The Search for God at Vanderbilt

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—Hamad Al-Rugaib, senior

The Wall at Rand is a reassuring chaos of the latest campus announcements—a weathered smear of posters for lectures, pizza joints, war protests, concerts—the life of the mind, the life of the senses, the life of Vanderbilt, a barometric shorthand of student preoccupations, circa 2003.

It’s not all politics, music and food.

The Wall’s crowded kiosk pluralism yields another 21st-century pursuit as well—a renewed stress on news of the spirit.
(origin of their morals and ethics?" announced the Socratic Club: ‘Can atheists justify or explain the presence of religious innovation contending for space in the heart of the Bible belt. Vanderbilt: A southern school steeped in fraternity and football and a busy day by day. But its real aim, Barker says, is to glorify Jesus Christ by building Christian camaraderie and encouraging moral accountability through small cell groups that meet weekly. ‘We’d have parties, but there is a code of conduct,’ he says. Members would not be forbidden from drinking, but BUC events would be alcohol-free. The tone of the national organization is evangelical Christian, but it’s open to a wide range of believers. Doctrines center around basic Christian creeds. Barker admits that obtaining or building an actual house for a Christian fraternity at Vanderbilt wouldn’t be plausible, for now. ‘We realize that a house isn’t a realistic thing to have,’ he says. ‘Any way you look at it, it’s not anti-Greek. I don’t want to draw people away from that. We just want to create an organization of men that will deepen their walk in faith.’

The fraternity, Beta Upsilon Chi (BUC), was started in 1985 in Texas, where most of its 10 university chapters are concentrated. At Sarratt in February, 30 undergraduate males committed to joining a prospective Vanderbilt chapter. BUC (also called “Brothers Under Christ”) would have some traditional fraternity elements—rushing, pledging, secret rituals, semi-formals, perhaps a house on campus some day. But its real aim, Barker says, is to glorify Jesus Christ by building Christian camaraderie and encouraging moral accountability through small cell groups that meet weekly.

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ern character, the Ivy League character. Here I can be comfortable as a southerner and a Christian meeting someone who is Jewish from New England or someone who is agnus- dic from California."

The recent hopes for a Christian fraternity at Vanderbilt might be seen as a sign of the strength of evangelical Protestant energies on campus. There are about a dozen organizations on that side of the Christian spectrum, and they attract hundreds of students weekly to study groups and worship.

Probably the biggest regular worship gathering on campus draws about 200 students to Branscomb every Sunday night. It’s sponsored by the Reformed University Fellowship, a ministry of the conservative-minded Presbyterian Church of America.

“I’m trying to encourage folks to engage the culture from a vantage point,” says the Rev. Brian Habib, the RUF campus chaplain. “I’m admittedly not neutral.”

He counsels with two or three students a day and stays in regular contact with dozens of others. His assessment of student spirituality: Lots of résumé-ready Vanderbilt undergrads inevitably feel a void in life if they neglect the divine dimension. Habib’s task is to give them biblical answers to life at a time when a predominant moral ideology and style, customarily called postmodernism, an attitude of skeptical irony and relativism, is exhaust- ing itself, he says.

“It seems that postmodernism has over- played its hand. When you just squat at every- thing and nuance everything and explain everything away—well, after a while human beings can’t live that way.”

According to the latest annual freshman survey, 56.9 percent of the incoming class in fall 2002 claimed a Protestant identity. Despite a survey, 56.9 percent of the incoming class in 2002, 52.8 percent of the latest entering freshman class and represent the single largest religious denomina- tional group on campus. The trend might be explained as the mainstreaming of Catholics into non-Catholic university life, and the mainstreaming of Vanderbilt into national life.

“As Vanderbilt has moved from a southern regional school to a national university, the pro- portion of students is starting to reflect the spread of 18–22-year-olds nationally,” says Associate Catholic Chaplain Jim McKenzie.

Some estimates put the number of Van- derbilt Catholic students at closer to 30 percent. “I’m amazed at how spiritual they are, how they have a relationship with God that they’re willing to talk about,” says McKenzie, refer- ring to the Catholic students he works with.

Perhaps it’s the swing of the pendulum, he suggests. Today’s students often appear to be more pious, more service-oriented than the older Gen-X demographic, or more theo- logically conservative than their parents. Also, the shock of 9/11 terrorism cast a new shadow of sobriety and fear over religious life, a new search for the image of God in a time of suffering.

“Students, like everyone else in the coun- try, started to look around and think hard- er about their relationship with God, what that relationship should be not only in times of prosperity but in times of disaster,” says McKenzie.

Freshman Victoria Stevens, in any case, was active in her parish back in high school in the Fort Lauderdale, Fla., area before she came to Vanderbilt last fall. Already she is president of the Vanderbilt Catholic Student community. With her music background (mezzo-soprano), she helped spice up the 10 p.m. Mass and the 7 p.m. Mass at Benton Chapel with con- temporary sounds (guitars, drums and singers). Her attitude: “Live your faith out loud, and don’t be afraid to go for it,” she says. “We live in the Vanderbilt bubble, but there’s still a lot of religious support if you are looking for it. Being in a pluralistic setting, you scru- tinate your faith in ways that don’t happen in high school.”

There are three Masses per week at Ben- ton Chapel (attendance at each is 70–100 peo- ple). On Wednesday nights, Stevens and 15 other committed Catholic students meet for dinner and a program of discussion, a gath- ering called Nourishment of Soul and Body.

Recently, they met at their designated Wednesday night gathering place for pizza and evening prayer. Where they meet might sound incongruous, but the Catholic kids like it just fine: The Ben Schuman Cen- ter for Jewish Life.

The Schuman Center opened in August 2002 at the corner of Vanderbilt Place and 25th Avenue South, with notable fanfare (Van- derbilt graduate Ben Schuman, class of 1938, donated $1 million to launch the $2.2 mil- lion construction). The Schuman Center has quickly become a cross-cultural reference point on campus.

“People are coming to the center more and more,” says Ali Al-Rugaib, a senior from Saudi Ara- bia and an officer in the Muslim Student Asso- ciation. “We need to communicate better,” he said. “We’re competing with other organizations, other entertainments and festivals. I’d like to see more programs that talk about the various religions. We should share experiences.”

The Muslim students’ meeting place for coming float (theme: the Ten Command- ments). Miraculously or not, it won first place.

“Who would ever have thought the Bap- tist and the Jewish students would worktogeth- er on a float?” Bais exclaims.

Hannah Bloom, a New Jersey native, turned down other universities with sizable Jewish enrollments to come to Vanderbilt because she wanted to be part of a re-energized Jew- ish student community. “We’re a sparking new organization and can go in any direc- tion we want,” she says.

Her goals for campus Jewish life: height- ened religious observance among Jewish stu- dents, more inter-community campus discussion, and more programs so the Schu- man Center is constantly in use.

Being surrounded by so many Christians at Vanderbilt led Bloom to deepen her con- nection with Judaism, she says. “Coming down here has made me appreciate more the pos- sibilities of Judaism in my life and want to share them with others. A lot of people here identify themselves as Christian, and that influences me to learn more deeply what I believe, my own religious principles.”

Other religious minorities round out Van- derbilt’s student spiritual spectrum: Buddhist (.59 percent), Eastern Orthodox (.76 per- cent), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (4 percent), United Church of Christ (1.6 percent) and Muslim (.39 percent), among others, according to the freshman survey’s religious preference data.

There are also small numbers of Christ- ian traditions such as Quaker (.25 percent) and Seventh-Day Adventist (.34 percent), and non-Christian traditions, too — Hindus, Wich- cans, Baha’is, atheists.

“We’re not trying to preach, but we are trying to present a clear picture of Islam,” says Hamad Al-Rugai, a senior from Saudi Ara- bia and an officer in the Muslim Student Asso- ciation. That means sponsoring Islamic information programs and panels and cultural celebrations that dispel media miscon- ceptions of the religion, especially after the terrorism of 2001.

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I looked forward to coming to campus to interact with the other side and test arguments for the faith that I learned in earlier years. I knew non-Christians before. But here, they’ll argue and defend their positions. It helps me understand the sincerity of their beliefs.”

— Philip Albonetti, sophomore

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The Muslim students’ meeting place for
In all sorts of weather, MarLu Scott, a Divinity School student, has stood on the streets of Nashville to protest capital punishment and, most recently, war with Iraq, alongside kindred souls. She also helps organize the eclectic lineage of Wednesday worship services at the school’s All Faith Chapel, a staging ground for crosscurrents of the spirit and prayers for the healing of the world—a simple room of gray neutral colors adaptable to a Methodist service one week, or Catholic, Lutheran or Cherokee the next.

Both activities, outdoors and indoors, connect her to Divinity School values that have helped her clarify her vocation—the religious conviction to speak out for justice, and the consoling miracle of community.

"This is what the Divinity School gives me: Even when it gets crazy out there, we have a faith and community that under girds us," says Scott, a United Methodist who graduates this spring, on track to be an ordained minister. "Activism stirs us to make the world better. And it comes out of a sense of ritual, a sense of sacrifice. It means giving something of yourself that you cannot express in another way."

The Divinity School is a mystery to some on campus—a graduate school where they study scripture and the wide world of faith. Is it a monastic Bible school? Or an academy of sainthood? Not exactly. It’s a training ground for ministers and others who have a sense of religious calling. It’s a multi-layered place of serious theological study, passionate debate, critical inquiry, and diverse attitudes about God, politics, sacred texts and congregational life.

Inside, religious tradition and pluralism co-exist, jostle, mutually probe—the way they do in the 21st-century global world outside.

"Our job is to help religious leaders prepare for lives of commitment and devotion—in a world where not everyone shares those same commitments," says Divinity School Dean James Hudnut-Beumler.

The Divinity School is ranked with the nation’s top graduate schools of theological education, and it’s one of the few, along with the divinity schools at Harvard, Yale and Chicago, that have no official denominational sponsorship. (The school was started as Vanderbilt’s Biblical Department in 1875 and was under the auspices of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, until university and Methodistists dissolved ties in 1914. The Divinity School since has been under the direction of the Vanderbilt Board of Trust. It was named the Divinity School in 1956.)

"An advantage to being ecumenical is that we live in an increasingly non-denominational world—that is, a majority of people don’t draw sustenance from a single religious tradition now, and so at an ecumenical divinity school, we’re allowed and even encouraged by our divinity to draw on the many sources of wisdom and spiritual practice," explains Hudnut-Beumler. "What we have here is an incredible range of students and viewpoints."

Denominationally untethered as it is, the school’s statement of commitments declares its active opposition to racism, sexism and homophobia. This framework of progressivism, forged in the heart of the Bible belt, gives the school a reputation for liberalism, at least locally.

"Some people might believe these values of diversity are lofty and academic, but we see our preparations as extraordinarily real- istic for the real world," says Chris Sanders, director of development and alumni relations for the Divinity School. "More than 50 percent of our students are women, and more than 50 percent of people attending worship, whatever the tradition, are women. We have a significant number of African Americans here. The issue of race isn’t going away in the world. Look at the scandal that brought Trent Lott down. And gay men and lesbians are winning rights in city after city in this nation, and that issue isn’t going away, either."

About 200 students are enrolled in the Divinity School (for the master of divinity degree or master of theological studies degree). Another 100 or so are studying for a Ph.D. or master of arts degree in the Graduate Department of Religion.

Graduates work as ministers or chaplains, or in nonprofit ministries, social services or law, or in teaching and academic research.

The single largest group of divinity students is United Methodist, but 25 denominations are represented. Recently endowed faculty chairs in Jewish studies and Catholic studies, as well as Methodist tradition, commit the school to a future of built-in diversity. (There’s also a Disciples of Christ concentration.)

As a Unitarian-Universalist, student Jason Shelton, director of the Divinity School choir, could have pursued a Unitarian seminary—his ministerial future. "Being here makes you realize there are always perspectives different from yours," he says. "It makes me more cautious about speaking in broad sweeping terms about what ‘everyone’ believes."

When he graduates this spring, he’ll officially have his master of divinity diploma. But, he says, what he perhaps has truly mastered is asking questions. "We are constantly engaged in asking questions," he says. "We are prepared here to ask better questions."