

Monday, December 14, 2009

Religion and Society the focus of 2010 Liberal Arts Theme

By **Dave Groves**, staff writer

The 2009-2010 Celebrating the Liberal Arts Theme at Oakland University's College of Arts and Sciences actually was selected several years ago, but there was little chance that "Religion and Society" would become any less relevant today than it was then.

"It is a timeless theme. For centuries religion has been the inspiration for great art, literature, music, scientific and political debate, and for human motivation," said Beth Talbert, a special lecturer in Communications and Journalism and chair of the Arts and Sciences Religion and Society Theme Committee.

"It has shaped history, world economies, global conflict and governments. It touches every aspect of our lives and, therefore, is an especially powerful theme for the liberal arts to explore."

The College of Arts and Sciences is inviting not only students, faculty and staff to take part in theme-oriented events that continue through the winter 2010 semester, but the broader community as well. Already this year, activities have included three debates, several lectures and panel discussions, and a handful of theme-oriented trips and performances. Organizers say participation has been broad and the discussions robust.

"What we want to have is an exchange of ideas," said Henri Gooren, an assistant professor of anthropology and theme committee member. He added that this year's events are designed to foster enlightening dialogue rather than an exchange of propaganda, proselytizing or attacks on various faiths.

"These are very important issues for students; the knowledge is relevant to them and what they are doing with their lives," Gooren continued. "This is why I think inter-religious dialogue is so important. People will get a more realistic idea of what the similarities and differences are, rather than the way these things are being portrayed in the media."

Achmat Salie, director of Islamic Studies at Oakland, agreed. "I think there's a lot of superficial knowledge, particularly about Islam, and about other religions," he said.

"If we really bring the topic out into the open and have a civil discourse about it, then our students will have a much better understanding when they see these issues in the media. They will be more able to read between the lines of what they're seeing and hearing."

Salie thinks theme-related events also will help participants develop sensitivity toward people of other faiths and belief systems. This, in turn, he said, may help them broaden their worldview.

"This is a way to show that there's not only one way of interpreting events ... that no one person has a monopoly on the truth."

Charles Mabee, director of the Religious Studies Program at Oakland University, argues that promoting a deeper understanding of issues tied to religion also has important pragmatic value, particularly to students and others who've not explored religion in the academic sense.

"They live in a democratic society and are expected to make intelligent decisions on matters directly related to this topic, and yet we're not giving them the tools they need to do so," he said. "Really, that's an unreasonable expectation."

In the same sense, Mabee said he hopes this year's events will help broaden awareness of religious studies as a relevant and legitimate academic discipline.

"Religion is a giant, umbrella term that we stick a very wide spectrum of human behavior and belief under," he explained. "What I hope is that this inspires some curiosity about the crucial role religion plays in what it means to be a human being. If we want to understand the human being, we have to understand religion."

Upcoming events in the "Religion and Society" series include:

- Jan. 6 – Debate: "Clash of Civilizations? Islam and Christianity"
- Jan. 25 – "Comedy's Odd Couple: One Muslim. One Jew. One Stage."
- Feb. 3 – Debate: "Evolution and Religion"
- Feb. 4 – Robert Pennock Lecture: "Creationism vs. Evolution"
- March 3 – (When and Why) Is Religion Dangerous?
- March 13 – Margaret Farley Lecture
- March 31 – Religion, Gender, and Same-Sex Marriage
- April 14 – The Scientific Study of Religion: Possibility or Contradiction in Terms?

To learn more about upcoming events, visit the College of Arts and Sciences Web site at oakland.edu/religionandsociety.

SUMMARY

The 2009-2010 Celebrating the Liberal Arts Theme at Oakland University's College of Arts and Sciences will offer events and discussions about Religion and Society.

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