



# *the* **Abrahamic Moment**

Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions  
at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

## **Beyond doctrine**

*Working to capture the essence of inter-religious dialogue*

One of the classes I teach on Western religions includes a lecture on inter-religious dialogue. I tend to end that lecture with a picture of the late Pope John Paul II, who was recently beatified. The picture was taken in May 2001 during the Pope's visit of the Umayyad mosque of Damascus in Syria, which is built on top of a former Christian basilica dedicated to John the Baptist. The picture shows the Pope holding in both hands a large copy of the Qur'an bound in thick, green leather. He is lifting the Qur'an up to his face while his eyes are closed. The Pope is kissing the Qur'an.

For anyone familiar with the liturgy of the Catholic mass, the Pope's gesture recalls an element of the mass when the priest, before and after reading the gospel, lifts the Bible to his lips to kiss it. This liturgical gesture is a



*LISAR Assistant Director Ulrich Rosenhagen uses photos to illustrate inter-religious dialogue in his undergraduate classes*

form of language; kissing the gospel symbolically expresses the priest's deep connection and devotion to the gospel's sacred text. Accordingly, when John Paul II kisses the Qur'an, he draws on the symbolic language of the mass and expresses the connection between man and the divine. Thus, with one simple gesture, the late

Pope acknowledges the Qur'an as sacred text as well as its divine origin.

Over the years, LISAR has organized conferences with a focus on either interdisciplinary scholarship or religious thought and practice among the different Abrahamic traditions. Currently we're looking

[lisar.lss.wisc.edu](http://lisar.lss.wisc.edu)

**Vol 1, Issue 3**  
**Spring 2011**

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**The Lubar Institute  
for the Study  
of Abrahamic  
Religions (LISAR)**

opened in July,  
2005, testimony  
to the vision and  
benefactions  
of Sheldon and  
Marianne Lubar  
of Milwaukee,  
Wisconsin.

The Institute's  
mission is to create  
better understanding  
of the Abrahamic  
traditions and their  
interrelationships by  
encouraging ongoing  
discussion of these  
traditions among  
scholars, members of  
those traditions, and  
the general public.



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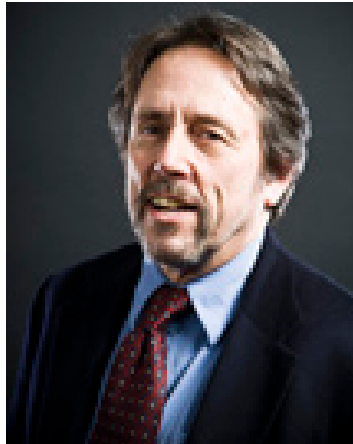
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# *From the Director*




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In late January I presented a lecture in conjunction with the New York Public Library's exhibition of Abrahamic manuscripts, "Three Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," and the accompanying series of neighborhood discussions, "The 411 on Faith," to which LISAR gave a grant. Two weeks later I attended a session of the White House Prayer Breakfast. On both occasions I witnessed a profound desire among the audiences to learn about other faiths. Shortly thereafter, the State of Wisconsin erupted over budget proposals put forward by Governor Scott Walker and the Legislature. The acrimony surged into the subsequent campaign for justice of the state supreme court and intensified during a recount occasioned by the twelfth-hour discovery of ballots that reversed the election's initial results. Meanwhile, massive (and unpredicted) protests against authoritarian regimes spread across the Arab world.

These events may seem unrelated, but to my mind they all shed light on the importance—and tenuousness—of civil society, the dense networks of voluntary organizations and personal association in which so much public discourse takes place. The willingness of citizens in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere to risk their lives for the chance to speak their minds testifies to the value they accord civil society, while the divisiveness of Wisconsin politics, albeit not bloody, speaks to its vulnerability even in places, like the Badger State, that enjoy the most propitious conditions for and robust traditions of nurturing it. This vulnerability suggests why interfaith conversations matter; they connect people who might otherwise remain segregated, thereby thickening civil society. Whether discussants agree matters less than that they respect the importance of continuing to talk. Facilitating the interfaith contacts so vital for sustaining American civil society comprises an important part of LISAR's mission. 

# LISAR Fellows Voice



**Tamar Shertok,  
LISAR  
Undergraduate  
Fellow, 2010-11**

I was raised in a Jewish home in Milwaukee, and I have a strong Jewish community in Madison. While living in Seville, Spain in spring 2010, however, I felt my place as a minority more than I ever felt before. The majority of the Spanish population is Catholic and as one of very few Jewish students living in Seville, I was singled out in classes and meetings, faced stereotypical remarks towards Jewish people, and was asked numerous questions by friends, teachers, Spaniards and Americans about Judaism.


At first, these encounters came across as ignorant and made me feel uncomfortable for being Jewish, but as the semester prevailed, I appreciated people's interest in my faith and lifestyle, and welcomed their questions. I learned how to converse with those who had never met a Jewish person and felt confident answering questions. Thus, as I was

learning about the Catholic faith, others were learning about my religious traditions. My experience abroad taught me the importance of getting to know other faiths as well as exploring one's own identity.

As a result of the comments and questions I received while abroad, I decided to continue learning and conversing with people of other faiths and traditions. I joined the Lubar Institute for the Study of Abrahamic Religions (LISAR) and as a fellow, I helped promote and facilitate dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Through my involvement in LISAR, I have become friends with students from diverse backgrounds and beliefs, making my experience at UW-Madison more meaningful.

Through the monthly forum discussions, coexistence dinners, and outside LISAR

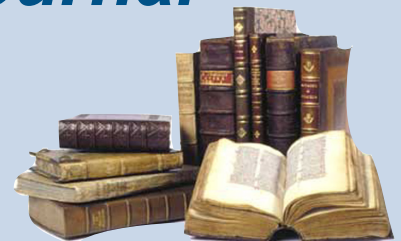
activities, my discomforts with other traditions have disappeared. In its place I have found a mutual respect, common understanding, and faith in humanity. LISAR illustrates the beauty and uniqueness of the three traditions rather than focusing on the differences.

My experience living in Spain ultimately sparked my interest in interfaith dialogue. Through the LISAR fellowship, I have had meaningful experiences in interfaith dialogue, where I continually learned about traditions, beliefs, and customs that were different than mine. LISAR became the instrument for bridging the gaps between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. As I move forward after graduation, I know the relationships I have formed in LISAR will be valuable to me in my efforts to continue fostering coexistence in the world today. 

## 2011 LISAR *Undergraduate Journal*

The Student Fellows of LISAR are thrilled to announce the publication of their signature project, the *Undergraduate Journal*. This document has grown in scope since its inaugural issue, but its purpose remains the same—the opportunity to present a student-eye view of LISAR's work. The pages, whether paper or electronic, of this year's issue gives participating students the opportunity to reflect on what the experience of working with peers from other faith traditions has meant to them. From their reports

on meeting with Dr. Aisha Al-Mannai, Dean of Shari'a at Qatar University and the first woman to hold such a position in an Arab country, to much more local opportunities, like explaining interfaith dialogue to high school church group in Milton, Wisconsin, the Fellows have had a full and rewarding year.





# Supporting the LISAR mission

While school may be out for many, summer is an excellent time to consider a gift to the Lubar Institute. Any contribution made this break will offer the opportunity

to participate in an unparalleled effort: the bringing together of Muslim, Jewish and Christian students, faculty and community members to share ideas, learn about other faiths and increase understanding of their own. Even the smallest gift you make this month enables LISAR to do something we could not otherwise accomplish. You may wish to visit our Web site to examine some examples of what levels of donation may do, but the real list of giving opportunities is endless.

The campaign for LISAR, like the Institute itself, is unique; it could happen only at a public institution with a long tradition of civic involvement like UW-


Madison. Consider becoming a part of our work. You can make a gift online, or for assistance in making a gift by mail, or to discuss further giving opportunities, please contact our UW Foundation representative.

## **Making a gift online:**

If you would like to make an online donation to the Lubar Institute via secure server, please visit <http://lisar.lss.wisc.edu/welcome/giving.html>

## **Making a gift by mail:**

For assistance in making a gift by mail, or to discuss further giving opportunities, please contact our UW Foundation representative:

Stephen Wald, Director of Development  
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[stephen.wald@supportuw.org](mailto:stephen.wald@supportuw.org) 

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forward to our next academic conference, which will be held in England, when on July 26-28 we'll partner with the Faculty of Theology at Oxford University.

For our past conferences we received a fair amount of praise for the high level of respect and appreciation with which the participants encountered each other. Since traditional doctrinal language has played only a minor role at these conferences, it seems as if doctrinal language cannot capture the very essence of today's inter-religious dialogue any more. After all, religious practitioners

know that there is a symbolic language beyond doctrine which is based on gestures, expressions and intuition, a language which makes immediate sense to the faithful despite its lack of discursiveness.

In the picture I mentioned, the Pope is employing this other type of language. By kissing the Qur'an, he speaks to the Abrahamic faithful in the language not of doctrinal theology but of piety and devotion. While doing so, he conveys to us that among the Abrahamic religions there is unity despite all differences, and that dialogue between Abrahamic people happens

on common ground rather than between exclusivist claims.

To me, the image of the pope at the Umayyad mosque serves as a metaphor for our conversations and endeavors at LISAR. Despite our various differences and particularities, the image can remind scholars and practitioners of the Abrahamic traditions of their ultimate source. The picture can remind Jews, Christians and Muslims that they all pray to the One who long time ago made a covenant with Abraham. 



*Ulrich Rosenhagen is LISAR's Assistant Director. He is an ordained pastor, originally in the Evangelische Kirche von Kurhessen-Waldeck (EKKW) and now in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He is also a lecturer in Religious Studies, offering courses in the history of religion of modern Europe.*