

Religion in Peace and Conflict Master Programme

New Coordinator

We would like to thank Nils Billing for his commitment and tireless work as a coordinator of RPC program for the past five years. Now, Congratulations, Håkan Bengtsson, on your position as a new coordinator!

Editor: We are all sure that you will be an asset to the program, with your years of experience, cooperation within it and not to mention your easygoing personality.

Håkan: I feel very privileged to coordinate RPC and I hope that I will contribute to the development of it.



Photo credit: Håkan Bengtsson

E: Could you briefly tell us about yourself for those who might happen to not know you?

H: I have a background in Biblical studies and I wrote the dissertation about the Dead Sea Scrolls many years ago. Since then I have been doing research about Biblical scholarship and antisemitism. I have also worked in Israel and Palestine for several years with interreligious dialogue.

E: For how long and what did you work with within the program?

H: When I returned to Uppsala University and the Department of Theology four years ago, I started to teach and to do some administrative work. I've used my abroad experience for supervising students in the program and I found rewarding both to teach and to be part of the process of writing a Master's thesis.

E: How do you see Religion in Peace and Conflict program within the department?

H: Today I consider it to be one of our department's most exciting environments in terms of international students and contacts. My colleagues master many different disciplines and it is advantageous to work in such an interdisciplinary framework!

Short News

Two new courses are introduced in the program: **Religion, Power and Politics 7,5 credits** (2nd semester) and **Current Debates in Religion and Society, 7,5 credits** (3d semester).

Religion, Power and Politics, 7,5 p. course studies the relationship between religion and politics and seeks to identify power structures that evolve from different types of interaction, it also teaches how to identify and analyze political conflicts in reference to religious traditions and the agents involved in those conflicts.

Within the course *Current debates in Religion and Society, 7.5 p.*, for the first time we will look at the ongoing development and struggles in our world, drawing on the present day news reporting as well as a background analyzes.

The examples that we take up will depend on what is happening in different parts of the world during the weeks when the course is given.

Campus Week

The participation in the Campus Week is compulsory and equal to 2 credits within *Religiously and Ethically Motivated Movements for Peace and Justice, 15 credits* course. Its 8 lectures and a few workshops emphasizing the new students meet as many of the program's teachers as possible. A Peace Walk: Uppsala's Pride and Shame followed by a guided tour at the university buildings introduced students to more than 500-year-old Uppsala and its University. For the **first time**, we had the joint dinner at our institution's lunchroom, where dinner included singing songs with piano accompaniment ranging from Bob Dylan to recent compositions. Songs were followed by a number of improvised theatre exercises and usual mingling.

Lecturer's Voice



Photo credit: Sai-kit Cheung,
www.brianpalmer.org/bio

The extract from the interview:

"David Frost's" ghost is here to finally interview Brian Palmer about his teaching and engagement in RPC (Religion in Peace and Conflict MP).

Frost: Brian, how do you, as an inspiring public lecturer, find teaching online? Do you see any advantages for yourself and others in it?

Brian Palmer (thinks for a moment): Online-based programs lack the energizing effect of classroom contact, so they challenge teachers and students to try to make up for that in other ways. One is the use of a creative narrative to try to recapture some of the vividness and playfulness and intimacy of classroom interaction. Online teaching demands an extra effort at creating engaging forms of connection between people. The temporal and spatial advantages are the same for me as for the students. I can be in a hotel room in Mexico City after giving a lecture at a museum there and still be working on the course. Just as my students can be anywhere in the world.

F: What do you see as the main goal of the courses you teach in RPC? What do you wish people to take with them?

BP: I want students to become powerful public speakers and writers because those capabilities are essential to almost all career paths the students may continue on. I want them to find some themes, questions, that they are passionate about. So that they can be driven by the sense of the urgency and excitement of what they are working on. The students in RPC often arrive with a high degree of ethical seriousness and humane commitments and I hope that those become even deeper at the courses of the program.

F: How would you comment on the growing interest in RPC?

BP: It may partly be that masters degrees are becoming seen in Europe as a bare minimum to have obtained in order to get attractive jobs. It is, perhaps, also because this program has a good record in terms of its alumni continuing in related jobs and sometimes doctoral programs. Both the fear of terrorism and the increase of international migration have caused governments, foundations and educational institutions across Europe to show increased interest in supporting and investing in expertise in religion in peace and conflict. Thus, our program has a better record than most masters programs in leading our students to relevant employment in.

F: I bet many are eager to know, what are the unwritten rules for the teachers in RPC?

BP: Interesting question! Genuinely Frost's type of question. There is a pedagogical libertarianism in the program. We are very eager to help students find their own vocations, passions, and commitments. We want them to have the freedom to do that without too much micromanaging and control from us, who hold the reins of power in the program.

So this is in line with a general Swedish pattern of treating graduate students as adults who shall have a lot to say regarding the direction and content of their own intellectual growth. A second answer is that some of us secretly wish that the program was not distance teaching but on campus instead. And that is why we have the campus week. To enable students to meet and recognize the wondrousness of one another. Once people have gotten to know each other in real life, the electronically mediated interactions tend to take on a more gracious, attentive and forgiving tone.

F: In a sentence or two.. How would you describe your job to a 5-year-old child?

BP: Interesting question.. Surprisingly hard to answer! I help students to notice the world around them and particularly the way that people communicate with each other and treat each other. Then I ask students to think and to write about what they see and eventually to talk about it publicly, so they can help others to understand the world.

F: What do you know now that you wished you knew when you were in your early thirties?

BP: Another question could be: what did I know in my early 30s that I still remember now? (laughing) In recent years I've been haunted by the understanding that the human species could come to an end as a result of large-scale nuclear war. Visiting institutions such as Cambridge University, Center for the Study of Existential Risk has heightened my concern about nuclear war starting by accident through computer chip failure or by computer hacking or due to a suicidal commander. Reading about new weapons systems that are now under development to be deployed in 5-15 years make the picture even bleaker. This is an issue on which specialists are far more pessimistic than the population at large, who imagine incorrectly that the risk of nuclear war mostly went away after the fall of the Berlin Wall. If I saw how severe the situation was earlier in my career, I might have devoted more energy to it.

Students Enrolled by Age

