



Lubar Institute

for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions
at the University of Wisconsin – Madison

Undergraduate Journal



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About the Institute

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

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

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

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Letter from the Director

Dr. Charles Cohen

Program Director, 2008-2009



Encounters between members of the Abrahamic traditions take place at many levels of politics and society. The most visible are those which take place among world leaders, such as Pope Benedict's visit to the Holy Land, which is concluding as I write this piece. Such events take place in the public eye, attracting close media attention and popular scrutiny. By their nature they seem momentous, as perhaps they are; but to concentrate only on them misses goings-on more subtle yet equally momentous in their own way, the tectonic shifts of perspective which arise from individuals reaching beyond their own traditions (or from outside any tradition) to inquire about the lives and beliefs of others.

The Lubar Institute's *Undergraduate Journal* embodies one of those moments. It reports the whisperings of still small voices that may well become larger over the years. The contributors have participated in the life of the Institute as fellows and/or members of the undergraduate forum. They conceived this project entirely on their own and have put it together by themselves, with the oversight of Ovamir Anjum, the Institute's Senior Fellow.

The *Journal* reflects various facets of the Lubar Institute's mission, but, for the most part, it presents students reflecting upon the experience of exploring their own faiths and those of others. They work through some of the same issues that occupy world leaders: How does one interact with someone holding different beliefs? Does religious truth lie exclusively in one tradition? How can, or even should, we reconcile a common humanness with religious difference? Entertaining these questions on their own, unencumbered by political agendas or the requirement of advancing an organized viewpoint, they speak more candidly than do those who must negotiate multiple constituencies. As much as do official documents, these reflections highlight what undertaking interfaith conversations mean for those individuals who risk engaging in them. On the basis of this sample, at least, the rewards are great.

Charles L. Cohen

Professor of History/Religious Studies
Director, Lubar Institute for the Study
of the Abrahamic Religions

The Week of Prayer

Katherine Pater

Undergraduate fellow, 2008-2009



I have struggled for months to write just a few pages about this three-day period of my life. Staring for hours at the screen of my tiny laptop, watching the flashing cursor blink away the seconds, minutes, hours, I thought that I was suffering from a case of writer's block or, perhaps due to my ongoing thesis project, writer's exhaustion. But the more I think about it, the more I reflect, the more I have come to see that I have trouble writing coherently about this topic because I am still, after many months, mentally processing the experience.

During the "Week of Prayer," or, as someone suggested, the "Weekend of Prayer," a number of us visited a Friday noon service at a local mosque, a Shabbat service at Hillel, the campus Jewish organization, and mass at a nearby Catholic Church, St. Paul's.

There are great dangers in writing about your experiences in other people's faith communities. It would be so easy to fall into flattering but meaningless platitudes: "All religions say fundamentally the same thing." Worse, it is easy to make claims that may seem conducive to peace and dialogue, but that instead glaze over some of the true, deep theological and philosophical differences between these faiths: "All three religions worship the same God."

To make such a claim, especially after experiencing just a single day in the life of someone whose faith is different from yours, would be to disrespect the fundamental beliefs which members of these faiths hold. It reduces their core beliefs to unimportant values that can easily be disposed of and lost to compromise when they sit down with others whose beliefs are in some ways quite similar, but in other ways, irreconcilably different, and also forces you to compromise your own. At the same time, over-emphasizing the differences and ignoring the commonalities makes dialogue useless and unpleasant.

I did not know what to expect when the Week of Prayer began, nor did I know what I wanted to expect. As a religious person, was I prepared to experience something spiritual in that place: a quiet stirring of the heart, or a living connection to the people there. Alternatively, was I prepared to experience nothing, to be a total outsider, to reduce the whole thing to intellectual niceties about categorical similarities and differences: the message is similar to something I would hear in church, but the language is different; it looks similar to a church service, but they dress differently.

I did not enter the Mosque, the Jewish Shabbat, or even the Catholic Mass to be convinced that people there were right and that my beliefs were wrong. Nor was I willing to enter believing that they were entirely wrong about how the universe works. And again, simply saying to one another, "the parts of the story that we agree on are true," while ignoring the parts that differ is dishonest. So why did I walk through doors that were not mine not once, not twice, but three times? What would drive me to do such a thing, and what would drive others of different faiths to do the same? The answer was twofold: curiosity and respect.

I was curious, intensely curious, just to know what these services would be like, what the worship space was like, what the people there were like. And I went out of respect, knowing that I could not in good conscience attempt to have a conversation about religion with people who I had made no attempt to understand. I went because I want peace, real peace that springs out of understanding and love and shared experience.

And so I went. I wish I could say that the week convinced me that the God we all worship is the same One, True God. But quite frankly, I'm still not sure, and I do not think I ever will be. What I did find was the assurance that all the people I met were true followers of Abraham.

We share many stories. But one of the most powerful we share is the story of Abraham, the man whom each of us believe gave birth to our faiths. His story is often a source of division among us: though we can agree on much of the plot, we are skeptical about others' memory of the details. Beyond the more contentious parts of the story, however, is the oft-forgotten tale that occurs in the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scriptures:

Has the story reached you of the honored guests of Ibrahim? Lo, they entered his presence and said: "Peace!" He said: "Peace!" [and thought: "These seem] unusual people." Then he turned quickly to his household, brought out a fattened calf, and placed it before them. He said: "Will you not eat?" (Surat al-Dhariyat 24-27)

And the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door and bowed himself toward the ground, and said: My Lord, if now I have found favor in thy sight, pass not away from thy servant: Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree: And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant. And they said: So do as thou hast said. And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth. And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetch a calf tender and good, and gave it unto a young man; and he hastened to dress it. And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat. (Genesis 18:1-8)

The details may be different, but the sense of each story is the same. Abraham offers these mysterious strangers food and water: precious commodities in a dry desert. He anticipates their needs before his guests ask him for anything, and gives them the best of what he has.

I had a similar experience during the week of prayer. Without setting aside real differences, it is important to remember that we share this story, and more importantly, that we try to live up to the ideals it expresses and encourages. After prayers at the mosque, I was invited to lunch by some of the gentlemen who attend services there. Halfway through my second slice of pizza, I realized I was thirsty. Practically reading my mind, one of them offered me water, and despite my protestations that I could fetch some myself, that someone brought it to me anyway. Likewise, after the Shabbat service, we were fed along with all of the other students there, not as outsiders, but as valued guests.

And perhaps this is the only lesson we can truly glean from all this: that although we may never agree about our beliefs, our stories, we can all look to our religions for teachings on how to treat guests, and we will find similar injunctions to love and care for the strangers among us. Like Abraham, perhaps the best we can do is leave the tent door open and make room for hearty conversation: talk that creates real respect without unfruitful compromise.

Coexistence Dinner

Huda Bashir

Undergraduate fellow, 2008-2009



Growing up I was always surrounded by interfaith dialogue. My parents were very active in the community, giving several talks and participating in many discussions. My mother used to come to my classes during Ramadan and explain to everyone the importance of fasting in Islam. I got involved as well. I remember being a part of a play in fifth grade for a religious conference at Concordia College in Moorhead, MN. I was the crab.

Coming to school in Madison has provided me with so many opportunities, especially the opportunity to participate in interfaith dialogue. I have always been fascinated by religion, especially the Abrahamic traditions. It was awesome being a part of LISAR and participating in these discussions, each of which has taught me more about these faiths.

One of the wonderful opportunities I was given was to help organize a Coexistence Dinner between Muslim and Jewish students in the previous fall semester. In April of 2008 several Muslim and Jewish students came up with the idea of hosting a Coexistence Dinner because they thought it was important for Jewish and Muslim students to discuss the events taking place in Israel-Palestine. The dinner would give everyone the chance to see and understand both sides of the situation, and the hope was to facilitate peace between Muslims and Jews as well as peace in Israel-Palestine. Such an emphasis on cooperation was very important for people to understand prior to attending. The dinner was not a debate, and no one's opinion would dominate. No one was *right*. We all understood that in order for peace to occur we were going to have to work together.

The dinners were hosted at Ofek Shalom, a Jewish cooperative on campus. Several students showed up to both the first and second Coexistence Dinners, and it was so heartwarming to realize that so many Jewish and Muslim students cared to work for peace. There was an equal representation of Muslim and Jewish students.

The evening started out with some icebreaker activities to allow students to get to know one other. It was amazing to see everyone sitting and chatting naturally with people they didn't know. Shortly after the activities, everyone divided into smaller groups of about six or seven students (which were changed around throughout the evening). The small groups discussed questions varying from religion, Israel-Palestine, and regular day-to-day life as college students at the University of Wisconsin.

Each person had a lot to offer to the discussion because each person came from a different background and adhered to his or her own level of religiosity and spirituality. Some of us had been to Israel-Palestine or had family there. We were each taught different things in school and from our parents about Muslims and Jews and about Israel-Palestine. It was incredible to watch people actively discussing these topics, and to be a part of the discussion.

The students discussed so many different ideas during the dinner, and I took away quite a bit from these discussions. I learned so much about what is happening in Israel-Palestine that I either didn't know was going on or didn't think was possible. I remember learning about an elementary school where Jewish and Muslim parents sent their children to learn about both traditions. Not only were these children exposed to things many of us never had the opportunity to experience, but they were simultaneously building peace between one another from the beginning. I think most attendees of the Coexistence Dinner had positive experiences as well. I began to feel like we were slowly merging from two separate groups into one powerful group that could make a difference with our voices and efforts in accomplishing our goal of peace in Israel-Palestine.

Toward the end of the evening two girls (one Muslim and one Jewish) came up with a brilliant idea to expand on the success of the Coexistence Dinner. While it was wonderful for all of us to gather together once a semester, they felt it was necessary to take the idea of coexistence to the next level. We needed to build bonds and relationships and keep the dialogue going. To do so, a group of us created the Muslim-Jewish Volunteer Initiative (MJVI). Helping those in need is an important aspect of both Judaism and Islam, and the initiative would also provide us with a chance to show everyone that peace is possible.

The MJVI does not just focus on volunteering, but also emphasizes the importance for us to build relationships between fellow Muslim and Jewish students. On top of volunteering, we have social gatherings (game nights) as well as opportunities to learn and explore each tradition. For example, we had a day of prayer, which allowed Jewish students to experience Friday Prayer and Muslim students to experience Shabbat. From my own experience I have built longstanding relationships with other Jewish students. Through these friendships I have been able to have many experiences and conversations which have strengthened my understanding of different issues in the world, varying from personal interactions to the United Nations. These friendships and dialogues have changed me for the better.

One thing that I'm really excited about is that the MJVI is continuing the tradition: we have begun to plan for the *third* Coexistence Dinner. This time we plan to discuss a few different solutions to resolve the conflict in Israel-Palestine. To think that a few kids getting together to talk about peace could lead to such a significant change is an incredibly exciting and awesome idea, and I'm honored to be a part of it.

The 2009 LISAR Conference

Simon Dick

Undergraduate fellow, 2008-2009



Each year the Lubar Institute holds a conference in the spring semester which focuses on an important aspect of religion in society. The topic this year was “Religion and the State.” Alan Wolfe gave the plenary address of the conference entitled “Who’s Afraid of American Religion?” His talk set an excellent mood for the rest of the conference, and other speakers would even draw upon his research in their own discussions.

As a Religious Studies major, it was extremely interesting for me to witness what people in the field actually do. The exchange of ideas was exhilarating. I was given the task of recording the event, which also gave me the great opportunity to spend more time pouring over the issues discussed. At lunch I received the honor of sitting with the speakers and getting to engage in deep discussions with them regarding the effects of religion upon society. The experience was an inspiration and furthered my desire to pursue my studies in religion.

Though no consensus was reached with regard to reconciling religious practice and secular society, I still feel that the conference was a success. Each person walked away with a new appreciation of religious studies, greater knowledge of the Abrahamic traditions, and new ideas to build upon their own. I myself was recommended a seemingly unreadable amount of books. I have begun to pursue my own private studies into these recommendations and have been nothing but pleased.

If nothing else, the 2009 LISAR Conference was a source of great exchange of ideas. I look forward to the topic next year and being able to attend the Conference again. Perhaps I will have expanded my knowledge and I too can take an active role in the deeper debates.

Being Jewish in Cairo

Emily Singer

Undergraduate fellow, 2008-2009



“What religion are you?” This is not a question that we, as Americans, are usually asked by complete strangers. But in the Middle East, where many of our American formalities do not exist, this question is not so uncommon. This is also not a question that many Jewish Americans feel they must answer with a lie, but that is exactly what I did during my semester in Cairo, Egypt.

I decided to study abroad in Cairo because I wanted to learn more about Arab society. I had tasted this culture briefly while studying in Israel and I wanted to learn more about these customs and this way of life, without the baggage of Jewish-Arab or Israeli-Arab issues, so I went to Cairo as an American student. Studying abroad in Cairo was not easy; it is not an easy city to be a foreigner in and every day was tiring. Every daily activity became difficult: catching a cab, trying to survive while crossing a busy street, not finding what you want in the grocery store, people yelling at you on the street, intermittent internet and electricity going out. All of these things could leave someone tired and frustrated, but I loved studying abroad in Cairo. It was hard, but extremely rewarding. I began studying Arabic, I found a connection and a love for Arab culture and I learned that my Judaism cannot be ignored; it is a vital part of who I am.

Being Jewish is not a crime in Egypt; in fact citizens of Egypt are legally allowed to practice only one of three faiths: Islam, Christianity or Judaism. Though I decided not to tell many people in Cairo that I was Jewish, this decision was not made out of fear. I did not want to explain my Judaism and I did not want to be different from the other American students in Cairo. This was a very personal struggle for me because I am proud of my Jewish heritage, and the thought of lying about it upsets me. Though I struggled with these issues, I decided that holding back this part of my life would enrich my time in the Arab world. I lied about my religion to cab drivers who asked, assuming that I was Christian anyway, and other people I met. Eventually, I did tell some people that I was Jewish and what I realized through these interactions is that the problem with being Jewish in Egypt is not a religious issue but a political issue.

Upon telling a few Egyptian students at the American University in Cairo about my religion, I was told, “It’s ok, we know the difference between Jews and Zionists.” That is the problem; I am not just a Jew but also a Zionist, who believes in the State of Israel as a Jewish State. I realized that during my four months in Cairo, there was little value in discussing Israel because there is a large gap between my understanding of Israel’s history and that of my Egyptian counterparts. I did not go to Egypt to talk about Israel: for the semester I was trying to disconnect myself from Judaism and the political aspects of Judaism that connect the religion to Israel.

Trying to detach from these important issues during my study abroad experience proved harder than I thought. Egypt, and Cairo especially, have much to offer in the way of Jewish history, as Egypt has one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world. This long history can still be seen today in the remnants of these communities. There are estimated to be less than one hundred Jews still living in Egypt today (mostly elderly women from what I saw) because most Jews emigrated from Egypt with the establishment of the State of Israel and the ensuing harsh treatment of Egyptian Jews.

I visited three synagogues in Cairo; one is no longer used, but is preserved as an antiquity and the other two actually do still hold services for the High Holidays (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur). Being in Cairo during the fall semester meant that I experienced the Jewish High Holidays as well as the Islamic month of Ramadan, which was an incredible lesson in Muslim kindness and camaraderie. I knew little about Ramadan before traveling to Cairo, but experiencing *iftar* (breaking-fast meals) with different families and seeing people give food to strangers to break the fast really showed me the humanity that exists in Islam.

For Rosh Hashanah I went to a synagogue in downtown Cairo, where they hire a Moroccan-French Rabbi to come and lead services. I had trouble following the service because it was different than what I was used to in America and even the Rabbi's Hebrew sounded foreign to me. It was very depressing to be in a strange place and without a familiar community for such an important holiday, but it was interesting to see some of the last living remnants of Cairo's elderly Jewish population. After Rosh Hashanah, I felt saddened that I had not felt any connection to the ancient Jewish community of Egypt. I felt the need to distance myself even more from Judaism in Cairo, because it had left me feeling very empty. I decided to try once more for Yom Kippur. I went to a synagogue in one of the nicer areas of Cairo, where the Moroccan-French Rabbi was again leading a service that I could not follow. This time there were more people at the service and I actually met some Israelis who work in Cairo for the Israeli Embassy or the El Al airline's security. Meeting the Israelis was like a breath of fresh air for me. I had been trying so hard not to speak about Israel or my Judaism that it was a nice change to relax about these issues. I immediately felt a connection to the other young Jews.

Through the rest of my time in Cairo, I kept in touch with the Israelis that I had met on Yom Kippur. Just knowing that they were also in Cairo made me feel better about being Jewish in Egypt. When I saw them, I felt that I could relax and be myself; I felt relieved. My experiences trying to ignore my Judaism while in Cairo made me realize just how important being Jewish really is to my life. No one forced me to pretend that I was not Jewish, but it seemed like the right thing to do if I really wanted to learn about this new society. I do not regret any of the decisions that I made while abroad. I think that I opened up to the right people and held back at the right times but having other Jewish friends in Cairo made the semester easier and more enjoyable because I could truly be myself with them.

Becoming Catholic

Kendric Walters

Undergraduate fellow, 2008-2009



“If Jesus’ blood was actually wine, he must have been wasted all the time!” Everyone else in the room laughed and the conversation continued without pause. To me, however, the joke struck a deep nerve, and I had to resist blurting out something I would later regret. We all were standing around the kitchen talking, and the joke had been prompted when someone discovered my friend had been raised Catholic and asked him if he was *really* going to give up meat for the month of Lent. My friend answered that he would not, and began to protest that many of the Church’s traditions were ridiculous. This episode, in my mind, epitomizes the situation in which many Catholics find themselves when confronted by a society which is largely antagonistic to religious faith in general and, in my view, of Catholics especially.

First, a little bit about me. I was baptized Methodist and confirmed Presbyterian; this may seem odd, but most practicing Protestants will tell you that interdenominational migration is a fact of life in many Christian sects. My parents remain firmly rooted in an abhorrence of doctrine, and in many ways my childhood religious education was focused on preparing me to choose my own religion when I became older. As a teenager, I explored several Christian denominations, visited synagogues and mosques, and perused the writings of Paramahansa Yogananda, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Mawlana Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi; my own studies within the broader field of religious studies remain focused on Indian religious traditions, which I find endlessly fascinating. My decision to become Catholic has a lot to do with the fact that I had never stopped believing in a personal and Omnipotent God (which ruled out Buddhist traditions) and, despite periods of doubt, never fully accepted the view that Jesus was anything less than Divine (precluding Judaism and Islam). I was finally persuaded to convert by the silent example of my devout Catholic aunt and uncle, and, as a theologically-minded person, by the doctrinal ineffability of a thousand-year-old Church claiming direct descent from the Apostles. However, when I revealed my decision to become Catholic to my friends and family, the reactions I elicited made it seem as though I had made some grave error of conscience.

Upon reflection, I think this has a lot to do with negative conceptions of Catholicism which predominate in our society – stereotypes which, if vocalized in opposition to, for example, Jews or Muslims, would raise the ire of anti-defamation organizations and provoke popular outrage. Since resolving to convert, I have come to see how frequently and nonchalantly Catholic beliefs, practices, and institutions are attacked by ordinary people in everyday conversation. Having been an “outsider” myself, I can easily see how many Catholic behaviors may appear archaic or repressive – but as an “insider,” I see how these practices have less to do with a “male-dominated hierarchy’s desire for power” than with helping the faithful act with modesty, compassion, and justice. For example, the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) is often ridiculed in the popular imagination as an illegitimate and unnecessa-

ry interference by “power-hungry priests” seeking to keep the faithful subservient to their unreasonable demands. In reality, this conception (which stems from Reformation-era anti-Catholic propaganda) could not be further from the truth, as many Catholics find the confessional inspires true contrition and regular self-reflection, as well as providing a genuine sense of closure for past wrongdoings: in a beautiful way, the act of confession transforms what was formerly a source of evil into the inspiration for a greater good. In a like manner, belief in Papal authority, miracles, the Blessed Sacrament, and the intercessory power of saints also generate endless scorn, particularly among Protestants, who are unfortunately in some cases better informed about debates surrounding these doctrines than Catholics.

This brings me to the greatest lesson I have learned in the process of conversion. After long talks with many of the older members of my parish, I have found that the biggest problem facing the Church today is not its unpopularity, but the poor quality of religious education which has often been given to Catholics as children. This can be seen not as a categorical failure of Catholic parochial schools in the previous generation, but rather as symptomatic of a more general sense of confusion which has faced the Church as a whole following the monumental reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Indeed, all subsequent papacies (particularly that of John Paul II) have centered upon explaining these reforms to the faithful such that, for example, the first authoritative catechism (compendium of official Church teachings) to be produced following Vatican II was only completed in the early 90’s. The point is that many – Catholic and non-Catholic alike – continue to misunderstand key doctrines of the faith. And it is precisely these misunderstandings that have allowed critics to attack a straw man of the Church: a pedophilic, hypocritical, chauvinistic, power-hungry cult bent on brainwashing the masses and achieving world domination. That is not to say that either I or any other Catholic I know condones, for example, the clergy abuse scandal, but this most recent example in particular serves to demonstrate the extent to which valid criticisms of individuals within the Church are allowed to spiral out of control into the good old fashioned Catholic-bashing which has often been vogue in the English-speaking world.

And this is where interfaith dialogue comes in. As a student of religious studies, it is central to the work I anticipate doing after I graduate; as a person of faith, it has played a vital role in the formation of my own beliefs and practices; and as a citizen, I see it as indispensable to living with others in a society made up of people from every corner of the globe. But I also believe that talking with people of other faiths has become even more important in light of the confusion and discord accompanying the increasingly hostile attitude which many have taken towards religious belief of any sort. I think that at its most basic level, the resistance I have encountered in my conversion to Catholicism can be traced to the fact that particularly in America, most people are no longer willing to take their religious upbringing seriously – that is, to make personal sacrifices for what they believe in. I don’t mean to pass judgment, but part of what defines religious faith of all stripes is the belief in something greater than oneself, and the willingness to abide by a personal ethic which challenges the larger society to reexamine its own conceptions of right and wrong. In essence, the “iGeneration” simply cannot comprehend behavior which requires one to step outside their immediate interests and, when paired with the modernistic tendency to divorce religious beliefs from everyday life, results in the categorization of those who take faith seriously as “zealots”. I think this is a tragedy, because a loss of faith – whatever form this takes – represents the loss of a fundamental dimension of our identity as human beings.

Interfaith Issues in Lebanon

Marisa Kovacs

Undergraduate fellow, 2008-2009



Lebanon has a rich and complex history of interfaith relations. This article will seek to give a brief historical understanding of those relations, starting with the introduction of Islam, the youngest Abrahamic religion, to the region. Lebanon's interfaith relations are too complex to be explained in such a brief article, but perhaps a historical understanding can put into perspective the ever shifting alliances and balance of power that exists in this small country. This article approaches the topic of interfaith relations through a political paradigm, looking at the link between religion and political power throughout history.

The Arab Islamic *fateh* (conquest) of the Middle East began in the 7th century. "In A.D. 636 Arab Muslim soldiers crushed the Byzantine army at Yarmuk and invaded the Middle East" (Phares,11). Conquered peoples were given three options. The first was to convert to Islam, which in principle guaranteed them the same rights as Arab tribesmen. The second option was to maintain their own faiths, but in doing so give up certain socio-political rights. This second option was known as *dhimmah*. Dhimmis paid the *jizya*, a tax that guaranteed them the protection of the state. Along with paying a tax, dhimmis were prohibited from keeping weapons and often were forced to wear distinctive clothing. "The transfer and deportation of populations, although not mentioned in the *dhimmah*, was nonetheless linked to the condition of the conquered peoples" (Ye'or, 57). Non-Muslims were prohibited from retaining land and ownership was transferred to the Muslim treasury (*diwan*). Property taken from Non-Muslims became state property and was administered for the benefit of all Muslims. "However, dhimmis could retain possession of the soil, draw the usufruct [sic] from it, and inherit it" (Ye'or, 59). The third option available to Non-Muslims was to refuse to accept the new order and struggle against it.

The rugged mountainous region of Lebanon became a haven for Christians, Druze, and Shi'i Muslims over the centuries. Maronite Christians were the first of these groups to flee to the mountains, coming from Syria at the end of the seventh century to escape religious persecution. Druze arrived after the Maronites and were followed by the Shi'ites. The Maronites supported the Byzantine Empire in its struggle to push the Muslims from the Syrian coast. Because of this support, the Muslim armies were dispatched to suppress the Maronites. In the Lebanese mountains, the Maronite community set up an independent state in the midst of Islamic lands which existed from 676 to 1305. "In the years A.D. 676 and 677, a warrior population of Christian Arameans from Syria, encouraged by Constantinople, started an uprising against the Umayyad [sic] rule. These populations were called *Marada* or *Mardaite*, from the Arab word "rebels." The Mardaite revolt spread into Mount Lebanon where the Maronites, also Aramaic, first joined, then led, the liberation movement against the Arabs... In less than two years, the Christian resistance established an independent entity in Lebanon" (Phares, 33).

During the period of independence, the Maradite leaders of Lebanon called for an uprising among the Christians of Syria. In a display of the convoluted relations and tactical alliances taking precedence over religious ties, the uprising was put down by the Byzantine emperor. "In 685, by virtue of a pragmatic *entente* with Caliph Moawiya [sic], a Byzantine expedition massacred the Mardaite chiefs" (Phares, 33). This caused the withdrawal of the previously expanding Mardaite state to the area around Mt. Lebanon. Lebanon's history is riddled with not only interreligious conflict, but also tension and competing goals within religions. This event set the precedent for what was to come toward the end of the 11th century, when the Crusaders approached Syria. The Maronites endorsed the Crusaders and joined their ranks. While the Shi'is did not endorse them, the community often cooperated with the Crusaders because of their shared animosity towards Sunni regimes in the Levant. Both groups were later persecuted by new dynasties for their complicity.

The Ottoman Turkish Empire gained control of Lebanon in 1516. When the Turks invaded, the Druze princes, who had previously been allied with the Christians, aligned themselves with the Ottomans. As a reward, Lebanon was made an autonomous emirate, with a Druze family given hegemony over Mount Lebanon under the empire's sovereignty (Phares, 44). The Christians considered the emirate status as a means toward full autonomy (Phares, 45) and supported it because of this. While the chief was always a Druze prince, Christians sat on his council and were appointed as feudal lords. Christians and Jews enjoyed the status of *Ahl al-Kitab* – protected "Peoples of the Book" – under Ottoman rule, and were thus given autonomy and allowed to live relatively peacefully. The Shi'is, however, did not enjoy these same rights because they were seen as deviating from Sunni Islam and distrusted as spies for the Shi'i empire of the Safavid Persians. Thus, while non-Muslims did not share equal rights, their position was relatively secure: they enjoyed a degree of autonomy and were given the protection of the state. The non-Muslims of Lebanon did not face the same fate of minority religions (such as the Jews and Muslims) in Spain or England. Over time, however, the status of the Emirate changed; by the mid 19th-century, Christian-Druze relations were beginning to fragment.

With the end of World War I, the League of Nations divided the Ottoman Empire and gave France control of Lebanon, which was at the time part of Syria. In 1926, Lebanon became an independent republic and France imposed on its protectorate a constitution based on religious affiliation which greatly favored the Maronites. As laid down by the constitution, "The President was always to be Christian, the Prime Minister (appointed by the President) a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the Parliament a Shi'ite. When Lebanon received its independence in 1943, an unwritten national pact used the 1932 population census to assign parliamentary seats in a six to five ratio in favor of the Christians. There was no mechanism in the constitution to change the ratio if the population balance changed" (Smith, 65). The results of the 1932 census demonstrated that the Christians constituted 51.2% of the population, with Maronites as 32.4% of the total population. Muslims represented 48.8%, with 22.4% Sunni, 19.6% Shi'i, and 6.5% Druze (Dagher, 70). Independence was followed by a failed coup attempt in 1949 and open fighting in 1958, with guerrilla fighters aided by Syria and Egypt revolting against the government. The split was among Arab Muslims, who wanted to accomplish the political Arabization of Lebanon, and indigenous Christians, who felt they had already made enough concessions to the Arabs and wanted closer ties to the West. In addition to the struggle between Arabization and Westernization, the 1960s saw a

demographic shift in which the Maronites became a minority. This was due in large part to the influx of Palestinian refugees and the higher birthrate of the Muslims, especially Shi'is.

In 1970, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was forced to leave Jordan because the government feared that they would destabilize the country. That year, the PLO moved their headquarters to Beirut, with the approval of the Lebanese government. By 1975, the ethnic and religious tension within the country exploded into a fifteen-year civil war. The root of the tension lay in the National Pact, but the flashpoint was a business dispute in the fishing industry. The Maronite government had become too weak from political infighting to be able to prevent the escalation, and the PLO attacks from southern Lebanon into Israel made warfare inevitable. By 1976, "the PLO and its left-wing Druze allies controlled about 80% of the country" (Smith, 64). The civil war however, was not simply Christians fighting Muslims; Muslims militias, Christian militias, and the Israeli army all were responsible for attacks on Palestinian refugees. Muslims and Christians were divided against themselves. The Maronite government demanded Syrian assistance, and the Shi'i group Amal, though "aligned with the Lebanese National Movement – an array of radical and reformist groups opposed to the political dominance of the Maronite Christians," supported Syrian intervention to prevent a victory by the PLO and the LNM over the Maronite militias" (Norton, 18). Southern Lebanon was devastated and PLO brutality forced Amal to initially welcome the Israeli invasion as a way to end the fighting. By 1989, fighting among the Christian groups had weakened the Maronite position so much that they were forced to concede to the Taif Accords, which brought a close to the war but substantially decreased their political clout.

In Lebanon's June 2009 general elections, the current ruling coalition, comprised of Sunnis, Druze, and various Christian groups will be challenged by the coalition of Amal, Hezbollah, and a Christian faction led by General Michel Aoun, including the main Armenian Christian block. The ruling coalition has the support of the United States, while the opposition holds the support of the Syrians and the Iranians. The alliance of Michel Aoun and Syria is particularly remarkable in light of the fact that, as Prime Minister during a series of Syrian raids on Beirut in 1989, he declared war on the country whose support he now enjoys.

Interreligious relations in Lebanon have explicit political connotations which I have sought to address in this article. The weakness of the Lebanese state and the failings of its political system do not translate directly into the failure of interfaith dialogue and coexistence: too many other factors have influenced Lebanon to differentiate between internal and external and religious and secular conflicts. Lebanese politics have reached a point where stability must be the highest aim, and hopefully, new interfaith alliances will be forged in its pursuit.

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Christians and Muslims in France

Kristie Saylor

Undergraduate forum member, 2008-2009



I have to admit, I wasn't exactly looking for an interfaith experience when I signed on to spend a semester studying in Aix-en-Provence, France, but somehow that's what I got. For six months, I shared my life with an absolutely wonderful host family: a single mother and her two kids, aged five and six. They were some of the warmest, most welcoming, and generous people I've ever met. They were also Muslim.

Not wanting to cause religious tension right off the bat, I kept my religious beliefs quiet during my first few days in Aix. As it turned out, I need not have worried – when I eventually mentioned to my host mom that I was Christian, she exclaimed, with rather more enthusiasm than I expected, “C'est fantastique!” and proceeded to applaud the merits of Christianity for the next ten minutes. I was surprised, to say the least, and more than a little impressed by her immediate acceptance of my different beliefs.

During my time in France, my host mom revealed herself to be a woman of many surprises. Many of our informal conversations over coffee turned into unexpected theological discussions. On more than one occasion I quoted a Christian theologian only to have her respond: “that's absolutely right!” During one discussion about prayer, she told me that many Muslims duck into churches when they need to pray and aren't near a mosque – after all, “it's the same God who lives in both places.” I was stunned. For all the talk that the Abrahamic religions all share the same God, that's a belief I've rarely seen put into action so beautifully.

As Easter approached, I tried to explain the importance of Holy Week to the Christian faith (incidentally, if you're looking for an adventure, I suggest trying to explain the Resurrection in a foreign language to someone with no background knowledge. See how much sense it makes.). Her slightly bewildering response: “It's a holy time for you too? I *knew* I could feel the holiness in the air!” Her comment entertained me, but didn't prepare me for what I saw when I came home on Holy Thursday: a house alive with Islamic music and my host mom at the stove preparing a feast. “I told you it was a holy time! Today is the Prophet's birthday!” After stuffing ourselves with delicious Tunisian food, we went off to celebrate our respective holy days, each of us promising to pray for the other.

What I experienced during my stay in Aix is what interfaith activists call a “dialogue of life.” In sharing very ordinary, day-to-day experiences with my Muslim host family, I saw a beauty in Islam that no religion textbook thus far has been able to communicate. Both then and now, I have been continually amazed – and humbled – by how much those who are different from us can teach us about ourselves.

Interfaith Climbing

Sarrah AbuLughod

Undergraduate fellow, 2007-2008



The word coexistence has always sounded good to me. It has been this idealistic concept of peace and harmony that had a “feel good” ring to it. The blue “COEXIST” bumper stickers always made me smile and I don’t think I gave real thought to the depth of its meaning until I got involved with LISAR as a fellow. This fellowship was the first step in my long journey toward defining this simple, yet overwhelmingly important word.

My next step started after graduating. I took a quick glance at the job market, and promptly booked a ticket to try my hand at traveling and Arabic language immersion. I soon found myself in Cairo, Egypt, taking daily classes and slowly but surely picking up on the language of my religion. Having grown up in America, with an English speaking mother, it was a challenge to become fluent in Arabic. Though I could read and write, I lacked a strong working vocabulary and so I understood little. My independent study abroad program proved to be a slow but successful process and I soon gathered enough confidence to try my hand at travel outside of Cairo.

Very soon afterwards I found myself on an overnight bus ride to Dahab, a small town on the Red Sea across the Sinai Peninsula. Thinking I’d set myself up with a weekend of beachside sun, snorkeling, and a moments rest from the hustle and bustle that is Cairo’s overcrowded streets, I slowly nodded off next to a fellow traveler in the seat beside me. Little did I know I was on my way to one of the most intense interfaith experiences of my life.

Mt. Sinai, or *Jebel Musa* in Arabic, is located in the Sinai region of Egypt. It is said to be the very place where Moses received the Ten Commandments. Tradition tells us that it is the spot where God gave laws to the Israelites, the place where the burning bush is allegedly still growing to this day, a holy location for not one, but all three of the Abrahamic faiths.

After a sleepless night on the bus, I arrived in Dahab. Once settled into the sparsely furnished motel room, I was informed about nightly treks out to the mountain’s base. From there, one could hire a Bedouin guide and make the 7497 ft. trek up the camel path to the summit of Moses’ Mountain to witness the sunrise. I quickly bought my ticket and that night found myself in a van full of tourists from all over the world heading on the same pilgrimage.

We arrived at the mountain’s base around one in the morning. Groggily stepping from the van, I saw a most unusual sight. Surrounding me were throngs of people, all out in the middle of the night to make the same climb. In one glance I could see representatives of at least four continents. Giving one listen, I could hear at least five languages being spoken. In one heartbeat, I could feel the passion of hundreds of people all converging for the same purpose, to pay homage to a great forefather, a leader, Moses; a Prophet of God.

I don't think I realized the significance of my journey until that moment. As I slowly started my climb along with the hundreds of flashlight-bearing individuals, I felt so connected with each and every soul around me. With each breathtaking step my heart opened to the momentous occasion of interfaith coexistence I was witnessing. To my left was a party of African Christians chanting hymns. To my right were Russian Jews whispering prayers. Ahead of me were Muslim Bedouins, behind me, Japanese travelers; each with their own reasons for making this pilgrimage, each with their own prayer on their lips.

The climb took me nearly three hours. Though the elevation was gradual, it was brutal on my short stature. The wind buffeted the mountain and my short legs could barely keep up with the Bedouin guide and the rest of the group. Thankfully, there were little huts along the way where local men sold hot tea and sweets to relieve and revive the weary climbers. I found myself catching my breath, sipping a warm drink, and sitting amazed at the experience I was barely prepared for.

When I found the energy to continue, I stepped back into the constant line of people, slowly making their way up the dark mountain. The few times I took my eyes off the rocky path below my feet to glance upwards, I was gifted with seeing shooting stars. The few times I glanced below from whence I'd come, I was gifted with seeing the slow bobbing of lights that looked like a line of stars reflected in a river. What I was seeing was the flashlight-lit path of all the pilgrims snaking their way up the mountain.

I reached the top an hour or so before sunrise. The summit was covered in people. I said my morning prayers on the rocky surface and found a place sheltered from the harsh winds to sit and wait. All around me people sat with their fingers poised on their cameras and prayers poised on their lips. Notes from hymns and requests to God were carried up and away by the buffeting wind as the morning slowly dawned.

The moment the first ray of sun shone through, an audible gasp was heard and the crowd came to life. People exclaimed in numerous languages, pictures were taken, and the warmth was soaked in by all those who had survived the bitterness of the cold and dark night.

That morning marked a new beginning for me. It brought my understanding of the word "coexistence" to a whole new level. I sat there worshipping in my own way on top of a mountain with hundreds of others just like me, yet so different. Coexistence was no longer only a "feel good" ideal. The word was no longer a faraway concept. This experience was the definition of coexistence and interfaith harmony. The multilingual whispers, the ethnically-diverse pleas and the many paths toward God, were all combined as one in this surreal moment of true coexistence.

Science in the Qur'an

Tarek Elgindi

Undergraduate forum member, 2008-2009



Behold! in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day, there are indeed Signs for men of understanding: Men who celebrate the praises of Allah, standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides, and contemplate the (wonders of) creation in the heavens and the earth, "Our Lord! not for naught Hast Thou created (all) this! Glory to Thee! Give us salvation from the penalty of the Fire." (Surat Ali 'Emran 190-191)

Several verses in the Qur'an have been interpreted to point Muslims toward understanding the creation of the heavens and the earth with certain Qur'anic concepts as the backbone of their scientific inquiry. These verses advance the notion that God has not created the world in vain as the conceptual foundation for "men of understanding." This verse, and the Qur'an in its entirety, does not place much emphasis on proving the existence of God by using such theories as, for example, the "watchmaker analogy;" rather, it seems that the Qur'an concentrates primarily on noting that the existence of God is given and then establishing that the One God has created purposefully (44:38). This is to say that the Qur'an views the universe as having a set order and purpose. From 3:190-191 it is clear that "men of understanding" strive to understand the *order* that God has set in the universe – but how does one do this? Are there boundaries of scientific inquiry for a Muslim? I claim that these "boundaries" for scientific inquiry are mainly conceptual and not practical. In other words, it does not seem that the Qur'an seeks to deny any particular scientific theory (e.g. evolution), but the Qur'an does seem to call upon its reader to conduct scientific inquiry with a specific state of mind: namely, that God has created with order. Before addressing the question of Qur'anic attitudes towards scientific inquiry, it is important to understand the role of science and religion.

It is often said, possibly in order to avoid controversy, that science and faith are completely separate entities that should never influence each other in any way. At first glance, it seems that this statement is very attractive to a person of faith who might fear that some scientific theories could diminish the legitimacy of God. On the other hand, beneath the solid division of science and religion, a student may hear the same question asked in zoology class and in the church and then answer the same question differently depending upon the setting. It is true that the basic questions in zoology class and the church are different and thus deserve different answers: however, what is problematic is the unfaithful psychology that develops under the statement that science and religion are incommensurable. Even more problematic is that an unconscious relativism develops: the student becomes accustomed to asserting the Providence of God in certain sectors of life and the superiority of science in others. Thus it seems that the idea of incommensurability – an absolute separation of science and faith – is quite problematic (and unnecessary) for the Abrahamic faiths.

It is useful to note that faith and science do generally deal with different questions and, naturally, use different methods to solve these questions. Two relevant questions in this discussion are: “*How* did the universe come to be as it is?” and “*Why* is the universe as it is?” It is clear that science deals entirely with the first question and little can be said with regards to the second question just from scientific inquiry. Religion, on the other hand, deals entirely with the second question and, in the case of the Abrahamic faiths, with very little doctrinal emphasis on the first. However, there is just enough emphasis on the second question (e.g. Qur’an 3:190-191) to make some definitive statements on the nature of scientific inquiry in the Abrahamic faiths and in Islam in particular.

Science, in principle, begins with observations of every sort. After observation, hypotheses which are deduced from observation are tested systematically for a deeper understanding of the phenomena in question. The Qur’an does not seem to chastise this kind of procedure; on the contrary, as chapter 29, verse 20 states: “Say: Travel through the earth and see how Allah did originate creation; so will Allah produce a later creation: for Allah has power over all things.” Later in that chapter, a parable is given involving the flimsiness of the spider’s web (29:41). The Qur’an then says, regarding this parable: “And such are the Parables We set forth for mankind, but only those understand them who have knowledge” (29:43). The verse after this asserts that God created the Heavens and Earth “with truth.” It is clear that the quoted verses from chapter 29 are saying that the Muslim should travel the earth and *observe* the world (the spider’s web, for example) with the attitude that God is the Creator. Moreover, these verses seem to say that it is not enough simply to observe the spider web, but one must also study it to properly understand its nature and origin. In other words, the observation that a spider web is “flimsy” must be put to the test for a deeper understanding of the spider web phenomenon. Only after a thorough study of the spider web can one then be a part of “them who have knowledge.” Finally, it is asserted that God has created the entirety of the heavens and the earth “with truth” as a Sign for believers – which completes the circle and asserts, again, that the inquirer should see God as One who creates “with truth.”

We have seen that the Qur’an calls to its reader to inquire scientifically about the earth and what is beyond the earth. Furthermore, it not only enjoins the reader to observe, but also to discover the basis of physical things (such as the spider web). The Qur’an does not push for incommensurability: it does not draw concrete distinctions between scientific inquiry and belief in God. In fact, the Qur’an turns scientific research into an act of worship, and does so without any real practical boundaries on it (3:190-191). The Qur’an puts a strong emphasis on keeping God in mind while doing scientific inquiry. It also emphasizes remembering that He has created with a set order that must strive to understand. It would seem that this is a very useful approach for the scientist, because associating scientific inquiry with God adds purpose and raises the worldly pursuit of knowledge to the realm of worship of the Divine. One of the Qur’an’s central goals is to take worldly issues outside of their confined context and place them in the context of the Divine – the Qur’an takes the act of scientific inquiry, a worldly passion for many, and raises it to the status of worship of the One God.



Abrahamic Holidays, Summer 2009

- May 12: *Lag B'Omer* (33 days after Passover), a Jewish day of resting and festivity.
- May 21: Most Christians celebrate the Ascension of Jesus into Heaven forty days after the Resurrection; Orthodox Christians will do so on 5/28; Jews begin the celebration of Jerusalem Day at sundown.
- May 28: The Jewish holiday of *Shavuot*, the anniversary of God giving the Decalogue to Moses on Mt. Sinai, begins at sundown and lasts to 5/30.
- May 31: Catholic and Protestant Christians celebrate *Pentecost*, the descent of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles in Jerusalem and the traditional date of the founding of the Church; the Orthodox celebrate Pentecost on 6/7 in 2009; Catholic and Orthodox Christians celebrate the Feast of the Visitation, in which the Blessed Virgin Mary, pregnant with the Christ child, visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with St. John the Baptist.
- June 7: Trinity Sunday, commemorating the central tenet of the Christian faith, is celebrated by Catholic and Protestant Christians.
- June 11: Corpus Christi is celebrated by Catholic Christians, often accompanied by a formal procession with the Blessed Sacrament outside of the church.
- July 8: The Jewish Fast of *Tammuz*, mourning the fall of Jerusalem to Roman armies, begins at sundown.
- July 18: *Laylat al-Mi'raj*, the miraculous "Night Journey" of the Prophet from Makkah to Jerusalem and thence to Heaven, is remembered by Muslims.
- July 29: *Tisha B'Av* ("Ninth of Av"), a Jewish day of mourning for the destruction of both the First and Second Temple, said to have occurred on the same day.
- Aug. 6: Catholic and Orthodox Christians honor the Feast of the Transfiguration, the day on which Jesus climbed Mt. Tabor with the Apostles Peter and John and became radiant in the presence of the prophets Moses and Elijah; Muslims celebrate the *Laylat al-Bara'at* from sundown, commemorating the salvation of Noah and his kin during the Great Deluge.
- Aug. 15: Catholic and Orthodox Christians celebrate the Feast of the Assumption, which commemorates the Blessed Virgin Mary's assumption into Heaven.
- Aug. 21: *Ramadan*, the Islamic month of prayer and fasting during which the angel Jibra'il (Gabriel) communicated the first Revelation to the Prophet Muhammad, begins at sundown and will last until 9/18.