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If you are Boris Dvinsky '06 and it is Saturday morning you leave campus and walk down the hill to Beth Tephilah Synagogue and then lunch at Rabbi Morrison's house. If you are Jenny Burton '06 and it is late Sunday afternoon, you are at the Rensselaer Union taking part in a discussion on the New Testament. If you are Ferheen Shaikh '06 and it is midday on Thursday, even if you are taking an exam, you duck out of class for five minutes to perform salah. | "Ideally, you would be in a quiet place where you could set up your prayer rug and make sure it's clean," says Shaikh, a biology major. "But an empty classroom will do. With Islam the whole world is a mosque."

**These are students of faith at Rensselaer**, for whom worship and study at a technological university are complementary pursuits. Reflecting a national trend, the Institute's religious population is larger, more active, and more diverse than it was even a decade ago.

The students approach observance with the intensity they bring to the study of engineering or architecture. They build hours of worship, community service, and organizational work into their already busy academic and activities schedules as they explore the relationship between the subjects they study and their faith traditions.

"The world is telling you that science and faith don't go together, that God couldn't have done all of that," says Kristen Clark '09, a physics major from Michigan who heads outreach for the Rensselaer Newman Catholic Fellowship. "Part of what is great about RPI is that you can learn that these things go together. It's a struggle. Science can't explain everything."

Five chaplains counsel students and work with about nine student-led religious organizations

that are active at any time. The chaplains are not Rensselaer employees and, like the religion clubs they serve, receive no Institute funds. But they do include students in their ministries and maintain an office on campus, and pages on the Rensselaer Web site.

The groups and their eclectic programs tell the story of both tradition and change on campus.

Participation among Catholics and Protestants, for example, who have composed Rensselaer's traditional student base for decades, is strong, and some students believe is growing. Interdenominational organizations are also active, among them the Rensselaer Christian Association, an affiliate of a national Evangelical network.

The Korean Christian Fellowship, Muslim Students Association, Hindu Students Association, and Indian Christian Fellowship speak to Rensselaer's growing religious and ethnic diversity, involving students from the U.S. and abroad. In fact, at least 19 faiths are represented in the current freshman class. | BY JANE GOTTLIEB

Keeping  
the

*Faith*

*Rensselaer students reflect a national trend in the growing number participating in religious observances and organizations.*

**A**s the student body has broadened, the number of campus clubs overall has jumped to 160—and counting. Like all groups, the religious organizations are prone to fluctuations in membership. Hillel, the Jewish organization, has seen its numbers lag recently, and Rensselaer's Brothers and Sisters in Christ is inactive right now. But in the range of faiths and their visibility on campus some advisers perceive something deeper than demographics.

"Since the mid-1990s we've had a resurgence of interest, more students staying with their religious heritage," says the Rev. Ed Kacerguis, Rensselaer's coordinator of religious affairs and one of two Catholic chaplains. "And I'd argue it's a contradiction in terms: our students are bright, articulate, intellectual, and innovators, but socially they tend to be very conservative. Our kids were very quiet. Now they are more open about worship, more comfortable exploring it. They're a little more public."

In fact, the people who gather as Catholics, Baptists, or Hindus are as active as those who gather as chess players or computer game enthusiasts.

Recently, for example, the Newman Catholic Fellowship had an overflow crowd for its forum on the ethics of cloning. More than 150 students attended a Mardi Gras party preceding Ash Wednesday services—an eye-opener for Asian Catholics who had never before donned masks or had beads tossed at them. African-American students joined members of local churches in the Rensselaer Union for a Gospel Expo celebrated in prayer, music, and poetry. Christian groups convened the first-ever Praise Night. Rensselaer Hillel's calendar included Passover seders and an evening of matzoh ball-making. The Muslim Students Association held a community basketball event.

Regular gatherings on campus abound. The Rensselaer Christian Association holds prayer meetings three times a week at 5 p.m. For the Korean Christians, it's 8 p.m. Wednesdays. On Sunday afternoons, the Protestant chaplain holds informal discussions on the Bible.

"The Sunday meetings are a breath of fresh air," says Jenny Burton, a lifelong Congregationalist who is a fourth-year architecture student. "RPI is obviously really intense. I get stressed. The discussion is a real grounding thing. It reminds me that there is more to life than my work."

Periodically, the Robison Pool closes to the

community so Muslim women can swim without breaking religious rules requiring them to cover their bodies. At noon each Friday, 100 or more Muslim students and local residents, wearing everything from the loose-fitting traditional garb to jeans, stream into the basement of the Alumni Sports & Recreation Center for Jumuaah services, signifying Sabbath. And five times every day Muslims find space to pray—though privacy is not always possible.

"While I'm praying people have whole conversations with me. They say 'Rami, why aren't you talking?'" laughs Rami Santrisi '06, former president of the Muslim organization.

### Surge in Spiritualism

It was not always this way at secular colleges and universities. Once, students were expected to study hard and meet their own religious and spiritual needs.

"It used to be that your religious beliefs were private—except for Mass on Sunday mornings," says Rick Hartt '70, director of the Union. "Now we try to create an environment where they can feel comfortable exploring their faith. I've really seen interest grow in the last five years. These students see the larger picture."

During the 1960s and 1970s many young Americans had traded in their parents' practices for political activism or study of Eastern philosophies, says Thomas Beaudoin, assistant professor of Christian theology at Santa Clara University. For the next few decades, he says, talk of God was largely absent from the intellectual discourse.

"In the 1950s you were required to participate in chapel worship and religious education on campus, and then after that there wasn't any requirement and it gradually fell away," says the Rev. Beth Illingsworth, Rensselaer's Protestant chaplain. "I'm a Presbyterian. I went to Lafayette College, a Presbyterian college, but you wouldn't have known it in the 1980s. We had a traditional worship service and nobody came."

By the 21st century the dormant spiritual life in higher education was waking up. A two-year study published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities reported that Evangelical groups, which had built their base slowly, blossomed. For example, from 1995 to 2000, the study found, Campus Crusade for Christ doubled to 39,000 members.

Just as significant, the report found there is a renewed interest at non-denominational schools. In 1998, 800 people attended a conference Wellesley College held on religious diversity. By then, religious studies courses pro-

liferated, along with multi-faith chapels recognizing the increasingly diverse student bodies. (The Rensselaer Newman Foundation opened its Chapel + Cultural Center in 1968 to provide worship space for Catholics. Today, students of all faiths use the C+CC for quiet reflection and cultural programs.)

Soon, presidential politics made "faith-based initiatives" a buzzword. The debate on evolution vs. creationism was back. The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks found many Americans seeking answers outside their day-to-day lives.

"There is also a growing trend of students who say 'I'm spiritual but not religious,'" says the Rev. Wayne Clark, a Methodist minister and president of the National Association of College and University Chaplains. "At our national conference our conversation confirmed that, yes, there is an increase in spirituality across the board. It is a concept colleges need to address."

Observers see a number of reasons for the revival. Among them is the late 20th-century emphasis on self-discovery. Students are often aware of the ways in which family patterns and problems have had an impact on their lives. And their parents might be the very people who shook things up in the 1960s and 1970s.

"This is a generation that is very used to dealing with psychology and looking inward," says the Rev. Illingsworth. "What you end up with are a great many people who are interested in spiritual questions. They approach Christianity in a very different way." What's more, they are less apt to reject their parents' advice.

Professor Beaudoin, who studies the interplay between secular and religious life, says that baby boomers are generally friendlier and less authoritarian toward their children than their own parents were. "I see it all over the country. Parents have tremendous access to their children," says Beaudoin. "There's the technology—cell phones and e-mail bring them constantly together. And, college is so expensive. When parents pay \$40,000 a year for college they have bought access."

Students interviewed for this article consistently referred to their mothers and fathers as close friends they are in frequent touch with. They say they were not anxious to abandon the rituals they practiced at home.

"I guess I just expect a Muslim community wherever I go," says Muhammad Ihsan Mohd Nasir '06, an information technology major who is, like a growing number of Muslims on campus, American. He was born in Illinois and raised both in the U.S. and in Malaysia.

When he came to Rensselaer, Nasir said he



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Senior Boris Dvinsky '06 knew that the Jewish community at Rensselaer was not large. But in Troy, he can walk to shul and spend long hours at the rabbi's house for discussions over meals. "They had kosher food available here and a place to go on Shabbat," he says. "I wanted a place where I'd feel accepted."

simply took for granted that there would be a Muslim presence. While the number of Muslims has not risen substantially, they are more likely than in the past to be undergraduates and more integrated into campus life than Muslim students of even a decade ago. Nasir, who is active in the Muslim Student Association, said the school environment has always been welcoming. At the same time, the campus provides an environment in which the students feel free to question one another in their spiritual lives. It is not unusual, he said, to hear, “what’s that on your head?”

### Finding a Home at Rensselaer

Imam Djafer Sebkhauoui ’86, the Muslim chaplain, came to Rensselaer from Algeria as a graduate student in psychology. He remained in the region and eventually helped open Al-Hidaya, the first mosque in Troy. Imam Sebkhauoui, too, sees change in the composition of the Muslim community.

“In the 1980s more of the Muslims were foreign students. They probably did more among themselves,” he says. “Now they are much more apparent because they are undergraduates who grew up here, much like the rest of the groups. They interact easily with the rest of the school.”

Having friends and roommates of other faiths has proved to be an important part of the Rensselaer experience. “I knew I’d end up in a room with a person who never saw a Muslim person before,” says Ferheen Shaikh, who also read about the Muslim group and met with members before coming to Rensselaer. “They are like my family,” she says.

Religious groups, like Rensselaer cultural organizations, bring together people of the same heritage. Muhammed Mohd Rafie Mohamad ’06, who is from Malaysia, is grateful for the support he gets on campus. More than once, he has experienced a less than welcoming reaction off campus. Recently, airport security took him into a room and questioned him for three hours.

“Once you’re on campus you don’t feel the difference,” says Mohamad, a member of the Muslim Students Association. “I just mix with everybody else. If they go to the bar, I follow, although I don’t drink. I drink something else.”

Students also can find diversity within the groups themselves. Jeffrey Wan ’07, for example, is a member of the Korean Christian Fellowship, even though he was born in Hong Kong and grew up in New Jersey. “I am not Korean,” Wan says. “There are a lot of members of the Korean Christian Fellowship that are not Korean. But we do have mostly Asians and

a few Caucasians as well. It’s important to me to be with the group I grew up with.”

Rabbi Aryeh Wineman, Rensselaer’s Jewish chaplain, agrees that it is important to help students identify with others like themselves. He believes the school could be more welcoming to prospective Jewish students. Local recruiting events often take place Friday nights, he says, and Commencement is on Saturday morning, both out of reach for those who observe the Jewish Sabbath.

“These are symbolic factors,” he says. “At RPI the religious representatives take part in the graduation. I don’t go.”

With such broad diversity on campus, accommodating all religious practices and beliefs can be challenging—and leave the Institute open to such criticism. Kenneth Durgans, Rensselaer’s vice provost for institute diversity, says that while holding Commencement on Saturday was not intended as a slight, he could understand Rabbi Wineman’s reaction. The day was chosen to make travel more convenient for parents, but such decisions have other ramifications.

“I’m not surprised to hear that people are saying what they’re saying,” says Durgans, who has no role in scheduling Commencement. “The beauty of the diversity issue is the complexity. We have to find ways to work through it. Sometimes in that process you do the best you can, and it requires some give on the part of diversity.”

Boris Dvinsky, a senior, doubts that the Saturday Commencement will disrupt worship for many people. Technically, as an Orthodox Jew he could attend without breaking Sabbath laws because Commencement is not a work commitment. But, regrettably, Dvinsky will probably not receive his diploma alongside his classmates, he says, because doing so on Saturday breaks the spirit of the day. Missing Commencement is “not a major problem for me,” he says. “The most important part for me and my parents is of course actually receiving the degree, not the ceremony.”

His baseball cap and sideburns hardly distinguish him from other students but his grooming reflects his adherence to Orthodox Judaism. A head covering shows reverence to God and sideburns are a modern interpretation of Jewish laws. Reared in Hanover, N.H., where the population of observant Jews is small, Dvinsky and his family practiced largely at home. He knew that the Jewish community at Rensselaer was not large.

But in Troy, he can walk to shul and spend long hours at Rabbi Leible Morrison’s house for

discussions over Shabbat meals. Professors understand when he misses class during holy days. “They had kosher food available here and a place to go on Shabbat,” says Dvinsky, a computer science major. “I wanted a place where I’d feel accepted.”

Perhaps this supportive atmosphere explains why Jacqueline Baldwin, an executive chef on campus, is filling more requests lately for kosher meals. Rensselaer dining halls provide self-service stations, equipped with a refrigerator and a grill, for both kosher and halal foods. Fruits and vegetables and desserts are also provided to meet Jewish and Muslim dietary laws. Baldwin special-orders meat and packages it as kosher or halal, as supervisors from both faiths look on. Traditional foods are also served during Lent and Passover. During Ramadan, campus food services packs up small meals students can eat before sunrise and after sunset.

“We started all of this within the past five years and we did a lot of research,” says Baldwin. “I think we give good service considering we serve 30,000 meals a week just in our dining halls.”

In residence halls, the Union, and all around campus, it is commonplace to hear questions being asked that are rarely brought up elsewhere. “Why do you wear a head scarf?” “Why can’t you drink?” “Why are you praying?” “Why can’t you go to a party on a Friday?” “Why can’t you wear shorts?”

Sometimes students negotiate a fine line between living their faith and blending with the secular community. For instance, Wan, a biomedical engineering and economics major, is uneasy in biology class when the topic of evolution is raised. While he is happy to consider the scientific theories, his Christianity compels him to also look to God for answers. Wan is unclear about when, or even whether, it is appropriate to raise his questions.

Joe Reynolds ’06, who has been a leader in the Rensselaer Christian Association, has occasionally felt uncomfortable around peers whom he fears will assume he is out to convert them. Even so, like many other students he also welcomes their questions.

“If I’m reading my Bible in public I’ve had someone ask, ‘Why do you read it all the time? Can’t you read it once and know it?’” says Reynolds, a chemical engineering major. “I was able to explain that a lot of the Bible you can pull out and talk about in groups and individually. We should be able to talk about these things. We’re in college. We did not come here to be spoon-fed.”