

U F RELIGION

NEWSLETTER



NEWS

- Alumnus **Dr. Venu Mehta** received a prestigious grant from the Templeton Religion Trust. See the News section on Page 2 for more information.
- Alumnus **Dr. Caleb Simmons** was recently promoted to Vice Provost at the University of Arizona (UA) Online. See the News section on Page 3 for more information.

EVENTS

- Religion Chair **Dr. Mario Poceski** was invited by the UF School of Architecture to give a 2-hour lecture on **September 16th** for a graduate course, ARC6793: Seeing Eurasia, on the topic of “*Chan/Zen Buddhism: History, Literature, Doctrine, & Practice.*”



Dr. Poceski speaking to graduate architecture students

NEWS

The [Claremont School of Theology \(CST\)](#) recently announced that UF Religion alumnus **Dr. Venu Mehta** and tenured CST professor Dr. Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan have secured a prestigious grant from the Templeton Religion Trust for their [project on forgiveness](#). This grant builds directly upon their work over the past 5 years through the [Annual Forgiveness Symposium and Conference](#) (Jain, Christian, and Interreligious) and the course “Forgiveness in Jain and Christian Religious Traditions,” which Dr. Mehta has had the honor to co-teach with Dr. Kuan.

“These initiatives have laid the foundation for the conceptual idea of this new project, and I am grateful to see them recognized and supported at such a global level,” said Mehta.

Dr. Mehta and Dr. Kuan will serve as [Project Directors](#) as they are both deeply committed to advancing the study and practice of forgiveness as a path toward peace, justice, and pluralism.



Dr. Venu Mehta, UF Religion PhD alum

NEWS

UF Religion alumnus **Dr. Caleb Simmons** recently received a promotion to [Vice Provost](#) at the [University of Arizona Online](#).

Dr. Simmons received his Ph.D. in Religion at the University of Florida in 2014, where he focused on Asian Religions with a specialization in Hindu Traditions. With the help of Professors **Vasudha Narayanan** and **Travis Smith**, his research explored the archives and temples of South India – focusing on how devotion to the goddess Chamundeshwai shaped the culture and politics of the Mysore region. His time as a UF graduate student also gave him the opportunity to participate in the [Provost Initiative](#) grant, which helped him gain the knowledge to further advance the University of Arizona’s online program.



Dr. Caleb Simmons

Post-graduation, Dr. Simmons began an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Arizona, teaching courses on Hinduism, yoga, mythology, and the study of religion. He published two monographs, *Devotional Sovereignty: Kingship and Religion in India* (Oxford University Press, 2020) and *Singing the Goddess into Place* (SUNY Press, 2022). Simmons’s monographs helped him reach tenure where he was eventually promoted to Associate Professor and then full Professor.

As time passed, Simmons found himself drawn to leadership roles that have a bigger impact on students’ lives. He became Faculty Director of Interdisciplinary Studies and now is serving as Vice Provost of Arizona Online where he gets to help shape the future of post-traditional education of the online campus with more than 10,000 fully online students.

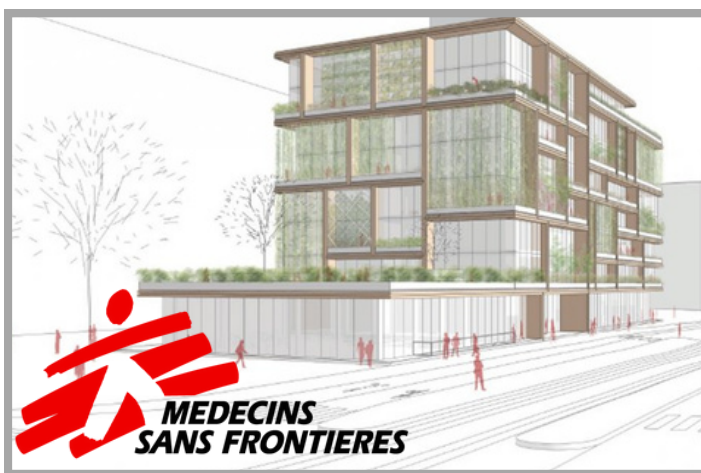
[“This work keeps me rooted in the values of access and opportunity that first inspired me to pursue higher education,”](#) said Simmons. [“If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that education changes lives. Not just in the classroom, but far beyond it. Whether I’m writing a hymns to a goddess or helping create a pathway for a first-generation student to earn their degree, I’m reminded every day why I do this work: learning opens doors, sparks curiosity, and gives people the power to reimagine what’s possible.”](#)

PRESENTATIONS

- On **September 25th**, **Dr. Terje Ostebo** participated on an expert panel to brief officials at **Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Operational Center of Geneva (OCG)** on the political and security situation in Ethiopia. The briefing was done in regards to MSF's plans to resume humanitarian work in Ethiopia. In 2021, the MSF had scaled down their activities in Ethiopia after the passing of three of their aid workers during the Tigray War. Now, the organization is trying to re-enhance their presence and has put together a panel to brief them about the security and political situation. Dr. Ostebo's portion of the panel focused on the Oromia region (the largest regional state in Ethiopia), where he spoke of the ongoing insurgencies, human rights violations, and the broader security situation.



Dr. Terje Ostebo



Geneva Operational Center, Médecins Sans Frontières in Switzerland

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (English: "**Doctors Without Borders**") is an independent, international humanitarian organization that delivers medical care to people impacted by conflict, epidemics, natural disasters, or lack of access to healthcare. Operational Centre of Geneva (OCG) is one of Médecins Sans Frontières's (MSF) five main operational centers that coordinate and support MSF's medical and humanitarian operations in various countries.

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If you have any information that you would like featured in the newsletter, please email **Ashley Tisher (a.tisher@ufl.edu)**.

We look forward to hearing from you!