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I INSTITUTE FOR THE
S STUDY OF
R RELIGION AND
C CULTURE

Inaugural Event for International Project on Religion, Secularism, and Political Belonging Oct 25th 7-9pm in the Tucson/Catalina rooms of the University Student Union

On August 5, 2013, Dr. Leerom Medovoi arrived at the University of Arizona as the new Head of the [Department of English](#). With him came a \$425,000 dollar grant from the Mellon Foundation and the backing of the [Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes](#) (CHCI) to set up an international research project on Religion, Secularism, and Political Belonging ([RelSec](#)). Over forty scholars from four continents, and from a dozen disciplines, will be participating in the planned research, with the University of Arizona as its hub.

The project launches on October 25, 2013, from 7-9pm in the Tucson/Catalina rooms of the University Student Union, when RelSec will bring internationally distinguished scholars Janet Jakobsen and Mayfair Yang to UA for an Inaugural Conversation. The animating question of the forum will be: what is the relationship of religion and secularism to political belonging today, and how do we engage that question in ways that are not just comparative, but genuinely translocal?

Janet Jakobsen is the director of the [Barnard Center for Research on Women](#) at Barnard College, where she also teaches courses on feminist theory, theorizing women's activism, and religion, gender, and violence. Mayfair Yang splits time teaching in the [Department of Religious Studies](#) and the [Department of East Asian Languages and Cultural Studies](#) at the University of California at Santa Barbara. As a cultural anthropologist, she is interested in the intertwined processes of religiosity, secularization, and state operations in modernity, postcolonial, and Communist conditions.

The RelSec project is a three year collaborative effort which brings together scholars from around the world in a joint study of how political life is changing worldwide in response to the forces of religion and secularism. Partnering with the [Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture](#) and the [Confluencer](#) for Creative Inquiry here at UA are the the [Portland Center for Public Humanities](#) at Portland State University, the [Minerva Humanities Center](#) at Tel Aviv University, the [Centre for the Humanities at Utrecht University](#), and the [Research Institute for the Humanities](#) at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The project now has a [website](#) at the University of Arizona (relsec.arizona.edu) that will serve as an on-line forum for the scholarly exchanges. Dr. Lee Medovoi explains, "what makes this initiative so innovative is its collaborative approach to humanities research on a global level and across multiple disciplines."

"The RelSec research project provides an exciting opportunity for us to bring together scholars at the University of Arizona with scholars from around the world to explore interrelations that lie at the very heart of our research interests," said Dr. Peter Foley, Director of the [Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture](#) (ISRC) here at UA. "The ISRC was set up to facilitate this very kind of discussion on the

political and other secular contexts for religion, and the bifurcation of political and religious contexts of philosophies and politics as they appear in my own research too.”

One of only two grants awarded to CHCI, RelSec’s project is ambitious and wide-ranging, responding to research questions that engage with contemporary and globally significant issues related to the contemporary resurgence of religiously-driven discourses, social practices and forms of cultural organization in political arenas, civil society and the public sphere. The urgency of the project grows from distinct situations on many continents, including fraught and complex recent world-historical events, the core values of modernity, our theories and genealogies of the political, reconsiderations of the sacred and profane, as well as cultural studies of immigration, fundamentalism, gender and sexuality; Dr. Medovoi said, “Our colleagues in the Netherlands, Israel, and China will necessarily approach these situations very differently. The dialogue we create will be essential to understanding the big picture.” Dr. Karen Seat, Director of the [Religious Studies Program](#) at UA and a coordinator of the project, said “The arrival of Dr. Medovoi, and the Mellon Grant he brings with him couldn't be more timely for the University. The project illuminates the importance of research conducted by scholars in the humanities and social sciences and their relevance for the University's—‘Never Settle’—strategic plan.”

RelSec group is carefully constructed to encourage directed and focused scholarly dialogue and collaboration across geographical, cultural, and even linguistic divides. To that end, the RelSec program is specifically designed to facilitate translational intellectual work among the centers’ research teams. “RelSec represents the interdisciplinary field of Religious Studies at its very best, as it draws on a wide spectrum of research methods to engage with pressing contemporary issues in the region and across cultures,” Dr. Seat said. Scholars at the University of Arizona and the other project sites will produce papers and organize public events that will bring Humanities studies not only to other disciplines in the university setting but to the general public by addressing issues of wide interest to local and global communities. The benefits for UA, Dr. Foley said, are far-reaching: “Housing this project in the ISRC and working with Prof. Medovoi allow us to bring home to Tucson what many of us who work internationally are used to sharing with audiences worldwide.”

The October 25th Inaugural Event will be the first of a series of invited lectures, forum-style conversations, and academic partnerships which will highlight the RelSec Project over its span. The Project Team here at UA is highly diverse, with core participation from the Departments of [English](#), [Religious Studies](#), [Philosophy](#), [East Asian Studies](#), [Judaic Studies](#), [Gender and Women’s Studies](#), [French](#), [Middle Eastern and North African Studies](#), and [Anthropology](#) as well as many others.

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