

# The Tablet

Newsletter of the Department of Religious Studies at Southwest Missouri State University

## Worldviews are a Work in Progress

Joby Taylor

*Joby is now in his second year as a M.A. student in the Department and is also one of our instructors in the introductory undergraduate course. Here, Joby offers us his reflections on the value of exposure to diverse cultures and international travel.*

In 1956 the anthropologist Horace Miner composed his now famous essay "Body Rituals of the Nacirema," describing the elaborate superstitions of a thriving North American tribe.

Those who are familiar with the article will recall these

people's obsession with dental hygiene, their enormous monetary support of healers, and their shame-laden body image. Miner's hook is baited; "Nacirema" is, of course, a thinly veiled inversion of "American." The essay makes a simple but important point: they (the observed) are we (the observers). When I assigned this as a reading in my Rel 100 class last semester, only 2 of 40 students failed to bite; the rest waxed eloquently on the horrors of such "primitive" living—and yes, I too must admit a similar embarrassment when I first read the essay. Miner's point is well taken; from any vantage point other than our own, would we recognize ourselves?

"Know thyself" goes the ancient Greek dictum, or, as the Chicago scholar of religion Jonathan Z. Smith urges, "the student of religion must be relentlessly self-conscious." The best method I have found to practice such self-scrutiny is a program of frequent cultural estrangement (even if this requires enjoying, incidentally, some beautiful tropical paradise, or so my rationalization goes). In need of a jolt, I find no substitute for literally throwing myself lock, stock, and barrel into some other geographical world, in the midst of something foreign enough to shake my constantly adjusting worldview.

All this is to say that I have spent my past two summers wonderfully estranged by working on the island of Guadeloupe. Located in the French West Indies near the

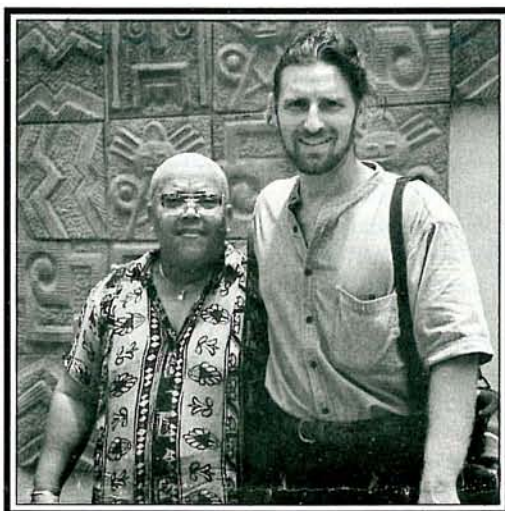
islands of Martinique and Dominica, Guadeloupe's history since Columbus' landing shares the turbulent, sometimes tragic, story of many of the Caribbean isles. None of its earlier inhabitants survive, and the current population is an intermingling of the descendants of French colonials, former slaves taken principally from West Africa, and East Indian plantation workers. To their language, French Creole, consider adding vocabulary drawn from such languages as Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese and you begin to understand the cultural complexity of this small corner of the earth, a corner that, to my mind at least, did not exist until just two years ago. Today, Guadeloupe is an official Department of France (more like Hawaii than Puerto Rico). This, most importantly, translates into fresh baguettes and pastries every morning, wines and cheeses of all descriptions imported even to the smallest of towns, and a

*haut couture* twist to island fashions. The island exports sugar and bananas from its plantations, and produces rum as its principal sources of revenue. Tourism comes in a close third, which contrasts with most Caribbean locales where tourism is a hands down first. Nonetheless, metropolitan France must continue to subsidize the island economy.

Roman Catholicism is the predominant religious tradition on the island, although, in an interesting Springfield connection, the Assembly of God community is fairly large and apparently growing. I also encountered Mormons and Jehovahes Witness. Remarkably, there is little visible sign of anything

resembling traditional African practice. Understandably perhaps, Guadeloupeans of color (Indians and Africans) seem to have an ongoing, if mild, love/hate relationship with their colonial mother, France. In full knowledge of the need for subsidy, small factions toy with calls for political independence but never gain a serious audience. 1998's celebration of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Guadeloupe was met with solemn parades and memorials, not angry protests. I sensed on the island an aura of discontent with economic dependency, but a strong multicultural sense of identity. Furthermore, their level of racial intermarriage leaves U.S. demographics looking more like a checkerboard than a melting pot.

Guadeloupe offered a rich environment within which to



*Pictured with Joby is Pierrette Cairo, Director of the Guadeloupean Center for Youth and Culture*

find myself asked to situate a summer program for Visions International, an organization that provides American high-school students with cross-cultural community service opportunities. With the aid of 5 staff members (two American, one Guadeloupean, and two French) we attempted to steer 25 adolescents through the months of June and July as participants, not tourists, in the small coastal community of Trois Rivières. Harkening often to my initial months as a Peace Corps Volunteer our goal was to provide these kids with a safe opportunity to broaden their world, and to take as their admission ticket to the island a spirit of voluntary service. The Guadeloupean center for youth and culture, under the direction of Pierrette Cairo, invited us into their community and sketched the work and recreational program, choosing their own youth group of 25 local students to act as our counterparts. On the work site (each Mon.-Fri from 8 am-2 pm) we together established a community park, clearing trash, building benches and picnic tables, planting trees and shrubs, and painting murals on the surrounding walls of the public swimming pool. It was not all work of course, and Pierrette and her gang showed us quite a time. Over the course of the summer we climbed to the top of a steaming volcano, swam in the basin of a 350 foot waterfall, scuba dived at one of Jacques Cousteau's personal favorite reefs, danced in an all-night Carnival celebration, and of course made a serious attempt at trying to spend an afternoon on nearly every beach in Guadeloupe.

It was with tears that our American kids left their newly formed friends to return home. Perhaps they are different than before the summer began. Perhaps they understand themselves better because of their experience of cultural contrast. Perhaps they now see their worldview as a work in progress. For myself, I know that these are all true.

## A Nearly Ideal Conference: The Sita Symposium in New York

J. E. Llewellyn

One of the most memorable experiences from my sabbatical this past year was the Sita Symposium, which was held at Columbia University from 30 April to 2 May 1998. In fact, I believe that this is the best academic conference that I have ever attended. Although I have attended the annual American Academy of Religion/Society for Biblical Literature meeting on a fairly regular basis, and I have always found it to be a stimulating gathering, it couldn't hold a candle to the Sita Symposium. This article will take you there.

First, a bit of history. Sita is the heroine of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*. There are many different versions of her story told over the course of the history of India, but the most influential one is a text that was written in the Sanskrit

language about two thousand years ago. The *Ramayana* is the saga of the god Vishnu, who became incarnate as the human king Ram thousands of years ago, or so the story goes. Vishnu took birth in our world to destroy a demonic tyrant named Ravan. The denouement of the *Ramayana* comes when Ram kills Ravan in single combat, but there is a complicated plot that leads to that point, which includes Ram being exiled from the palace to the forest by his father, and Sita being kidnaped by Ravan there. Sita's role in this drama has been interpreted in various ways over the many generations through which the story has been passed down. Often in contemporary India she is presented as the ideal self-sacrificing wife. She accompanies her husband from the palace to the jungle without complaint and remains faithful to him through long months in Ravan's captivity. Of course, there are feminists in India who object to the way that Sita is used to force women into self-denial, and they have rewritten her story in contemporary plays and movies and short stories with dramatically different results.

I first became interested in holding a gathering about Sita when I attended a panel about the status of women in the Hindu tradition at the AAR/SBL annual meeting in 1995. There Linda Hess of the University of California at Davis told a story about the presentation of Sita's story in a recent popular television series in India. I had just returned from India then, and I was working on a book on contemporary Hindu religious leaders who are also women. (There is more about that book, which just came out, elsewhere in this issue.) Sita figured prominently in the books that these women had written and the sermons that they preached, and I realized that I needed to learn more about what Sita means to contemporary Indians. After that meeting I contacted Linda Hess, and we eventually proposed a panel on Sita for 1997 annual meeting of the AAR/SBL in San Francisco. I thought that it was bad news when I heard that our proposal had not been accepted (because there were too many strong competing panels), but then I learned that the idea of a gathering about Sita had been picked up by Mary McGee, who is the director of the Dharam Hinduja Indic Research Center at Columbia. Eventually McGee, Hess, and I, along with several other people, put together a conference that was exclusively about Sita.

None of this speaks directly to why I thought the Sita Symposium ended up being so wonderful. One of the great things about the meeting was that it was small, with only about twenty participants. Thousands of scholars attend the larger conferences, like the AAR/SBL meeting, which means that participants have to spend a good deal of time running from one event to the next. On the other hand, the pace of the Sita Symposium was much more relaxed. That is not to say that the meeting was just a vacation. On the contrary, there were substantial papers presented by some of the world's leading authorities on Sita and the *Ramayana*. I understand that this might sound dry, but the story of Sita is so compelling, with so many important and conflicting undercurrents, that even the most scholarly of papers at the meeting were still compelling.

