

## Vanderbilt study examines relationship between politics, religion

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How do religious ideas shape politics? Or, do political ideas influence religious ones?

A group of researchers at Vanderbilt University postulates that Americans are no longer adamant about separating church and state. Instead, they are increasingly merging religious and political beliefs and practices.

The Vanderbilt Project on Religion and Politics asks "how Americans are learning to construct and transmit to the next generation a coherent, cohesive world view that accommodates deep-seated contradictions among their religious and political commitments."

"We seek to learn about how local cultural and religious forces propel citizens toward certain political decisions and

actions and, conversely, how local cultural and political forces induce certain religious belief and practice."

To test the project's hypothesis, Vanderbilt selected five communities across the state and assigned two student researchers to each community. Their task is to talk to as many people from as many different backgrounds as possible.

Michael "Mick" Nelson and Nichole Phillips arrived in Dyer County on May 18. Nelson, who has lived in Australia, Canada and the United States, is a doctoral student studying community research and action. Phillips, who hails from New York City, is a doctoral student studying religion and science.

Religion and politics are, Nelson said, "the two topics you don't talk about at dinner parties." And, the topics are rarely linked in research, either, he said.

So, the students are searching for people who are willing to discuss these topics.

"Whoever will engage us in conversation - really that's the

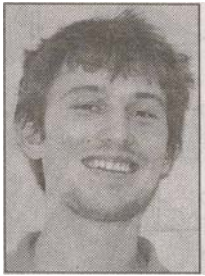
bottom line," Phillips said. She encouraged people to think of "politics" not just as a governing body but also in terms of social issues that impact the welfare of a group.

Nelson nodded. "It's not just an argument about issues. It's more about decision-making," he said.

The students were sent to Dyersburg with three basic starting questions. They were to ask about the war in Iraq, immigration and gay marriage three topics that dominate the national news. But, they've also been asking local residents what their biggest concerns may be.

Nichols said he believes the study will help people understand how wedge issues play out in a small community like Dyersburg. "Is there a discrepancy between what is said to be the major issues and what the people of Dyer County believe are the major issues?" he asked.

In Dyersburg, Phillips said, people are concerned about jobs, the excellence of education and crime. Those inter



SG photo/Kathy Krone  
**Nelson**

viewed so far also comment on the love they have for Dyersburg's small-town feeling.

While the Information could

be quite useful to politicians

seeking election, Phillips and Nelson said that isn't the point of the study. In fact, by the time the results are released, no one will even know that Dyersburg was one of the communities studied. The students said everyone who responds to the study is being granted anonymity. Pseudonyms will be used for the communities studied and anyone quoted in the study.

The study is expected to take three years, with researchers using each year's results to refine the next year's work. Vanderbilt's Center for the



SG photo/Kathy Krone  
**Phillips**

Study of Religion and Culture sponsors the study; which also includes faculty members from philosophy; political science,

psychology, sociology, anthropology; legal studies, religious studies, natural sciences, medicine and education. The project is giving students an opportunity to do field research, will include a series of seminars and could lead to a new college course called "Community; Faith and Politics."

The researchers selected five communities for the study: one in West Tennessee, two in Middle Tennessee and two in East Tennessee.

Dyersburg was chosen partly upon the recommendation of a faculty member's wife, who had traveled through here and

thought Dyer County was an interesting place.

"Another really standout thing," Nelson said, "it's quite clear on the city Web site that Dyersburg is a city that embraces politics and religion."

Nelson referred to a letter from Dyersburg Mayor Bill Revel on the city government's home page at [www.dyersburgtn.gov](http://www.dyersburgtn.gov). It says: "The many churches, clubs and other organizations are well organized to meet your religious and social requirements and to offer you an opportunity to share your talents with us. Dyersburg is composed of friendly, God-fearing and patriotic citizens living in a community atmosphere and enjoying 'big city' conveniences. From minister and merchant to Mayor and Aldermen, we all stand ready to help you enjoy being one of us."

Dyer County also was chosen for a third reason. "It's known for its agribusiness. Not just small farmers, but agribusiness," Phillips said.

Nelson agreed. "Dyersburg and Dyer county are unique, but

they are also representative of what's happening in rural West Tennessee," he said. "It has a small-town atmosphere, but (it also has strong) agribusiness."

"And, it's experiencing a growth spurt," Phillips added.

When the research project is completed, the results will be released to anyone who wishes to see them.

Phillips said she hopes the project will result in a publication describing how people feel about the mixture of politics and religion in Tennessee.

Ultimately; she said she hopes the project will "increase awareness of how different people think. We go around with our stereotypes and issues. Hopefully; we can break down the lines that divide us."

*For more information about the study, visit the Web site: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csrfc/politics.html>.*

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