

Religion & Culture

New center tackles thorny issues from many perspectives

Imagine what could happen if a group of distinguished scholars from diverse disciplines joined forces to tackle the pressing issues of religion and terror. What new information and practical solutions to current global problems might emerge? That's just what Professors Volney Gay and Douglas Knight are hoping will result from the newly established Center for the Study of Religion and Culture.

"We're living in a period when the interplay between religion and culture is as dicey as it's ever been," Knight says. "Religion itself can form our highest values and ideas, but it can also occasion our most tenacious conflicts. Religion and culture are embedded in each other, at times a comforting thought and other times a frightening prospect. We need to understand better how these two domains intersect and plan to do so through the center."

Knight and Gay can envision a table where a historian of ancient China, a specialist in 19th century British novels, a criminologist, a biblical scholar, an anthropologist who studies an Amazonian tribe, an ethicist, a researcher in human development and education, an archaeologist and art historian of classical Greece, a specialist in existentialism, and a psychologist gather for discussion.

"That's 10 scholars who have probably never sat in the same room with each other," Knight says. "Can they talk together? What will happen if they keep the conversation going for three years? Now set them loose on one of the following topics: religion and terror; religion and slavery; religion, art and aesthetics; religion and the sexual self; religion and the meaning of life; religion and American civil life; the cultural matrices of Christianity; or Islamic humanism."

"Each project of the center will have an academic intensity about it and a focus on core issues

which will attract thinking people," Gay says. "We want dissent. We want more debate, not less. We want differences, not just of skin color, but of thinking and articulation."

About three years ago, Gay, chair of the Department of Religious Studies in the College of Arts and Science, joined with Divinity School Professor Knight in formulating ideas about establishing the new interdisciplinary center. They consulted with numerous faculty colleagues across the campus, wrote and rewrote proposals, went through a rigorous process of committee reviews, and ultimately received approval this past January. The center has received \$3 million from the University's Academic Venture Capital Fund for five years. Additional funds and an endowment will need to be raised in order for the center to be sustained after 2008.

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state of research in the areas of religion and culture and, in the process, to promote the scholarship of Vanderbilt faculty and graduate students. In addition to scholars from the Divinity School and the A&S Department of Religious Studies — the two schools which provide most of the faculty for the masters and Ph.D. students in the Graduate Department of Religion (GDR) — participation is expected by faculty from such diverse fields as sociology, anthropology, history, political science, economics, philosophy, psychology, literature, law and education. The center may also draw scholars from the Medical Center and the Blair School of Music. Already, some 55 faculty members have been identified as possible participants.

Plans call for five to six research teams to run concurrently, each for up to three years. Each team typically will have from eight to 10 facul-

ty members, drawn from a wide range of fields of study. The groups will bring in visiting lecturers, sponsor at least one international conference on their topic, and publish a major book on their subject. New co-taught courses are expected to emerge as byproducts of the interactions.

Graduate students will benefit immediately from center funding of summer research projects, stipend support and dissertation research advancement. Masters and Ph.D. students who join a project group will have a ready-made opportunity for research and dissertation topics.

One of the first graduate students to benefit from the new center will be Jan Holton, a GDR student whose doctoral dissertation will center on post-traumatic shock in refugee populations

— specifically "The Lost Boys of Sudan." The Lost Boys, as they were labeled by the media, were about 30,000 young males from ages 5 to 12 who lost their parents and were forced to flee the civil war in Sudan. Unaccompanied by adults and often lacking food or water, they made the long trek to Ethiopia. About half of them died along the way or in refugee camps. They were subsequently taken to the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. Some were later allowed to immigrate to the United States. Holton has worked extensively with a group of the Lost Boys who were sent to Nashville. To complete her research, she needs to travel to the Kakuma Camp and interview refugees there, many of whose names have been provided by the Lost Boys in Nashville.

"The new Center for the Study of Religion and Culture is financially supporting my research



which applies the rich resources of theology, anthropology and psychology as lenses through which to examine the overwhelming problem of traumatic stress among the 'lost boys' population," says Holton. "This research not only applies the principles of the center in its multidisciplinary approach, but also addresses a serious problem of global proportions — the mental health of the world's 22 million refugees and displaced persons.

"The center provides a forum for interdisciplinary dialogue that challenges graduate students, and all scholars, to think outside of the familiar framework of their particular learned discipline and, instead, to pull and stretch at the safe boundaries," she continues. "The new center will also provide other graduate students coming to Vanderbilt with funding so they can complete their degrees and their research much more quickly."

There will also be stipends available for top undergraduate students who might participate in some of the research projects. The Nashville community and clergy will have the opportunity to benefit from public forums, conferences and presentations offered by the center. It is likely that the center will become a resource for the media and the public on certain issues.

It will also benefit faculty recruitment, as Gay has already discovered. "This has been a hard time to recruit good faculty, even at Vanderbilt," he says. "Frankly, we have used the center as a lure for hires. It will help both the Divinity School and the Department of Religious Studies attract and retain the very best faculty from across the country. We have a chance to elevate two to four Vanderbilt departments in significant ways to a rank that would put them in the same category as those of Harvard, Duke, Chicago, Princeton and Emory — all of whom have similar but slightly different centers."

— Lew Harris

