

## ***Pluralism on the University Campus: Princeton University's Religious Life Council***

***By Elizabeth Jemison '08 and Dana Graef '05***

*A student fellow and recent alumna on the Princeton Religious Life Council share their experiences and show how open dialogue about religious pluralism can impact campus conversations and create a stronger, more inclusive community. The example of the Religious Life Council serves as a model for other institutions that want to integrate student voices into an inter-faith discussion to raise awareness and create environments that promote pluralism and a deeper understanding of religious diversity within higher education.*

Made up of a dynamic group of undergraduate and graduate students from more than ten different faith traditions, Princeton University's Religious Life Council (RLC) brings dialogue about religious pluralism to the core of the campus conversation. Yet the Religious Life Council does far more than simply present 'show and tell' information about the religious traditions of its two dozen Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian (Protestant and Catholic), Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, Sikh, Unitarian/Universalist, Zoroastrian, and religiously unaffiliated members. Engaging some of the weightiest questions of their day, ranging from religion and war to sexuality and abortion, Religious Life Council fellows offer a model for thoroughly frank, yet remarkably sensitive dialogue in which all perspectives are welcome and respected.

The Religious Life Council commits itself, in the words of its mission statement: "To deepen understanding and cultivate respect among all religious faiths; to weave connections between intellectual life and spiritual growth; to widen the conversation on critical moral and ethical issues of the day; and to provide visibility for the strength and diversity of religious life on the Princeton campus." Through a combination of weekly meetings, annual retreats, open discussions and other programs for the university community, the Religious Life Council has sought to realize this mission on campus over the past seven years.

The interfaith movement on Princeton's campus started in the early 1980s with an informal gathering of students interested in discussing "Big Questions" of religion. In 2001, the generosity of an anonymous donor enabled Princeton's Office of Religious Life to formally establish the Religious Life Council, which has since become an integral portion of the Office's work. Under the strong leadership and supportive assistance of Rev. Paul Raushenbush, Associate Dean of Religious Life, the Religious Life Council's three student

co-conveners lead the Council in closed meetings and open discussions. The private, closed meetings enable vulnerability and foster honesty about group members' religious experience and perspectives; and open discussions allow broad engagement of the campus community to promote religious pluralism in campus life. Student fellows consistently remark that private meetings maintain the group's cohesive identity and fuel the Council's important work across campus, while open meetings enable the Council to share its spirit of dialogue and have an impact beyond its own members. Religious Life Council fellow Rabia Ali '04 commented that meetings can have a profound influence not only on others, but on members' personal spiritual growth: "An RLC discussion is not just a discussion, it is an experience that its members go through together, where they learn from each other, they argue, they disagree, they get confused, and sometimes confuse each other ...they relive their uncertainties about their own belief and views, and fall silent when they honestly admit that they do not have the answers to the questions others ask them."

The diversity of Council members is reflected in their perspectives and personal commitments, including those with exclusive absolute faith commitments as well as those whose religious traditions place a central emphasis on inclusion and acceptance of a diversity of opinions. Far from demanding that fellows strive for consensus on issues or that individuals accept others' religions as equally true, the Council encourages disagreement between members to build trust and understanding across even the most divisive boundaries. The unique ability of students from such diverse backgrounds to develop openness in their pluralistic dialogue begins with the Religious Life Council's annual five-day retreat in late January, when new fellows officially join the Council. Lasting from Sunday afternoon until Friday morning to allow students to practice weekend religious observances, the retreat centers around the presentation of spiritual autobiographies over the course of several hours each evening. In these autobiographies, old and new fellows share individual narratives of their spiritual journeys and religious identities, often discussing very personal experiences and emotions.

Through many hours of spiritual autobiographies and time shared together, the retreat serves to unite Religious Life Council fellows in preparation for another year of intense conversations and campus outreach. The opportunity to escape the demands of campus life at a retreat center, youth hostel, or Zen Center (to list a few of the recent retreat locations) allows participants to engage in conversations into the wee hours of the morning and rapidly nurtures new friendships. As Jewish Religious Life Council fellow Steven Kamara candidly admitted in a *Daily Princetonian* newspaper article after attending the retreat in 2004, [the retreat] "was the first time I befriended someone of the Muslim faith since being at Princeton." Returning to campus for the spring semester, the Religious Life Council's internal life continues to be nurtured by regular Monday dinner meetings, more than half of which are limited to Council fellows to maintain an atmosphere of sensitivity over topics often discussed. Conversations range from topics such as death, politics or evil to art, music, conversion, interfaith relationships, or prayer and meditation.

Complementing the Religious Life Council's internal focus, cultivated through the annual retreat and regular closed meetings, is its broad commitment to a host of campus conversations and events. A very popular guest speaker series that began with Princeton's earlier version of an interfaith council in the early 1980s invites Princeton administrators and faculty members to speak to the questions of *What Matters to Me and Why?* Recent

speakers have included Princeton University President Shirley Tilghman, Molecular Biology Professor and Nobel Laureate Eric Wieschaus, English Professor John Fleming, and Dean of Admissions Janet Rapelye. Some invitees speak about their personal spirituality, yet the invitation to speak about the question of personal meaning in no way presumes religious or spiritual identity. Speakers have remarked how much they appreciate being asked to speak on a topic beyond their own scholarship, and students flock to hear respected professors and administrators reflect on their sources of inspiration and meaning.

As Religious Life Council advisor Rev. Paul Raushenbush observed, "*What Matters to Me and Why?* inspires students by offering them insight into the professor behind the ideas they are professing, and it allows professors and senior administrators the unusual opportunity to reflect on their core commitments. One Nobel Prize scientist who recently spoke to over 100 students at a *What Matters to Me and Why?* commented on what a surprisingly challenging and moving experience he had as he shared his life-long love of science and knowledge."

The Religious Life Council also engages in conversation about timely current events and other campus life issues. In 2005, the Council held a dinner meeting open to the campus community to discuss the complicated issues surrounding the controversial Danish cartoons that sparked violence in a number of countries. In anticipation of a week when an alarming number of students traditionally engaged in binge drinking, the Religious Life Council held a conversation on "God and the Street," discussing religion and wise decision making at the off-campus "Street" where many weekend social events take place. These conversations have brought together students who self-identify as religious or spiritual with others for whom the topic at hand is compelling for secular moral or ethical reasons. Partnerships with other campus groups are central to these endeavors. For example, the Religious Life Council has joined with members of the Princeton Coalition Against Capital Punishment and the ACLU to hold a conversation about the death penalty. Additionally, each spring the Religious Life Council sponsors an interfaith day of service in cooperation with student religious groups and the Student Volunteer Council, as part of the National Day of Interfaith Service coordinated by the Interfaith Youth Core. After spending a day together engaged in community service, students join in an open meeting discussing the personal motivations each has to serve others.

In times of celebration, tragedy, or transition, the Religious Life Council is an important resource to the campus community. Each Thanksgiving, the Council's interfaith Thanksgiving dinner draws large groups of students for a vegetarian feast and a time to reflect upon the many reasons each has to be grateful. As students returned from the winter break in the wake of the South Asian Tsunami in January 2005, the Religious Life Council provided a forum for reflection by organizing the Interfaith Vigil for the Tsunami Disaster. Religious Life Council fellows have also been recruited to train Residential College Advisors about interfaith awareness; a booklet on "Religious Basics" that introduces each of the religions represented on the Council is now given to each incoming Residential College Advisor to prepare him or her to counsel students from a variety of backgrounds with greater knowledge and sensitivity. Religious Life Council fellows are often asked by Residential College Advisors to organize or moderate conversations about religious issues in dormitories and dining halls. A recent conversation on "Being Religious at Princeton" invited Council fellows to speak about the way that their religious faith and observance influence

their lives as students. Conversations like these bring religious pluralism to the forefront of discussions about student life. By situating Religious Life Council sponsored activities in student common spaces, such as dining halls, religious pluralism ceases to be an abstract concept discussed in a classroom or lecture hall, and begins to take shape as a way of life for Princeton students.

Beyond its important work on its own campus, Princeton's Religious Life Council serves as a national model for other colleges and universities interested in developing similar interfaith groups. In this role, the Religious Life Council has facilitated national and international conversations about religious pluralism in the academy. In July 2004, nine Religious Life Council representatives attended the Parliament of the World's Religions in Barcelona, Spain. At the conference, a panel of Religious Life Council members presented a paper entitled "Inter-Religious Engagement in Higher Education: The Princeton Model." In February 2005, the Religious Life Council organized the Coming Together Conference, a National Summit of Interfaith Councils, which was one of the first national gatherings of college multi-faith councils. Nearly 100 students from 30 different universities attended the conference, which included workshops, conversations, and opportunities to join campus religious groups during their prayer services and meditations.

Following the leadership of the Princeton Religious Life Council, Coming Together has become an annual conference hosted by different universities. Religious Life Council representatives have attended Coming Together 2 at Johns Hopkins University in 2006, and Coming Together 3 this spring at the University of Southern California. At each Coming Together conference, Princeton's Religious Life Council members have sought out students involved in other multi-faith groups to share ideas and discuss challenges, while serving as examples to other colleges and universities who look to Princeton as a model in forming multi-faith councils on their own campuses. For Religious Life Council fellows, such opportunities to learn from others and to share from their experience prove rewarding.

We realized that the Princeton model is only one approach to interfaith dialogue – many campuses have larger groups, for example, or a less formal meeting structure. In our experience on the Religious Life Council, we have found that a well-defined group of approximately 25 members is ideal for conversation. Formally establishing Religious Life Council fellows encourages a commitment to the Council, and a time and space for regularly scheduled meetings is essential. While not all institutions are able to facilitate a weeklong retreat, we believe that any opportunity for students to share their spiritual autobiographies will tremendously enhance cohesiveness and trust within the group.

Owen Fletcher '08, a current Religious Life Council co-convenor, attended Coming Together 3 at USC this year, and shares his reflections below:

"I found the conference a useful opportunity to step back and compare my very concepts of interfaith dialogue and its purpose against those of other group leaders. At CT3 I led a discussion [with two other co-convenors] about why these groups exist. We asked, what exactly are we trying to do? And we found a lot of different answers. I, at least, left the room feeling challenged to continue interfaith work in a subtly modified way."

As Fletcher mentioned above, attending the Coming Together conferences allows student leaders to engage in open dialogue and explore the purpose behind the interfaith work occurring on college campuses nationwide. Students also have the opportunity to discuss sensitive topics that impact the multiple interactions students have to navigate when promoting pluralism. Fletcher illustrates one example of these challenging conversations and his reactions and reflections:

“We discussed proselytism in the context of an interfaith gathering, and I realized what a difficult environment an interfaith setting must be for someone who feels called to convert others to their own religious views. There is a definite bias against proselytism among many practitioners of interfaith dialogue, but I think this can and should be overcome.

The conversation essentially made me realize that interfaith groups must take very explicit measures to encourage a full diversity of viewpoints if they are to achieve their goal of building strong bonds of trust between members.”

Through Fletcher’s observations on the recent Coming Together 3 conference, it is evident that these gatherings allow students from across the country the space to share their stories and struggles with interfaith work. The ability to brainstorm and share ideas among a community of student leaders demonstrates how “this sort of leadership summit is a driving force behind the evolving face of religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue on college campuses,” as Fletcher notes.

As Council fellows often tell peers from other colleges, the Princeton Religious Life Council has been successful in promoting pluralism in campus life because of its commitment to drawing upon a core of deep trust and respect, cultivated through retreats and weekly meetings. Personal relationships among a community of peers committed to dialogue and religious pluralism form a core in which students gain energy to encourage others to embrace the richness of the diverse expressions of religion and spirituality on the university campus. Over the past seven years, the Religious Life Council has had a significant impact not only on members’ personal spiritual growth, but also on campus life and the community of higher education at large. Religious Life Council open discussions have exposed numerous individuals to interfaith dialogue, while the Coming Together conferences are encouraging a broader discussion across the country. We look forward to continuing this discussion with an increasing number of interfaith groups in the years to come.

*Elizabeth Jemison, a Christian, will graduate from Princeton in 2008 with a degree in Religion. She joined the Religious Life Council as a freshman during the 2004-2005 academic year and currently serves as one of three co-conveners. Elizabeth grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, and during her time at Princeton, she has been active in the Princeton Evangelical Fellowship and the Episcopal Church at Princeton. She also serves as an Eating Concerns Peer Educator and as a volunteer with the Student Volunteers Council. After graduation, Elizabeth plans to pursue graduate studies in American religious history.*

*Dana Graef, a Zen Buddhist, graduated from Princeton in 2005. She joined the Religious Life Council as a freshman during the 2001-2002 academic year, shortly after the group had formed, and was an RLC fellow throughout her four years at Princeton. She was a co-convener in 2003, and was also active in the Buddhist Students’ Group on campus. Dana grew up in Vermont, and majored in Ecology & Evolutionary Biology at Princeton. She is currently working as a research assistant at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton and will be attending graduate school for environmental anthropology in the fall.*

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