

# OUR MODERN RELIGIONS



BVNW students explain their religious identities and the impacts they have on their everyday lives.

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*This photo is separate images edited together of Cameron Quick, Rumesa Nisar, Nick Schemmel and Vedha Pennmetcha.*



**F**or Senior Avi Keating, fear arises when thinking about attending a traditional Jewish synagogue, he said. In this setting, men and women are forced to sit in separate areas. As a transgender, bisexual, Jew, Keating said he has fears about where the congregation would make him sit. He said his sexual and gender orientations affect the way he is perceived in the traditional Jewish faith.

Keating said he practices a more modern denomination of Judaism because it is holistically more accepting. He said traditional Jewish practices are more conservative, making them less accepting of people who stray from straight and cisgender orientations.

"With my sexuality, I think I've been very lucky to be at a synagogue with a gay rabbi," Keating said. "I haven't had any anxiety about it because of that, but I'm sure that if I went to a different synagogue, things may have been a little different."

Similarly to Keating, senior siblings Nate and Nick Schemmel also practice a modern form of Judaism.

Nick said their parents practice different religions, as their dad is Catholic and mom is Jewish. Both boys began their religious journey from an early age, Nick said. As they grew older, their involvement with Judaism through volunteering, religious camps, and other religious activities caused them to devote themselves to Judaism.

"My mom is really deep into religion and she wanted us to become Jewish and go through the process and learn about it. So we got into Sunday school at a young age and we learned scripture and how to read Hebrew, [it] just kind of evolved from there," Nick said.

When they were both 13 years old, Nick and Nate visited the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Israel for their bar mitzvah, a coming-of-age ritual signifying the religious adulthood of a Jewish boy. Nate said the emotion and rich devotion to prayer from crowds of people served as a formative experience and shaped him and his brother into who they are today.

However, with their religion comes challenges, Nick said. Both the Schemmel brothers and Keating fear a lack of acceptance for their beliefs.

Keating said he has faced problems because of his Jewish religion within the walls of BVNW. He said the way he has been treated and the offensive words of his peers toward him regarding the people of his religion scare him.

"I've been called a greedy Jew for picking some coins off the ground," Keating said. "I've been told I should be gassed in a concentration camp and I've been told I'm going to go to Hell."

Keating is not the only one who faces fears of sharing his religious identity with peers. Nick Schemmel said being Jewish in a dominantly Christian area has created a sense of fear when it comes to opening up about his religion. Nick said he is an analytical person, causing him to keep his religious beliefs to himself.

"The fact that I don't tell too many people [that I am Jewish] is probably an inclination that I'm afraid of what people will judge me as," Nick said. "I

wouldn't be as afraid to tell people if I practiced a more accepted religion, like Christianity."

Nonetheless, both brothers said the strongest aspect in Judaism lies in its community and acceptance of others. As people devoted to a religion with a turbulent past, Nick said they want to save others from the judgment and hatred Jews have faced and continue to face to this day.

"I feel like being Jewish helps me be accepting because we know in the past, Jewish people haven't been accepted all the time," Nate said. "And now that other religions are having that problem too, we don't want that to happen to them either."

While religious identities are unique, current events can greatly shape a person's religious character, Nate said. Some religious people face more hatred than others, particularly Jews, he said. This realization has allowed both brothers to bond with those of



*Junior, Rumasa Nisar wears the hijab as she practices Islam in her day-to-day life.*

other religions and be accepting of them despite their beliefs.

Despite the challenges they face, both twins continue to practice Judaism, and they each have a unique perception of what the religion means. As an aspiring doctor, Nick said he maintains a more modernistic view of Judaism compared to his brother. While religion and science oftentimes conflict, Nick said his passion for the subject has pushed him to have a more scientific view of the world.

Similarly, senior Cameron Quick said he experiences clashing viewpoints between his religion and science. Quick is a Evangelical

Free, Protestant, Christian. He said his religious beliefs usually take precedence over his scientific beliefs because of how deeply rooted he is in his faith.

“Different topics that I learn [in school] can conflict with what I believe in and, you know, I try to hold true to what I know is true from God’s word,” Quick said. “And I recognize that other people may not see it the same way, and I’m okay with that.”

Quick said his religion does not always match widely accepted worldly views on certain topics, but he navigates these conflicts through discussion with his family and youth

group. He said together, they can compare and contrast their individual interpretations to try to reach an understanding. He said while he tries to come up with a clear answer based on his religious beliefs, it is not always possible because there are so many interpretations of his religion.

Quick said the theory of evolution is a perfect example of the clash between his perspectives of science and religion.

“Speaking on the topic of evolution, you know there’s some theories as to how that fits into the Bible,” Quick said. “Such as the seven day theory that some days weren’t actually seven days, but again that’s up to interpretation.”

Senior Vedha Penmetcha practices Hinduism, a religion that she has grown with and been able to make her own throughout her life. Penmetcha said starting in middle school, she attended Balavihar classes on Sundays to enhance her understanding of her Hindu religion by learning the meaning behind stories and shlokas.

Paired with the Balavihar classes, Penmetcha said she also participates in a type of South Indian classical dance called Bharatnatyam. She said that this type of dance is a portrayal of deity’s stories, emotions and events in an artistic way. She said she plays different characters in her dances, allowing her to explore the stories on a deeper level.

“Adding those emotional aspects and nuances into religion gave me that firsthand or kind of direct experience because you are acting the part, you’re seeing that story unveil or unfold in front of your eyes,” Penmetcha said.

Penmetcha said that her dance paired with the education she received from her Balavihar classes has helped her to make her religious journey her own.

“I would explore [the stories] more from an educational point of view within those Sunday classes, and that’s when I would first start getting those meanings,” Penmetcha said. “Then, I’m a dancer so that’s when I would actually fully dive deeper into the meaning and make it my own.”

As she has grown older, Penmetcha said engaging in conversation with her Hindu friends has helped shape her religious views as well.



*Senior, Nick Schemmel wears a Jewish Kippah on his head as he points a yad necklace toward a miniature Torah.*

"It's kind of nice because it's a conversation that can be fun and interesting just because it is so varied among each person and each person's perception and view on it," Penmetcha said. "So I guess it's just kind of engaging."

Penmetcha said that making her religion her own over her life has created something important for her to fall back on in difficult times. She said Hinduism has helped her strive to be the best human she can be, regardless of the situations she is in.

On the other hand, junior Rumesa Nisar is a Sunni Muslim. One of her biggest challenges, she said, has been feeling comfortable with her religious identity in public environments, such as school.

Nisar said she began wearing the hijab, an Islamic head covering for women, in sixth grade. Since then, she said she's faced a multitude of questions and challenges from her friends and peers.

"I have friends that are also Muslim that don't wear a hijab, and I can definitely see people target me more because they can see that [my hijab] is a sign for them that they're like, 'oh, okay, she's Muslim.'" Nisar said. "So, they try to approach me more in a negative way and to my friends they act like they're normal humans."

Although Nisar said she's fully aware of the counseling resources at Northwest, Nisar said she resorts to seeking help from her friends and family due to their understanding of similar viewpoints. Despite her minority status, she said her friends and teachers try their best to create a welcoming environment allowing her to embrace her religion.

"My friends and teachers try their hardest to make it feel like an open environment which is good, and I feel like it works at the most part, but there are also students that do have different views than others, and try their hardest to make their views be shown," Nisar

said.

However, taking into account the minority population at BVNW as a whole, Nisar said the environment still poses challenges for herself and others.

"[They can] definitely open their eyes and know that students have feelings, and that, you know, not everything is black and white in the school. We have inner conflicts as well," Nisar said.

Ultimately, Nisar said her challenging

experiences have made her a stronger and more understanding person. Although there have been times of questioning her identity, she said her journey has allowed her to appreciate her religion and love the way she practices it.

"The experiences that I've had with my religion made me who I am today, the bumps in the roads basically

molded me into who I am. As many hardships as I went through, it didn't bring me down," Nisar said.

While many students at Northwest identify with a religion, a number of others refrain from having any religious commitments. Senior Sravya Narahari said she is agnostic, or someone who believes proof of a higher being's existence has not yet been determined.

Coming from a Hindu family, Narahari said she chose agnosticism when she was in eighth grade because growing up she did not regularly visit the Hindu temple or take Hindu classes, prohibiting her to establish a strong connection with God.

"It didn't make sense that good things would only happen to me if I prayed or that I could only be kind to people if I prayed," Narahari said. "I just don't think I need a religion telling me how to be a good person, because I feel like my parents have taught me the values and virtues to be a good person by myself."

While both of Narahari's parents acknowledge and respect her beliefs, Narahari said she often participates in Hindu traditions and events as a

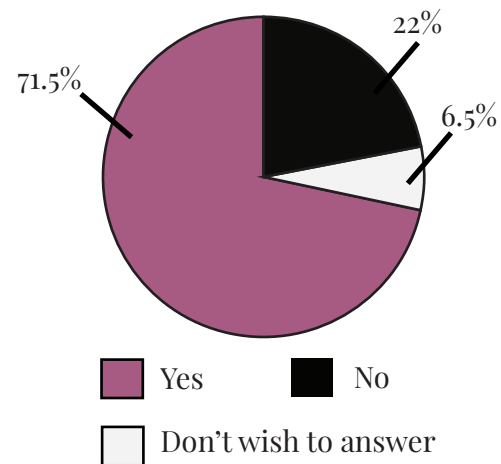
"I just don't think I need a religion telling me how to be a good person, because I feel like my parents have taught me the values and virtues to be a good person by myself"

-SRAVYA NARAHARI

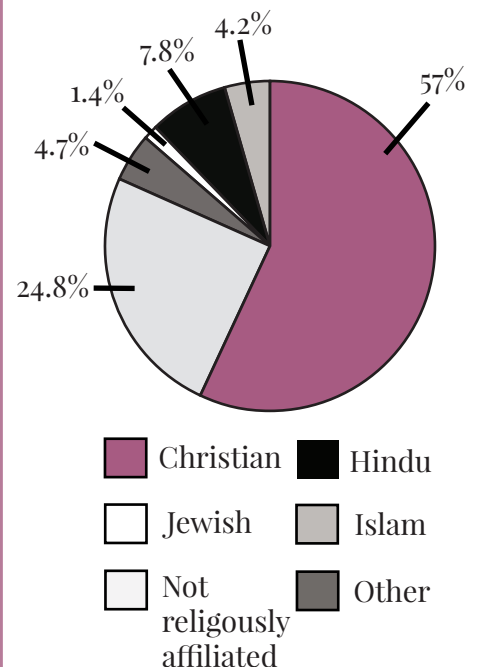
## RELIGION AT NORTHWEST

*\*214 Blue Valley Northwest Students were surveyed*

### \*Do you believe in a higher power?



### \*What religion are you?







*Representing Hinduism, Senior Vedha Penmetcha wears Churidar pants with her cultural dress.*

courtesy to her mom, who is religious to a higher extent. Narahari said belief systems are a choice, and she doesn't want her mom to feel her beliefs are invalid.

"I think she wishes that I was there with her and sat down next to her when she was doing [religious] things," Narahari said. "But whenever it's like for the bigger events, honestly, out of respect for her and because I want her to be happy, I'll sit down with her."

Ultimately, Narahari's parents' respect and acceptance for her beliefs lifts a weight off her shoulders, she said, and helps her accept her religious standing with utmost certainty.

Not everyone has such luxuries of ease in regard to their religious identity. As an atheist, or someone who denies a higher being's existence entirely, junior Tyler Fitzsimmons said

he experiences arguments with his family members regarding religion and its intricacies. Although the arguments are infrequent, Fitzsimmons said, they occur within both his mom and dad's side of the family, who practice several different beliefs, ranging from atheism to different denominations of Christianity.

"I don't like those conversations," Fitzsimmons said. "I really feel like it's not my place to speak on what someone else should believe in."

Although Fitzsimmons' family engages in religious discourse, he said it doesn't have a large impact on the dynamic of his family as a whole. He said their ability to separate their arguments from their daily activities allows them to live together with differing belief systems.

"I think of religion as more of a

personal thing," Fitzsimmons said. "Something that should just be openly spoken about. You can speak about it, I think that's good, but I don't think it's something to get angry about or something to, you know, fight over."

As an atheist, Fitzsimmons said he chooses not to practice religion because of the vast information available to people from science, so he said there is less of a need to rely on a supernatural force for answers. He said that while Gen-Z is one of the most non-religious generations, he thinks it is the most accepting in terms of differences between individuals.

Similarly, while Narahari does not actively practice religion, she said if people need religion to guide them and to be able to stay positive, they should practice it. For herself, she said she does not feel like she needs to believe in another entity to be in touch with herself and the added responsibility of a religion is a lot to carry.

"As long as it's helping you be a good person and you're being a good person outside of your religion and you're not pushing it on to other people, [it's a good thing]," Narahari said. "Like, you're happy and content with yourself. I think that's all."

As someone who has faced tribulations because of his sexual and gender orientation, Keating said religion has affected the way he sees the world and has helped him to put personal experiences through a new lens. Keating said he is very accepting of people, regardless of the religion they choose to practice.

"Even if you're an atheist, you need to respect Christian's views, even if you're an atheist, you need to respect Muslim's views and even though you've had a negative experience religion, that doesn't mean all religion is bad, you know," Keating said.

“I’ve been told I should be gassed in a concentration camp and I’ve been told I’m going to go to Hell”

- AVI KEATING

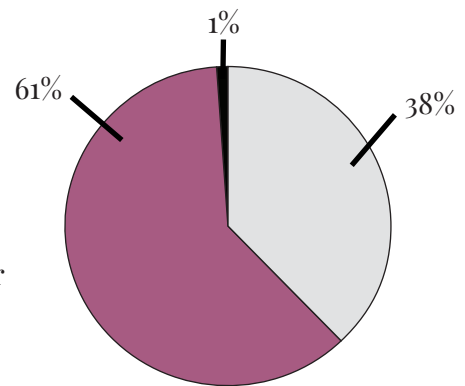
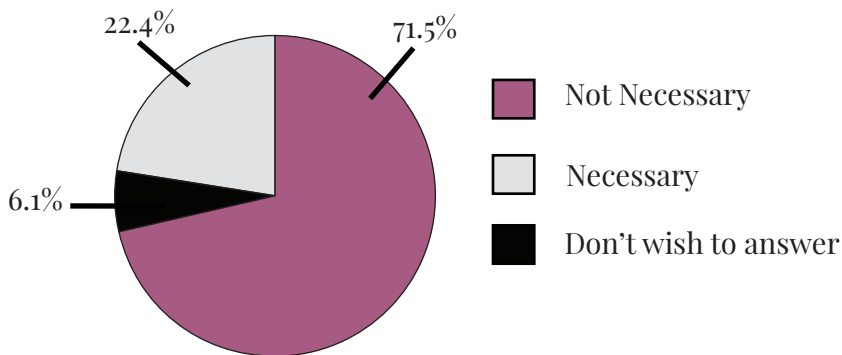
# NORTHWEST VS. NATIONAL POLLING

*\*214 Blue Valley Northwest Students were surveyed for Northwest polling and national polling is from Pew Research Center*

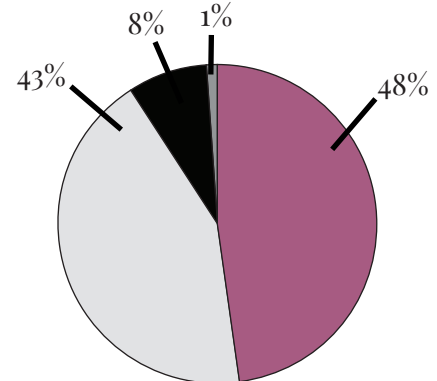
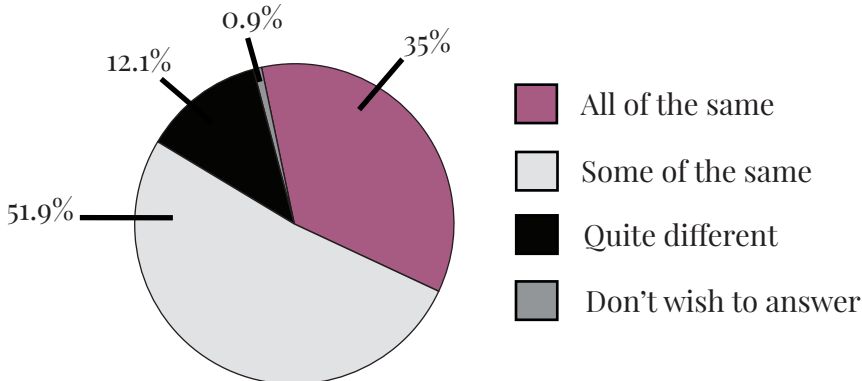
## NORTHWEST

## NATIONALLY

**\*It's \_\_\_\_\_ to believe in a higher power in order to be moral and have good values.**



**\*You have \_\_\_\_\_ religious beliefs as your parents.**



**\*Do you see students at BVNW getting teased or made fun of for their religion?**

