

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

April 24, 2008

[Andrea Estrada](#)

UCSB Conference Explores Contributions of Walter Capps to the Study of Religion

As a professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara for more than three decades, Walter Capps influenced thousands of students. Many went on to careers in teaching and research and carried his legacy into their own work. Several of these students will return to UCSB in May for a two-day conference titled "Exploring the Contributions of Walter Capps to the Study of Religion." They will be joined by a group of Capps's former faculty colleagues.

Presented by the Walter H. Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion and Public Life, the conference begins at 9 a.m. on Friday, May 9, and continues at 9 a.m. on Saturday, May 10, in the McCune Conference Room, 6020 Humanities and Social Sciences Building. It is one event in a yearlong series commemorating the 10th anniversary of Capps's death.

"This conference is both a remembrance and a celebration of Walter Capps's many contributions as scholar, teacher, public figure, and congressman," said Wade Clark Roof, a professor of religious studies and director of the Capps Center. "Walter believed that 'democracy begins in conversation,' and in that spirit we hope to carry forward the conversation about how we in the university and in the community -- citizens all --

can be enriched by what he taught us."

A popular professor who taught at UCSB for 33 years before being elected to the House of Representatives from California's 23rd Congressional District in 1996, Capps was an advocate of ardent but polite discourse who showed an uncommon commitment to civility and duty. He suffered a fatal heart attack in October of 1997, just 10 months after taking office. His widow, Lois, who continues to represent California's 23rd Congressional District, succeeded him in Congress.

Richard Hecht, professor of religious studies at UCSB and the conference organizer said of Capps: "Walter authored several books on important theological traditions in Europe in the 1960's, a series of important books on religion and politics in the 1980's and 90's, and books on religion and psychology, mysticism, and monasticism. All of these have become significant contributions to the study of religion in the 21st century."

Among Capps's former students attending the conference are David Chidester, chair of the Department of Comparative Religion at the University of Cape Town, South Africa; Edward Linenthal, a professor of history at Indiana University and editor of the *Journal of American History*; Tomoko Masuzawa, a professor of history and comparative literature at the University of Michigan; and Sarah McFarland Taylor, an associate professor of religion at Northwestern University, whose book *"Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology"* was published in April by Harvard University Press.

Other scholars participating in the conference include Wendy Wright, professor of religious studies at Creighton University; Robert Orsi, the Grace Craddock Nagle Chair in Catholic studies at Northwestern University; and Jonathan Z. Smith, the Robert O. Anderson Distinguished Service Professor of the Humanities at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Wright is co-author of a book on monasticism in Catholic Christianity, which relates directly to a course taught annually by Capps in which he and Wright took 50 students to monasteries in Southern California and Monterey County to experience the monastic life. Orsi, who was president of the American Academy of Religion in 2003-2004, will speak on Capps's contribution to the intellectual agenda of that organization, which is the largest professional society in the academic study of religion. Smith, who was hired by Capps as a lecturer in the religious studies department at UCSB in 1965, has become one of the most important voices in the study of religion both nationally and internationally.

In addition, Giles Gunn, a professor of English at UCSB and chair of the campus's global and international studies program, will discuss Capps's contributions to the study of religion and American literature as well as that of religion and global studies.

The conference is co-sponsored by the UCSB College of Letters and Science, Department of Religious Studies, Division of Humanities and Fine Arts, Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, and Office of the Chancellor.

For more information about the conference, call (805) 893-2317.

Related Links

[Capps Center](#)

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.