

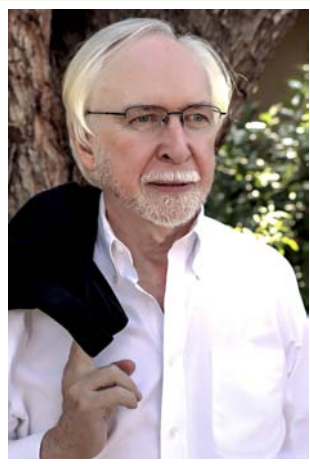
RELIGIOUS STUDIES AT UC IRVINE

WWW.HUMANITIES.UCI.EDU/RELIGIOUS_STUDIES

NEW LEADERSHIP FOR UCI RELIGIOUS STUDIES

A Message from the (Outgoing) Director

For four rewarding if often challenging academic years, it has been my privilege to serve as Director of UCI's small but thriving and often colorful Program in Religious Studies.



Why small? Simply because as a program rather than a department, Religious Studies at UCI has no permanent faculty of its own but relies for much of its core teaching on lecturers who, though often wonderfully talented and dedicated, must be reappointed annually—an anxious business in budget-troubled time and a circumstance that places a lid on our growth.

Why colorful? Because every year, faculty in existing departments find that their professional interests lead them to offer courses on one aspect or another of the endlessly complex phenomenon of religion. More than would be the case in a normal department, the Director of Religious Studies never knows quite what his curriculum will turn out to be. Life in our program can be exciting!

Why thriving? Because the combination of modest central requirements and a lively array of electives has

meant that, for its small size, UCI Religious Studies has regularly attracted a healthy complement of majors. The current crop is as strong as ever.

As my 75th birthday approaches and I retire from UCI, I am deeply pleased to be able to turn over the direction of the Program to my younger friend and colleague, the talented Prof. Susan Klein of the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, the author of three books and many learned articles, particularly on Japanese religion and literature. As I write, she is just back from delivering an invited lecture first at Yale, then at Harvard: "Spellbound by Blossoms: Political Allegory in Dream Vision Noh."

The past three years have been suspenseful ones for UCI Religious Studies. At various points along the way, it seemed likely that one, two, three, or even four new endowed chairs in Hindu, Jain, Sikh, and Buddhist Studies were in the offing. The news kept changing, but a transformative moment in the study of religion at UCI seemed potentially at hand. As things now stand, one endowment seems all but certain to be approved, this one for a chair in Jain Studies to be located in the Philosophy Department. Final confirmation is awaited from President Janet Napolitano, and a search may begin as early as Fall 2017.

Meanwhile, through the good offices of Prof. Klein, UCI has received a matching grant of \$300,000 from the American Council of Learned Societies with the Robert Ho Family Foundation to fund a chair in Buddhist Studies. The new position will be in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, but—functioning just as we expect the Jainism chair in Philosophy

to function—will redound to the strength of the Program in Religious Studies.

In our day, it sometimes seems that religion cannot be touched



anywhere without touching a nerve. In several senses of the word, the subject is more wired than ever. In Southern California, one need only mention the word sanctuary to sense a stirring in the room. (See Elizabeth Allen, p. 4, on the religious and historical background to our inherited concept of sanctuary.) As I step back from teaching to concentrate on writing during my remaining active years, it is gratifying to leave the UCI Program in Religious Studies in such good hands and at such a promising moment.

Jack Miles

*Distinguished Professor Emeritus of
English & Religious Studies;
Director, 2013-2017,
UCI Program in Religious Studies*

THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Obed Prayoga Purwoko

Obed Prayoga Purwoko, born and raised in Indonesia, is an economics major at UCI currently resident in Religious Studies House and active in its programming.

Growing up in a very religious Protestant family, I was never encouraged to explore other religions. My exposure to other religions was limited to the Islamic prayers, broadcasted from the local mosques five times a day – which is quite common in my country, Indonesia. As a religious minority, we Christians were always treated respectfully by our neighbors of different faith. Yet, it cannot be denied that religious tension has always been there. Most Indonesians consider religious affiliation as a part of identity as vital as one's ethnicity may be for an American. Converting to another religion, or even conveying an interest in another religion, is likely to be interpreted as feeling shameful about one's own identity and one's own community. I strongly conformed to this idea, until four years ago when I left Indonesia to study abroad in the United States.

During my first two years in the U.S., I studied at Foothill College in Northern California. As a 17-year-old teenager, living 10,000 miles away from home, I found comfort every time I met fellow international students. Without realizing it, I also began to consider the religious convictions of my new friends, starting from my atheistic Israeli housemate to my apathetic Swedish classmate. Quite soon, religion became a topic that fascinated me. It still does. Along with completing the



Religious Studies Theme House in Arroyo Vista

requirements to transfer to UCI, I also took two religious studies courses: one regarding Western religions (e.g. Judaism) and one regarding Eastern religions (e.g. Buddhism). In fact, I subsequently visited several worship places as well to discover more about the religions I was studying. I remembered asking a classmate – who is a Muslim from Kuwait – to visit a Jewish congregation with me, and she enthusiastically agreed to join me.

An obvious path for me, to continue exploring religion at UCI, was to make home the Religious Studies house in Arroyo Vista. During the two years I have lived here, I have had many meaningful discussions with other residents, all of whom brought unique perspectives shaped by the majors they study (philosophy, psychology, you name it) and occasionally, the foreign countries they are from. Additionally, there were frequent events which contributed greatly to my understanding of religions, such as a visit from an imam as well as a field trip to a

mosque. Besides that, I also took a course, “Economic Approaches to Religion,” which related religion to the field of study I pursue. As I have become busier with economics, I have had less time to study religions either through Religious Studies courses or in my free time. I have learned an important lesson, though, that studying religions is valuable to anyone, even to those who already have settled beliefs. We must not forget that religions often arouse wonder among their disciples – and they can also do the same for us if we are open to learn from them.

LIFE AND LEARNING AT UCI'S RELIGIOUS STUDIES HOUSE

Keith Nelson

The Religious Studies student residence we founded at UCI in the fall of 2014 has been and is a fascinating experiment, full of surprises, some disappointments, and lots of unexpected successes. And certainly many of our successes over the last three years have been due to the hard work and dedication of our three resident assistants (the “RAs”) – Krista Kernodle, Rachele Aguilera, and Lauren Espinoza. I should also acknowledge the generous contributions of my fellow faculty advisers, especially Gerry Larson, Rebecca Davis, and Nancy McLoughlin.

My original anticipation of “religious” activities in the House was that from time to time we would host a knowledgeable guest, speaking to us on a relevant topic, and that the sixteen student residents would respond with robust interest and attendance. However, despite the splendid efforts of a considerable number of UCI faculty and local religious practitioners (addressing a wide variety of subjects and issues), this turned out

to be somewhat too sanguine an expectation, and for a variety of reasons—the outside jobs many students hold, their need to schedule all their classes on certain days, their demanding commitments to other organizations, and even the impressive diversity of majors, interests, and faiths represented in the House.

Learning as we have progressed how to create an active and energetic community, we have discovered, for example, the wisdom of extending invitations to our events to all the neighboring Arroyo Vista residences. This can increase student engagement in any activity and make a world of difference in discussions and participation.

And there have been other useful discoveries as well. We have enlarged student involvement, for instance, by comparing and enjoying the foods of different faiths, by holding a poster-hanging party (mounting photo-posters of the world's leading religious structures), by having Thanksgiving dinner

together, by hosting celebrations at the end of the school year, by inviting faculty speakers to bring students from their own classes with them, and by arranging group visits to places of religious worship in Irvine.

Events are seldom simple and never the total success one would like to see, if for no other reason than that students' needs, ambitions, experience, and concerns are of such variety. There are students who have just transferred to Irvine and students who have been here for three or four years. There are believers and skeptics and anti-believers, the quiet ones and the very articulate. But most of our residents are persuaded that religion is interesting, important, and worth talking about. This is what makes Religious Studies House an experiment so clearly worth continuing and supporting.

Professor Emeritus of History Keith Nelson, a former director of UCI's Religious Studies Program, was faculty advisor for the Religious Studies House in Arroyo Vista for the past three years.

SANCTUARY THEN AND NOW

Elizabeth Allen

Sanctuary has been much in the news since Donald Trump's election. More and more cities and universities have declared themselves sanctuaries, and from Philadelphia to Phoenix, immigrants have moved into churches to avoid deportation. It is a very old idea that sacred space should not be violated: there are Biblical 'cities of refuge' and Greek practices of asylum in the sanctuaries of the gods. In the deep history of sanctuary seeking, flight to a holy place suspends violence and asserts the significance of human life. But paradoxically, sanctuary also admits political dramas into sacred space.

A decade ago, I became fascinated by the way that sanctuary relies on the boundary between secular life and sacred space, but at the same time crosses those boundaries. So I am writing a book about sanctuary seeking in medieval England, where the practice was codified and recorded as part of the common law. Any accused felon could seek a respite from punishment by fleeing to the nearest church; the fugitive could stay in sanctuary for up to 40 days, confess his crime to the king's representative (the coroner, not the priest), give up all his goods to the crown, and go into exile; he then walked barefoot and in a shift, like a pilgrim, to the nearest port. This was a systematic procedure from about 1180 to 1340 and roughly 500 people followed it every year.

Sanctuary is a legal mitigation, like pardon; it is a form of mercy, saving the lives of criminals who would otherwise be executed. Sometimes it provides time and space for negotiation, which means it relies on judgments according to circumstance and does not produce a set result. In the 1301 case of a boy who fled to a church because his brother died when he hit him in the head with a rock, the story that the neighborhood tells the coroner is that the brother actually died from a paralytic fit before the rock hit his head. This communal negotiation lets the sanctuary boy survive; it spares him execution and even keeps him at home with his parents. Sanctuary opens the door to new stories, new ways of understanding events. It suspends violence; it represents a locus of divinity and a call for mercy.

This use of the church shows, paradoxically, that sacred space is not

as pure as we might think: sanctuary welcomes criminals and debtors, kings and knights, merchants and immigrants. The space is therefore not as safe as we might think. In 1388, the Chief Justice of England, Robert Tresilian, was accused of treason, dragged out of sanctuary, and summarily executed. Bishops and archbishops protested the violation of the church and won assurances from Parliament and the King that sanctuary would in future be protected—Tresilian even becomes a sort of secular martyr.

My project makes me aware, then, how complex and dangerous the politics of sanctuary can be. Indeed, the idea of refuge in a sacred space can pose a fearsome challenge to authority, and that puts people in harm's way. In the American Civil Rights Movement, churches provided safe space for meetings that mixed devotion with political protest; but they often attracted violence as well—perhaps most notably in the Birmingham bombing of 1963. In the aftermath

of that and other church burnings, organizers used a vocabulary of martyrdom and sacrifice derived from Christian history. Paradoxically, the protected space of the church gained symbolic and legal power precisely from being violated.

Modern-day sanctuary cities open the door to narratives of community and resistance, and to new accounts of the socio-political role of local government. Sanctuary campuses, too, might suggest new accounts of the university's role as a safe space for intellectual work. A person living in fear of deportation cannot concentrate on learning. To declare sanctuary is not simply to flout the law, but to call attention to the injustice of current immigration laws. It is to call upon legal and religious tradition as a model of mitigation and mercy, in a form of nonviolent protest. The deep

history of sanctuary embraces criminals and foreigners, rich people and poor people, everyone in danger, as, first and foremost, human beings who need protection. To declare sanctuary is to acknowledge—and share—the risk of creating a safe haven.

Elizabeth Allen, Associate Professor of English at UC Irvine and a member of the Standing Committee of the Program in Religious Studies, is completing a book to be entitled *Uncertain Refuge: Ideas of Sanctuary in Medieval English Literature*.



The Execution of Robert Tresilian (1388), from Jean Froissart's *Chronique*

ALUMNI - STAY IN TOUCH

With ever-increasing modes of electronic communication, more options are available for alumni to stay up-to-date with the Religious Studies Program and the School of Humanities.

- Religious Studies home page: www.humanities.uci.edu/religious_studies
- School of Humanities home page: www.humanities.uci.edu
- To receive the Annual Newsletter from the Program in Religious Studies, please send your email address to kwashizu@uci.edu
- To receive a monthly e-newsletter from the School of Humanities please send a request to eestone@uci.edu