

Presidents' Day 2015

Dear Colleagues in the UCI Religious Studies Program:

At a quiet moment on a holiday weekend, I pause to write to you briefly on various developments in UCI's Religious Studies Program that may be of interest to you or to your students.

## **Students First**

### **1. Student Awards**

I invite you to nominate students for any of the following three awards that will be presented at the end of the current academic year through the generosity of the Friends of Religious Studies (including the Dean):

--The Early Achievement Award (\$300) to an outstanding junior majoring in Religious Studies.

--The Promise Award (\$300) for excellence by a student enrolled in a Religious Studies core course: 5A, 5B, 5C, or 110.

After years at the front of the classroom, professors can easily overlook student awards, but they loom large to the affected students at the time and can have surprisingly far-reaching effects. I invite you to do a little thoughtful scouting.

### **2. Student Housing (Religious Studies House)**

Please emphasize to your students that those interested in the Religious Studies House in 2015-2016 should indicate their interest now to RS House faculty advisor Prof. Emeritus Keith Nelson ([klnelson@uci.edu](mailto:klnelson@uci.edu)). Prof. Nelson will inform them late in March what dates in April the application window will be open for students *without* guaranteed housing. (For those *with* guaranteed housing, the deadline has passed.) N.B. Students interested in applying to the Religious Studies House should be warned not to rule themselves out by signing contracts this spring for housing elsewhere.

Thanks to the patient skill and good cheer of Prof. Nelson and of Krista Kernodle, resident advisor for the new Religious Studies theme house, the house is gradually developing a campus "personality" through informal faculty "fireside chats" (with refreshments) for interested students. During the current quarter, Prof. Cecelia Lynch spoke on January 15 on religion and humanitarianism. I spoke on February 12 on the history and practice of religious conversion. Prof. Roxanne Varzi will speak on March 3, 2015 on religion and the Middle East; to that chat, Culinary Arts House residents have been invited, and a Persian supper will be served. In April, students from Honors House will be invited (menu TBA).

Twice, other faculty have seen fit to drop in on one or another of these chats. As word-of-mouth momentum builds and turnout continues to grow, further faculty

involvement may be in the cards, later this year or next year. Religious Studies House is located at #1050 in the Arroyo Vista housing village.

### **Staffing of the Religious Studies Program**

The staff support baton for the Religious Studies Program has now been efficiently passed from Marc Kanda, MSO of the History Department to Rina Carvalho, the new MSO of the Classics Department. ([rmcarval@uci.edu](mailto:rmcarval@uci.edu); 824-7254). Marc has been steadily helpful in the transition, especially in seeing through to completion our proposal for a Graduate Emphasis in Religious Studies, now (we trust) nearing final approval by the Graduate Committee. Rina, who grew up in Western Australia, is graciously serving Jewish Studies in the same capacity as she serves Religious Studies, from her office in the Classics Department suite on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of Murray Krieger Hall. We anticipate that in the near future, a 50% Administrative Assistant will be appointed to work with Rina. The assistant's primary responsibilities will include scheduling classes, processing reimbursements, purchasing, planning events, coordinating course evaluations and maintaining unit websites. The incumbent will provide instructional support to faculty, lecturers and TAs and general administrative support to the department chair and program directors.

### **Major New Support for the Study of Indian Religions at UCI**

I am pleased to report that the study of Hinduism at UCI as well as of other religions and philosophies originating in India will be greatly strengthened in the years ahead through the public-spirited generosity of Irma and Ushakant Thakkar and the Dharma Civilization Foundation. UCI has accepted a gift of \$1.5 million, to supplement which the University will establish a matching fund of \$500,000, for the establishment of the "Thakkar Family – Dharma Civilization Foundation Presidential Chair in Vedic and Indic Civilization Studies."

The appointment of a senior scholar to this position will be preceded by the appointment, for two years, of a visiting scholar in "Indic Civilization and Hindu Studies." This visitor, the gift agreement stipulates, "will work closely with the lecturers and faculty affiliated with the Program in Religious Studies and other departments in the School of Humanities to develop courses relevant to the study of Vedic Dharma (Hinduism), other religions that originated in India, and Indic civilization and culture."

For both appointments, funds "will be administered in accordance with UCI Policies and Procedures on Endowed Chairs. The Donors will create their own advisory council of 3-5 members, who will be meaningfully informed of the process and progress of the chair holder recruitment; however, all final decisions will be made by the faculty and administrators involved in the search on the basis of highest academic excellence...."

As Director of the Program in Religious Studies, I know I speak for many in expressing our deep gratitude to Dr. and Mrs. Thakkar for their far-sighted generosity. And let me add a word of appreciation to Nicole Balsamo and Marijana Lekousis of Humanities Development and, not least, to Dean Georges van den Abbeele for their professionalism through an inherently delicate and complicated negotiation.

## ***The Norton Anthology of World Religions* now in paperback**

Last November, *The Norton Anthology of World Religions*, of which I am the general editor, was published in a boxed, two-volume hardcover edition. By the end of February, 2015, just days from now, it will become available in a six-volume paperback edition. Individual volumes—such as *The Norton Anthology of Islam*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe—president emerita of Bryn Mawr College, general editor of *The Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, and currently director of scholarly programs at the Library of Congress—will cost \$45. Any three volumes may be purchased for \$75. Each of these volumes, though compact and easily portable, is around 600 pages in length, with sufficient primary material for several different undergraduate courses. At full length, any one of these six paperbacks offers a foundational survey that may prove invaluable to graduate students in more fields than just religious studies itself.

Speaking personally, though the warm reception of the hardcover edition in *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times*, plus interviews by *Salon*, *Die Welt* (Berlin), and by Terry Gross on NPR (“Fresh Air”) has been gratifying, it is in the paperback edition that the work will succeed or fail in reaching its larger intended audience and achieving (or not) the semi-canonical status of its great predecessor and model, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. A double review expected shortly in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* may matter significantly to the work’s paperback reception. I will be interrupting my sabbatical quarter (such as it has been) to lecture on art and religious studies, with possible reference to art incorporated in the anthology, at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art on Wednesday, March 18, this as the museum’s annual Sneh Singh Lecture. Thereafter, if all goes well, an excursion up the coast to San Simeon.

## **Outside speakers**

The practice of the Program has been to schedule at least one speaker per quarter. In the Fall quarter, Dr. Urmila Patil, who has been teaching Religious Studies 5B, our survey of Asian religions, during the current quarter, gave a lecture on the place of Sanskrit, India’s classical language, in contemporary Indian culture.

On January 29th, with support from the Pacifica Institute, Dr. Zeki Saritoprak, associate professor of Islam at John Carroll University in Cleveland, lectured about his new book, *Islam’s Jesus*, to an unusually large double audience: Religious Studies students and friends plus International Studies students and friends.

Also in the current quarter, Religious Studies is again a co-sponsor, this time with Classics and Critical Theory for a February 19<sup>th</sup> lecture by Prof. Daniel Boyarin, Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture and Rhetoric at UC Berkeley, entitled “Josephus without Judaism.”

In the Spring quarter, on April 8, Fr. Patrick J. Ryan, S.J., McGinley Professor of Religion and Public Life at Fordham University, will lecture on “Interfaith Marriage: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives,” followed by both a Jewish and a Muslim response.

## **Looking Ahead to 2015-2016**

Over the past few weeks, departments and programs in the School of Humanities have been submitting their budgets and proposed curricula for the upcoming academic year. Religious Studies has already received several early (or permanent) cross-listing requests. Other courses that you know of may merit cross-listing. I draw the matter to your attention.

Finally, if the Graduate Emphasis in Religious Studies is approved in time, which appears likely, a new course, Religious Studies Graduate Colloquium 200, will be offered for the first time next year. A major thrust behind the creation of this course has been the perceived need for a forum where graduate students whose work, in whatever discipline, including social science or even natural science, involves religion may find one another and benefit from cross-fertilization and serendipity, not least in the discovery of other faculty resources on a campus that sometimes hides even its brighter lights under bushels. If you know of a possibly interested student, please send the name and a word of explanation to me at [milesj@uci.edu](mailto:milesj@uci.edu), so that I may be in touch as plans develop.

Respectfully submitted,

Jack Miles  
Distinguished Professor of English and Religious Studies  
Director, UCI Program in Religious Studies