

Dr. Timothy H. Wadkins takes  
a holistic approach to  
revitalizing the Canisius Center  
for the Global Study of Religion



# Religion and the Road Less Traveled

*It's early June in Cuernavaca, Mexico and **Dr. Timothy H. Wadkins**, associate professor of religious studies, along with eight Canisius College students, set out on an afternoon tour.*

Their first stop: the new Fabricon factory, an American-owned company that makes clothes for such high-end designers as Tommy Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren and Liz Claiborne. Wadkins recalls a warehouse filled with sewing machines "as far as the eye could see." He remembers the charismatic

American CEO who talked about the two weeks vacation afforded each employee, the company baseball team and the new high school Fabricon was helping to build adjacent to the factory. Following the tour, the group visited Cuernavaca's town market where students were given a list of groceries to

buy – groceries that would modestly feed a family of five for one day. It was a simple exercise but one that, Wadkins says, included a valuable lesson for students.

"When they added up how much was spent on groceries – nearly \$16, the students were shocked to learn that the cost of living there is five-times the \$3.20 daily wage of the factory employees they met earlier in the day."

*It may seem more like a lesson in economics than Christianity, but Wadkins believes experiences like this teach students real-life lessons about people, politics and religious cultures around the world.*

“You can’t just educate with ideas alone, particularly when you are talking about cultures and the ways in which people practice their faith and come to think about things. You need to bring the culture to them or get people on the road and take them places where they can really see what these ideas mean in the embodiment of the culture.”

This philosophy serves as the premise for the **Canisius Center for the Global Study of Religion (CCGSR)**, which Wadkins now oversees. The center is not new to Canisius. In fact, it was originally established in 1969 with funds donated by the late educator and broadcasting evangelist Dr. Clinton H. Churchill. For more than 30 years, the Religious Studies Center, as it was then called, led a relatively quiet existence, sponsoring the occasional speaker or religious conference. But the center underwent somewhat of a rebirth in 2000 when Wadkins was appointed director and unveiled plans to make Canisius a premier educational and resource center for the global study of religion.

“Buffalo was a very compartmentalized community. Canisius was doing things. Niagara was doing things. Daemen was doing things. Various churches were doing things. But very little ministry was being done cooperatively,” says Wadkins. “Since Canisius is really the center for religious education in the area and the largest Catholic undergraduate institution, I wanted to establish a religious studies center that would promote interest in the study and practice of religion among students, college faculty and the wider ecumenical community.”

To do this, Wadkins enlisted the assistance of Dr. Paula M. McNutt, interim dean of Arts & Sciences and Rev. Benjamin Fiore, S.J., chair of the Religious Studies Department. Together, the trio identified three essential programs that would serve as the foundation for a revitalized center.

“Ecumenical issues are of great interest to Dr. Wadkins,” states McNutt. “So, it was



Sandra Dedo '03 visits with children who live at the Smokey Mountain Garbage Dump in Manila, the Phillipines.

important to him that Canisius bring prominent religious studies thinkers to campus to share their ideas and to provide students with opportunities to travel and experience other cultures.”

The establishment of a formal immersion course, such as the one in Cuernavaca, was among Wadkins’ first priorities as the new director of the center. The academic course would emphasize

“education for life” through an intense, month-long trip in a Third World location, and enable students to experience another culture; learn how Christianity is manifest in that culture; and witness how that influences the ways in which Christianity

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is formed in a particular community. In developing the program, however, Wadkins quickly learned that such trips can cost



Dr. Tim Wadkins and his group visit the famous silver town of Taxco, Mexico. Pictured l-r (front): Dr. Thomas Reber (associate professor of English), Dr. Wadkins, Stacy Choczynski '04; (back) Meghan Szykowski '04, Christina Petruzzo '04, Tony Maggiotto '04, Michael Bayerl '03, Christopher Heim '03, Zachary Schneider '04, Peter Koch '04.

upwards of \$4,000 per person – money not readily available to students nor the center. So, he applied for and was awarded an Oishei Teaching Professorship grant, which he now uses to help defray the expense of the annual immersion course. The grant has allowed Canisius students to travel to Mexico, where in addition to touring factories like Fabricon and shopping at the town market, they participated in traditional Pentecostal religious services.

“It was like going to a religious rock concert,” explains Mike Bayerl '03, a political science and urban studies major who made the trip to Cuernavaca last spring. “The people are very vocal and energetic. They physically dance in the aisles. They sing. They laugh. They cry. And they fall to the ground and pray because they truly believe at that moment God has come down to join them. It was something like I’ve never seen before.”

Students also traveled to the holy mountain of Banahaw (Ban’-ah-haw) in the Philippines, where religious cults, including Christian, Tribal and Pagan, live and await the return of Christ. And they witnessed the extreme poverty at the Smokey Mountain garbage dumps, along the outskirts of Manila, where hundreds of thousands of people live off the refuse.

“We learned about poverty, from the economic and political perspective, in class,” says Kim Simon '04, an education major who visited the garbage dumps. “But it’s completely different to actually see the people who live in those environments. You begin to think about your own situation at home and how you can help improve theirs. It was a very spiritually fulfilling trip.”

Wadkins adds, “In trying to educate students holistically, you can talk in the classroom until you are blue in the face about ideas. But when you take students someplace like Mexico or the Philippines, they experience, first-hand, a very different concept. That can open the door to spiritual inquiry and engage students in some very meaningful discussions about God and values.”

To further enhance that spiritual dialogue among students and faculty, Wadkins initiated what he calls a “scholarly exchange,” the second program developed under the umbrella of the Center for Global Study of Religion. Throughout the academic year, students are invited to join faculty in various scholarly forums involving

religious studies professors. The program offers an engaging setting for the exchange of religious studies ideas, theories and philosophies.

“The idea behind these mini conferences is to provide opportunities for religious studies



Conversations In  
**Christ & Culture**  
 2003 Lecture Series

“Theology, Human Nature and Artificial Intelligence”

**Anne Forest,**  
 St. Bonaventure University  
 Thursday, March 6 / 7:30 p.m.  
 Grupp Fireside Lounge

“Can There Be a Just War?”

**Martin Cook,**  
 U.S. Army War College  
**David Robinson,**  
 Pax Christi USA  
 Tuesday, April 1 / 7:30 p.m.  
 Montante Cultural Center

scholars to share and discuss their research projects with colleagues,” explains Wadkins. “At the same time, they expose students to people who are doing exciting things in their various fields of religion.”

Although these scholarly exchanges are limited in attendance to the Canisius community, the small and informal setting of the colloquia is attracting the attention of religious studies scholars from Western New York and beyond. Most recently, Dr. Alice Bach, of Case Western Reserve in Cleveland, visited Canisius to present a film she produced on feminism. Dr. Pam Thimmes, from the University of Dayton, spoke about ecology and the Bible. Professor Shawn Kelly from Daemen College lectured on Biblical scholars and the Holocaust. Rev. Martin X. Moleski, S.J., associate professor of religious studies at Canisius, also presented research from his book, *Personal Catholicism*.

“At these scholarly forums, we learn things that we haven’t studied ourselves and we learn them from good teachers,” notes Moleski. “Faculty members can ask the hardest questions but one of the highest accolades is to have a faculty member in your field say he respects your work.”

With two of his three new programs underway, Wadkins turned to his third and most ambitious objective in reviving the Center for the Global Study of Religion. He wanted to further the Jesuit pastoral tradition of educating men and women for others by engaging the local ecumenical community in a spiritual dialogue. Specifically, Wadkins envisioned bringing prominent Christian thinkers to Canisius to speak about the issues that unite and divide communities.

“We wanted to create a lecture series that would expose the Christian community to internationally-known speakers, foster conversations about the relationship between Christianity and culture, and promote cooperation and understanding across religious, gender and ethnic lines,” explains Wadkins.

To determine if the idea would even interest the area’s ecumenical community, Wadkins hosted a luncheon for 40 pastors and representatives of various religious institutions. Their enthusiastic reaction resulted in the formation of the “Conversations in Christ and Culture” lecture series which, through combined support from the Network of Religious Communities, the college and wider ecumenical community, was introduced in spring 2001.

“Some of the speakers brought in for the lecture series have pretty hefty fees,” notes Rev. James Pollard, co-pastor of



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Williamsville United Methodist Church and member of the lecture series steering committee. “But because Tim engaged the ecumenical community, we’ve been able to organize a highly successful lecture series that none of the congregations would have been able to do individually.”

In just two years, “Conversations in Christ and Culture” has welcomed a variety of renowned Christian thinkers to Canisius, including Korean theologian Dr. Chung Hyun Kyung; Dr. Horace Clarence Boyer, a leading authority on African American gospel music; and Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a leading expert on Islamic science and spirituality.

“This lecture series has made a tremendous contribution to the life of our region,” adds Rev. Pollard. “It’s enabled people to come together to focus on issues that have religious dimension, in a setting for very thoughtful engagement.”

Despite this success, however, Wadkins will tell you his efforts in establishing a premier

educational and resource center for the global study of religion are just beginning. His task now is to build on the programs already created for the center. He notes that as the popularity of the “Conversations in Christ and Culture” lecture series continues to grow, so too will the number of speakers. Just this fall, the Office of Academic Affairs awarded Wadkins new funding, which he will use to establish a new lecture series, entitled the St. Peter Canisius Lecture in Catholic Thought.

“This new lecture series will further enrich our Jesuit-Catholic identity, in ways that correspond to Pope John Paul’s *Ex corde Ecclesiae*,” states Dr. Herbert J. Nelson, vice president for academic affairs. “The document states that it’s essential for Catholic colleges to engage in ecumenical and interfaith conversations to promote the study, discussion and thought of Catholic intellectual tradition, values and ethical issues, and that of other great religious traditions.”

This spring, Wadkins will have also

successfully merged the academic study of global religion with that of the practice. In a collaborative effort with Campus Ministry, Wadkins’ students will spend 12 days participating in “Project Mexico,” the college’s social justice program, before departing on an immersion course in Cuemavaca. The incorporation of the service learning element into the immersion course, says Wadkins, reflects the Jesuit mission.

“You can’t easily divorce the academic study of religion from the practice of religion and those social justice programs that accompany it, particularly when our mission is to educate the whole person,” says Wadkins. “This new effort emphasizes religion both as a discipline and potentially a practice for students.”

And in an effort to extend the life of the immersion course, Wadkins plans to reapply for a Teaching Professorship in spring 2003. If successful, he will take students to El Salvador, Namibia, Africa; and the Philippines to study the economics, politics and religious cultures of those areas. He is also working to establish a similar interdisciplinary immersion program for faculty.

“Dr. Wadkins has already done quite a lot for the center with very little,” says Nelson, who notes that Wadkins has been working from a limited budget, since becoming director. “His ideas for the future are even more ambitious.”

No doubt. Wadkins envisions a center that will one day provide scholarships to students interested in the study of religion; offer endowed professorships for prominent religious studies scholars; furnish faculty funding for the continued study of marginalized cultures; and house a study center for religious research.

For now though, Wadkins’ challenge is to find new ways in which to fund his vision. He may learn a few lessons in economics along the way, but for the students, faculty and ecumenical communities that ultimately benefit from his efforts, the most valuable lesson learned will be in Christianity.

“We’ve created a Center for the Global Study of Religion that is unique, in that its focus is on both the study and practice of religion. Its programs build important bridges between the college and community, and its emphasis is on religious research, religious teaching and the practice of religion,” states Wadkins. “The end result of something like this is that we are educating people on how to be better citizens of the world.” ■