional letterhead and submitted directly by the representative. (If the student will be inducted subsequent to the deadline, the faculty representative should indicate the planned date of induction.)
6. a one-page cover sheet with the following information:
    - the student's physical mailing address that will be valid in June and July 2020 (for example, the student's permanent address);
    - a statement from the student verifying that the copy of the transcript is of an unaltered transcript that accurately reflects their work;
    - the names, email addresses, and phone numbers of the two faculty members who are submitting letters of recommendation on behalf of the applicant;
    - the name, email address, and phone number of the TAK faculty representative who will confirm the student's membership in TAK and that the chapter supports their application.

If there are any questions about the application process or award, please contact: theta_alpha_kappa_inquiries@thetaalphakappa.org

Note of Appreciation for Outgoing Board Member, Dr. Sharon Betsworth

The Board of Directors bids farewell to Member-at-Large, Dr. Sharon Betsworth, Professor of Religion and Director of the Wimberly School of Religion, Oklahoma City University. Dr. Betsworth, a New Testament scholar, joined the Board of Directors in the Fall of 2017. Participating on all-volunteer board is labor intensive, and Dr. Betsworth has contributed much to Theta Alpha Kappa. For example, Dr. Betsworth led a committee charged with developing orientation materials for new chapter representatives; each time a new chapter representative comes on board, they receive a helpful orientation letter from Dr. Betsworth. Fellow Member-at-Large, Dr. Michael Berger noted, "Having worked with Sharon on the Awards Committee, I can say she is an extremely careful, methodical reader of applications. She has the ability to identify applicants' potential and assess the value of their intellectual projects with clarity and conciseness, enabling us to compare and weigh the many compelling applications that are submitted. She performs her TAK service promptly and with grace, in spite of a rather heavy professional workload." Dr. Andrea Stanton also offered this appreciation: "When I stepped on to the TAK Board, Sharon went out of her way to welcome me and provided a friendly presence as I settled in. Her inclusiveness is a wonderful asset." The Board thanks Dr. Betsworth for all her good work and cheer.

2020 Undergraduate Achievement Awards

If your chapter code number ends in the **digits 0—4,** it is your academic year to name one student from your chapter for this $100 Undergraduate Achievement Award. (If you've lost track of your chapter number, this information is available in the Chapter Directory on our website). This award is available to each chapter every other year to promote excellence among undergraduate students. Designating the student you wish to recognize is very easy; simply send the name of the student (along with that individual's current mailing address) to the Theta Alpha Kappa Treasurer, Dr. Christopher McMahon at:

Christopher.McMahon@stvincent.edu

The 2020 Clark Award Winners

You have some amazing students and the annual Albert Clark Awards for the best essays in religious study and theology at the Undergraduate and Graduate Level provide your chapter the chance to share your students' work with a wider audience as well as compete for cash prizes. For the 2020 Competition, Theta Alpha Kappa is pleased to announce the following Clark Awards for the best essays in religious study and theology at the Undergraduate and Graduate Level. At the Undergraduate Level, the Winner is Kathryn Gerry of Elon University (Alpha Tau Chapter) for "'There is Not a Thing like Religion or Caste between Migrants': Navigating Multireligious Landscapes in Kerala and the Gulf." The Runner-up is Emma Welch of Samford University (Alpha Iota Epsilon Chapter) for "The History of the Catholic Church's Role in the Lives of African-American Catholics in Birmingham, Alabama and How the Church Can Better Serve the African-American Community Today." At the Graduate Level, the Winner is Molly Smerko of Union Presbyterian Seminary (inducted in the Alpha Epsilon Kappa Chapter, Meredith College) for "From Nameless Victim to *Eshet Hayil*: Remembering *Bath-Jephthah* in Judges 11:34-40." The Runner-up is Rebekah Gordon of Florida State University (Alpha Nu Omicron Chapter) for "Political Affect and Semiotics: The Kaepernick Phenomenon." Each of these individuals receives a cash award and their essays will be published in forthcoming issues of *The Journal of the Theta Alpha Kappa*. Theta Alpha Kappa is grateful to Dr. Bernadette McNary-Zak for coordinating the Clark Awards, the panels of judges for their evaluations, noted in the Spring issue of *JTAK*, and also to the Chapter Representatives who encouraged their students to submit essays. Please keep encouraging your students to submit their best work for the Annual Clark Awards. Details can be found on our website.

WELCOME NEW CHAPTERS

Since the *President's Newsletter* of October 2019, we are delighted to welcome four newly chartered chapters to our society.

Institution	Chapter
Florida State University	ΑΝΟ
Unification Theological Seminary	ΑΝΠ
Fresno Pacific University	ΑΝΡ
Johnson University	ΑΝΣ

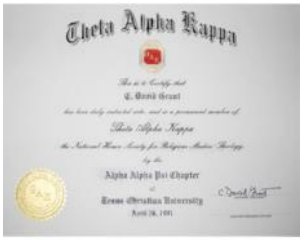
These chapters join 305 active chapters of Theta Alpha Kappa, a thriving honor society which is also a member of the Association of College Honor Societies.

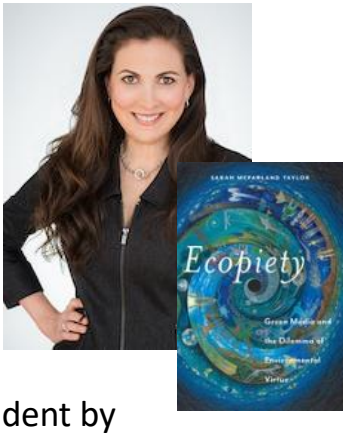
Leading an Honor Society in an Age of Disruption

We are all aware of the challenges that institutions of higher learning face these days because of disruptions caused by the Coronavirus. But even before social distancing caused colleges, universities and seminaries to go online or do business differently, experts have predicted difficult days ahead due to enrollment declines that will worsen by 2025. In this changing landscape, departments and schools will be facing increased awareness of limited resources. Happily, honor societies do have something to offer students, making them important allies to their institutions. In his keynote presentation on "Leadership in a Time of Extraordinary Change" at the Association of College Honor Societies, Dr. Kevin Kruger (NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) remarked that to ensure students of today and tomorrow thrive, universities will prioritize mentoring, coaching and proactive advising; this response will be important especially for helping first generation college students and students who are Pell-grant eligible, constituencies entering universities in greater proportions, to thrive. Theta Alpha Kappa, as a disciple-oriented honor society, encourages mentoring as well as welcoming students into an academic community and professional socialization; and honor societies, like Theta Alpha Kappa, provide opportunities for students that connect them further with their vocational aspirations. Looking to the future as well, Dr. Jeremiah Shinn (Vice President for Student Affairs, Louisiana State University) addressed the needs of students in "Engaging Students in an Era of Declining Enrollment." He noted that mattering and belonging are important to our students and deserve extra effort; the schools which engage students will survive, he anticipates, during the challenging times ahead. Honor societies that are relevant, sustainable and focused will contribute to students feeling a sense of belonging. How do we know, though, whether we are relevant to the lives of our students? The National Board of Theta Alpha Kappa can share with you that we regularly hear from both undergraduate and graduate students wishing to join the honor society. Students **are** interested and would be grateful for the opportunities that come with membership. So, if you are looking for a way to engage students and to contribute to their sense of belonging in a department, institution and/or professional track, your connection with Theta Alpha Kappa is one tool you have at hand.

Spring Inductions and Distance Learning

Many of our institutions are closing or are closed for the remainder of the semester because of the Coronavirus, complicating many of the ways we engage our students. Theta Alpha Kappa Chapter Representatives who had anticipated inductions yet this Spring but whose contexts no longer easily allow for it, please be in touch with your inductees and let us also know how we can assist. The National Board is in conversation with Kenneth E. Jernigan and Associates, our vendor who produces and sends induction certificates, about the situation at hand. We are also deliberating about how best to help chapters with seniors who are graduating yet this May and need still to be inducted.



Where Are They Now? Catching up with Dr. Sarah McFarland Taylor and Dr. Steven Vose

While not a surprise that students inducted in Theta Alpha Kappa have gone on to great accomplishments in the study of religion and theology, it is indeed a joy to see them mentoring the next generation of scholars. We caught up with two Chapter Representatives, Dr. Sarah McFarland Taylor, representative of the Alpha Kappa Nu chapter at Northwestern University and Dr. Steven Vose, representative of the Alpha Gamma Pi chapter at Florida International University (from 2013-2019) who were themselves inducted into Theta Alpha Kappa as students. Dr. Taylor was inducted as a doctoral student by the Alpha Beta Phi chapter at UC Santa Barbara and in 1999 won the Clark Award at the Graduate Level for her essay: "Living Categories of Religion and Culture: Insights From African-American Religious History." Today Dr. Taylor is an associate professor of Religious Studies, specializing in the study of media, religion, and culture and the author of several books, including *Ecopiety: Green Media and the Dilemma of Environmental Virtue* (NYU Press, 2019). Dr. Steven Vose was inducted while an undergraduate student by the Alpha Epsilon Omicron chapter at St. Lawrence University. Today Dr. Vose is the Bhagwan Mahavir Assistant Professor of Jain Studies and serves as Director of the Jain studies Program within the Department of Religious Studies. In addition to developing this program, Dr. Vose is the author of several significant studies on Jainism. We celebrate both of these outstanding members of the Theta Alpha Kappa, their accomplishments and commitment to encouraging their own students to be involved with Theta Alpha Kappa. Kudos! Chapter Representatives, send us your news too!