

IN AN AREA OF THE COUNTRY COMMONLY KNOWN AS THE "BUCKLE OF THE BIBLE BELT," ONE MIGHT NOT SUSPECT MUCH RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY ALONG THE I-65 CORRIDOR BETWEEN LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY, AND NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE.

"I moved here in 1990," said Larry Snyder, a Western Kentucky University associate professor of Religious Studies. "I like to tell people that this was the most homogeneous region of the country that I had ever lived. I had students tell me that they had never met a Catholic before coming to campus. Of course, that has changed significantly over the past five years here in Bowling Green and Warren County."

Snyder and Tom Russell, visiting assistant professor of Religious Studies, have received an affiliate grant from the Pluralism Project sponsored by Harvard University. The Pluralism Project began in 1991 at Harvard as an attempt to study and document the growing religious diversity in the United States over the last 30 years.

In 1997, the Pluralism Project published a CD-ROM, titled *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, which released the project's findings to that point. Also that year, the Pluralism Project received a grant from the Ford Foundation, enabling the research to be extended to affiliate groups throughout the country.

Western initially obtained the grant through the efforts of Russell, who in 1999 represented Western at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in Boston. The Pluralism Project was holding a conference at the same time in Boston, and Russell approached them about the possibility of Western obtaining an affiliate grant.

Faith to Faith

IN THE BIBLE BELT

BY LUKE E. HARLOW



Saman Shrutpragya Shhitpragya, a Jain monk from India, spoke in Tom Russell's class about the Jainist monastic tradition. He said that he travels to "spread the message of peace and non-violence" to universities all over the world. Shhitpragya demonstrated chanting and meditation, and spoke about how to stay unstressed and in a positive state of mind.

"They were more than excited that we appeared," Russell said. "They needed someone to work on this area of the country. Diana Eck, the head of the project, had written an article on the Hindu temple in Nashville, so she was excited about the whole concept."

The project will focus on five major cities along the I-65 corridor: Nashville and Clarksville, Tennessee, as well as Bowling Green, Elizabethtown, and Louisville, Kentucky. The region will be studied over the course of three proposed stages, to be completed over the span of three years.

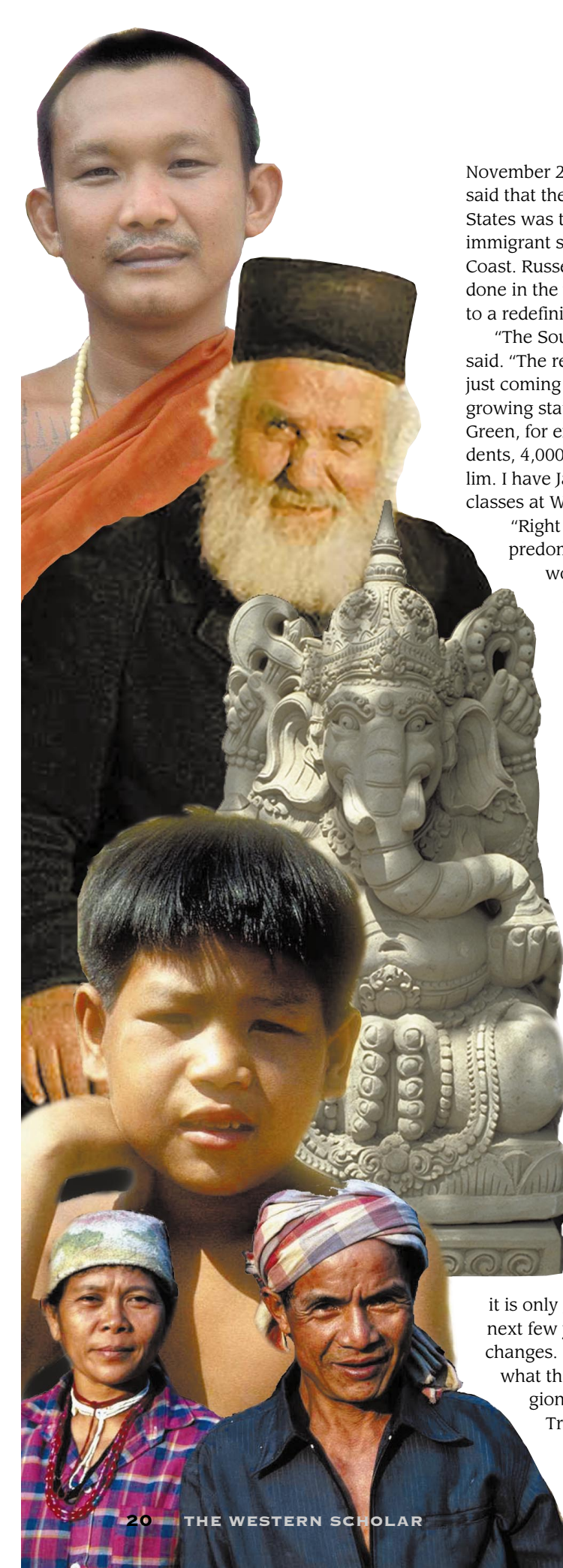
There has been significant immigration to the region, making it necessary to spend the first phase finding what groups are located along the corridor. The second stage will attempt to study the relationships between the new religious groups and

the groups that are already there. Finally, the project will step back and organize the information gathered in the first two stages in order to come to some conclusions.

"As we have had Bosnians, Laotians, Cambodians, and Hispanics moving into the region, there has been a greater awareness of cultural and religious diversity here," Snyder said. "People want to know who these people are, why they're here, what they believe, and why they look different. They want to know why it is that these people don't want to join their church when they get here."

Russell has been overseeing the first year of the project, which is examining Nashville, Clarksville, and Bowling Green. Snyder will head the second year of the project beginning this fall focusing on Elizabethtown and Louisville.

Russell asserted that the findings might be interesting to some. He pointed to an article that appeared in



November 2000 in *USA Today*, which said that the Southeastern United States was the second highest area of immigrant settling, behind the West Coast. Russell argued that the research done in the project ought to contribute to a redefining of the term "Bible Belt."

"The South is changing," Russell said. "The results from the census are just coming out and there are rapidly growing statistical changes. Bowling Green, for example, has 50,000 residents, 4,000 of which claim to be Muslim. I have Jains and Sikhs in my classes at Western.

"Right now, Bible Belt culture is predominant, but you have to wonder what it will be like in 20 years. Even now Christianity in Nashville is more than Protestant, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox. There are Armenians and Coptics as well."

In the broader sense, Snyder argued, the project has some bearing on every American. As the population continues to diversify, notions of a Judeo-Christian American heritage must be reexamined.

"We live in a democratic state which celebrates religious diversity as part of our creed," Snyder said. "At some level—it may sound a bit hokey—there is something about good citizenship that requires some basic knowledge of who your neighbors are and how to get along with them.

"Religious diversity is not going to go away, it is only going to increase over the next few years as the population changes. I am very curious as to what that means for American religion. We still have 'In God We Trust' on our coinage. Well,

whose God? Everyone assumes that it is the Judeo-Christian God, but what does that mean for someone who is Muslim or Native American or Buddhist? What do we do with that real, hands-on issue of pluralism and diversity, which is part of who we are?"

Student involvement has been an important aspect of the project. Russell offered a 400-level seminar course in the Fall 2000 semester where 10 students worked on one of two teams, centering their research in either Nashville or Bowling Green. In addition to traditional seminar-style course requirements, such as readings and papers, students were to locate, identify, and classify various religious communities, then interview members of the groups and document their findings. Events and people were photographed, and at the end of the semester, each team presented a 25-page written report of its findings.

"I took the course because I am interested in pluralism and how Asian religions adapt in a predominantly Christian environment," senior Tommy Holt said. "We studied Sikh, Bahai, Buddhist groups, and a number of others."

Holt said that their findings were consistent with scholarship on Buddhism in America, which has held that that immigrant and non-immigrant practitioners of Buddhism tend not to mix in practice. In Nashville, while they maintain positive and friendly interaction, Holt said, the difference in worldview is too great for immigrants and non-immigrants to relate to one another.

Amanda Hayes, who graduated in December, and Holt led the Nashville team. Senior Nathaniel Walker headed the group in Bowling Green. The three had the opportunity to speak on their research at the American Academy of Religion's 2000 annual meeting, which was held in Nashville in November.

"That was a remarkable thing," Russell said. "Eight thousand to



"Religious diversity is not going to go away, it is only going to increase over the next few years as the population changes."

—Larry Snyder, associate professor of Religious Studies

10,000 people attend that meeting, only a handful of undergraduates go, and even fewer undergraduates speak. It provided an opportunity for undergraduates to speak in an academic forum and they did what good students do: they gave facts and figures and made tentative conclusions. That is borderline scholarship."

In the fall 2001, Snyder will be offering a course similar to Russell's looking at Elizabethtown and Louisville.

"This project is unique in some ways because it does provide the opportunity for an intersection between faculty research and student involvement," Snyder said. "A lot of research is done in the privacy of one's study or the library, then published in a professional journal or a book. If you get to talk about it in class, then great. But this has a real opportunity for students to be involved in the fundamental work of the project."

There is enormous potential for growth in the Religious Studies program, according to Snyder. The affiliate grant from Harvard is the first ever awarded to the program, and new opportunities are just beginning to develop. Snyder hopes the project will bring more visibility, as well as provide new direction for the Religious Studies faculty.

"We are more than just 'holding our own on the third floor of Cherry,'" Snyder said. "We are trying to make our presence felt in the community and the region by talking about the study of religion and why it is important. We are talking quite publicly about the place that religion plays in contemporary society, how important it has been in our history, and how it can affect issues of citizenship, neighborliness, and policy."

The Religious Studies program is working toward the eventual establishment of a Kentucky Institute for the Study of Religion, to be housed in Cherry Hall. Once under way, the institute would attempt to coordinate studies of religion in this region, and promote public education about the history and role of religion in the Commonwealth and American culture more broadly.

