

# Symons Fellows: Global Jewish Communities Initiative

Sponsored by Jonathan Symons

Thanks to the generosity of Jonathan Symons, the Global Jewish Communities Initiative was set up in Fall 2013. After two years of successful and even frenetic activity, the Initiative has now become the Global Jewish Communities Program directed by Dr. Tudor Parfitt, Distinguished Professor in the Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs and President Navon Professor of Sephardi and Mizrahi Studies, Florida International University. Each year the Program selects fellows to participate in its activities. Fellows must be taking courses at postgraduate level in order to receive funding from the Program. They contribute in various ways to the Program's activities and particularly to a Monday Symposium and lecture at JMOF-FIU. This is the first article in a series entitled *Symons Fellows* featuring students that are participating in this Program.

## Patrick Villalonga

Patrick Villalonga is pursuing a Master of Arts Degree in Religious Studies with a focus on Judaism. Patrick became a Symons Fellow with the help of Dr. Oren Stier, who recognized his interest in Jewish studies and recommended him for the program. Dr. Parfitt and Mr. Symons were excited about his thesis work and were willing to support his investigations.

As a Symons Fellow, the only formal obligation he has is to attend the Monday Symposium and lecture series at JMOF-FIU. This is a great way to be exposed to a variety of topics in Jewish theology, culture, and history. These topics can vary from the rebirth of Hebrew as a popular language, to the Jewish rules of war, to the history of Jewish comedy. All of them are relevant for someone trying to understand the Jewish worldview throughout history and today. Informally, the Fellows often collaborate with Dr. Parfitt and each other on various projects. It is essentially a think tank on Jewish culture; a space for the fellows to meet to discuss our work, receive feedback, and sharpen our skills in dealing with Jewish culture.

Patrick's thesis is concerned with the contemporary *Noahide* movement. Noahidism essentially posits the following: the laws given to Moses at Sinai are for the Jewish people to follow, but previously, seven laws were also given to Noah and Adam. These seven laws are binding upon all of humanity. The Jewish sages have been writing about these laws for more than a thousand years, but only in recent history have non-Jews begun to follow them. This movement is very small, but it is a worldwide phenomenon that is working intimately with various Orthodox communities. There are a growing number of online communities that connect sons of Noah in more than twenty-four countries in every continent. His work, in particular, is to figure out the current state of the movement and how Noahidism acts as a conduit for conversion to Orthodox Judaism, that is, is Noahidism a hindrance or a gateway to full conversion?

Patrick says, "Having too many interests means it's hard to get bored, but it's also tough to figure out how to orient yourself professionally." At the moment, he is interested in either becoming involved in local politics or pursuing a PhD in Psychology of Religion. He feels the Psychology of Religion is interesting because he feels it is the next stage in his understanding of religion as a human phenomenon, it is the next step in understanding how humans engage with the sacred.

## Thomas Just

Symons Fellow Thomas Just is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in International Relations and came across the Symons Fellowship program as he began conducting his dissertation research. He found it to be potentially very helpful in accomplishing his research goals and decided to apply.

As a Symons Fellow, he is expected to make progress on his research related to Jewish studies and meet weekly with Dr. Tudor Parfitt and the other Symons Fellows to discuss their findings. He is currently conducting research for his dissertation on the topic of "Contemporary State Responses to Anti-Semitism in Germany and Poland." In the summer of 2015, he also traveled to Turkey as part of a summer university program and began work on a research project with students from the Middle East on the messaging and branding of political extremist groups.

After completing his dissertation and graduating from FIU, Thomas plans to continue his research on the topics of antisemitism and political extremist groups in either academia or the policy realm.



Rabbi Yakov Cohen and Patrick Villalonga in Crown Heights, NY. The Rabbi gave Patrick a tour of Crown Heights, including the famous 770 Eastern Parkway Ohel. This was the home of the revered Lubavitcher Rebbe and is now the spiritual center of the Chabad Jewish community in New York.