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UCSB Conference to Explore the Dynamics of Religious Pluralism

A group of scholars from around the world have gathered at UC Santa Barbara to study the religious diversity of the United States and to learn firsthand how people with widely differing beliefs can coexist. They will participate in a two-day conference exploring the dynamics of religious pluralism in their home countries.

The conference will take place on Thursday and Friday, July 14 and 15, and will give UCSB faculty members, students, and the broader Santa Barbara community a unique opportunity to learn about religious issues in other parts of the world. Free and open to the public, the conference will begin at 9 a.m. in the McCune Conference Room, 6020 Humanities and Social Sciences Building at UCSB.

The scholars, 18 in all, are taking part in a program titled "Study of the United States Institutes -- Religious Pluralism and Public Presence." Hosted by UCSB's Department of Religious Studies, the program is part of a broader U.S. Department of State initiative that seeks to promote a better understanding of the United States abroad by improving the quality of teaching and the curricula used in academic institutions overseas. The program at UCSB is one of several taking place this summer at universities around the country.

"The program seeks to present the United States, its people, and its culture in a better -- though not unreal -- way than many people around the world perceive us to be," said Wade Clark Roof, the J.F. Rowny Professor of Religion and Society at

UCSB and the program's co-academic director. "The participants are journalists, professors, and government workers who are in a position to have some public influence. This is our 10th year doing this, and we are hopeful that what we do makes a difference."

Among the countries represented in the program are Argentina, Armenia, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Egypt, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Jamaica, Lithuania, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland, Sudan, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, and Turkmenistan.

Kathleen Moore, professor of religious studies and the program's other co-academic director, said: "It's unfortunate, but religious intolerance and tensions between religious groups have increased around the world. Because of migration and globalization trends, religions are less confined to one particular region than before. This program has widened the discussion about the importance of dialogue."

The program, which began on June 19 and continues through July 31, features a lecture series by UCSB faculty on topics that include history of religion in the U.S., the demography and sociology of religion, religion and the media, and church/state issues. In addition, field trips to local congregations, along with study tours to Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C., are designed to help scholars understand the breadth of religious diversity in the U.S.

The institute is funded by the Study of the United States Branch of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). Participants are among over 40,000 individuals who take part in State Department exchange programs each year. For more than 60 years, ECA has funded and supported programs that seek to promote mutual understanding and respect between the people of the United States and the people of other countries.

More information about "Religious Pluralism & Public Presence" can be found at <http://www.religion.ucsb.edu/projects/summerinstitute>.

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