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## **Matters of Faith Find a New Prominence on Campus**

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Peter J. Gomes has been at [Harvard University](#) for 37 years, and says he remembers when religious people on campus felt under siege. To be seen as religious often meant being dismissed as not very bright, he said.

No longer. At Harvard these days, said Professor Gomes, the university preacher, "There is probably more active religious life now than there has been in 100 years."

Across the country, on secular campuses as varied as [Colgate University](#), the [University of Wisconsin](#) and the [University of California](#), Berkeley, chaplains, professors and administrators say students are drawn to religion and spirituality with more fervor than at any time they can remember.

More students are enrolling in religion courses, even majoring in religion; more are living in dormitories or houses where matters of faith and spirituality are a part of daily conversation; and discussion groups are being created for students to grapple with questions like what happens after death, dozens of university officials said in interviews.

A survey on the spiritual lives of college students, the first of its kind, showed in 2004 that more than two-thirds of 112,000 freshmen surveyed said they prayed, and that almost 80 percent believed in God. Nearly half of the freshmen said they were seeking opportunities to grow spiritually, according to the survey by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Compared with 10 or 15 years ago, "there is a greater interest in religion on campus, both intellectually and spiritually," said Charles L. Cohen, a professor of history and religious studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, who for a number of years ran an interdisciplinary major in religious studies. The program was created seven years ago and has 70 to 75 majors each year.

University officials explained the surge of interest in religion as partly a result of the rise of the religious right in politics, which they said has made questions of faith more talked about generally. In addition, they said, the attacks of Sept. 11 underscored for many the influence of religion on world affairs. And an influx of evangelical students at secular universities, along with an increasing number of international students, means students arrive with a broader array of religious experiences.

Professor Gomes (pronounced like "homes") said a more diverse student body at Harvard had meant that "the place is more representative of mainstream America."

"That provides a group of people who don't leave their religion at home," he said.

At Berkeley, a vast number of undergraduates are Asian-American, with many coming from observant Christian homes, said the Rev. Randy Bare, the Presbyterian campus pastor. "That's new, and it's a remarkable shift," Mr. Bare said.

There are 50 to 60 Christian groups on campus, and student attendance at Catholic and Presbyterian churches near campus has picked up significantly, he said. On many other campuses, though, the renewed interest in faith and spirituality has not necessarily translated into increased attendance at religious services.

The Rev. Lloyd Steffen, the chaplain at Lehigh University, is among those who think the war in Iraq has contributed to the interest in religion among students. "I suspect a lot of that has to do with uncertainty over the war," Mr. Steffen said.

"My theory is that the baby boomers decided they weren't going to impose their religious life on their children the way their parents imposed it on them," Mr. Steffen continued. "The idea was to let them come to it themselves. And then they get to campus and things happen; someone dies, a suicide occurs. Real issues arise for them, and they sometimes feel that they don't have resources to deal with them. And sometimes they turn to religion and courses in religion."

Increased participation in community service may also reflect spiritual yearning of students. "We don't use that kind of spiritual language anymore," said Rebecca S. Chopp, the Colgate president. "But if you look at the students, they do."

Some sociologists who study religion are skeptical that students' attitudes have changed significantly, citing a lack of data to compare current students with those of previous generations. But even some of those concerned about the data say something has shifted.

"All I hear from everybody is yes, there is growing interest in religion and spirituality and an openness on college campuses," said Christian Smith, a professor of sociology at the [University of Notre Dame](#). "Everybody who is talking about it says something seems to be going on."

David D. Burhans, who retired after 33 years as chaplain at the University of Richmond, said many students "are really exploring, they are really interested in trying things out, in attending one another's services."

Lesleigh Cushing, an assistant professor of religion and Jewish studies at Colgate, said: "I can fill basically any class on the Bible. I wasn't expecting that."

When Benjamin Wright, chairman of the department of religion studies at Lehigh, arrived 17 years ago, two students chose to major in religion. This year there are 18 religion majors, and there were 30 two and three years ago.

At Harvard, more students are enrolling in religion courses and regularly attending religious services, Professor Gomes said. Presbyterian ministries at Berkeley and Wisconsin have built dormitories to offer spiritual services to students and encourage discussion among different faiths. The seven-story building on the Wisconsin campus, which will house 280 students, is to open in August.

At Colgate, five Buddhist and Hindu students received permission to live in a new apartment complex on the edge of campus this year. They call their apartment Asian Spirituality House and they use it for meetings and occasional religious events.

The number of student religious organizations at Colgate has grown to 11 from 5 in recent years. The university's Catholic, Protestant and Jewish chaplains oversee an array of programs and events. Many involve providing food to students, a phenomenon that the university chaplain, Mark Shiner, jokingly calls "gastro-evangelism."

Among the new clubs is one created last year to encourage students to hold wide-ranging dialogues about spirituality and faith. Meeting over lunch on Thursdays in the chapel's basement, the students talk about what happens when you die or the nature of Catholic spirituality.

Called the Heretics Club (the chaplains were looking to grab students' attention), the group listened to John Gattuso talk about his book, "Talking to God: Portrait of a World at Prayer" (Stone Creek Publications, 2006), a collection of essays and photos about prayer in world religions.

"Do you need to believe in God in order to pray?" Mr. Gattuso asked.

The discussion was off and running, with one student saying one needed only to believe in "something outside yourself" and another saying that "sometimes 'Thank you' can be a prayer."

Afterward, several students talked about what attracted them to the sessions, besides the sandwiches, chips and fruit. Gabe Conant, a junior, said he wanted to contemplate personal questions about his own faith. He described them this way: "What are these things I was raised in and do I want to keep them?"