

In the wake of shattering world events,
Sooner students flock to a new academic program
that explores the world's religions.

Breaching the *Barriers*

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN
PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR



ALTHOUGH OKLAHOMA MAY BE THE GEOGRAPHIC BUCKLE ON THE BIBLE BELT, a new program at the University of Oklahoma is reaching beyond established borders to bring understanding and tolerance of major world religions to the heartland. Judging from the number of students who are making room for religious studies courses in their class schedules, it was an idea whose time had come.

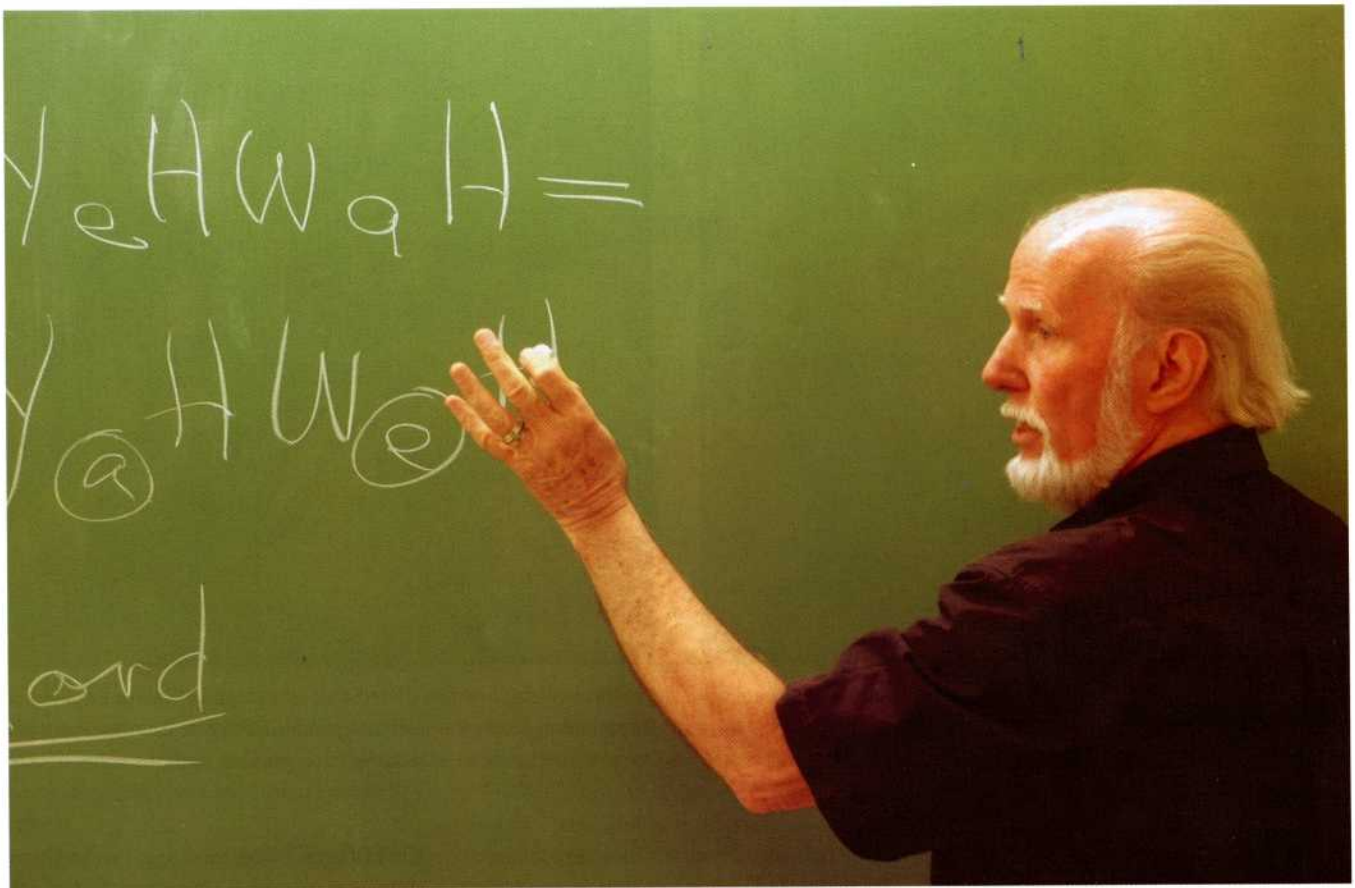
In just two semesters, the interdisciplinary Religious Studies Program in the College of Arts and Sciences can count more than 1,000 students enrolled in classes that qualify for the major—50 of them actually declaring the new degree as their major—while 30 faculty members from 13 departments have become associated with the program.

“We couldn’t have created a religious studies program five years ago,” says program director Allen Hertzke, who also holds a Presidential Professorship in political science where he has taught for 17 years. “But you know that saying, ‘If you build it, they will come.’ We just didn’t expect them to come so fast.”

Hertzke recalls that he and other faculty members had discussed the possibility of such a program for some time, but it took a world-altering event to bring the key players together.

After September 11, memos and notes started flying to Evans Hall, making inquiries into the feasibility of a religious studies program. President Boren responded by calling 15 faculty members into his office. “Is there enough interest?” he asked. “*We’re* interested,” was the reply. “Okay then,” said Boren. “How are we going to do it?”

“Right away we realized religious studies had to be interdisciplinary, not a separate department,” says Hertzke, one of the nation’s leading scholars of religion and politics. “And



Packing University classrooms once again is a familiar figure, master teacher Tom Boyd, an emeritus professor of philosophy who abandoned his retirement in New Mexico to participate in the new Religious Studies Program. "Tom is our Mr. Chips," says program director Allen Hertzke of Boyd, whose only condition of re-employment was that he be required only to teach.

we had to make it clear that the program encompassed all major religions." After meeting with a committee convened by Dean Paul Bell and fleshing out a curriculum, Hertzke began recruiting faculty from departments all over campus.

"This was my pitch," he recalls. "Every student will be engaged in a complex religious environment that is different from the one a generation ago. If you're in business, you'll be operating with Muslims, Hindus, Catholics and Jews. If you're a teacher, you'll be dealing with a wide range of religious practices. And if you're a journalist, you cannot do your job without sensitivity to the religious community. There is not a profession today that can afford to be tone-deaf when it comes to religion."

The response was overwhelming. From art to sociology, professors responded to the call. While Hertzke garnered support on the home front, President Boren and his wife, Molly Shi Boren, began making reconnaissance trips into the sleepy mountain town of Red River,

New Mexico, where old OU family friends Tom and Barbara Boyd had retreated to the peace and quiet of the Sangre de Cristos.

Tom, professor of philosophy emeritus,

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and Barbara, a Presbyterian minister, together had been a powerhouse of religious and philosophical resources in the Norman community for more than two decades.

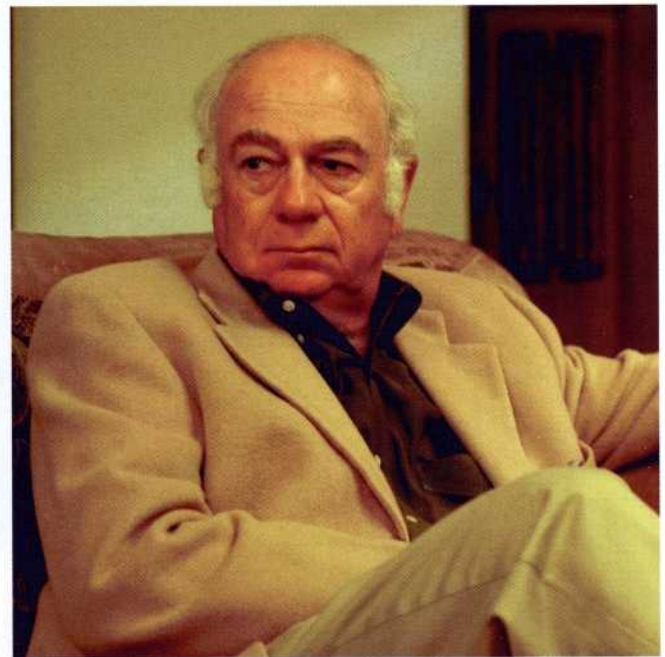
The couple met in the late '70s, when Barbara enrolled in Tom's popular "intro" class and quickly became a philosophy junkie.

With his silver hair and intensely blue eyes, Tom Boyd resembles a 21st century Gandalf, fresh from Lothlorien. During his 28 years in the OU philosophy department, he became legendary among students for his mind-expanding lectures and animated teaching style. He retired from OU in 1997 and moved with Barbara to Colorado, where she had accepted a clergy position outside Denver. But after 25 years of virtual non-stop university and church work, "we were pretty hammered," says Tom of their decision to take some time off "to recharge." After a year in the mountains, Barbara was ready to make a commitment to a new church. But higher powers, one of those being Boren, had a different plan in mind.

"David would visit us in Red River and share his vision of this new program," says Barbara. "We had great discussions, but frankly, we were not intending to be



Norman Stillman sees his students in "Judaism: A Religious History" and "Medieval Jewish History" as open, interested and very respectful in trying to understand a broader perspective.



Alan Velie, who teaches "The Bible as Literature" in the English department, views the interdisciplinary Religious Studies Program as an opportunity to interact with colleagues campus wide.

part of it. By August I assumed I would be off pastoring. But David, in his own inimitable way, convinced us to come."

While Tom was intrigued with joining a religious studies program, he did not relish the idea of getting "bogged down in administrative duties." Boren, something of a sorcerer himself, knew the magic words that would make the charismatic professor of philosophy reappear on the OU campus. "I only want you to teach," Boren told him. Barbara would become the program's outreach director, Tom would return to the classroom. "Barbara is our eyes and ears," says Hertzke, "Tom, our Mr. Chips."

Every Friday, Saturday and Sunday since last August, Barbara has been on the stump, spreading the word of OU's new program from Buddhist temples to Baha'i dinners. "My job is to find what's out there for our students and what's going on in here for the community," she says.

Due to the great demand for religious studies courses, Barbara also teaches in addition to her duties as outreach director and faculty advisor. "In the program's first semester, I taught 'Comparative Christianity,' introducing the bold idea that Christianity is not just the denomination you practice," says Barbara with a smile. "Students are slowly learning to step out-

side the box and realize those outside their particular faith experience are not doomed."

Tom has found that even staying within the students' established belief system can be risky business. "You bring in 18-year-olds who are really committed to a religious practice, and they often have no idea how rich and complex the history of their own religion is," says Tom. "So when I get evangelical students in '20th Century Christian Thought,' it blows their minds!"

Now, Hertzke says, most of the students in the program come from Christian backgrounds, but the program does not reflect a Christian bias. "We heavily stress different religious traditions," he explains. "It's built into our structure. You cannot graduate with a degree in religious studies without learning about Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and indigenous faiths."

More than 30 classes currently are included in the curriculum, spanning such diverse topics as Native American traditions, Byzantine art, medieval Jewish history and Islamic culture.

"Josh Landis, who teaches 'History of Islam,' is having to turn them away," says Hertzke. "Since 9/11, there is a much greater interest in understanding the Mus-

lim faith. While I used to say in lectures that 'one cannot understand American politics without understanding American religion,' now it is clear that one cannot understand American religion or politics without comprehending global religious developments. This view helps underpin my work in the new religious studies program."

Hertzke is constantly seeking courses that will help students better comprehend the intertwining relationships between the sacred and the secular. A new course to be offered in the fall by Jill Irvine, who specializes in Yugoslavian studies, will explore how religion can drive political agendas in "Religion, Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict." Thanks to the program's multidisciplinary vision, students can sample internationally known lecturers from Kingfisher College chair Linda Zagzebski to Schusterman/Josey chair Norman Stillman.

"Allen's interest in religion as a factor in American and geopolitics gives a certain texture to the program that fits in with other concerns that give a relevance beyond the history of religion," says Stillman, who specializes in Jewish and Islamic history and culture. "It also shows how religious beliefs play out in contemporary life."

"My students are open, interested and very respectful," he adds. "They have a genuine intellectual curiosity, and they are trying to understand a broader perspective. For example, I assigned a book report and, naturally, it had to be about Judaism. I had a student who told me he could not finish the book because it conflicted with his beliefs as a Christian. I told him, 'I am not asking you to believe it; I am not selling you a product. I am asking you to understand it.' One of the things we do with this program is to globalize a student's perspective. And I think that's a good thing."

Alan Velie, an international lecturer and a Presidential Professor, has taught "Bible as Literature" in the English department for the past 10 years. He says he welcomes religious studies students to his class. "They understand when they take the course that this is not a Sunday school and that a lot of their beliefs probably will be challenged," he says. "That's why they take it."

Another important aspect, says Velie, is the benefit professors derive from participating in a well-structured, interdisciplinary program. "The program is very valuable to professors because you get to meet on a regular basis with people working in the same general area that you just wouldn't meet otherwise," he explains. "It is really profitable for scholars to be able to talk with other scholars. You think it would be enough to be on the same campus, but it just

Outreach activities for the new Religious Studies Program are the province of Barbara Boyd, left, here meeting for lunch with graduate assistant Dara Fogel, center, and Jennifer Scott, vice president of the newly formed Religious Studies Student Association.

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isn't. A program like this serves a purpose not only for the students, but also for the professors. It really helps them with their research."

Alan Atkinson, a visiting professor who taught "Religious Arts of Asia," says he was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm and excitement of the students. "They are so gung-ho," he says. "Here are students who come into the program with a fairly narrow

view of religion, and they have the courage to take on the whole magilla. They are asking for intellectual bread that will provide a comprehensive and comparative understanding of world views. And if you can't find that in a university, then where?"

Hertzke and the Boyds similarly are impressed by the depth of student involvement in the program. Students wasted no time in creating a Religious Studies Student Association and already have submitted a charter for University approval. Without a meeting place of their own while space in Dale Hall Tower was being renovated for the program, the students often wound up at the Boyds', talking, arguing, planning, until late into the night. "It's a wonderful, dynamic group," says Barbara. "They conflict, but they do it joyfully. Their energy is amazing. They have all kinds of projects in the works."

Stacy Shelton, an Oklahoma Supreme Court mediator and former TV news anchorwoman, is president of the organization. She says she returned to college solely because of the Religious Studies Program. "I always thought I was alone in my desire to study religions," she says.



With renovation of their Dale Hall Tower office space complete, Religious Studies faculty members await the arrival of the furniture. From left are Linda Zagzebski, philosophy; program director Allen Hertzke, political science; and Michael Alexander, history and Judaic Studies.



“Now it’s obvious there was a great demand. The club was formed to facilitate tolerance between all religions and belief systems. Sometimes it’s hard to accept there are other ways. The Boyds are two people who can facilitate that process.”

With the welcome addition in January of Lee Green as administrative assistant, Hertzke and the Boyds have been able to catch their breath. “I’ve never worked so hard as I have in the past seven months,” says Tom. “Teaching these courses is hard; getting courses up and running is hard. But what I have learned is that I am not cut out to be a couch potato. I will do this for the rest of my life. It’s inside me, and I can’t ignore it.”

In just its first year, the program has established roots and is looking toward branching out. Long-term goals include the creation of a religious studies institute, which would host week-long symposiums, think tanks and internationally known speakers.

“We can envision something we might call the Heartland Institute for Religious Studies to strengthen our academic program and link it to the community and the world,” Hertzke says. “This is something we all believe in. It’s a challenge, but we are having a ball.”

Religious Studies Faculty

Michael Alexander, *Judaic Studies & History*

Michael Anderson, *Religious Studies*

Rozmeri Basic, *Art*

Barbara Boyd, *Religious Studies*

Tom Boyd, *Religious Studies*

Ryan Brown, *Psychology*

Tom Burns, *Sociology*

Susan Caldwell, *Art*

Peter Cahn, *Anthropology*

Jeanette Davidson, *African & African-American Studies*

Ralph Doty, *Classics*

James Goldsmith, *History*

Allen Hertzke, *Political Science*

Sam Huskey, *Classics*

Drew Kersten, *Law*

Clara Kidwell, *Native American Studies*

Joshua Landis, *History*

Steven Livesey, *History of Science*

Jamil Ragep, *History of Science*

Larry Rossow, *Educational Leadership*

Michael Scaperlanda, *Law*

Wilbur Scott, *Sociology*

Shmuel Shepkaru, *Judaic Studies & History*

Daniel Snell, *History*

Ken Stephenson, *Music*

Norman Stillman, *Judaic Studies & History*

Ann-Marie Syzmanski, *Political Science*

Zev Trachtenberg, *Philosophy*

James Treat, *Honors College*

Alan Velie, *English*

Stephen Weldon, *History of Science*

Linda Zagzebski, *Philosophy*