

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2013 Undergraduate Journal



Dr. Ulrich
Rosenhagen

Steve
Buting

Saad
Siddiqui

Ben
Agatston

Tim
Baerg

Jessica
Hare

Naman
Siad

Rachel
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Walker

The Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions
University of Wisconsin–Madison

The Undergraduate Fellows are a selected group of students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Representing the Abrahamic faiths of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, the students meet weekly with Lubar Institute staff to talk about religion, participate in campus and community activities, and develop interfaith leadership skills.

This *Journal* collects their end-of-year reflections on their involvement with the group.

Views expressed here are those of the individual students and are not statements on behalf of the Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions.

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A Letter from the Assistant Director

Dr. Ulrich Rosenhagen, Pr.

Just recently, I re-read Eboo Patel's memoir *Acts of Faith*, his coming-of-age story of an Indian-American Muslim from Chicago. As founder and head of the Interfaith Youth Core—a Chicago-based organization that brings together young people of different religious backgrounds for community service and dialogue—and architect of the President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge, Patel is certainly one of the crucial voices of interreligious dialogue these days. About a year ago, he came to Madison to talk about community service and his own vision for contemporary interreligious dialogue. In the postscript of *Acts of Faith* he summarizes the essence of such a vision in two words: "language" and "space." Patel writes: "We need a language that allows us to emphasize our unique inspirations and affirm our universal values. We need spaces where we can each state that we are proud of where we came from and all point to the place we are going to." For Patel, "language" and "space" are the two mainstays of interreligious dialogue in the twenty-first century.

For the fifth time we are publishing an annual edition of the Lubar Institute's *Undergraduate Journal*. As in previous years, the *Journal* is the voice of our Undergraduate Fellows, those

students who are awarded an annual stipend to meet regularly for interreligious conversations and advance the mission of the Lubar Institute on and off campus. For this latest collection of

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essays, we decided to change the Fellows' assignment. Whereas in previous years we had asked our Fellows to reflect on the different events organized by the Institute throughout the year, this time around we wanted to hear a more personal voice. Accordingly, we asked our Fellows to meditate on *their* year with the Lubar Institute. We asked them for thoughts on their own interreligious journey in 2012/13. What has been important for them throughout the year? How have the conversations with the "Abrahamic other" changed them and their attitudes? How does this last year at the Institute fit into their life stories thus far?

Anybody who carefully reads the essays compiled in this edition of the *Journal* will surely notice that the two mainstays of interreligious dialogue for Patel are also at the center of the Undergraduate Fellows' experience. The Fellows' essays provide ample evidence of the space the Institute provided for their conversations about service and prayer, rituals and doctrine, representation and meaning. The essays show deep appreciation of the fact that the Institute is a distinct and safe setting where these thoughtful and intimate conversations can take place. They acknowledge the Lubar Institute as a unique space on campus where it matters where you are from and where you go in the twenty-first-century America of religious pluralism.

But the essays are also important examples of a younger generation's quest for a new language of interreligious discourse. By reflecting on their personal searches and struggles, by reporting on agreement and disagreement with

the Abrahamic other(s), by pondering about consensus and distance, the Fellows not only unfold a rich tapestry of interreligious student experience at UW-Madison, they also explore a language between Abrahamic traditions which reaches beyond mere religious tolerance. To me, this development has become especially clear during several interfaith conversations on campus facilitated by our Fellows as well as the campus-wide community service project spearheaded by the Fellows. Here, more than in other endeavors, the Fellows have taught me that interreligious dialogue doesn't stop by just marking differences. Instead, interreligious dialogue challenges us to look for a new language growing out of curiosity and respect as well engagement and participation. By identifying what we have in common and by working together for the greater good while drawing on the best of our own traditions, we are actively seeking to understand the other beyond tolerance. The Fellows' essays wonderfully document this exploration towards a new language between Abrahamic traditions.

This year, my special thanks go first to Ariana Horn, Brad Klingele, Sari Judge, and Prof. Charles Cohen. They all deserve a lot of credit for their careful reading and editing of the students essays. The Institute is further indebted to Meg Hamel, our new Communications Director, for the laborious but creative task of designing and formatting the *Journal*. To all of you, and to the Lubar Undergraduate Fellows of 2012/13, thank you.

Shalom, Peace, Salaam.



Ben Agatston

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Looking back on my sophomore year at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I can see a distinct change in my confidence. My Rabbi emphasizes the importance of growth. Whether it occurs in one's own faith, in regard to one's relationships with others, or just in one's general progress in life, growth is key to maintain a fulfilling life. As I look back to September 2012, I remember walking into the first Undergraduate Forum with high expectations and even higher nerves. Compared to where I am now, it is almost comical to remember how nervous I was to discuss interfaith issues. I cannot put a finger on exactly why being a Undergraduate Fellow boosted my confidence so much. I'm not sure if it is what I learned about my faith and myself. Perhaps becoming comfortable with people from other faiths helped bolster my self-confidence.

The first time I realized that this change was occurring was in November at one of my first Lubar Institute events. While there, I introduced myself to the couple in front of me and asked them who they were. I quickly learned I was the only Fellow who was unaware that I was speaking to Sheldon and Marianne Lubar, the name-

sakes of the Institute. The conversation I had with Mrs. Lubar alerted me to my growth that was occurring without me realizing it.

She asked how being a Fellow had affected me, and I was ashamedly unable to answer her question well, since I was only two months into the Fellowship. She continued to ask me if I felt

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more empowered since beginning the Fellowship, and after mulling it over for a short while, I realized that this was the exact feeling my time as a Fellow had instilled in me. As early as two months into participating in interfaith dialogue and working closely with students from other faiths, I was starting to reap benefits from the experience, though I was not necessarily able to put the feeling into words.

After accepting the Fellowship, I knew I would be working with people from other faiths, but did not realize the caliber of people I would be working with. I strongly believe part of my growth is a direct result of spending time with these people.

Whether it was learning and discussing topics with renowned author Charlotte Gordon, spending time with religious and academic leaders such as Pastor Professor Rosenhagen, listening to Pulitzer Prizewinner Ayad Akhtar speak, or studying and debating with the other Fellows, I was constantly engaged, challenged, and forced to reconsider my views on religion and the world. Unlike any other student organization I am involved with, the Lubar Institute has forced me to think globally.

A childhood Jewish song goes, "Wherever you go, there's always someone Jewish," but my time with the Lubar Institute has reminded me that, in our society, all Abrahamic religions have been disseminated to nearly the entire world.

Another Fellow, Tim, presented on his family's form of Christianity, which heavily reflected its Nigerian background. The country is divided into Muslims and Christians, controlling the

north and south, respectively. Though divided geographically, the two religions coexist, and Tim compared it to being somewhat analogous to the relationship between northern and southern Christianity.

Later in that Forum, two Muslim students spoke about their ethnicity. Saad's family hailed from India, while Megan's (a convert) was from Ireland. While most Jews I know are from European descent, I did not realize the other Abrahamic religions were so diverse. Hearing these backgrounds allowed me to think on a global level when issues arose in my life, whether they were in an academic or social situation. This new mode of thinking was one of my most growth-intensive experiences.

As the second semester started, the Fellows began planning our Week of Prayer, scheduled to take place during the first week in March. When I entered the *Jumu'ah* service, I felt the same feeling I did at the first Undergraduate Forum. However, this time I was less nervous and more excited to experience a new prayer service.

As it was my first time in a mosque, immediately after entering I was shocked to learn that all participants remove their shoes before praying. However, I am fully confident that, after a semester as a Fellow, I was much more open and confident in entering the service, partially because I knew others who would be there, but more importantly, since I now knew Muslims on a personal level, I was much less nervous joining their service. From my experience, it seems that people are cautious and nervous when around those from different backgrounds. However, once

they meet people from different religions or ethnicities, they realize how many things they have in common, and once that realization is made, their demeanor is completely and forever changed. Personally I can attest to this, and I think that change was cemented after the prayer service.

I had also never been to a Sunday morning Lutheran service. I had attended Midnight Mass at home before with family friends, so I was less apprehensive walking into the church. My prior churchgoing experience was at a Congregational church, and almost exclusively featured community members leading prayer. Since it was Christmas, it was not a usual service. Also, since it was the last service of the three Abrahamic religions we had gone to, and I had already seen the Christian and Muslim Fellows attend and enjoy a Shabbat service, I was more comfortable and open when attending the Sunday service.

The Lutheran service appeared to be a more “typical” service than those I had previously attended, as it was the weekly prayer and not a holiday. The community interaction was much different than what I had previously experienced. Prayer was led by three clergymen rather than by community members. Additionally, at a certain point in the service, worshippers shook hands with each other, saying, “Peace be with you.” This touching tradition fostered a sense of community and acceptance, even though I had never met the people around me. The smaller parts of prayer, such as these, are what truly create a community and make worship special.

Though this service was much different than what I had experienced at home, it was equally, if not more, beneficial. Everything that was new and different about this service (clergymen, bigger chapel) was an exciting experience and learning opportunity. I have never been to a Jewish service that was led by more than two Rabbis, and this delegation of leadership was a refreshing change of pace.

The last notable event the Fellows put on was the President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge. Though the Fellows and I began planning the event early in the fall semester, it did not really materialize into something legitimate until about late February. Our original vision was to send out interfaith groups to service sites across Madison, in an attempt to foster interfaith dialogue and community outreach. As sometimes happens, we ambitiously overestimated the amount of involvement we would get from student organizations, but this is one of the obstacles that must be overcome when one first begins a large, annual event.

After downscaling our operations, we focused on the Salvation Army, Savory Sunday, the Goodman Community Center, and St. Vincent De Paul Port (a men’s shelter). While we had originally planned to pick a common theme—homelessness, hunger, literacy—we deviated from this plan as the scheme grew to accommodate more people. However, our final project did focus on hunger. The groups at the Salvation Army helped serve dinner, as did those at Savory Sunday. The volunteers at the Goodman Community Center ran a very successful canned food drive at grocery

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stores across Madison, and those at the St. Vincent DePaul Port helped serve lunch and prepared a meal.

My event took place at the Salvation Army, where a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew, and I took to serving a Sunday dinner to the homeless. The event was extremely reminiscent of my past, as my family used to go to a soup kitchen in New Haven, Connecticut, every Thanksgiving and Christmas morning. Though the Week of Prayer was probably the most interesting event, this was definitely the most fulfilling. One of the main unifying traits among the Abrahamic religions is community service, and it was extremely rewarding to be working alongside Fellows and other volunteers serving those less fortunate.

The service day was preceded by a party-mixer event at the Lowell Center, in which food, drinks, and interfaith di-

alogue were shared in a casual setting. This celebration at the end of the year was the moment when I realized how much the Lubar Institute has changed me in the past eight months. I am nearly certain that I would not have been as comfortable, confident or enjoyed the mixer as much as I did since having been a part of the program.

Throughout this semester, serving as a Fellow has taught me many intangible things, the foremost being the value of trying new things, especially those that originally make you feel uncomfortable. Whether it was attending my first Forum and seeing girls with “things” on their heads—*hijabs*—or attending a Sunday morning Lutheran service, the knowledge one gains after experiencing these different activities that instill unease is invaluable. ●

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Tim Baerg

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When I first heard that there was an Abrahamic Interfaith institute on the UW campus, the scholar—and more importantly, the Christian—in me sought out the opportunity to learn more about this organization. As I filled out my application for the Undergraduate Fellowship, I could not help but think how my dynamic spiritual journey as a Christian would be further developed into something more beautiful through participating in interfaith dialogue. Now that I have graduated from the program, I can confidently say that all my expectations have not only been met, but greatly surpassed. Not only has my understanding of other religions grown by discussing issues in the safe space created by the Lubar Institute, I have matured as a Christian.

After attending the first Undergraduate Forum of the year, I was surprised to see the great diversity present in the room. In this first meeting, every member of the Forum brought their own questions about religion to the group, and as a unified unit, we pieced together our thoughts to create an organized agenda for the academic year.

Although such a task might sound

simple on paper, in actuality the exercise was quite challenging. The ability for a group of religiously, ethnically, and intellectually diverse students to agree while expressing many unique opinions occurs rarely on our divided campus. In contrast, this Forum demonstrated maturity and goodwill. Such positive interactions early on in the year encouraged me, as a Christian,

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to mimic what took place at the Forum that day. I believe that our interfaith teamwork resembled something that Christ would have done. When I realized that, I made sure to maintain that positive energy throughout the year.

As with the Forum, I quickly formed valuable relationships among the Fellows. One thing that I immediately noticed was that each Fellow had his or her own unique interests in the other Abrahamic faiths.

For example, in our first Fellows' meeting, Meghan, a Muslim, asked Ben and Rachel, the Jewish representatives, a question about how one could consider oneself culturally or ethnically Jewish while they might not feel any particular attachment to Judaism religiously. Ben and Rachel were more than happy to address such questions and they answered them in a gracious and productive manner that expanded everyone's perceptions of Jewish culture and religion.

Meghan's question not only served as an icebreaker for discussion, it also revealed her inner thirst for knowledge of other religious and cultural traditions. As the year progressed, numerous questions like this one were brought up in our weekly Fellows meetings. These questions not only improved our academic knowledge of the faiths, but also created a space where each one of us could share our personal points of view. Sharing religious experiences brought us closer together and established a positive atmosphere.

I was greatly influenced by a conversation in which Meghan described how coverts are portrayed within popular culture. Like many Scottish-American

youth, Meghan was raised in a Protestant home. However, unlike many of her peers, her spiritual journey eventually led her to Islam. Through her conversion process, she was introduced to Saudi Arabian customs that observed Islam in different ways from other Muslims around the world. Although Meghan thought these practices were universally "Muslim," she eventually learned that they were found nowhere in the Koran, and furthermore, were specific to the Saudi Arabian people.

As I listened to her perception of how culture and religion often overlap, I could not help but realize how the same issues applied to Christianity. Therefore, I challenged myself to let my Christianity speak for itself through my words and actions without incorporating certain cultural values.

I quickly learned, however, that religion influences culture just as much as culture influences religion. Hearing how Christianity, Islam, and Judaism were affected by cultures around the world helped improve my knowledge of all three Abrahamic religions, and dismantled certain stereotypes I held.

For instance, prior to hearing Ben and Rachel's presentation about food in Jewish culture, I assumed that most Jews, whether religious or not, abided by the food regulations of *kashrut*.

Little did I know that *kosher* food differs from *kosher*-style food! Ben even clarified that it was completely legitimate for *kosher*-style food to violate the food laws provided by *kashrut*, including laws forbidding the consumption of pork. *Kosher*-style food, unlike the food prepared according to *kashrut*, has influenced every Jewish society.

Ben continued to explain that some of these food ways, especially those in large metropolitan areas in the West, have been almost completely cut off from their Jewish roots to fit within popular Western culture. After hearing the history of certain Jewish foods, the idea of how culture and religion can mesh became clearer to me.

The conversation of religion and culture reminded me of how Christians are viewed in society. Nevertheless, it also reminded me of how much I did not care. While listening to how others might perceive me, I questioned how I perceived myself as a Christian. Though numerous thoughts ran through my head, the one that jumped out to me the most was this: am I the kind of Christian who shies away from interacting with others who do not necessarily identify with my faith? Although the answer to such a question might seem obvious to some, I really did not know how I felt. Though I engaged in respectful dialogue with members of other religions, did I actually identify as a Christian who would become intimate with people of other religions?

After serious thought, I realized that these Undergraduate Forums affected my spiritual journey by allowing me to become intimate with those of different faiths. After this recognition, I began to perceive myself as an open-minded Christian who seeks to do what I believe Christ would want me to do: break bread with members of other faiths.

Another Forum meeting that influenced the course of my spiritual journey was the discussion we had about how popular media portrays religion and how this recognition helps disman-

tle stereotypes about our own faith traditions.

Although I have been a Christian since childhood and have been acquainted with numerous charismatic Christian forms of worship, a Christian presenter introduced me to the Appalachian American Christian practice of snake handling. She explained that this ritual, although extreme, was based on Mark 16:17–18, and has been used to demonstrate that the power of God will allow anyone with faith to do anything, even handle snakes without fear.

Such a thrilling practice, done only by a small sect of Christians, marked a perfect example of how the popular media will use radical traditions to generalize about an entire group of people. As a result of activities like this, we discussed how the media likes to make zealous Christians look like foolish, dramatic people who are incapable of fitting into mainstream society.

Additionally, we discussed how the American media loves to stereotype all Muslims as Arab, long-bearded, *hijab*-wearing foreigners who, from time to time, do something extreme in order to grab the world's attention.

The Muslims in the Forum described how they often feel that the media portrays Muslims as people who are a threat to American peace and who, all too often, engage in violent and terrorist activities.

After hearing the Muslim perspective, I greatly sympathized with them for the inaccurate characterization of their religion. While some argue that “Islamophobia” has dwindled since 9/11, I greatly disagree. After hearing stories from Forum members stating

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that they receive harassment at airports simply because they are Muslim, I realized that great religious injustices still occur every day. Such a realization immediately made me realize that it was my civic and Christian duty to fight for justice in our corrupt world. In doing this, I hope to carry the messages I learned from the Forum into the surrounding world. I believe that if Jesus were on earth today, he would do the same thing.

Although I loved the discussions that took place within our Fellow and Forum meetings, I found great joy in leaving our Lubar bubble in order to promote interreligious dialogue to those who might not be familiar with the Lubar Institute.

In our first week coming back from Winter break, a group of Fellows and I engaged in religious discussion with a group of students living in the UW residential halls. The students and House Fellows who participated in discussion brought rich personal stories and fun conversation to the workshop.

I cannot remember anyone in the 20-person circle remaining quiet, nor can I remember any feelings of animosity or discomfort. Rather, I remember an engaging conversation that brought about many personal, yet shared, emotions.

Personally I enjoyed sharing my religious views with others while attentively listening to theirs as I searched for points of agreement and disagreement. I particularly admired talking to an atheist House Fellow who was majoring in philosophy. His take on religion was much different than I would have thought. For example, he did not

think that religion was pointless, but rather a necessity in order to bring the masses together for hope of a brighter future.

Before encountering a person like him, I was under the impression that all atheist philosophers were anti-religion. He, however, gave me hope and inspired me to never judge a book by its cover, and to not judge other's ideology simply because they aren't religiously devout.

I personally thought that this dorm event fulfilled the exact aims of the Lubar Institute, which is to encourage religious acceptance among all. In our group, Christians, Muslims, atheists, and agnostics all related to each other through one common goal: to better understand one another.

Though I greatly enjoyed all events that the Lubar Institute organized this year, without a doubt my favorite event was the Abrahamic Week of Prayer. On this exciting weekend, I had the unique privilege of attending an Islamic Friday *Jumu'ah*, a Reform Jewish Shabbat, and a Lutheran Church service. Each event marked a unique, beautiful new experience that allowed me to gain a greater appreciation for each of the Abrahamic faiths.

The first service, *Jumu'ah*, was of particular interest to me because it was the first time in my life that I attended an official, organized Islamic worship service. As I watched others go through the motions of prayer, I observed the great diversity within the crowd. This observation reminded me of the immense variety of cultures and ethnicities within the Islamic faith. As in Christianity, people of numerous backgrounds gather together with the

common goal of following God. This, to me, emphasized the beautiful ethnic diversity of the Islamic faith.

Following *Jumu'ah*, I attended Hillel's Friday Shabbat service. I found it interesting that this service, as opposed to even the church service the following Sunday, was most similar to the worship services I attend at Mt. Zion Baptist Church. The worship style of the Reform Jewish service included reading of scripture through song, a practice that I have been accustomed to for years. One thing that struck me as unique during the service was the wearing of the *yarmulke*. When I wore the *yarmulke*, I learned a religious and cultural lesson.

The final event that I attended was the Christian worship service at Luther Memorial Church. This event was interesting to me because it celebrated

Christianity in a very different manner than I was used to. I appreciated the style and I enjoyed the overall dynamic of the experience.

I believe participating as a Fellow in the Lubar Institute taught me more than I ever could have learned in an academic environment. Not only did I receive the field experience necessary to better understand the teachings of the Abrahamic religions, the experience also put me in a position to express my beliefs to others.

Through the sharing of my own faith, I grew as an intellectual, and more importantly, as a Christian. I sincerely appreciated the unique experience I had with the Lubar Institute, and hope to continue engaging in interfaith dialogue as I grow older in age, in faith, and as I progress on my own spiritual journey. ●

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Steve Buting

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As I write this reflection, it has been almost a year since I went to my first event by the Lubar Institute lecture by interfaith leader Eboo Patel, a Muslim–American and founder of the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago. I had been accepted as an Undergraduate Fellow the previous week, and I was invited to go to a luncheon just hours before his lecture. At the luncheon, Patel spoke on the importance of interfaith dialogue and cooperation on university campuses, and he lauded the Lubar Institute for its excellence in promoting these goals on UW–Madison’s campus.

I remember being very impressed with the Lubar Institute from the beginning because of his comments, and I will never forget the lessons that he taught me through his speech that night (and his book *Acts of Faith*, which I read some time later).

Lesson 1: You are much less likely to stereotype or generalize about a religious group if you know a member or adherent personally.

Lesson 2: Interfaith leaders are meant to be bridge-builders between different faith communities so that those personal relationships can begin to form.

These two lessons, these two truths, have rung true for every encounter I have had this year as part of the Lubar Institute, and it has been the motivation for much of my work this year as a Fellow. I would like to reflect on what these two lessons have meant for me this year and the challenges I have faced while applying these truths as an interfaith leader.

This year has been one of remarkable growth for the Lubar Institute and for me personally. At a glance, the students involved at Lubar were able to pray, laugh, and bond during some wonderful discussions in the Under-

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graduate Forum. The Fellows were given the opportunity to speak to dozens of the UW Residence Hall House Fellows during their Diversity Training; we also went to the Residence Halls in order to facilitate several interfaith dialogues. In collaboration with the President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge, we hosted our first Interfaith Service Weekend that drew almost 100 people to dialogue and community service.

My personal growth has less definitive milestones, but the organization of the Interfaith Service Weekend was crucial to me. I was able to spearhead the operation, and it was humbling to see it take shape, sometimes shakily, during the months leading up to April. However, before I give away too much about the finale, let me take you back to the overture in September 2012 and begin by explaining one of my reservations about joining Lubar.

Early in the year, I recognized a tension that would continue unresolved throughout my time in the Lubar Institute. I asked two important questions of myself in my first reflection in mid-September: "What does it mean to be devoutly Catholic and also a religious pluralist?" and, related to that question, "Can evangelization and interfaith dialogue coexist?"

These questions puzzled me and continued to play cat-and-mouse in my mind as I participated in Forum discussions, informally chatted with the Fellows before and after our weekly meetings, and talked about the Lubar Institute with my roommates and Catholic friends.

On the one hand, Jesus Christ clear-

ly gives the command at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations." On the other hand, the values of interfaith and religious pluralism discourage proselytization during discussions between faiths because it tends to block honest and sincere dialogue. Navigating and balancing these two perspectives has weighed heavily on my mind at times, and I would be remiss to ignore them, however uncomfortable these ideas are in the modern world.

To me, much of this year has been a reflection on what it means to be a Catholic living in a religiously diverse world. How does my Catholic identity shape the way I view other religions, and how does that affect my interactions with them? How am I being called to live out my faith in ways that respect others while also presenting my own views boldly?

A unique moment that exemplified my experience in Lubar occurred during my favorite Forum discussion of the year during our Week of Prayer. We started the weekend by attending the Mosque on Friday for *salat*, continued with the synagogue for Shabbat services and dinner, and ended with church for worship on Sunday morning.

The three services gave us a lot to think about and reflect upon, and our conversation afterward was very engaging and personal. We shared our experiences of being in a different religious space, and the discomfort we felt while not understanding the service's language and following clumsily in the ritual actions. We shared how the presence of our friends of different Abrahamic faiths helped us become more

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I connected with some of the Fellows very particularly because of this love for tradition, and we each deepened our understanding of what ritual meant in our respective traditions.

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aware of the oddities, as well as the joys, of our own worship tradition. Our conversation became more deep and personal about the very nature of God. We all accepted that the God we all prayed to was the same, but what was He like? When push came to shove, was He a just or a merciful God, or was He both?

During our conversation, disagreements emerged between those who saw God's essential nature as Justice, Mercy, or both, and I found that the different members of the Forum lined up along this continuum rather than remaining within the doctrinal confines of their own Abrahamic tradition.

Our conversation taught me a lot about how my fellow Abrahamic participants perceive their relationship with God and what that means for their life. It also dispelled any myths that religious people believe in all doctrines uniformly, and it allowed for the possibility of diversity and disagreement within traditions.

The Forum clarified for me that I viewed God as Mercy and not solely Justice. As the year progressed, this truth took on more significance as I learned how my relationship with God should be applied to others. At the moment, however, this realization connected only on a theological level rather than a moral one.

One of the most surprising revelations during the Forum discussions and the weekly Fellows meetings was how much we drew from the same well when we conversed about our own religious tradition. Our similarities were truly astounding! One aspect that I had realized previously but that was heightened immensely during our conver-

sations was our dedication and love of ritual worship. I connected with some of the Fellows very particularly because of this love for tradition, and we each deepened our understanding of what ritual meant in our respective traditions. This often illuminated the hitherto mysterious aspects of my own tradition. Learning about how Judaism's Shabbat service was organized or why Muslims performed certain ritual actions during *salat* enlightened my understanding of Judaism and Islam while simultaneously helping me to appreciate the beauty of Catholicism's ritual, especially in the celebration of the Mass with its ancient roots in the Near Eastern world.

A key component of ritual that spoke to me was piety. In the Catholic tradition, it is defined as a gift of the Holy Spirit that "perfects the virtue of religion, which is the practice of justice toward God." Piety is rendering to God the just praise that is due to His name, and attempting to do this has been a large part of my Catholic identity since entering college.

Meeting other students who shared this outlook was a beautiful realization that there are other young people outside my own community at St. Paul University Catholic Center that desire to give God their first fruits in their worship of Him. However, I fully admit that my desire to live more religiously at times tends toward a self-interested, judgmental "pietism" that is really a distortion of piety. This has led to a hardened heart and a lack of charity that has hurt my ability to actually hear what others are saying when they disagree with me.

This has occasionally and unfortu-

nately been my experience, typically during a heated conversation during one of the Forum meetings. Though at times it has tinged my experience at Lubar, this inner conflict was resolved in the final weeks of the semester, and its resolution relates to the larger lessons I learned last May from Eboo Patel.

I wrote a brief reflection back in November about the importance of piety in my religious upbringing. I noted that when I first rediscovered my faith in college, I took piety way too seriously and made it the primary object of my devotion to God, to the point where I would privately condemn others (particularly those in my own faith) who did not act in the same ways or believe the same things I did.

Five months ago, I thought I had kicked that nasty habit of judging others and had moved on to the more beautiful religion of love of God and neighbor that Christ commands. I'll admit honestly now that I wrote those words without really thinking about their meaning.

Only two weeks ago, I helped facilitate an interfaith dialogue in Chadbourne, the dormitory where I used to live. During our conversation, a guy named John pointed out how little Jesus actually stated his beliefs while he was ministering to people. He loved people, plain and simple.

The next day, after a series of particularly negative thoughts about others, I opened my Bible to the reading of the day: the conversion of Saul. The weight of the story hit me like a ton of bricks. This was a man whose mission before he met Jesus was built on false generalizations, piety, and judgments. I later

wrote in my journal, "I am Saul. Religious, concerned with orthodoxy, hateful towards those who believe differently than me. What shall I do, Jesus?"

My immediate thought was this: love people and don't focus so much on beliefs and doctrine. Our service weekend was the next weekend, and a part of me was very excited to demonstrate to myself and to God that I was ready to be the apostle of peace that He desired. However, a part of me was apprehensive that my awareness of the issue would not be enough to lead me to love others.

During the service weekend, I helped organize a food drive for the Goodman Community Center. We spent the day convincing shoppers at a local grocery store to donate their food to the center when they were done shopping. I worked with one of the employees at the center, a Catholic friend of mine, and a woman named Sarah from Atheists, Humanists, and Agnostics, a student organization on campus.

Between greeting shoppers, I spent much of the day talking with Sarah about many things. I am no good at small talk, so during our conversation I actually tried to get to know her. However, unlike what happens in many of my conversations with strangers, religion came up only once, and it was in a positive setting that served as another way to get to know her as a person rather than start an argument.

The day helped me realize two important lessons: though it seems obvious to me now, conversations are much more fun when you are building bridges of understanding rather than islands of orthodoxy, and service represented the

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culmination of the human effort to help the world, regardless of religious belief.

The service weekend confirmed what Eboo had said when he stated that getting to know people decreases your chances of generalizing about them. My perception of atheists was changed after our conversation! In addition, the weekend proved that service could be the perfect way to build those bridges that Eboo had stressed during his lecture almost a year ago.

The looming question about evangelization and interfaith dialogue remained, however: how sturdy could those bridges of understanding be if my ultimate mission was to evangelize?

An answer to this question came in the form of an approach to religious study formulated by Bob Orsi, a scholar of religion at Northwestern University. He describes a way of studying religious people that I think translates well to interfaith dialogue: his “common ground” approach is about “render[ing] one’s own world other to oneself as prelude to a new understanding of the two worlds in relationship to one another.” The definition ends there; there is no further goal beyond understanding, no hidden agenda to secretly change their minds.

I had spent parts of this year viewing others as the “other” to be reformed rather than trying to understand how our beliefs and practices intersected in relationship. I rarely stepped out of my

religious world to place myself firmly in their shoes; my conversations were almost always evaluations of their religious beliefs and practices in the light of my Catholic beliefs.

Through this year’s experiences, I understood that interfaith dialogue occupied a separate place in my faith that would actually be harmed if I tried to evangelize directly. Dialogue had a different, but still important, goal in my life: taking me out of my comfort zone and placing me in contact with people who would positive influence the way I look at my faith and treat others.

Though I cannot repeat this year and correct all the mistakes I have made and the opportunities I have not taken, I take a few things with me as I leave. Though it took me most of the year to learn this lesson, I now know the importance of bridge-building and actually getting to know other people. I know the importance of friends who challenge my deeply rooted assumptions about my faith and my beliefs.

Though I’m still a committed Catholic, I know the importance of interfaith as a vital antidote to the tendency to retreat into what is familiar and comfortable in my own faith. If I have been Saul in the past, I pray that this year has taught me how to be Paul to the world: a bold and yet loving witness to the love of God for the world, a true apostle of peace. ●



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This past academic year was a whirlwind at the Lubar Institute. We accomplished much and learned even more, growing as people and as an interreligious dialogue community. As the school year began, I chose to continue working with the Lubar Institute; this time as an Undergraduate Fellow after a year in the Undergraduate Forum.

The year brought challenges as well as incredible rewards. We stood ready to face another year of the President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge. The service project included, beautifully, many members of different faith groups and quite a few different sites all over Madison. We are all called to live out our faiths in the Abrahamic religions. We, as a theistic whole, must work together to change peoples' views on faith, and I think that the Institute is doing a wonderful job of correcting misperceptions about faith.

I was also faced with the unique challenge of becoming a second-year member of the Forum, as well as a convert to a new faith. My views on my own faith have changed drastically

ly over the last year and a half, and my personal beliefs have become more solidified from the last two semesters. I was raised in the United Methodist Church of America and have entered the Roman Catholic Church. The Institute has offered me a support system—a “safe space” in the words of Marianne Lubar—during this change in my life, one that I was unable to receive from family or friends, try as they might.

As the Lubar Institute is so steeped in interfaith conversation, I feel I am more educated and confident in my choice than I would have been outside of this group. There remains only one other convert in the group of Fellows, my dear friend Meghan, a Muslim, and she has been of incredibly valuable

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help, offering a listening ear when I was sure that no one would understand.

The Lubar Institute is a unique entity. It is made up of religious individuals who can converse about faith while remaining neutral and nonproselytizing. I can only hope that the message of Lubar—understanding—has spread.

I can only say this: I love the Institute. The Fellows' weekly meetings and our monthly Forums are constants that I can rely on and can't wait to attend. We are, quite frankly, an excellent group of individuals who want only to understand each other. As we grew this year, I wanted to work on getting the Lubar Institute out there. I want students to know about us. Religion is important. The vast majority of students are religious in some way, shape, or form, and the lack of discussion about faith in the liberal arts education concerns me. The Institute is in a valuable position to change that. I am so happy to be a part of changing perspective on faith in the university.

I was always one of those college students who seemed to have it together and who knew exactly what I would be doing with the rest of my life once I had graduated from the university. Then, suddenly, at the beginning of the fall semester, I began having second thoughts. Maybe I didn't want to do much with my degree in dance after I graduated. Suddenly the panicky feelings of being a person without a plan emerged.

I found myself going to class and life as a student not knowing what any of this would do to help me in my future. In October, the Institute brought in Charlotte Gordon, author of *The Woman Who Named God*, as the year's Sister

Rose Thering Fellow. I felt that she kept coming back to the idea that she didn't always know what was going to come out when she put pen to paper, and that maybe that was okay, perhaps even encouraged. Life is not meant to be a straight line from point A to point B.

The Institute is where I enjoy my work the most. As the fall semester continued, I found myself constructing a new plan involving graduate school, writing, and research. I'm not sure what I would be doing with my life if not for my involvement at the Lubar Institute because it's filled with people who think religion is as fascinating as I do, and more importantly, that it is a valuable discussion that is being ignored in favor of other, just as important but more vocal, issues.

While I went to the workshop with Charlotte Gordon thinking about the fact that I like to write (the jury is still out on whether or not anything I write is worth publishing, but I digress) and came out still without a plan, at least I began facing a brave new direction.

During the September meeting, the Undergraduate Forum members discussed how their cultural and religious identities intersect. I was upset to find out that I had to miss the gathering, especially since I had planned on presenting my own story. My maternal grandfather grew up in a community of Mennonites in Ohio. His father was Joseph Habegger, a Swiss-German Mennonite who fell in love with my great-grandmother Eva Perkins, an English Anglican, and drove his wagon by her house every day to wave to her until she would finally talk to him.

They married without the approv-

al of Joseph's family (he threatened to leave the church over their engagement) but with the eventual tolerance of Eva's family, and they raised their children in the Mennonite church. My grandfather and his siblings were raised, not with a bad taste in their mouths but certainly with some negativity about Catholicism. This likely stemmed from Eva's culturally English distaste for the Catholic Church and Joseph's disapproval of their ritualistic practices.

Though my mother would like me to hide my conversion from my grandfather, I find that there is no logic in doing so. My grandfather loves me, and he was raised in an interreligious household himself, rare at the time. He is the patriarch of interreligious dialogue in my family. He knows about the dialogue and respect between different Christian denominations. I wouldn't be surprised if my grandfather already knew about and understood my conversion.

As we inched closer to the Winter Break I found myself wondering why it is that Christians don't celebrate Hanukkah. If Christianity is a continuation of Judaism, as Christians believe, then why do we ignore the miracle on which Hanukkah was founded? The story isn't included in the Protestant canon; however, it is included in the book of Maccabees in the Catholic canon. I can look closer at the story than previously.

The holiday seasons enable us to learn by observing and participating somewhat in the celebrations. At a Fellows meeting during Hanukkah, we lit a Menorah and listened to the prayers said beautifully by our very own Rachel Lerman and Ben Agatston. I wish I

could come closer to understanding the words.

Being a Fellow for the Lubar Institute during the holiday season opened pathways for us to talk about our traditions, their rituals, and their meanings. I was grateful for the opportunity to participate because it is only through doing that we learn most completely.

Many people read about other religions and their holidays. Most know all about Christmas, for example; however, this surface knowledge isn't enough to facilitate conversation and understanding. As students of religion and proponents of interreligious dialogue, we have to know more thoroughly what we are talking about.

In the Spring semester, the Lubar Institute introduced International Conversations on Faith in America, a group for international students at the university to discuss the American society in relation to religion and religious expression in this society.

Many students come to this university from countries where religion is a part of the larger scheme of everyday life: present in government and in their schools in ways that we, as a secular society, would find startling. Our culture looks at religion too often as a private matter, something to keep under wraps except in our respective religious communities, lest we offend someone with outward expression.

I believe a worthwhile goal of the International Conversations Forum is to find the middle ground for these international students, somewhere between the extremes that each culture offers. Religion, like it or not, is a major part of an individual's identity and

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The feelings I get during a Shabbat service are similar to those which I experience during a Latin Mass; I understand little of the words, but am overwhelmed by the beauty of what is happening in front of me, perhaps more so because I do not understand the language.

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should be discussed as a factor of diversity on this campus. I firmly support any effort made by the Lubar Institute to include conversations about religion in the overall education of this university's students. It is entirely possible that religious diversity is the next necessary conversation in our world. Yet, a minority even finds it offensive, as they are unable to distinguish interreligious dialogue from proselytizing.

I set a goal for myself after the introduction of this new group to share the Institute with the people I meet on this campus, especially the International Conversations Forum with international students. The Lubar Institute is a huge part of my life as a Religious Studies major and Undergraduate Fellow, yet is largely unheard of by the greater student population. The dialogue that the Institute creates is hugely valuable to anyone on this campus, religious or not, American citizen or not.

After my decision to convert, the Lubar Institute offered an incredible group of people who were nonproselytizing and positively involved in interreligious dialogue to listen and participate in conversation with me. At the Institute I found a group who would listen to my frustrations and challenges. I can only hope that I am living up to my own expectations as a Fellow in promoting the same environment and support to others on this campus.

The Lubar Institute participated in my favorite event of the year, the Week of Prayer, during March. During this weekend long event we visited Hillel, the mosque on Orchard Street, and Luther Memorial Church on University Avenue. All three places of worship are

within or near the borders of our campus, and all three welcomed us with open arms. Many of the Undergraduate Forum members came to one or all of the places of worship, and I'm certain that everyone learned something valuable.

My favorite excursion last year was to Hillel, and this year's visit did not disappoint. As a Catholic Christian, I value Judaism because the Church grew up out of the Jewish synagogues. Over my years in the Religious Studies Program, I have delved so much into the religion's history and the culture of Judaism that my roommate, for two years, thought that I was Jewish.

Every time I step into Hillel, I am overtaken by the beauty of the services, the discussions, the language (of which I can read very little and understand even less), and the community. The feelings I get during a Shabbat service are similar to those which I experience during a Latin Mass; I understand little of the words, but am overwhelmed by the beauty of what is happening in front of me, perhaps more so because I do not understand the language. It is easy to feel some holy presence when you aren't concerned with the words themselves. That being said, I would love to learn Biblical Hebrew, perhaps in my graduate-school years.

There are three separate Shabbat services at Hillel, and all are student-led. They are Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox, and all three take place at the same time. We split up as a group and I went with quite a few others to the Conservative service.

After services, we reunited and went to the Shabbat dinner that Hillel

offers. There, we learned how to ritually wash our hands, said a blessing, and prayed together. Two of our Fellows also talked about the Institute. The dinner was possibly my favorite part of the night because we had discussions and good food; what else can a college student ask for? The hospitality at Hillel is beautiful and I am certain that everyone had as good of a time as I did. We all learned a lot, not just about the Jewish faith, but also how to relate it to our own and work together as well.

I feel no theological conflict in worshipping at Hillel because Judaism is the father of my own faith. On the other hand, I separate myself completely from worship at the mosque and approach the service purely as a scholar and an observer.

This was a topic of discussion when the whole Forum got together, and we did not come to any one consensus—some believe that all three faiths worship the same God and all are equal in validity; I, along with some others, see the Christian faith as the end-all. However, I believe that is what these discussions are for. Through them, we find out more about ourselves, and in effect, how to work with each other to further interreligious dialogue.

Finally, we concluded the year with a service weekend for the President's Interfaith Challenge. The event consisted of a party at the Lowell Center on Saturday, April 20, and continued the following day with service sites around Madison. The party on Saturday was a hit. Yes, we were short on numbers,

but everyone had a good time. Games, music, and a panel presented by the Fellows rounded out the night. I am entirely confident that this event and the entire weekend could easily become an annual event.

Some sites we traveled to on Sunday included the Goodman Center, the Salvation Army, and Savory Sundays at the Capitol. Students from each Abrahamic faith group, and some without a practice, came and assisted. The turnout was incredible and incredibly exciting. I was at Madison's Fresh Market collecting food for the Goodman Center's food pantry. Each year this event could continue to grow. While we did get the Institute's name out there, what was really important was that we delivered to our sites. I believe that we did, and I hope that the groups would partner with us again next year.

This year has had its challenges, especially with the service weekend event, which was entirely new. However, what is exponentially more important is that we pulled it off. The Fellows have grown close in friendship and in discussion, and I am confident in the leadership qualities that we have each gained. I am not graduating this year, and I have already made it clear to the faculty that they won't be seeing the last of me. The Institute is entirely too important to my life and learning experience. The Fellows are off to do great things, and as the Institute continues to grow and learn, it will continue to do great things as well. ●

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Rachel Lerman

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Religious spirituality has always played a large role in my life. From as far back as I can remember my family came together for the holidays and every week for Shabbat. My parents taught me important Jewish prayers when I was young and we often practiced them together. I went to a Jewish day school and summer camp. Basically, Judaism surrounded me and I felt very connected to it. In addition to learning the importance of my own faith, at a young age I also learned that interfaith dialogue is critical to reaching understanding and accomplishing common goals. My father, David Lerman (דוד), recognized this at a time when interfaith dialogue was just beginning in Milwaukee.

The Milwaukee Inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAHA) is an organization that brings together congregations from around Milwaukee to work together towards justice. A number of years ago, there were no synagogues in Milwaukee involved with MICAHA. At the time, my father was on the Social Justice Committee for our synagogue, Shir Chadash. He realized that it was critical that our congregation become a part of MICAHA because if they really wanted to fight for social justice, they needed to become allies

with other groups doing the same. So, our synagogue became the first Jewish congregation to be a part of MICAHA.

It was MICAHA that first introduced me to interfaith work at a young age. After our synagogue joined, I often attended events and meetings with my father. I really enjoyed attending these events. One event we attended every year was the MICAHA Prayer Breakfast, where all the congregations came together for a meal. During breakfast, each congregation shared a prayer from their religion with everyone.

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I enjoyed learning about other people's faiths along with being able to share my own faith. We all ate a meal together, and I was able to meet people from different backgrounds, many of whom I would not have had the chance to meet at my Jewish private school.

In high school, I became involved with the Other America Tour, a youth program run by the ACLU of Wisconsin with the intention of bringing together high school students from a variety of backgrounds to discuss the ways in which discrimination affects many young people's lives.

Our group of fifteen students met every week for five months to discuss and prepare workshops. At the end of the program, we facilitated workshops for fifty students from an inner-city school and fifty students from a suburban school for five days. One of the subjects we discussed was religion, and it was interesting to hear perspectives from other students about the role religious identity played in their lives, as one part of their identities.

In my last year of high school, I decided to spend a semester abroad, immersed in a culture different than my own. The program I participated in allowed the student to choose which country s/he would go to and then placed the student in a city anywhere in that country. I decided to go to Chile for many reasons, one of which was that Santiago has a large Jewish community. I thought it would be very interesting to be a part of another Jewish community, far away from my own.

Two weeks before leaving, the program informed me that I was to be placed in Coyhaique, a small city in

the southern Patagonia region of Chile. Coyhaique is located very far from any Jewish community. Although I was nervous about the distance, I decided to go anyway. I was the only Jewish person living in Coyhaique and the only Jewish person that most of my Chilean classmates had ever met. As a result, I had many conversations with people about religion as we tried to understand each others' beliefs and customs.

Despite my initial uncertainty, I am now able to look back and appreciate my experience in Coyhaique so much. In addition to learning and having completely new experiences, this time also challenged me to continue practicing my religion, even when I had little access to a Jewish community. I learned that even though there are so many different religions, connections and understanding can be found among all individuals, regardless of differences.

This experience strengthened my belief in the importance of creating open and honest dialogue, which allows for individuals to teach about their own tradition and learn about others' traditions. Ultimately, the goal of dialogue is to reach a place of appreciation and respect.

Upon my arrival at UW-Madison, I continued to seek out spaces where I could practice my Judaism. In addition, I wanted to find a place where I could meet other students who also wanted to engage in meaningful conversations about other faith traditions. This desire is what helped lead me to the Lubar Institute.

I first heard about the Lubar Institute while attending a training workshop conducted by the Interfaith Youth

This experience strengthened my belief in the importance of creating open and honest dialogue, which allows for individuals to teach about their own tradition and learn about others' traditions.

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Core. This was the first interfaith experience I had on campus, and I remember feeling so energized afterward. The training included students, faculty, clergy, and Lubar Institute staff members. We went through many activities that challenged us to think about how our faiths affect our lives, while also connecting with people of different faiths who were pondering similar questions within their faiths.

This experience made me realize that religion is important for a lot of people on campus, though it is seldom discussed. After the training, I became involved with the Muslim–Jewish Volunteer Initiative and, once again, heard about the Lubar Institute at our meeting. With the encouragement of others who were also a part of the Forum, I decided to apply for the Fellows program.

My experience with the Fellows has been both meaningful and challenging. From the beginning I appreciated the opportunity to be a part of the Forum, along with many students whom I had never met before. In the first meeting, we were able to decide collectively what discussion topics we valued and made the schedule for the year. It was interesting to see what topics were important to each person, and that many of these overlapped.

Early in the fall semester this past year, I left Madison to return home to be with my family as we cared for my father. After a long battle with cancer, my father (אבא) passed away at the end of October. Though it was a very hard time for me, when I returned back to campus, I was warmly welcomed back to the Fellows group.

I remember having a very mean-

ingful conversation with Fellows about practices that each faith has surrounding a death. I discussed Jewish traditions which value remembering my father and making his memory to be for a blessing. I learned about Muslim and Christian traditions as well. Though it was a hard time for me, I was able to learn and teach in an environment that was welcoming and accepting.

The most valuable thing I have gotten from the Lubar Institute has been the discussions I have had and the connections I have made with other students who also care equally about their own religious beliefs and about creating greater understanding among many people. Looking back on all of the interfaith experiences I have had, including my time at the Lubar Institute, I realize that I have to thank my father (אבא) for leading me on this path. He knew the value of creating open dialogue among those who seem very different on the surface, but in actuality, are not so different at all. He knew that many people coming together creates a power that is stronger than one voice working toward change.

MICAH has now grown to become a large organizing force in Milwaukee that includes many congregations from many different faiths. I am so grateful that my father pushed for our synagogue to join MICAH, something that led the way for many more congregations to do the same and inspired me to continue pursuing interfaith work. I am also so grateful that he instilled within me a desire to pursue justice and continues to push me to work towards greater understanding. ●



Naman Siad

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My experience as an Undergraduate Fellow

has allowed me to grow as a person and view my faith and the faith of others in a completely new light. I went into this experience thinking I was going to learn about Judaism and Christianity; however, I realized that, through learning about the faith of others, I was able to find out more about my own faith, Islam.

One of the key events that caused me to reflect more substantially on both my own faith as well as that of the other Fellows was the Week of Prayer, which took place Friday, March 8, to Sunday, March 10. The Week of Prayer, in which Lubar Institute undergraduates attend a campus-area service at Abrahamic houses of worship, was definitely one of the most eye-opening and beneficial experiences I have had the pleasure of taking in during my time as a Fellow.

We had the privilege of attending three worship services. First, on Friday afternoon, we attended the Islamic Center of Madison to observe Friday prayer (*Jumu'ah*). The sermon was very fitting, since it addressed the need for interfaith dialogue within the Abra-

hamic traditions and the need for the Muslim community to make it a priority. Although the Friday prayer was something I partake in every week, the privilege of explaining the different parts of the prayer to my fellow Undergraduate Forum members made me appreciate my prayer even more.

Sometimes it is easy to get caught up in the physical part of prayer while forgetting about the important spiritual aspects. Having to explain the actions of my prayer forced me to reflect and think about why I prayed in a certain manner. When I stepped back and looked at my prayer from a different lens, I actually began to appreciate and focus more during my daily prayers.

Then, on that same Friday's evening, we attended a Shabbat service at

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One similarity between the Church and Shabbat services is that the congregation took a moment to spread blessings to people around them. This aspect really resonated with me, and it was nice to feel that sense of community in all the congregations.

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Hillel. This was my first time observing a Shabbat service, and it was a wonderful experience. Although I don't understand Hebrew, it was very helpful to read along with the translation and see some of the same themes of love and mercy that are found in the Quran and in Muslim Prayers.

One specific part of the Jewish prayer that stuck with me was when the congregation was asked to turn to someone they haven't met before and spread their blessings to encourage the feeling of community and family.

The most enjoyable part of the experience, though, was the community dinner afterwards. I found it so beautiful that the community ate Shabbat dinner together regularly like a family. I feel that the sense of community is something that the Muslim community often lacks. This could be attributed to the fact that the majority of the Madison Muslim community come from different parts of the world and there are often language barriers. Despite this, I wish that sometimes our community could take the initiative to break down the language barriers and create more of a familial feeling. All in all, the experience at Hillel was wonderful and eye-opening.

Last, we attended prayer at Luther Memorial Church, where the experience was equally remarkable. The church was outstandingly beautiful and it was also the first time I sat through a church service. The people at the church were very welcoming and made me feel like a part of the congregation.

One similarity between the Church and Shabbat services is that the congregation took a moment to spread bless-

ings to people around them. This aspect really resonated with me, and it was nice to feel that sense of community in all the congregations.

All three services made me reflect on how similar the Abrahamic traditions are when it comes to organized worship. Although we might physically pray in different manners, and the languages spoken may be different, there were many similarities in the message of love, mercy, and worship. It made me reflect on how all three Abrahamic traditions worship the same God, just in three different ways. It was a very rewarding feeling to attend all three services.

Another important aspect of this year was the opportunity to bring religion into the discussion about diversity on UW-Madison's campus. A year ago, as a freshman, I realized that religion was seen as a "boring" topic to those around me (regardless of their own religion). However, religion guides the way so many people live their lives. I believe it is a very important subject to discuss. A lot of the religious tensions that occur are merely because of ignorance. If there were a common understanding of religion, a lot of the misconceptions and stereotypes would disappear.

This year, as a sophomore, I was able to experience a great opportunity in which three other Fellows and I organized a session to train residential House Fellows on campus regarding interfaith problems that could occur in the dorm. It was an important first step in getting religion a spot in the diversity dialogue on the UW-Madison campus.

To conduct an effective training session, we Fellows came up with a list of

experiences that we had personally run into living on campus, as well as fictional situations that we thought could realistically occur. Many of the problems and situations were quite similar in all three faith groups, such as alcohol or controversial political topics that have a religious aspect (such as the Palestinian–Israeli conflict). We then came up with a list of possible solutions to the problems at hand. We realized that having an open dialogue with roommates or coming up with a roommate contract that includes respecting religious differences could potentially solve many of the situations that were described.

The training session really did bring religion to the table in terms of the discussions had on this campus. Many of the House Fellows understood the need to have these discussions with their residents and really appreciated the experience.

This opened my eyes to how potentially simple the solution to religious conflict could be. The Undergraduate Fellows could conduct many training sessions explaining this, but, in the end, it really is as simple as allowing for dialogue in which a person can explain his or her religious or personal beliefs and values. In addition, getting students on campus comfortable in asking their roommate questions about religious practice could help alleviate misunderstanding as well as distrust.

People often think learning about the theological aspects of a religion will help gear their understanding of a certain person's actions and beliefs. In reality, to most people, practicing a religion isn't as black and white as a literal reading of religious codes might imply. In-

stead of assuming all Muslims eat *halal* or all Jews observe *kosher*, I feel it is important to ask what a particular person practices in order to avoid generalizations. This is where dialogue comes in handy, as it separates religious institutions from the individual and allows for understanding personal narratives.

We had a similar training session with actual residents in the dorms (specifically at Bradley and Chadbourne). There, the other presenting Fellows and I spoke with the residents about their views on religion in their lives on and off campus. Many of the students were interested in what the Lubar Institute had to offer. I believe it was a step in the right direction in terms of bringing interfaith dialogue on to new and different parts of this campus. Many of the discussions weren't intense theological debates but rather the conversations focused on personal narratives; I think this is where interfaith dialogue should start. People should discuss their similarities, such as their common personal struggles, in order to create a connection. When this connection is created, there is a base of understanding that allows for space to discuss theological differences.

The third aspect of the Fellows program that resonated with me this year was the need for people of all religions to get involved in community service. I reflected on the need for service after an experience at an Islamic Society of North America conference in Washington, D.C. this summer. It is an annual conference that brings together Muslims across the United States and Canada for a weekend of lectures, entertainment, and networking.

This is where dialogue comes in handy, as it separates religious institutions from the individual and allows for understanding personal narratives.

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Throughout the year, I began to feel more comfortable with speaking, and having weekly meetings with all the Fellows allowed me to develop my communication skills.

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I wanted to take this opportunity to reflect on a theme that I saw in all the lectures and workshops. The conference really focused on the need for humanity in the Muslim community. A lot of the time, it is easy to find the Muslim community focusing on the physical actions of being Muslim. This can be shown in the way people pray, the clothes they wear, the food they eat, etc. Although these are very important aspects of our faith, more emphasis should be placed on the sense of humanity and personal spirituality.

When communities get obsessed with this physical aspect of religion, they lose the sense of being a community or being humane towards each other. If someone prays five times a day and donates thousands of dollars to a mosque, but neglects their family and lacks good character, it is somewhat counterproductive.

This is why I personally find it a duty to read about the Prophet (ﷺ). The Prophet Muhammad in Islam is an ultimate model for every role in society. He was the ideal father, husband, friend, leader, and community member. He not only focused on the physical aspects of religion, but also focused on being a good and kindhearted person.

This focus on behavior has stuck with me since the conference, and I have tried to incorporate it into my life. I make sure that I value having good character as much as I value praying five times a day. I have learned to value prayer as a reflection of all that I've done that day as well. In addition, it has helped me value service and volunteering as acts of faith. Just as praying five times a day helps me identify as a

Muslim, volunteering and upholding good character should identify me as Muslim as well. All in all, it was an excellent experience and really helped me mold myself into a better person.

As Fellows, we incorporated this theme of service into the year by planning a campus-wide Day of Service. The Day of Service focused on the theme of homelessness and we chose several sites to volunteer at such as the Goodman Community Center, the St. Vincent de Paul men's shelter, and the Salvation Army shelter program.

Each service site had a group of people from different faiths volunteering together for the common good. I strongly believe that this is what interfaith dialogue looks like. Having people from different faiths put aside differences and focus on an aspect that is in every faith group really breaks down barriers and allows for friendships and connections to begin. By becoming humane individuals and giving back to our communities, we find that most of the religions are not that different from each other and that all strive to achieve a greater good for their world.

Overall, this year as an Undergraduate Fellow has taught me much about other faiths, my own faith, and myself as an individual. In the beginning of the year, my public speaking skills weren't the best. A lot of the time, I had something to say but didn't feel a hundred percent confident in voicing my opinion. Throughout the year, I began to feel more comfortable with speaking, and having weekly meetings with all the Fellows allowed me to develop my communication skills.

Having good speaking skills is very

important when it comes to interfaith work and discussing faith in general. Having different outlets to discuss faith allowed me to discuss matters that I couldn't discuss with students in my class or in my friend circles.

I genuinely think that initiatives like the Lubar Institute will allow for a much better community on this campus. Religious beliefs are an integral part of someone's identity and should be celebrated and appreciated. This program allowed me to meet people from all walks of life and have some of the most genuine and meaningful conversations of my college experience.

My year as a Fellow has taught me that, before seeing someone as a Chris-

tian, Jew, or Muslim, I must see him or her as a human being who has dreams and aspirations for the world similar to mine. Hopefully I can take all the lessons I have learned from this beneficial year and go forth on exploring interfaith dialogue in my future. These dialogues don't even have to be in a formal setting. If having a conversation with someone in the line of a grocery store allows them to change their negative perceptions about Muslims, I feel that I have achieved some good. It all begins with a simple conversation and from there the stereotypes and prejudices all slowly fade away. One simple and genuine conversation is all it takes. ●

It has taught me that before seeing someone as a Christian, Jew, or Muslim, I must see him or her as a human being that has similar dreams aspirations for the world as I do.

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Saad Siddiqui

Senior

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We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore.

Dorothy Day

Perhaps the most significant thing I have learned from my year as an Undergraduate Fellow is the patience to begin to know those around me. The year has been filled with weekly meetings, monthly Undergraduate Forum gatherings, speakers, and planning our interfaith day of service in which I met the same group of people over and over again. Honest conversation with these people allowed me to relate ideas, understand my own history, and experience new religious modes of worship. In learning about other faith traditions, I realized that though our rituals may differ, their essence is familiar.

Each week, the Fellows would meet in the Humanities building and plan our work for the upcoming Forum. These meetings would usually start with a random discussion with Steve

and Tim about some aspect of Christianity that I was unfamiliar with. We would talk about whether or not a similar concept exists in Islam, and ask Ben and Rachel about Judaism. Through these conversations I learned little bits about Christianity and Judaism that I would never have known. The Fellows became comfortable enough to make interfaith jokes without ever offending anyone's religious sentiment.

I first started thinking seriously about religious scholarship when Charlotte Gordon came to visit. Reading her book, *The Woman Who Named God*, and being able to talk with her on visit as the Rose Thering Fellow has been one of the most rewarding experiences for me as a Fellow in many respects. The book itself was stimulating both intellectually and spiritually, to

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say nothing of meeting Mrs. Gordon. She helped complete the process of reading the book by explaining its origins and her own process as a writer.

What I enjoyed most about *The Woman Who Named God* was that it read like a novel but was founded on serious scholarship. Gordon was able to tell the Biblical story, the historical context, and her own imaginative interpretations without ever conflating these categories. It was always clear when Gordon was simply speculating; often these speculations were the most interesting statements.

I had always known that Abraham was an important guy, but I was never quite sure why. In the Islamic tradition, we learned that Abraham was the perfect monotheist and established the Kaaba in Mecca. We send blessings to him and his family (including the family of Muhammad) in each of the five daily prayers.

I had never really known what made him significant enough to deserve such celebration until I read *The Woman Who Named God*. The book took Abraham, for me a mythical figure, and turned him into a striving human being like the rest of us. I had always had this complaint with the stories of the Prophets that I heard in the Islamic tradition: they are so perfect that we can learn nothing from them. Reading the book changed that and also opened my eyes to the fact that the humanizing prophets is possible, and necessary, even in the Islamic tradition. What good is a prophet if no one can learn from him?

The other striking aspect of the book was that Gordon seamlessly discussed the stories from each of the three Abra-

hamic traditions without ever being dismissive or condescending of any of them. She genuinely approached each of them for what they mean to the followers of each faith and explained that sense to the reader in the same way. This made me realize that it will be possible for me to explore other traditions to deepen my own beliefs.

Meeting Charlotte Gordon really completed the process of reading the book. She talked about how the book came to be, and the spiritual practice of writing. It was almost surreal that her conversion to Judaism was accelerated by her study of the Islamic tradition of Hagar and gave her a new understanding of the faith she adopted, and a Muslim reader like me could read the book and learn about Abraham in an “Islamic way.”

She was as honest and gentle as the book was written, and she could tell a story both in word and in print. Meeting her changed how I read books because for the first time I met the author of a book I had read and loved. She convinced me to start writing, and I have found reading and writing spiritually enlightening. I am beginning to understand the first Revelation to the Prophet, “Read in the name of the Lord who created, and taught man (to write) by the pen that which he did not know.”

The ideas that Charlotte Gordon connected in her book were brought to life when we visited worship sites during the Forum. I had never attended a Jewish service before that week. It was fascinating to see that Hillel offered different services for Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews at the

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It was a wonderful experience to sing through prayer. Earlier this year, I started attending Sikh spiritual services on Sundays at a local gurdwara in order to be able to listen and sing devotional hymns.

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same time. Such a concept is unheard of in Islamic Friday prayer.

The Orthodox service included reading and singing from the Torah without instruments. I was struck that a majority of the service consisted of hymns set to tunes. In contrast, Islamic prayer is usually strictly oration. I have always felt a connection to devotional music, though it is generally absent in Muslim culture, or performed in Arabic (which I don't understand). It was a wonderful experience to sing through prayer. Earlier this year, I started attending Sikh spiritual services on Sundays at a local *gurdwara* in order to be able to listen and sing devotional hymns.

The monthly Forum meetings provided opportunity for deep discussion about topics that I would not discuss in any other space on campus. During the Forum meeting about cultural identity and religion, Tim discussed something that I had been thinking ever since my return to the United States after three months in India. He said that, "In Africa, spirituality is everywhere. Belief is a completely normal part of life."

It would be inaccurate to say that belief is not a part of life in the United States, but it is, in my experience, not everywhere on the landscape. This may well be because urban landscapes in America are organized, compartmentalized, cemented and clean.

I recall a *Time* cover with the title, "The End of Nature." In India, although the country teems with the progress of capitalism, nature is still ever-present. When it rains, you can feel it in your home, sometimes literally. When the sun rises and scorches the earth, man-made structures cannot do much to

prevent it, and electricity isn't reliable enough for air conditioners. Even the design of older homes lets nature in, with unroofed courtyards in the middle of a home and trees that were probably there before the house was built around them.

The spiritual effect of this is hard to describe. The best I can do is say that there seems always a reminder in India that there are forces outside of human control and that no amount of clever scheming will change that. It seems to me that in the United States I have known, this feeling is present only when cataclysmic events (such as Hurricane Sandy) occur. Only then are we jolted out of our material comforts and required to acknowledge our own weaknesses.

I have been trying to come to terms with my own weaknesses and often wonder how my use of technology is amplifying them. I spent three months in India with no laptop and a "dumb" smartphone that only made calls, and I was perfectly happy. When I felt bored, I would grab a book and read deeply. I had no access to infinite tabs and Wikipedia articles to jump from one thing to the next with no understanding.

I read a book called *The Shallows: How the Internet is Making us Stupid* and came to terms with the possibility that my brain may be changing because of how I use technology. The author argued that we are becoming information consumers and losing the ability to focus deeply, which reading and writing require.

Now that I am aware of the idea of God-consciousness, I wonder how

much of a detriment this is for any spiritual development. God-consciousness requires patient and dedicated focus to hear and see the quiet signs of God in every aspect of life. Yet the way we use technology is making us distracted, impatient, and addicted to the loud and new. If I cannot have a conversation with a real person without checking my phone, how am I to converse with God, who is much harder to notice?

I have always struggled with focus, persistence, and managing my time. This has meant that I always arrive late, turn in things late, and feel as if time passes without my notice of it. I have often wondered if this is a defect or if it's just because I have been so unconscious of my life and time. I started reading about Islam and understood that part of the reason for the five prayers is to remove us from our day and return to God-consciousness, until we can slowly develop the discipline to be God-conscious at all times.

Returning from India, however, and getting plugged into my laptop and smartphone have once again jumbled

my sense of time and ability to focus. It is so incredibly easy to open a few links and spend hours doing exactly what I have not intended. I don't even think I am as addicted as others, yet it still can derail my intentions. I suppose this is part of the spiritual struggle. I wonder if it was easier in India because it is entirely normal now as a college student to be on your laptop, on your phone, and doing something else at the same time.

Besides offering a space to think critically about topics related to religion, the Lubar Institute challenged us this year to take part in the President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge. It was indeed a challenge to plan and coordinate a large-scale effort to bring together students to visit sites across Madison to do service. Though at times it seemed as if we were disorganized and struggling to meet our goals, we worked together for the sake of the project. I imagine many such projects being possible between communities of faith and non-faith in order to bridge the divide between "us" and "them." ●

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Meghan Walker

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Níl de dhia ach Dia, agus is é
Muhammad A theachtaire.

(the Shahadah in Irish)

It is always sad to wave goodbye to something that you enjoy and treasure. So, with a heavy heart, I reflect on the past two years that I have had with the Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions before I wave goodbye to it for one final time.

Last year, I was introduced to the Lubar Institute through a friend who encouraged me apply to become a member of the Undergraduate Forum. A wonderfully kind Catholic girl named Sonia sat beside me and asked me, with wide and curious eyes, things about what it means to be a Muslim and what I believe. A small moment turned into a friendship for life. A year later, I sat with tears streaming down my face as I watched Sonia walking down the aisle on her wedding day. Another friend that I made that year recently asked me to become some sort of a Muslim Godmother in his baby daughter's life so that, if she ever wondered

about Islam, she would have a friend to turn to for questions.

So the Undergraduate Forum has had a sneaky way of entering into my heart and bringing me memories and friends that will last with for the rest of my life. I never would have thought that a short application and monthly conversations would turn into such a wonderful experience.

This year, I was granted the opportunity to be an Undergraduate Fellow, and I knew right away that it was going to be a year of fun. While some of my favorite members from the year before had graduated and moved on to other things, close friends I had made at the

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Forum were also chosen to be Fellows along with me.

My favorite event during my year as a Fellow is called the Week of Prayer, where the Forum members spend time experiencing the different types of worship held by Jewish, Muslim, and Christian students on campus.

On Friday afternoon, we attend *Jumu'ah* Prayer at the Islamic Center of Madison, on Friday evening we go to Hillel for Shabbat and enjoy a meal (complete with matzo-ball soup!), and on Sunday morning we attend church service at a chosen Christian church on campus.

This year, I awaited this event with great anticipation and looked forward to it for months. I organized a meeting place for all of the students to meet so that we could walk to the mosque together, and I could show them how to perform an Islamic ritual ablution, wrap their *hijabs*, share prayers and answer any questions.

On Friday morning, I got myself ready, double-checked to make sure everyone knew where we would meet, and drove from my hometown of Janesville to Madison. Little did I know that the high schools around the state would be meeting in Madison that very day for sports events and that every parking garage in the area was packed. Finally, after driving around for a long time, I was able to find a parking place. I was supposed to meet my fellow Forum members the students almost immediately, but the place where I found parking was on the opposite side of the isthmus. So my favorite event of the year was colored with disappointment as I called each Forum member to say that I could

not meet with them, since I would miss the entire service by the time I arrived at the mosque.

Luckily, that evening, I would still be able to attend the Shabbat service at Hillel. I chose to attend the Conservative service because the previous year I had attended the Orthodox one. Rachel, one of our Jewish Fellows, showed me how to light the candles and brought us into the room where the service would be held. One of the things that I loved most about Shabbat was that the majority of the service was held in song. This is something that Muslims don't experience in a mosque unless the Imam is reciting passages from the *Qur'an*, which are rhythmic and musical even though they are not considered song. After the service, we walked down to the cafeteria where we were handed small glasses of juice. I drank mine immediately at the door thinking they were nice little appetizers. Little did I know that they would be used later during a prayer before the food was served.

Rachel showed us how to wash our hands in the appropriate fashion and I could not help but smile at how similar the ritual was to doing an Islamic ablution. It dawned on me that the ceremonial washing prior to engaging in a holy act transcends the boundaries of our Abrahamic traditions and creates a common ground which serves as a reminder that our religions really do inspire one another.

Although I was unable to attend the church service on Sunday morning, the Forum meeting immediately following was one of the best such meetings that I have ever experienced. It was held in a room attached to the church, and we

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all sat around in a circle sharing our experiences about how we felt during the Week of Prayer.

One man whom I had never seen before began talking and identified himself as a Muslim. I looked at him and saw that, like me, he is a convert and, also like me, he incorporates much of his Christian background into his walk as a Muslim. He reveres Jesus Christ as his most beloved prophet. I favor this meeting above the others because it was the first time I met a convert to Islam who does not attempt to smother past beliefs but, instead, appropriates them to fit beautifully into his unique walk as a convert to Islam.

One of the larger points I shared was that I rarely use the Arabic word for God (*Allah*) when I am addressing God in supplication. I refer to Him as God because that is the word that feels most familiar to me.

I challenged the other people at the meeting, if they are Christian or Jewish, to attempt to call God by the Arabic name in their prayers and see if they feel as if they are speaking to the same deity. To me, changing the word that one uses to address God feels like He has become an entirely different God. In the four years that I have been a Muslim, I am only now beginning to slowly form a relationship with the word “Allah” and can use it with complete inner peace the way I do when I call Him God. I was pleased to note that the other convert in the room repeatedly nodded his head in agreement with me.

One of my biggest missions in which I feel as if I have succeeded this year as a Muslim at the Lubar Institute has been in representing Western Muslims.

Most of the Muslims I have met thus far are also Western, but either first-generation Americans or immigrants themselves. I come from an Irish, Scottish, and German family, and my identity has always sprung from my roots. In high school, I wore women’s tartan skirts for fun, attempted to learn Gaidhlig, and passionately researched both my Irish and Scottish roots, and my clan history. After converting to Islam, however, something in me felt different, as though I weren’t fully Irish or Scottish anymore.

Because I viewed my new religion as being Eastern, I suddenly felt as though the biggest part of me had to fit in with this Easternness as well. I believe that most converts go through this stage immediately after this conversion.

I have had many conversations with other converts who believe that, since their ancestors were not Muslims, they should not be proud of them or proud of their identity as a “Euro-American” Muslim. I, however, reached a different conclusion. Instead of trying to shed my identity from before I was a Muslim, I decided to embrace it and bring Islam into it. This made the past year at the Lubar Institute was one of my most self-transitioning years when it comes to my identity as a Western Muslim. I also realized I’m not the only one in the Forum who is trying to either appropriate his or her former religion into a new walk of life, or accommodate new religious traditions with the faith they currently follow.

Luckily for me, I found out that I am not the only person who appropriates different holidays or religious traditions into their personal walk. During one of

the Forum meetings, I shared that I still celebrate Christmas and will continue to do so forever. For me, it is justifiable, since Jesus Christ is a beloved prophet in Islam and celebrating his message is a perfectly acceptable thing to do.

After I shared this sentiment, a Catholic student raised his hand and said excitedly that he loves Hanukkah and celebrates it every year. He reads the Hanukkah story in his Bible and finds spiritual fulfillment in doing so. His way of justifying this celebrating of Hanukkah was that this holiday is at the core of his own “Christian” Abrahamic faith. Sometimes it doesn’t seem to be fitting anymore to label a holiday “Christian” or “Jewish” anymore; instead, Jews, Christians, and Muslims need to appropriate certain holidays into a larger Abrahamic universe.

In addition to bringing Islam into my American identity, I learned what it truly means to worship God through helping other people. I had the opportunity to be in the driving seat for the Lubar Institute’s largest event of the year: the President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge.

In the first half of the year, Steve Buting and I met every Tuesday to make rough plans, come up with ideas, talk about possibilities, organize responsibilities, etc. After the initial ideas were organized, we passed out jobs for each of the Fellows to do in order to make this community service project come to life.

Our idea had an overarching theme of homelessness. We were going to contact a number of nonprofit organizations or homeless shelters around the downtown Madison area and offer to

provide a group of volunteers to help them with whatever service they needed. While Steve chose to spearhead the actual event and the service projects, we decided that Jessica Hare and I would plan the social gathering the night before.

Preparing that night with Jess was an adventure in itself. We came up with a game idea where we would cover beach balls with questions about each of the three Abrahamic religions and would split everyone into groups so that they could toss the balls in the air and try to answer the question that their hands touched. The game event planning with Jess was a blast, and I am forever thankful to her for blowing up all sixty of the red and white balloons that we scattered all over the floor of the large meeting room that we had for our party. I knew our event was successful when guests stayed past 9:45, when the party ended. In fact, many did not leave until around midnight. We enjoyed cookies, snacks and soda, played the beach ball game, and enjoyed a wonderful performance by a popular a capella band on campus called Jewop.

The following day, it was time for us to split up into our different groups and go to our service sites. Ben Agatston and I met up with Ben’s friend Rashid from the Forum in order to go to the Salvation Army, where we were going to serve dinner to a community of homeless people. On the menu: ham, rice, gravy, and carrots. I am not afraid to admit that the ham ended up smelling really good, and Ben and I laughed at the fact that Ben and I—a Jew and a Muslim—were drooling over the most forbidden of meats in our religions.

Sometimes it doesn’t seem to be fitting anymore to label a holiday “Christian” or “Jewish” anymore; instead, Jews, Christians, and Muslims need to appropriate certain holidays into a larger Abrahamic universe.

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I will miss every moment that I spent with amazing Fellows, who have all become close friends, and also the wonderful Forum members, who have helped evolve and shape my own religious views.

The community service project could not have come at a more necessary time, since the tragic events at the 2013 Boston Marathon were very fresh in the background. The night that I watched the news, I kept my fingers crossed praying that the men behind the bombs were not Muslims. My heart broke when I learned that they were. To combat that news in my own way, I went out and did something positive for the American community by participating in the community service project. I was honored to be able to represent Islam in a positive light, and I'm ready to see Muslims take back their religion from violent criminals.

My time at the Lubar Institute

comes to a close. I'm about to graduate and so I wave goodbye to one of the best organizations on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus. While I am excited to kiss my undergraduate journey goodbye, I will miss every moment that I spent with amazing Fellows, who have all become close friends, and also the wonderful Forum members, who have helped evolve and shape my own religious views. To them, I give a huge thank-you. They don't know how much their friendships and conversations, their thoughts and faith practices, have helped enrich my life. To everyone, *assalamu alaikum*, *shalom*, and (in good Abrahamic Irish) peace. ●

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The Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions opened in July, 2005, testament to the vision and benefactions of Sheldon and Marianne Lubar of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. 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, the Lubar Institute is dedicated to strengthening the values of religious pluralism so vital for sustaining American civil society and peaceful international discourse.

The Institute'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, the Institute 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.

The Lubar Institute 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 regular conferences, 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. ●





**The Lubar Institute
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