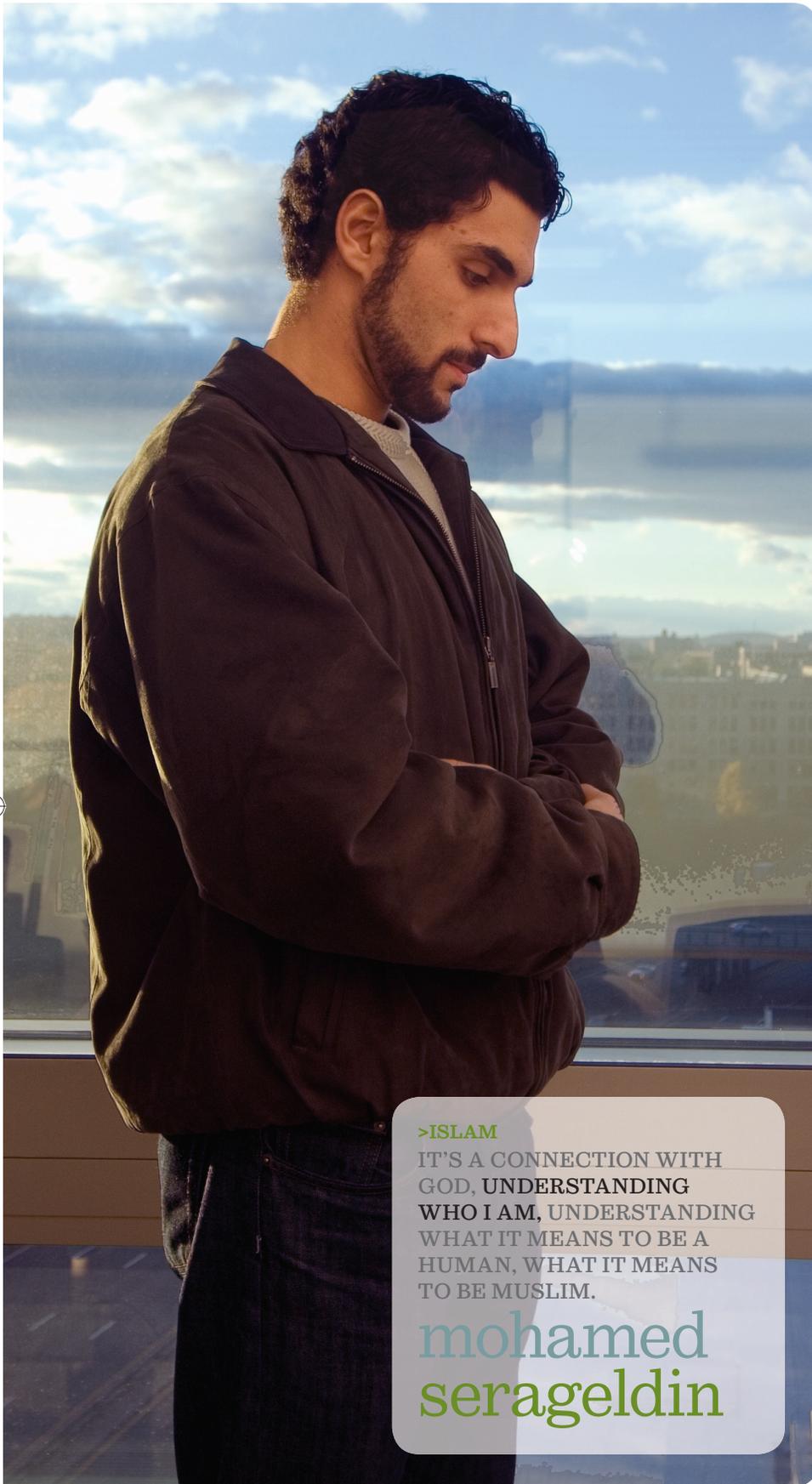


to be in a
relationship
with god
to calm down
to understand
who i am
to explain things
that i cannot
to give thanks

STUDENTS TALK ABOUT WHY THEY PRAY
INTERVIEWS BY EDWARD A. BROWN PHOTOGRAPHS BY VERNON DOUCETTE





>ISLAM

IT'S A CONNECTION WITH GOD, UNDERSTANDING WHO I AM, UNDERSTANDING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A HUMAN, WHAT IT MEANS TO BE MUSLIM.

mohamed
serageldin

On Sundays, they gather in Marsh Chapel for communal worship. Several times a day, they pray facing Mecca in a room at the George Sherman Union. On Fridays and Saturdays, they meet in Hillel House on Bay State Road, and when the seasons change, they celebrate on the lawn behind Marsh Plaza. Growing numbers of students at Boston University are involved in spiritual life; the former Methodist seminary is home to twenty-nine religious groups, and that number appears to be increasing as well.

Reverend Robert Hill, dean of Marsh Chapel, says the abundance of religious groups bodes well for the spiritual development of the current generation of BU students. "The University has always had a deep-rooted connection to the Methodist tradition," he says. "Now it's blossoming. It has become very ecumenical. We have seven University chaplains: two rabbis, one Lutheran, one Episcopalian, one Methodist, one pan-Protestant, and one Roman Catholic. In addition, we have campus ministers, many part-time, who are helping lead the various religious groups."

What's it about? Hill says that in the current generation he sees "a great respect for a sense of wonder."



>JUDAISM

IT JUST CALMS ME. HAVING THAT CONNECTION TO GOD IS SOMETHING THAT'S MORE IMPORTANT THAN ME. IT TAKES A LOT OF PRESSURE OFF.

naomi rose
konikoff

"It's there," he says. "It's not a tidal wave, but it is a different sensibility."

Hill's observations are similar to those of Donna Freitas, a College of Arts and Sciences visiting assistant professor of religion, who recently spent five months traveling and talking to students on campuses across the country for a book about the spiritual identities of college students. By Freitas's measure, student interest in spirituality is "off the charts."

"Students look at spirituality as a way of developing a relationship with God or with the divine," she says. "It becomes this place where they can hang onto some sort of higher meaning in life."

Freitas believes that this generation's interest in spirituality stems in part from the easy online availability of information about world religions. Students understand that it's OK to explore religions other than those practiced by their family or to rekindle family religion that has become dormant. Her research persuaded her that as many as 80 percent of college students think of themselves as spiritual or religious.

"That is an enormous percentage," says Freitas. "They didn't do surveys like this fifteen years ago, but I would guess that if they did, they would not have had a response like this." Funded by a grant from the Louisville Institute, her research is the basis of the book *Sex and the Soul*, scheduled to be published in March by Oxford University Press.

Bostonia spoke with students from several campus religious groups about their spirituality and about why they pray.

Mohamed Serageldin (ENG'08)

Islam is a way of life. I grew up in the United States and my parents were very conscious of raising me with basic Islamic values. Not the rituals, necessarily, but to have good etiquette, to have good character.

It took root later. I was thirteen or fourteen years old, and it was almost coinciding with my older brother's going through a similar phase in his life, where he was finding God and becoming more of a practicing Muslim. So it was at that age that I started to question my path. I looked at myself and said, "Where am I going to be in ten years?" I had to make a decision to change my path, and that's when it happened. A lot of people find it a young age to make a decision like that, but it was really important to me at that age. Ever since then it's been a very dynamic growth, a connection with God, understanding who I am, understanding what it means to be human, understanding what it means to be Muslim.

Faith is what connects me to my creator, so I can't imagine being independent of that relationship.

Prayer to me is a time to escape what seems to be reality and to go to what is in fact reality, which is connecting with the one who created me. Praying five times a day may seem to be a burden; paradoxically, it's not. In fact, it's a moment for you to escape the actual burdens in your life: the anxiety that you

have every day, the schedules that you have to keep, the relationships you have to maintain.

I pray because, number one, I have submitted to God and his way of Islam, so it's mandated upon me to pray these five daily prayers. Because I've been doing it for so long and it's gathered so much layered meaning to me, it's a getaway from the anxieties of life. I don't like to be anxious, but sometimes anxieties are created. It means a connection with my Lord and his words. Sometimes when you pray, and you listen to the words that God has said, and you think about how it's contextualized in your life, you feel there's so much beauty. Beauty on a transcendental level like that — you can't really put it in words, but it's probably one of the most unparalleled pleasures of life.

Naomi Rose Konikoff (SAR'09)

I grew up in a traditional Conservative home. My brother and sister and I were brought up with Judaism being a huge part of our identity, a huge part of who we were. I grew up keeping kosher, not as strictly as some people do, but we would buy only things for the home that had hechshers, which is the symbol that says it's kosher. We kept Shabbat in that we would go to services every Saturday morning; we would have Friday night dinner.

I was in private school through the age of fourteen. I was totally committed to Judaism as a kid, and I believed everything. And then I had my rebellious phase. I think that when I got into public school and started wanting to go to football games on Friday nights and to hang out with my friends on Saturdays, it became a burden to me. I think a lot of people feel that religion isn't convenient. And it isn't convenient. But I guess it depends on how important it is to you.

I remember the first month I was here, one weekend I went away to Rhode Island for a retreat with the a cappella group at Hillel. Something clicked and something changed, and I started wanting to be observant again. It was a really, really slow process.

Over the past couple of years I have become even more observant than I was as a kid. I started going to Chabad last fall, and that really changed everything for me. It's become a huge part of my life. For twenty-five hours, from Friday night at candle-lighting, which is eighteen minutes before the sun starts to set, until something like an hour after that the following day, Saturday, everything shuts down for me. My phone's off, my computer's off, I don't do my homework, I'll read for pleasure but not for work, I won't write, I won't highlight. Shabbos is my favorite day of the week. It's a huge part of who I am. It really affects every facet of my life.

* web extra

Slide shows of students talking about how they pray are at www.bu.edu/bostonia.

>CATHOLICISM

IT'S MY NATURE TO WANT TO BE IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. THE DESIRE FOR PRAYER IS PRINTED ON MY HEART.

renee
vyhanek



>HINDUISM

I LOOK TO GOD TO EXPLAIN THINGS THAT I CANNOT. I HAVE FAITH THAT GOD WILL TAKE CARE OF US.

sanu dev



When I'm overwhelmed or I'm stressed out or something goes wrong, I find myself really looking forward to Shabbos even more. And it just calms me. And I think having that connection to God is something to connect to that's higher and more important than me. It takes a lot of pressure off you.

Renee Vyhanek (CAS'08)

The basis of my faith, and the Christian faith in general, is a personal relationship with the Lord, the creator of the universe. And prayer is conversing with him. It's so important to have an active prayer life, because how could you have a relationship with someone without ever talking to him or her? Just like in our human relationships, the more you talk to someone or the more you spend time with them, the deeper your relationship is. It's the same on the spiritual level.

I want my life to be a prayer. I say a morning prayer and an evening prayer. I go to mass every day, and that's one of my favorite types of prayer. But I also prayed this morning when I was running. I pray before I eat.

I'm a "cradle Catholic." I was raised Catholic and went to Sunday school and was active in my home parish, but I think my faith really became personalized and I began to take a lot of ownership of it when I came to BU and was involved in the Catholic Center here. One of the biggest parts that I am taking away from my time at BU is an active prayer life. But I think even more than that, on a very much deeper level, it's my nature — it's human nature — to want to be in a relationship with God. So that desire for prayer is something that's printed on my heart. It's just a matter of when and how you become aware of that desire.

Simply put, the most important thing to me is my faith. I mean, what else can compare to faith? My family is so important to me; school is important; my future plans are important. But when you're talking about having a relationship with the God of the universe, that kind of makes everything else pale in comparison. So it's very important, and it's definitely one of the areas of growth that I've seen most of all at my time at BU. I'm a senior, and I will leave here with so many things that I've learned and ways that I've grown. But hands down, the area that I've grown the most in is spiritually, and the most important thing that I will take away is an active prayer life.

Sanu Dev (CAS'08)

I grew up in a Hindu family, and my parents took me to temple and read stories to me and did all of the traditional religious rituals. When you live with your family, they're the influence for your religion. Once I came to Boston University, it became my choice to continue practicing. I decided that I wanted to continue this, because faith is an important part of my life. My faith is my backbone, and I need it.

I would consider Hinduism not just a religion, but a philosophy. It's often described as a way of life. And we consider it a way of life because there are different rituals and traditions each

person or family does for their own spirituality.

Prayer in Hinduism usually takes the form during *Puja*, the ritual where we sing *bhajans*, which are devotional songs, and during that time we try to mentally connect with God. I pray once a day, because it's my connection to God.

The *arti* is done at the end of the *Puja*, where you hold a plate, which is called a *thali*, and there are lights on that. The light signifies knowledge and removal of ignorance. You hold the plate with the lights, and you do the circular motion in front of the deities to invoke that knowledge and purity.

I pray before I go to sleep. For me, it's a way to just think about the day and clear my mind and prepare myself for the next day.

Hinduism is unique among religions because we don't have a single text that we can go to for guidance. There are several texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Vedas. And we don't have a set of rituals that every Hindu must follow. There are several different ways of conducting prayer services. It's a very personal religion, spirituality.

In general, I look for God's ways to explain things that I cannot, and sometimes when situations are very tough, I have to have faith that it's in God's ways, and God is on our side, and God is going to take care of us, and we've got to struggle through this tough moment.

Amber Dame (SED'09)

Wicca is a nature-based religion that believes in the duality of deity, so we believe in a god and a goddess. All of our holidays revolve around the agricultural cycle, so we have holidays for the harvest, for planting, and that kind of thing. We also have holidays for the new moon and the full moon. The agricultural holidays deal more with the god aspect of our religion, and the moon holidays deal more with the goddess aspect.

It's a very individual religion. We don't have somebody who has to speak to deity for us. It's important that we do it ourselves, whether that involves actual prayer or lighting a candle or leaving an offering on an altar for a specific deity.

In our rituals, which I would say are a type of group prayer, we all get together and stand in a circle. Some of them are very ceremonial and they have a certain format, and some of them are just, well, which deity do we need to ask for help today? I pray when I want to give thanks, when I'm going through a hard time.

Faith is very important to me. And the community that my faith offers is very important, because we're like a family, and if I need help or if I'm going through a hard time, I know that I can rely on my faith and my Wiccan family.

I think that it's very, very misconstrued. There are a lot of stereotypes out there about Wiccans, and I even see it on campus. One of the common stereotypes is we worship the devil, that kind of thing, which is absolutely not true. We don't believe in ultimate good or ultimate evil. There's a balance in everything. So, there are a lot of stereotypes about us, and we work really hard to try to change them. ■



>WICCA

I PRAY WHEN I WANT TO GIVE THANKS OR WHEN I'M GOING THROUGH A HARD TIME.

amber
dame