

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - MADISON



Lubar Institute

for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions

2009-2010 Undergraduate Journal



University of Wisconsin

Volume 2, Issue 1

Please Note: The views expressed in this journal are those of the individual students alone and do not constitute statements on behalf of the Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions.



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A Letter From the Director

Welcome Readers!

In the inaugural issue of the Lubar Institute's *Undergraduate Journal* last year, I ruminated on the importance of encounters between members of the Abrahamic traditions that take place away from close media attention and popular scrutiny; they are as momentous in their way as those among international religious and political leaders. The *Journal*, I proposed, "embodies one of those moments," reporting "the whisperings of still small voices that may well become larger over the years." That last statement mixed pride in the Fellows' having realized an ambitious project with uncertainty over whether a journal was a "one-and-done" deal or not. This year's Fellows have answered emphatically that it is not.

In their five-year history, Fellows have done much to further LISAR's mission to improve understanding of the Abrahamic traditions. As I write, emeriti/ae Fellows are working/studying (or are preparing to) in places as diverse as Israel, Egypt, India, and Mongolia, not to mention the United States, continuing their commitment to strengthen the values of religious pluralism vital for sustaining American civil society and peaceful international discourse.

This year's class has followed in their predecessors' footsteps, as this second edition of the *Journal*, conceived by the Fellows and overseen by Ulrich Rosenhagen, the Institute's Assistant Director, attests. It features articles on the symposium with the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights and the Rose Thering Fellowship with Jim Wallis, as well as personal reflections on Fellows' participation in events on and beyond the campus. It also includes comments from members of the Undergraduate Forum on the subjects they debated, which this year went further than ever in raising "edgy" subjects about theological and moral stances among the traditions. These conversations, pushed by the students themselves, manifest the kind of constructive colloquies that arise when people trust each other enough to voice their candid concerns. That the Fellows and their peers have managed this feat in a relatively short time credits all of them.

Charles L. Cohen

Charles L. Cohen
Professor of History/Religious Studies
Director, Lubar Institute for the Study



Our Mission:

To create better understanding of the Abrahamic traditions and their inter-relationships by encouraging ongoing discussion of these traditions among scholars, members of those traditions, and the general public.





About the Institute:

The Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions (LISAR) opened in July, 2005, testament to the vision and benefactions of Sheldon and Marianne Lubar of Milwaukee, WI. Concerned about rising religious tensions worldwide and believing Jews, Christians and Muslims to be capable of prolonged and honest inquiry into their common heritages and varying perspectives, they imagined a center that would advance mutual comprehension by mingling scholars with the general public, clergy with laity, and members of different faith communities with the citizens of Wisconsin, the United States, and the world. Through encouraging people belonging to and/or interested in the Abrahamic traditions to engage each other and to find out more about both these several traditions and their intersections, LISAR is dedicated to strengthening the values of religious pluralism so vital for sustaining American civil society and peaceful international discourse.

LISAR's mission emerges from the intimate yet often bitter relations that have historically existed between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Recognizing that the Abrahamic traditions share common origins and values, that their history has been deeply intertwined for some 1300 years, that much current popular as well as scholarly thinking tends to view them in isolation or as being antagonistic to each other, and that the legacy of misunderstanding and mistrust militates against peaceful discourse between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, LISAR seeks to cultivate greater understanding of these traditions and their relationships by encouraging ongoing discussion of these traditions among scholars, members of those traditions, and the general public.


LISAR carries out its mission by running programs in two linked spheres, the academy and the larger community. The academic enterprise contributes to scholarship and provides intellectual scaffolding for the community-oriented activities, which invite individuals to meet with members of other traditions and which, in turn, inform scholars about emerging issues in the relationships among the Abrahamic faiths. The Institute's academic projects include hosting the annual LISAR conference, offering lectures, publishing scholarly work, supporting initiatives concerning the Abrahamic faiths developed by other departments on campus, and contributing to the teaching mission of the UW Religious Studies program. Its community-oriented activities include campus projects such as the Undergraduate Forum and undergraduate fellowships, as well as off-campus works being developed under the auspices of the External Steering Committee, which is comprised of clerical and lay figures from around south-central Wisconsin. The merger of academic and community-oriented activities exemplifies the Wisconsin Idea, articulated by University President Charles Van Hise a century ago, that the walls of the University extend to the boundaries of the state. In the twenty-first century, those walls reach even farther. 

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Negotiating Religion Internationally


Stephanna Szotkowski (Fellow)

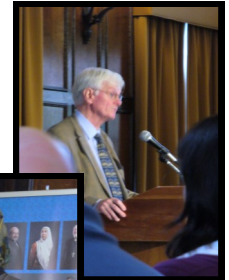
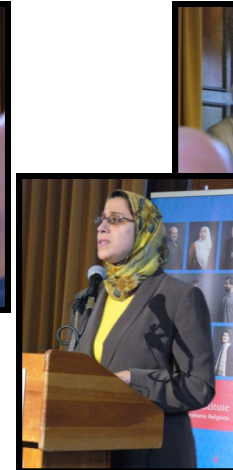
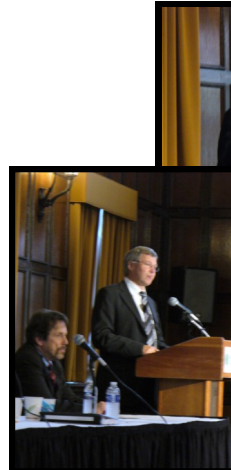
The LISAR-sponsored fall symposium, “Negotiating Religion Internationally” brought together some of the great minds on interreligious dialogue and international relations. The former Prime Minister of Norway, Kjell Magne Bondevik and Ambassador to Norway Thomas Loftus were joined by Professors David Morgan of UW-Madison and Amaney Jamal from Princeton University in a lively panel discussion. What struck me more than their mutual recognition of the merit of interfaith dialogue internationally was how they physically demonstrated their dedication to respectful discourse. Each speaker advocated the active role needed in interfaith dialogue to generate cooperation and peace in the world but on a smaller level, their thoughts provided a measure to act by in our daily lives.

As a political science, international studies, and religious studies major, I approach religion and particularly the topic “Negotiating Religion Internationally” in a distinct, possibly unorthodox way. Like Prime Minister Bondevik, I find it difficult to separate religious and political influences on decision-making processes whether done by the individual or international actors. In international relations, a common model used is called game theory. Thomas Schelling, a renowned game theory scholar and Nobel laureate, refers to it as the “theory of interdependent decision.” The common example of game theory is referred to as the prisoner’s dilemma, in which each actor playing has the incentive to defect in order to secure a higher reward. One of Schelling’s significant contributions to game theory is the idea that actors within a game can move beyond constraints or likely negative outcomes by developing convergent expectations based on something outside the game. Listening to the speakers on the panel, it became apparent to me that their remarks on interreligious dialogue provided a ubiquitous illustration of game theory principles.

Throughout the discussion, Bondevik and the other members of the panel spoke about the power of interfaith dialogue and how to use it as a meaningful tool for better relations. By sharing religious beliefs, talking, and listening, the speakers voiced their common goal to create constructive resolutions to conflicts through cooperation.

Bondevik specifically identified religious leaders in areas of conflict as people who should not be overlooked in dialogue processes whether the discussions be religious or political. He noted that religious leaders bring legitimacy and values of peace, unity, and human rights to the negotiation table and, in his experience, espouse nonviolent solutions. Bondevik has continued this work after his tenure as Prime Minister and started the Oslo Centre for Peace and Human Rights, which works closely with religious leaders and political leaders, such as Mohammad Khatami of Iran, to engage in dialogue and come to peaceful resolutions to conflicts. As with game theory, interreligious dialogue does not only apply to the international level but, as the speakers demonstrated, carries significant weight on the individual level.

As Bondevik stated during the discussion, “there are not one but several truths living side by side.” Indeed, the symposium brought together four people of various backgrounds and religions, but the audience, comprised of many of the LISAR undergraduate forum members, was also made up of people of similarly diverse backgrounds. The interreligious dialogue advocated by the panel and their dedication to dialogue on the international level can serve as a model for our own lives. While our discussions may not involve high-level, international actors, our methods remain strikingly similar. As we engage with each other, we encounter the same pseudo-game theory problem. Though it may be beneficial to gain more for ourselves, true progress must be made through cooperation. Interreligious dialogue can serve as an outlet and a legitimizing force for meaningful solutions, and hopefully understanding. In this way, Thomas Schelling’s idea still rings true—despite our differences on the individual level, to escape conflict, we can find a way to promote and secure cooperation through dialogue. 



LISAR Forum on Religious Stereotypes

Alison Herold

For one of the first meetings of our group I was asked to present on Christian cultural stereotypes. At first I felt that I would have a fairly simple task; in the end, however, I learned that it is extremely hard to present on a stereotype when you do not feel you embody it.

My main focus of the discussion was to look at pop culture's representation of Christians particularly in TV and media. I learned a lot of fun information, including the fact that Ned Flanders, the mustached, godly neighbor from—"The Simpsons," is the second most-recognized Christian in America after Jesus Christ, himself. I thought that this information was extremely important, especially when looking at stereotypes, because not only is, "The Simpsons," known worldwide, but it also portrays Christians in a positive light. Although Ned may be nerdy, he is wholesome, honest and just wants to please God (He once even says that he does everything the Bible tells him, "Even the stuff that contradicts the other stuff"). However, within the media, there are many negative stereotypes of Christians, which we discussed within our undergraduate forum, including the television show, "Family Guy," which takes a jab at Catholics almost every episode. As a Lutheran, I was able to laugh at the joke and know it was untrue but this is what brought upon the most discussion when looking at the stereotypes made for Catholics in particular.

Within all of the Christian denominations it seems that the Catholics are the group that in particular takes the most flack, especially when their ideas of birth control and Eucharist are portrayed in the media. This discussion was an interesting one because I, myself, was curious why Catholics are the butt of almost every single religious joke about Christians. I wanted to know what made them more laughable than the Lutherans, Methodists, and other denominations. Discussion ensued, and we concluded that, of all the denominations, Catholic values are in general stricter and more staunch than the others. Catholicism is based on a long religious tradition that has been around since the time of Jesus Christ and his apostles. Since the Reformation, it seems like Catholics have had to constantly defend their beliefs from attack.

Overall I felt that I learned a lot and it was an extremely enlightening discussion on American stereotypes about Christians and on how to remedy them. When leading this discussion I also wanted to talk about methods of how to remove stereotypes (which many would say is an impossible task). The example I brought up is when I personally worked with a rabbi to help make the temple a more welcoming place for people of college age, and how to remove the stereotypes that were held about the Jewish religion. This rabbi in particular decided to help the students view their religion outside of common held stereotypes to take them to South America to see how Jewish students their age practice their religion without the fear of fulfilling negative stereotypes. As a group we discussed if that would work for college-aged Catholics, and what I heard was agreement on the belief that the only way we could eliminate the stereotypes was to stop believing them ourselves. 🌟

Rose Thering Fellow: Jim Wallis: Lunch

Sarah Hasan (Fellow)

“What is the one thing you are most passionate about in this world that you have worked to, or want to work to change?” This was the simple question that was presented to us at the beginning of what became a profound discussion about with Rev. Jim Wallis. As we went around the table, undergraduates offered issues such as clean water, human trafficking, education, and sustainable development. The Reverend waited patiently, nodding after each response until we had heard them all.

The common thread of social justice then sparked a discussion Rev. Wallis brought full circle, advocating the need to address such issues with a faith perspective. He reiterated success stories of his experience with inter-religious dialogue, “act together, and talk while you’re acting” he said, encouraging us to take action in addressing problem issues together, and thereby boosting dialogue quality. He lauded efforts initiated by organizations such as the Interfaith Youth Core, bringing together youth from different faiths to build houses and talk about their beliefs along the way.

Reverend Wallis emphasized coming together in a common mission, digging deep into our own traditions for solutions, and exchanging this information while being sensitive and respectful to each other from the heart. With his pleasant sense of humor and compelling call to action, popular opinion was that he left us with a sense of empowerment that made this pre-lecture lunch a truly profound experience. 🌟

Rose Thering Fellow: Jim Wallis: Lecture

Sehar Sufi (Fellow)


Jim Wallis is the founder of Sojourners, the largest network of progressive Christians in the United States. Wallis is a man who advocates social justice and interfaith dialogue as being integral to not just the Gospel, but to the Abrahamic faiths. He spoke here at UW-Madison as the second annual Rose Thering Fellow, sponsored by our very own Lubar Institute for the Study of Abrahamic Religions. Wallis spoke on a unique topic— “An Evangelical Christian Looks at Jews and Muslims”.

Although he was speaking to an audience of Christians, Jews and Muslims, Wallis utilized his knowledge and experience in working with Christians from various denominations in explaining how to empower and reform interfaith relations. Wallis introduced a unique approach to interfaith dialogue, gleaned from his experience working with rival gangs in major cities across the nation. Surprisingly, Wallis drew from these experiences and applied them to uniting people from different religious denominations that would otherwise have nothing to do with each other. Wallis described one such encounter in his talk, "I've brought together the National Association of Evangelicals and the National Council of Churches. That's like bringing together the Crips and the Bloods." Wallis's views on interfaith and social justice are embedded in the general fundamental necessity in all three faiths to help thy neighbor. What is essential to interfaith is that one starts with working for social justice, and leaves the theological discussion for when you are in action together. Wallis is a strong believer in the concept that people will come together through engaging in this sense of duty and not merely through theological discussions and debates. Wallis urges people of different faiths to make a deeper inquiry into their respective faith traditions in how to effectively help one's neighbor. Debates, discussions and conversations about what you believe God commanded you to do works in bringing people together to an extent, but engaging in one of God's commandments together brings another level to interfaith dialogue.

Jim Wallis Lecture (continued)

Sehar Sufi (Fellow)

It is with this vision that Wallis sees true progress being made in the world and for faith in general. While working together for the good of humanity through protests, community development and so forth, Wallis recalls from his own experience the great things that can be accomplished which are not just exclusive to social justice and progress, but also in the interfaith arena—it happens concomitantly. He also encourages adherents of different faith organizations to engage in their own respective spiritual supplications and to be sincere with one's self. The sensitivity and respect toward each other should exist; however, there is no need to cower and hesitate from being who you are, Christian, Muslim or Jew. Wallis also had some words which truly empowered the audience. He placed emphasis on the skills and established networks that people of faith already have in areas with major problems, and that these people are indispensable to the struggle for justice everywhere.

Wallis presented a practical approach to interfaith dialogue—one that acknowledges interfaith as not about watering down your beliefs to come together, but acknowledging the higher goals that are shared between you and coming to an understanding of one another through working towards it. His call for social justice appeals to Jewish, Muslim and Christian sensibilities in regards to justice, goodness and duty to the divine. 



Interfaith Youth Core Conference Reflection

Jennifer Myers (Fellow)

This past October, three LISAR Fellows, past and present, armed with an SUV full of religious texts, LISAR brochures and four days worth of fruit snacks, made their way to Evanston, Illinois for the 6th Annual Interfaith Youth Core Conference. Over the course of this three day conference, Kirsten Erickson, Simon Dick and I met with students, professors, academic staff, rabbis, reverends, chaplains, activists, politicians and NGO workers from all corners of the globe, all with one common goal: to better our world and better understand one another through interfaith dialogue.

From the original spark of interest in the creation of an interfaith youth network in 1998, the IFYC was born. Originally run out a basement, the Interfaith Youth Core now has twenty-two full-time employees as well as the newly instituted Fellows Alliance, which bands together a group of exemplary collegiate interfaith organizers each year. The organization is led by its accomplished Executive Director, author and activist, Eboo Patel, whom we had the great pleasure and honor to meet while in Chicago.

Kirsten, Simon and I were not quite sure what to expect upon arrival at the Northwestern campus, but we became quickly enamored with the enthusiasm of everyone in attendance. The conference was organized to include several elements: two plenary sessions per day, four daily workshop sessions, networking meals and extra night events like film screenings and a special lecture from Rev. Jim Wallis.

Every morning began with an opening prayer or sentiment, each led by students of different faiths. Following the morning prayer, the plenary sessions generally invited a diverse panel of interfaith leaders to speak on different issues in faith communities. The plenary sessions featured a stunning array of top minds in a variety of fields; the Conference saw visits from Representative Keith Ellison, Hillel President and CEO Wayne L. Firestone, Chief Executive of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation Ruth Turner, Harvard University Humanist Chaplain Greg Epstein, Executive Director of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network Rami Nashashibi and many, many more. These leaders spoke to the efforts of their respective organizations and also shared insights on the future of interfaith leadership for today's youth.

Interfaith Youth Core Conference Reflection (continued)

Jennifer Myers (Fellow)



After the morning plenaries, conference goers were able to choose from a myriad of workshop sessions on every imaginable topic. Kirsten, Simon and I split up trying to hit the maximum number of sessions possible, but even after attending some thirty-six workshops over the course of the conference, there were still others

we wished we could have attended. Some of my favorite workshops were: “Voices from the Field: an Interactive Workshop around Palestinian and Israel Nonviolent Civilian Efforts,” “Interfaith Leadership for International Religious Freedom,” and “Engaging Media: Using Film to Build Bridges and Effect Change.” We all learned so much; every night at the hotel we were up for hours discussing the workshops, ideas and interesting people we had met over the course of the day.

For me personally, there is not a truly satisfying way to articulate the energy I felt at this conference. There was something completely exciting and hopeful about being amidst the most religiously, ethnically and nationally diverse group of people I have ever encountered and feeling an overwhelming sense of common purpose. The passion and positivity of the Interfaith Youth Core is unique and will, in my view, become a necessary tool in our ongoing global struggles against intolerance and violent extremism. To echo the words of Eboo Patel: “To see the other side, to defend another people, not despite of your tradition but because of it, is the heart of pluralism.” After this conference, I am excited about seeing a continued partnership between the Lubar Institute and the Interfaith Youth Core, which could make measurable progress to our organizations’ shared goals. 🌱

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Religious Dialogue Abroad

Emily Gordon


This year, as a member of the LISAR Undergraduate Student Forum, I had the fortunate opportunity to present on my year living in Israel. As a part of the group discussion on “Inter-Religious Dialogue Abroad,” it was my responsibility to reveal my own first-hand experiences living in a foreign country in which the purpose of inter-religious dialogue goes beyond the promotion of tolerance and education—indeed, it has the great potential of becoming the foundation for peace in a land all-too familiar with civil conflict and war.

After graduating from high school in 2006, I spent a year in Israel on a program called Nativ through the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. For the first half of my year abroad, I lived in downtown Jerusalem, just a short walk away from the sites of multiple terrorist attacks in previous years. As most people who have visited or lived in this area will admit, Jerusalem is one of the most interesting and complex cities in the world. It is at once the grounds of holy and sacred tradition and history for the three Abrahamic religions and a bustling metropolis, an international center of commercial activity and development.

On Friday afternoons, the eve of the weekly Jewish Sabbath, Jerusalem overflows with activity and excitement. The voices of vegetable, spice, fish and bread vendors in Mahane Yehuda—the outdoor market—shouting out their last-minute deals among the masses of humanity packed into narrow alleys that stood during the time of the great monarchies of Babylonia (“A kilo of grapes for 20 shekel! We give the best price!”) evoke an overwhelming sense of exhilaration. Scrambling through this organized chaos feels like running through a loud, heavy waterfall where you lose your thoughts in the sounds and sensations enveloping you. Within the span of an hour, as the Sabbath approaches, the busy alleys clear out, the vendors close their stands, the spilled wine slowly falls downhill through the cracks in the ancient streets, and Mahane Yehuda becomes peaceful. It seems as though the entire universe stops and stands still for the duration of the Sabbath, from sunset on Friday until Saturday evening.

Religious Dialogue Abroad (continued)

Emily Gordon

I see Friday afternoons at Mahane Yehuda as a microcosmic representation of Israel and American views on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. As a Jew living in the United States, I often feel burdened with the great responsibility of showing my friends, neighbors and acquaintances that Israel is actually a wonderfully intense country with some of the tastiest food, grumpiest store-keepers, freshest music and warmest communities that will open their doors and offer a seat at their tables to any stranger in need of a warm meal. Israel can also be incredibly difficult to navigate and may seem dirty and unorganized, especially compared to our high standards of comfort and cleanliness in the United States. Americans do not know these sides of Israel. They innocently—or ignorantly—take Israel for what they see on TV: a dangerous, bloody war-zone with suicide bombers on every block. While Israel has unfortunately seen far too much death and war than any country should withstand, at the end of the day, as the sun sets, it becomes quiet. Somehow, the violence, the religious conflict, the ideologies fade away, and it becomes a country just like our own half-way across the world. By showing this side of Israel—a country to which I am deeply connected—I hope to have created a greater and more salient peace in the minds of my peers in the LISAR forum. I believe that illuminating the quiet and less-publicized aspects of this difficult and wondrous country is what inter-religious dialogue among the Abrahamic religions is truly about; indeed, it can turn us all into enlightened advocates for peace. 

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Annual Week of Prayer

Simon Dick (Fellow)

Prayer lies central to my rooting in Judaism. Thus as I begin to learn more about other cultures and religions, prayer serves as gateway into the minds, dreams, and desires of those people I wish to know. Symbolism and the words of worship provide great insight into other peoples. So when the Week of Prayer finally arrives, I am always excited to go. During the Week of Prayer, around twenty or so students and I attended services of the three Abrahamic faiths. Friday, we attended a mosque as well as Jewish services at UW Hillel. On Sunday, we attended mass at St. Paul's, a local Catholic church. As I was unable to attend the Muslim service I shall limit my discussion to the Catholic mass. I've always been amazed at the beauty of the Catholic mass: the singing, interesting dress, and communal act of partaking in the host. During the course of our visit, Reverend Rosenhagen noted something I had not considered before - a shared symbolism held between our faiths.

In ancient times the Jewish people built the tabernacle which served as an encampment for God and for the Ark, things of great importance to the Jewish people. As we sat in the mass, I stared upon a small cube which the Catholics referred to as the tabernacle. Inside their tabernacle, the bread from communion resided. Having been transformed into the body of Christ, the followers now held this item as sacred as the ark, and identical to the God who once traveled with the Israelites in the wilderness.

Though the Lubar Institute does so much, I cannot imagine it without the Week of Prayer. By entering into the worship services of another we enter into their most intimate moment with God. It is a chance to truly know the other, and a key part in creating inter-religious peace. ۞



"I have set the LORD continually before me; Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my glory rejoices; My flesh also will dwell securely." Psalm 116: 8-9. (Simon Dick)

Homosexuality and Religion

Simon Dick (Fellow)


The topic of homosexuality can produce some discomfort in people. Lately it has become an increasingly political issue, as discussions arise around gay marriage and the place of homosexuals in religion. Yet as we spoke at our monthly meeting, I found nothing but respect among the participants which should be commended and admired. Though we disagreed on the issue, the Undergraduate Forum held a very well-mannered and extremely interesting conversation.

In exploring the topic we focused on why homosexuality is singled out from among the sins and why some may think it is not a sin. Certainly we place bank robbers in jail, but they receive nowhere near the picketing and heckling that gay persons experience. The same goes for adultery, another sex-related act considered a sin. It was suggested that, in the case of homosexuality, it is actually the openness of the act/sin which drives people to speak out against it. While I personally could not imagine instructing someone who was gay or lesbian to be less open or themselves, it was an interesting observation.

The discussion then turned toward the end result of each sin. While stealing, and adultery can and often do produce both emotional and physical pain, homosexuality, it seemed, was different. Here some struggled to define what the true consequences were beyond judgment from God (admittedly perhaps a very bad consequence). Some suggested it related to the need to reproduce as central to both religious belief through the repeated command “be fruitful and multiply” while others saw a purpose in ancient times for ensuring a culture would reproduce and continue.

Theological justifications were sought after. Some believed that the verse in Leviticus banning relations between a man and another man came in the context of things to avoid, as they were once pagan rituals. Others saw the texts as much more clear on this point. In discussing Islamic belief on the matter the importance of mirroring the life of the prophet Mohammed was brought up. Here we learned that one must have a good deal of witnesses in Islam to truly punish someone for the act.

In addition to our discussion we also watched clips from three interesting and perhaps also controversial movies - *Jihad for Love*, *Trembling before G-D*, and *One Nation Under God*. These added a great deal to the discussion and were very interesting. Some Forum members had some very valuable and valid concerns regarding the claims of the movies.

Overall the discussion could not have been better. People were very engaged and seemed to be generally interested in the conversation. I hope others enjoyed it as much as I had and have learned something as well. 

Personal Belief and Scholarship

Laura Partain

The theme of reconciling one's personal religious beliefs with the endeavor of religious studies can often be a controversial and a touchy subject. Religion in its very nature is not meant to be approached in the same way as other subjects are. There is a delicate balance between accepting religious texts as metaphysical sources that enter into supernatural realms, and analyzing the text to find a deeper meaning that can be supported by archaeological and scientific evidence. The two worlds of scholarly study and religious study differ in that scholars study holy writings as a dead text—something that has happened in the past and is no longer changing—while religious sects tend to believe that the writings are continuous movements in every day life. As a group presenting this subject at LISAR, it was important that we find a way to relate our views both as individuals and collectively in a manner that would relate our respect for each endeavor into religious studies.

The most noteworthy point is that both of these studies do not have to be at odds; rather they can be complimentary to one another. It is important to study these religious texts in order to keep the religious communities in check. The followers of different sects are affected by the framework of their religion and the study of said religions lends credence to their practices. This is also true when speaking of both the scientific and religious worldviews. There is a common misunderstanding that the scientific community is non-religious. This is not necessarily true; on the UW-Madison Campus there are quite a few science professors who are openly religious.

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."
2 Timothy 4:7-8. (Laura Partain)


Personal Belief and Scholarship (continued)

Laura Partain

On a personal note, I was brought up in both a Christian and scientifically grounded family. Coming to this university and studying religion allowed me to reconcile some of the previous questions I had regarding the mixing of the two fields. At points in my studies, I had difficulty with some of the information I would be hearing that would at times push me towards questioning my faith. It was at these times that I would talk to my religious studies professor and my teaching assistant

“You must see these studies through eyes of faith.”

for some perspective on my troubles. Both of them were very supportive and gave me the best advice I could have gotten during these times, “You must see these studies through eyes of faith.” It was after I realized that I myself could not simply deny that I felt God even during these periods of uncertainties that lead to me growing stronger in my own personal Christian faith.

There are numerous case studies show people turning away from faith after they pursue academic religious studies. However, there are also many times that people have turned towards a faith after becoming a scholar. The group at LISAR brought up this discussion, and it was clear that it is often up to the person as to how they choose to incorporate the scholarly information into their lives. Often, even in religious communities, people view religious texts as static pieces written long ago that should be used systematically only to formulate rules in religious sects. Looking at the Bible, however, one can see how people at the time in which it was written took the texts personally. They took the words as directed not at a future audience but to them particularly. Appreciating the Bible as having had real meaning for the people to whom it was originally delivered can open our eyes to how the spiritual world is still active. Doing so allows the Bible's texts to act not primarily as the grounds for systematic theology but rather to be incorporated into our lives, to serve not only as rules to live by but also as  words that live through us.

Faith and Orthodoxy

Andrew O'Connor

In the last meeting for the LISAR Undergraduate Forum, we discussed the issue of faith and orthodoxy. The word “orthodox” comes from Greek and means “having the right opinion,” and usually refers to adhering to the accepted or traditionally established faith. In this Forum meeting, representatives from Islam, Judaism, and Christianity took turns presenting traditional views and interpretations of what is considered “orthodox” and “unorthodox” within each faith. This discussion turned out to be, in my opinion, one of the most informative and enjoyable meetings of the Forum. Here I will provide a brief summary of the information presented by the three faiths as well as some general conclusions reached by the entire group.

Within Islam, the basis of all rulings comes from the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad, as passed down through the *sunnah* and *hadith*. There are no bishops or popes, and there has been no central authority in Islam since the times of the Caliph, so instead authority tends to rest upon prominent scholars, allowing for much fluidity and contestation between rulings. Thus, the presenting student stated that in Islam “orthodoxy” has often been considered as following the consensus of scholars through the generations of the religion's history. The presenter then turned to a topic of modern interpretations of Islam, focusing on two polar views: so-called ‘Progressive Islam’ and ‘Traditional Islam’, each of which consider the other to be unorthodox. Much of the differences between the two are based upon responses to modernity and colonialism and the West. Traditional Islam aims to create a modern Islam compatible with classic interpretations of the religion, whereas progressives tend to critique these approaches and prefer to break with the former, out of date interpretation of Islam. For example, in discussing whether women are allowed to lead prayers, most progressives would say “yes,” stressing the equality of the two genders, whereas traditionalists would say “no,” because this division had been decided centuries ago to protect women. The speakers also stressed that there were many diverse opinions and views within each, as indeed Progressive Islam is hardly a cohesive movement.

The presenters on orthodoxy within Judaism stressed the multiplicity of views within different movements. Even within the three branches of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed), there is much diversity, although they do indeed share certain characteristics.


Faith and Orthodoxy (continued)

Andrew O'Connor

These branches are faced with the modern issue of orthodox versus liberal views of their religion, which is sort of analogous to 'more observant' or 'less observant' interpretations. The student speaker also mentioned that within Judaism there is a strong movement toward coexistence, as most Jews, with the exception of some extremists, do not believe that most other people should become Jewish. They concluded with the Thirteen Principles of Faith of Moses Maimonides, a medieval Jewish philosopher and scholar, most of which have bearings on all branches of Judaism but are particularly central to Orthodox Jews. This also sparked the debate on whether members of the 'Jews for Jesus' movement could be considered Jewish. By considering Jesus to be God, some will say, they are turned away from recognizing the unity of God, while others say that if they self-identify as Jews, it was not within the authority of others to deny it to them.

The issue of orthodoxy has been an enormous issue throughout all of history, which the presenter on Christianity did well to articulate. Even within the Bible itself, the letters of the apostles Paul and John are concerned with issues of those who have fallen away from the faith, perhaps in reference to Gnostic communities. Future concerns included debates over the nature and personhood of Jesus Christ in regards to the balance of his humanity and divinity (the Christology debates). It was decided at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. that Christ had two natures, both fully divine and fully man, in a single person, although some believers in the monophysitism ('one nature') of Christ rejected the decision. Issues of orthodoxy can also be exemplified in the split between the Eastern and Western Churches over the nature of the Holy Spirit and the use of icons in worship. Perhaps the most well known example is the Protestant Reformation, where individuals such as Martin Luther and John Calvin questioned the authority of the Catholic Church and opted to return to the authority of the Bible alone ('sola scriptura').

We ended the session with the construction of three large diagrams depicting the divisions and organization of the three Abrahamic religions, which was particularly helpful for those of us not as familiar with faiths different than our own. It was revealed that each faith is split into various subdivisions, denominations, or schools of thought. Upon examination of these diagrams, many present were led to concede the point that perhaps there is no orthodoxy, or that conceivably determining what is orthodox is up to the individual.

All practitioners of faith must ultimately decide whether they are capable of discerning the truth of their religion or submit to the notion that authority may rest upon forces outside of their control--that truth exists independent of whether they accept it or not. 

Annual Conference: “Are There Limits to Our Dialogue? Interfaith Marriage and Conversion.”: Jewish Perspective

Stephanna Szotkowski (Fellow)

Ruth said, "Don't entreat me to leave you, and to return from following after you, for where you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God (Ruth 1:16).

“The souls’ refers to the souls which he had brought under the sheltering wings of the Sechinah, for Abraham converted the men and Sara the women, and Scripture accounts it to them as if they has made them...”(Rashi).

Rabbi Joshua Ben-Gideon of the Beth Israel Center of Madison began the afternoon session of the annual LISAR Conference with a discussion of conversion from a Jewish perspective. The annual LISAR Conference brings together some of the great leaders in interfaith work as well as many who are committed to meaningful, interfaith dialogue. Rabbi Ben-Gideon was definitely no exception.

He opened by describing the background of Jewish conversion. Reference to Jewish conversion can be found both in the Torah and the Talmudic commentary, particularly from Rashi. Ben Gideon noted that the above passage from Ruth is seen as the basic metaphor and rubric for Jewish conversion. Rashi refers to the multiple paths in which a person may undergo conversion but, ultimately, they are brought under the “sheltering wings of the Shekhinah,” i.e. the divine presence. These excerpts provide only an entry point in understanding the seriousness and profoundness of conversion to Judaism.


Annual Conference (continued)

Stephanna Szotkowski (Fellow)

Conversion is not taken lightly by the Jewish community and much caution is involved if a person helps a non-Jew to convert. Ben Gideon, who has helped many to convert, laid out the process of conversion to Judaism.

He described a one-year process in which a convert learns ‘What it means to become Jew.’ The year serves as a time for consideration and growth and as a way to live and experience the entire Jewish calendar. During this year, the convert becomes enmeshed in the Jewish community and tries to become one with a people whose souls received the Torah from Moses at Mount Sinai. This connection to the Jewish community serves as one of the three requirements of conversion to Judaism.

Rabbi Ben-Gideon explained that conversion must represent a solid understanding of Jewish life through a threefold conversion to the faith, living, and peoplehood. After a person wishing to convert to Judaism finishes their year-long process of conversion, they have mastered and made their own Jewish identity in a very organic way. For the convertes, Ben-Gideon stated that “conversion is not an endpoint, but a commitment to a beginning.” In all cases, the commitment to Judaism must exceed other gains from conversion, such as the purpose of marriage.


I learned much from listening to Rabbi Joshua Ben-Gideon’s talk. Before attending the conference, I had likened Jewish conversion to Roman Catholic conversion, both of which generally take a year to complete. What surprised me the most was that new convertes to Judaism, through the process of conversion, are supposed to achieve a level of righteousness beyond that of other Jews and that they become accepted completely into the community. As I sat listening to Rabbi Ben-Gideon speak, I began to understand the real power behind the process of conversion. In none of the three Abrahamic faiths is conversion to be taken lightly, and each step in the process is imbued with profound meanings. Truly, the process of conversion has a transformative effect on the convert and changes their lives forever. This year’s conference in a way also transformed my own religious outlook. It has made me more aware of my own faith and more interested in the processes and reasons why others would seek to join my community in belief. 

Annual Conference: “Are There Limits to Our Dialogue? Interfaith Marriage and Conversion.”: Christian Perspective

Simon Dick (Fellow)

This year’s Lubar Institute Conference discussed considerably more personal—and controversial—topics: conversion and interfaith marriage. Sometimes controversial, it was interesting to listen to the various speakers. As I sat and listened, I was particularly struck by the speaker who discussed Christian conversion.

One word stood throughout the course of his discussion – “love.” For him the love of Jesus was the most important thing. Desire to convert others came only in the form of wishing that they too would know this love. Though as a Jewish student, attempts at conversion can cause me to feel slightly uncomfortable, it was helpful to hear it given in this way. It forced me to consider to what extent I am willing to accept inter-religious dialogue and interactions. Should conversion attempts be avoided?

For me the answer seems to be no. To truly accept a Christian’s ability to fully practice their religion, mission, a central theme, cannot be removed. That having been said, it also requires mutual respect. While we must accept the desire of others to express their religious beliefs, there must be a point at which they respect others. One should only attempt to express religion so far as others are comfortable. This notion of “love” seems quite interesting. While the speaker spoke of his desire for others to truly know the love of Jesus, he was careful to include the importance of not making others uncomfortable. I truly appreciated the speaker’s words and gained a much deeper insight into the mind of Christian conversion. 



Annual Conference: “Are There Limits to Our Dialogue? Interfaith Marriage and Conversion.”: Muslim Perspective

Sarah Hasan (Fellow)


The afternoon session of the Fifth Annual LISAR Conference was concluded with the Muslim perspective on Conversion presented by Dr. Louay Safi, Adjunct Professor at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, and Fellow with the Institute of Social Policy and Understanding.

While many religious communities respond negatively to conversion out of Islam, conversion from other religions has always been celebrated. Dr. Safi explained the concept of *dawaa*, or the “invitation to Islam” as opposed to “forced” conversion, which is theoretically condemned. With a foundational message to always promote the freedom of religion, *dawaa*, he clarified, could be considered more of an outreach effort, leading by example and stressing respect of the humanity and dignity of the Invited. While the nobility of undertaking the call to Islam is notably immense, there has been no agreement among Muslim groups on how to rightfully conduct *dawaa*. In fact, among the many schools of Islam, the Hanafi (Sunni) have taken a lighter approach overall. Thus there is no prescribed method, except that once the message is proclaimed, the ultimate decision of whether conversion has occurred is decided by God; in this way, he says, human authority over one’s conversion is thereby eliminated.

To elucidate the Muslim perspective in a social context, Dr. Safi touched on the history of the Ottoman Empire, providing examples of women who divorced their husbands based on their spouses’ alleged conversions out of Islam. He said that, in Islam, there is no compulsion in religion; followers come to their own convictions, and I would think that this is what is meant to define the intensity of one’s connection with their faith.


Annual Conference (continued)

Sarah Hasan (Fellow)

Tracing this concept of the need for conviction back to Noah, Dr. Safi spoke of how Islam values the freedom of belief, that matters of faith are by no means determined by human judgment, but rather will be settled on the Day of Judgment. In fact, he said, the Holy Qur'an makes only two references to penalty against conversion out of Islam that he quoted from Surah An-Nisa (4) and Surah Al-Maeda (5). These references further substantiated conversion as a Divine judgment, thereby necessitating the respect and dignity of all people. Conversion and faith are matters of the heart, he said, and it would be better not to impose on it. 



2009-2010 LISAR Fellows

We would like to take this opportunity to personally thank you for your support and your interest in our journal. This has truly been a collaborative work of the fellows, the forum members, and the LISAR administration. Thank you everyone for your thoughtful reflections, submissions, and your verses of inspiration that adorn the pages of this journal. We encourage everyone, readers and forum members alike, to continue engaging in interfaith dialogue. Peace be with you, Shalom, and Salaam! 

THANK YOU!



Simon Dick



Sehar Sufi



Sarah Hasan



Jennifer Myers



**Stephanna
Szotkowski**



