



# *the* **Abrahamic Moment**

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

## **Breaking down the barriers**

*Key LISAR programs encourage interfaith conversation*

As time inevitably ushers in the autumn season and the colors of the leaves proliferate, so does our work at the Lubar Institute. As the Graduate Fellow at LISAR this fall, I took an active role in coordinating the visit of our Thering Fellow, the inspiring James Carroll, in October. I also spent time fielding many requests to speak about spirituality, community-building and topics related to the Abrahamic faiths. But most of all, I devoted much time to recruiting participants for and leading two of the Institute's signature programs – the Community Forum and the Courage Project.

The Community Forum annually brings together adult members of the local Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities to engage each other in learning about each other's

traditions, their places within their own traditions and their interrelationships as neighbors and members of particular faith communities. This year, instead of having meetings at just one location, we are going to visit different houses of worship.

The Courage Project, now entering its second year, likewise provides a space in which its teenage participants can engage in conversations that deal with ethnic and religious diversity, stereotypes and boundaries.

These two programs operate by encouraging participants to learn from one another and build skills to approach members of other faiths meaningfully while remaining rooted in their own tradition. The human contact the meetings provide will, I expect, help us gain the ability to



*Rohany Nayan, LISAR Graduate Fellow*

recognize the humanity of the Other.

The relationships, friendships and humanity cultivated and nurtured through activities at LISAR were clearly evident this fall when a misfortune befell the Madinah Academy of Madison (MAM), the first local Islamic school. On Saturday, September 3, 2011, an early morning fire broke out in the building where the school was located. With the school year originally planned to start on the

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

**Vol 2, Issue 2  
Winter 2011**

**continued pg. 4**

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

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

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



**Director:**

Charles Cohen  
clcohen@wisc.edu

**Asst. Director:**

Ulrich Rosenhagen  
rosenhagen@wisc.  
edu

**Graduate Fellow:**

Rohany Nayan  
nayan@wisc.edu

**Administrator:**

Karen Turino  
turino@wisc.edu

© LISAR, 2011  
lisar.lss.wisc.edu

# From the Director



---

**... but the most  
meaningful  
moment in  
my estimation  
centered not the  
latest advance  
in digital  
communication,  
but on a  
facsimile edition  
of the Sarajevo  
Haggadah...**

---

In late October I participated in the Ninth Annual Conference sponsored by the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID). The Conference attracted figures from around the world; the session for which I acted as *rapporteur* included William Vendley, Secretary General of the World Conference of Religions of Peace, and Rev. Jesse Jackson, as well as participants from Britain, Spain, and India. Dr. Aisha Al-Mannai, Dean of Shari'a at Qatar University, chaired the session. The first woman to hold that position in an Arab country, Dean Al-Mannai presented a lecture co-sponsored by LISAR at UW-Madison in 2010.

The Conference dealt with the impact of social media on interfaith activity, but the most meaningful moment in my estimation centered not the latest advance in digital communication, but on a facsimile edition of the Sarajevo Haggadah, a fourteenth-century illuminated manuscript created by the Sephardic Jewish community of Spain that now resides in the Sarajevo Museum.

Mustafa Čeric, Grand Mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina (and the plenary speaker at LISAR's inaugural conference in 2006) presented the book to Qatar's new Museum of Islamic Art. He is distributing copies, he explained, because Sarajevo's instability renders the original vulnerable, and he selected Qatar for reasons that ultimately go back to the eighth century. Medieval Baghdad housed a magnificent library and research facility, the *Bayt ul-Hikma*—House of Wisdom. The city gained international renown as a center of both Islamic and Jewish intellectual life. By presenting the Museum with a copy of the Haggadah, Čeric was articulating his hope that Doha will become a new House of Wisdom—and with all of the implied multicultural resonance.

The Mufti's deposit of a Jewish text in an Islamic museum is mostly a symbolic gesture, yet such acts, along with the Conference's mingling of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars and clerics, will likely constitute more of its legacy than the academic presentations. 

# LISAR Fellows Voice



Lamin Manneh,  
LISAR  
Undergraduate  
Fellow, 2011

My home is a tiny country on the west coast of Africa called The Gambia. Its many beaches make it a perfect spot for relaxation and keeps its people smiling, giving it the nickname, “The Smiling Coast of Africa.” It has a population of 1.7 million people, 90 percent of whom are Muslim. The remaining 10 percent is Roman Catholic. I am Muslim, and, like many of my fellow countrymen, I was unaware of the diversity of religions that the world offers.

The Gambia runs like a small community, with close-knit families and friends supporting and taking care of each other. Most people have a great sense of responsibility

to their neighbors, who are probably distant relatives of some sort. However, small homogenous communities suffer from certain ailments; there is a lack of diversity in thought, action and personality, especially in the religious sense. A very simple world is created, where you do and think what your father did and thought. You are boxed in by your community, never exploring to find out what else exists outside of common thought and practice. This is the world most of my countrymen live and die in.

I left my country at age four to live in Saudi Arabia, which is a country far more puritanical in its practice of Islam than my own. I lived there for six years, although I can’t remember much. I do however, recall the strictness in practice — shops closing down on Fridays as every

Tom, Dick and Harry (or, rather, every Musa, Muhammed and Uthman) rushed to the mosque for the Friday sermon. Not having the capacity to understand what was going on around me, I didn’t really internalize it; it didn’t really give me a worldview.

At the age of 10, I moved backed to The Gambia. This time my environment did shape my perceptions of wrong and right. I thought of Islam as the only right path to salvation and believed that the way it was practiced in my country was a standard for the Muslim world. Muslims in my country are generally tolerant; however, they never really engage the Other — Christians, primarily — in a dialogue with the desire to hear a different story of religious perception. When they did talk, it was always with the intent of ridiculing the Other; they wanted to show him/her how delusional he/she was.

I too was guilty of keeping this mindset; I felt like I had an ownership of the truth. This edifice of truth that I had built for myself came crumpling down pretty quickly once I got to college. My mind, eyes and ears were submerged in the diversity of thought, people and expressions Madison has to offer. The walls of the box in which my community had long trapped me gave way. I was even slightly overwhelmed by how gray, or to put it more flamboyantly, how multi-colored the world really is.

I saw the teachings and practices of Islam emulated by the many peoples I came across, and they weren’t Muslim. With this break between what I thought and what I saw, I began to question and even grow angry at the views about other religions held in my country. I increasing became angry with Islam itself. I realized, though, how fruitless this path of anger would be. I decided it would be better to denounce my ownership of truth than denounce my religion. It would be better to learn about other religions and see the truth in them. Joining LISAR has been a blessing; meeting and interacting with people of different faiths and forming bonds that go beyond religion has allowed me to further embrace the idea that religious truth is multi faceted. 

## LISAR 2011-2012 Calendar of Events

Visit [lisar.lss.wisc.edu](http://lisar.lss.wisc.edu) for the latest updates

2/16/12

**Amitabh Pal lecture**

- 7:30 PM in in Pyle Center
- “Not Just Gandhi: The Tradition of Nonviolence Among Muslims in South Asia”

5/2012

**Courage Project presentation**

- Date and time TBA
- Creative presentations by participating students of their Courage Project learning experiences

continued from pg. 1

following Monday, the MAM faced tremendous pressure to find an alternative location to start school as soon as possible.

Due to the contacts and friendships established at LISAR, this small disaster turned into a big opportunity for interfaith friendship and cooperation. The call for help for the MAM elicited overwhelming and incredibly wonderful responses from the local Abrahamic community, with rabbis, priests and ministers all wondering what their faith community could do to support and assist the Islamic school in their time of need. Within days, we were able to secure a short-term home for the MAM through the generosity of the Westminster Presbyterian Church in the Nakoma neighborhood. The hospitality extended by this church enabled the MAM to start its school year on Monday, September 12, 2011.

LISAR was founded in the wake of the 9/11 tragedies. How fitting it is that, just one day after the Madison community commemorated the tenth anniversary of that dark day, a bit of brightness shone on the near west



*The students of the inaugural Courage Project developed this logo for their program and t-shirts.*

side of town. The Lubar Institute aims to be part of the solution to religious intolerance and violence. Based on what I've seen this fall, we seem to be well on our way.

Faithfully yours,  
Rohany Nayan, Graduate Fellow 

## Supporting the LISAR mission



December is the time when many of us make decisions regarding year-end charitable gifts. And there is no question there are many wonderful programs and valuable

research on the UW-Madison campus alone that warrant donor support. This year, we at LISAR would be honored and appreciative if you could consider a gift in support of our mission.

All contributions to the Institute offer the opportunity to participate in an unparalleled effort: the bringing together of Muslim, Jewish and Christian students, faculty and community members to share ideas, learn about other faiths and increase understanding of their own. Even the smallest gift enables LISAR to do something we could not otherwise accomplish. You may wish to visit our Web site to examine some examples of what levels of donation may do.

The campaign for LISAR, like the Institute itself, is unique; it could happen only at a public institution with a long tradition of civic involvement like UW-Madison. We invite you to become a part of this unprecedented enterprise.

### **Making a gift online:**

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

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

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

Stephen Wald, Director of Development  
College of Letters and Science  
University of Wisconsin Foundation  
608-263-2202 (office); 608-287-6480 (cell)  
[stephen.wald@supportuw.org](mailto:stephen.wald@supportuw.org) 