

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal



Dr. Ulrich
Rosenhagen

Alaa
Fleifel

Daniel
Wieber

Annie
Glasser

Erika
Cummins

Daniel
Bliss

Yasmine
Flodin-Ali

Carly Ann
Braun

David
Schulz

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.

A Letter
from the
Assistant
Director

01

Daniel
Bliss

03

Carly Ann
Braun

10

Erika
Cummins

18

Alaa
Fleifel

26

Yasmine
Flodin-Ali

30

Annie
Glasser

37

David
Schulz

43

Daniel
Wieber

50

A Letter from the Assistant Director

Dr. Ulrich Rosenhagen, Pr.

I'm writing these lines in Marburg, a small, medieval university town in the midst of hilly, rural Germany. It is the place where Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), a Lutheran theologian and author of the classic *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), lived and taught for the last twenty years of his life.

Otto was a devout man, a creative religious thinker, steeped in his own tradition, yet always looking beyond the limits of his Lutheran upbringing. Otto realized early on that doctrine alone cannot grasp the manifold manifestations of the divine.

The professor was on the cusp of a thriving liturgical reform movement. He always had an eye for practical religious issues, supported women's causes in the church, and even served as a parliamentarian for some time. Whereas many German professors spent their life between classroom and study, Otto traveled the world. His journeys brought him to Greece and Spain, Egypt and North Africa, the Middle East, India, China, and Japan. They brought him to Morocco in 1911, where, at a small synagogue, he was struck by the immediate power of the divine. And he came to the American

Midwest—to Oberlin, Ohio—where in 1924 he lectured on the encounter of European Christianity with Eastern religious traditions.

Out of this rich experience grew the deep conviction that religions need to work for mutual peace in the world. In 1920, shortly after the end of the Great War, he proposed the establishment of a "Religious League of Humanity" as a religious equivalent to the League of Nations. Political institutions, laws and negotiations he considered powerless if they are not continuously supported by "an awakened collective conscience." To Otto, it was up to "religious groups and communities and their representatives and leaders" to arouse and awaken such conscience. Otto envisioned those leaders and representatives from all religious traditions to meet every three years to assemble publicly in order to discuss any issues of universal and

Abrahamic
Reflections

*The 2014
Undergraduate
Journal*

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

pressing concern. Otto even dreamed that such assembly would develop into “a forum that would be completely independent of the struggles and limitations of diplomacy.”

Last year, the Lubar Interfaith Student Fellows acted again as representatives and leaders of their respective Abrahamic traditions. The eight Fellows met weekly and very soon became a small and intense learning community. While learning from each other about different religious practices and ideas, they discovered the richness of the Abrahamic traditions. When discussing theological and political issues, they realized how much they agreed and disagreed on their ultimate beliefs and convictions. During our meetings, the Fellows began to see themselves from a different religious angle, though they also deepened the understanding of their own religious commitments.

The reflections we asked the Fellows to write during their year-long experience are published in this journal. In a world shaped by pluralism and change, they are a rich testimony to college students’ engagement with difference and otherness. The reflections are evidence that interreligious dialogue is neither a bland affirmation of difference nor an occasion to fight about right and wrong. Rather, it is a delicate communicative practice that requires a lot of personal engagement with commitments and ultimate values.

Rudolf Otto’s Religious League of Humanity faltered soon after it was launched. In Germany in the 1920s, there was not enough room for the idea of interreligious dialogue as a remedy to world conflict. Maybe the idea of a set

of mutual religious values as the conscience of the world was just too grand? After all, religions *are* different and they contribute as much to conflicts as they are a remedy to solve them. But even in the global twenty-first century, religions are still an essential part of how we explain and make sense of the world. When many social and political conflicts cannot be understood without sensitive religious knowledge, there is pressing need for interreligious learning and understanding.

So maybe a better way to go about dialogue is not so much the creation of a grand Religious League, but instead the conversations and exchanges in smaller learning communities? Maybe the intense experience of the Lubar Fellows is indeed the way to go? Certainly, the Lubar Fellows program is not the conscience of our university. It is just a part of what makes the time in college so valuable. It is a student community that provides plenty of room for difference and disagreement as well as for personal commitment and engagement. It supplies the grounds for mutuality beyond the lines of one’s background and tradition. And, above all, it is a way to conduct interreligious dialogue.

I wonder what someone like Rudolf Otto would have made of such an interreligious student community. Though I can only speculate about Otto’s likely response, there is no doubt in my mind that he would have enjoyed last year’s Fellows conversations as much as I have enjoyed them. For sure, he would have been as grateful as I am for the time we shared. Thank you, Fellows, for a rich and wonderful year.



Daniel Bliss

Two years ago, if you'd told me that I would be part of an interfaith organization in college, I would have laughed in your face. But after a semester as a Lubar Institute Fellow, I cannot bear to think of all the opportunities for growth and development that I would've missed had I not joined. I got involved with the Lubar Institute through a friend's recommendation, as well as the testimony of a Lubar Fellow from the previous year.

This Fellow was a discussion leader in an "Introduction to Gospel Literature" course in which I was enrolled, and I was very impressed by both his knowledge of Christianity and his sense of passion for the subject, as if he not only knew the materials but was able to and was excited about applying them in more critical and real-world situations. His description of the Lubar Institute was one that seemed relevant and realistic for the schedule of a full-time undergraduate. Furthermore, since I identify as an Evangelical Free Christian and come from a multicultural background, I was very intrigued by the idea of interfaith. I saw the

work of the Lubar program as reconciling things that our society perceives as different and opposing. Yet these things are better together than they were apart. The Fellows seemed to be a celebration of this edifying diversity, while at the same time it was not a call to homogeneity. This type of "bringing together" is something that I live for.

Despite the excited, passionate view coming in, I had few actual interactions—let alone friendships—with practitioners of other faiths. The closest (and only) friendship that I had was a Jewish co-worker who would help me with basic Hebrew terms for an "Introduction to the Old Testament" course.



**Abrahamic
Reflections**

*The 2014
Undergraduate
Journal*

We stepped into the shoes—and kitchens—of each other’s religious experiences, learned much, and came together for a memorable and exciting experience.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

Through our weekly meetings, as well as at Forum meetings, I have been able to interact and build friendships with both undergraduate and graduate students from a variety of backgrounds within the Abrahamic traditions.

In each of our interactions, we go so much farther than just discussing the similarities and differences between the traditions. Our “interfaith dialogue” moves past just talking, as we often find ourselves opened up to learning and participating in each other’s religious experiences, traditions, and customs, which brings my understanding of the Lubar Institute into the new realm of “interfaith as a lifestyle,” not just a dialogue.

I think the biggest thing that it has changed in my own perception of the other Abrahamic traditions is that it has put a face to prejudice. Not only did my experiences as a Fellow this semester break down my expectations of what it means to be Jewish, Muslim, or Christian, they also “gave me a heart for them,” as many Christians would say. Suddenly, misrepresentation or prejudice against another tradition wasn’t just offensive by principle. Now, these offenses were against my friends and colleagues, causing a radical shift in the way in which I view the severity of these issues.

During my first semester as a Fellow, my favorite moment was meeting G. Willow Wilson, our visiting scholar for the year. After reading her novel, *Alif the Unseen*, and learning more about the experiences of Muslim Americans in a post-9/11 country, I was very excited to meet her. Also, as a comic book collector/enthusiast/geek, it was

an incredible opportunity to meet the woman who has written for some of my favorite superhero comics. It was such an amazing experience to hear her take on religious portrayal and expression through fantasy literature, which includes comic books! It opened my eyes to just how important the representation of themes, values, ideals, and characters of religious traditions are in fantasy literature and popular culture.

Another memorable experience was a meeting we had in the middle of the semester discussing dietary practices and regulations. Each Fellow was told to bring a dish that is representative of his or her tradition but that also adheres to the dietary regulations of the other two traditions.

As a Christian, this task was very difficult, as I couldn’t recall any traditionally “Christian” foods with which I had personal history (or was able to recreate). Accommodating others’ dietary restrictions presented a challenge as well, but the experience taught me a valuable lesson about being mindful of others’ faith practices without being scared to try. In the end, we came together for a wonderful meal of Jewish bread, hummus, pastries with dates, and several stew dishes that were reminiscent of traditional Midwestern church potlucks. This was an experience in which the Fellows did more than just talk about these aspects of our faiths. We stepped into the shoes—and kitchens—of each other’s religious experiences, learned much, and came together for a memorable and exciting experience.

It has become very clear that the Lubar Institute offers so much more

than a few conversations about religion. It is a space for a brighter future. As corny as that sounds, I believe that the Institute offers a space for people to speak freely about religious views, a space that is not only accepting and academic, but from that dialogue demonstrates personal growth in faith. The Institute promotes the idea of diversity, that we build each other up better than we would be apart. I think the Institute brings that idea to the University in the hopes that the students and members of the Institute who experience this will go on to further promote this wherever their education may take them. I hope that the future will bring more Fellows, since more students mean more perspectives and more impact. I have been incredibly blessed to have the experiences of one semester of participating in a Lubar interfaith student group, and

I have seen personal growth in how I interact with members of my own tradition, as well as the ways in which I see others. Recently, in my faith community, we were talking about a conflict between Christians and Muslims overseas, and I found myself personally engaging and challenging my friends to look with more informed perspectives. Without a doubt, I can attribute this to my time as a Lubar Fellow. And if one Christian with Muslim friends can educate his community about the importance of breaking stereotypes and promoting relationships across faiths, more students have a bigger impact. Furthermore, more resources would allow us to bring in more speakers and host more “hands-on” events that would draw in a larger student base, which brings in the benefits stated above.

SECOND REFLECTION

In the movie *The Infidel*, a Muslim man living in the England discovers he is adopted, and was born Jewish. The Lubar Institute and its Fellows decided to use this movie as a fun event to end the semester, and to open up an interfaith dialogue with the greater student body, beyond the Forum and Fellows. The movie documents this man’s journey to learn more of his Jewish heritage, all the while trying to keep up appearances with his Muslim family, including the fundamentalist future father-in-law of his son. Along the way, he meets an elderly Jewish-American man named Lenny Goldberg, living in England, and falls under his tutelage in “How to be

Jewish 101.” The dynamic between the main character, Mahmud, and Lenny draws out stereotypes and prejudices towards both religious traditions in such a way that makes them blatantly obvious to the audience. This “outing” of stereotypes is meant, on a deeper level, to make one think about the way in which religious identity is formed, but, at face value, is meant to entertain.

During the movie, I often found myself caught between these two purposes. Those rare moments, where you want to laugh but don’t know if you can. I tried to look around and see who, if anyone, was laughing, and tried to predict at whose expense my laughter

If one Christian with Muslim friends can educate his community about the importance of breaking stereotypes and promoting relationships across faiths, more students have a bigger impact.

Abrahamic Reflections
The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

During the movie, I could feel a tension for this sense of social awareness, internally asking, "Who's laughing? Is it okay to laugh? If I laugh at one joke, am I choosing sides?"

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

would be coming. After all, I'm a Christian student. I have really no stake in the conflicts on screen. The theater was dark, and the few people I could see seemed to be disappearing every time I would look back. The movie itself was entertaining, posing many different arguments about religious identity and stereotyping, but a sensation hung in the air throughout all of it: tension.

With some reflection, I think I am able to distinguish two types of tension that I felt during that experience. The first was the initial tension described above. I found myself very challenged about whether it was appropriate to laugh at a lot of the content and dialogue in the movie. In any discourse on stereotypes as a vehicle for comedic entertainment, there is a question of appropriateness, where to draw the line between funny and offensive.

Members of the audience that night could've resonated with the ambiguity of this line, as in the film Lenny and Mahmud often exchanged stereotype-driven name-calling and "joking." There were more obvious examples of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim jargon, such as the Nazi concentration camp outfit that Mahmud dreams about, which, in my opinion, is never an appropriate target for to humor. But the majority of dialogue, especially between the two protagonists were filled with these stereotype-based jests and comments.

This left much tension in the audience, as we struggled to find our own understanding of what is appropriate and what is offensive. Personally, there was a spectrum, and things were not so black and white as the dichotomy may

suggest. Also, there was the tension to laugh (or not) in the context of social atmosphere. The fact that we were in a theater with other students and audiences, many of whom identify as Jewish or Muslim, creates the need for awareness of one's own humor boundaries. During the movie, I could feel a tension for this sense of social awareness, internally asking, "Who's laughing? Is it okay to laugh? If I laugh at one joke, am I choosing sides?" And there, perhaps, lies the dilemma with movies that play on stereotypes, especially in the context of Abrahamic traditions: they play on the stereotype that we cannot get along. The movie, despite its message of pluralism, derives much of its humor from the "anti-other" sentiments of Muslims and Jews.

But the tension was deeper than: *is it appropriate to laugh at this?* There was an inner tension around the question, *should I be offended by this?* I mean, as a Christian, I really didn't have much at stake in the jokes and images portrayed in the movie. Sure, there was a gospel choir singing outside in one of the scenes, but other than that, the Christians weren't really represented. I suppose I should be thankful that we didn't get misrepresented, but it created a very confusing situation for myself as a Christian in the audience. The tension to laugh or not was perpetuated further by the lack of Christian representation in the film. After all, we had nothing to really be offended at. If we laughed, it was at the expense of another Abrahamic tradition, not our own.

Conversely, the same was true if we were offended. If the movie went too far and we were upset, it wasn't

our own territory or tradition that it was crossing, but another's. And not just any other, but the traditions of our friends, Fellows, and colleagues—and, to me, that was the silver lining. This movie created the space for empathy to occur. As a Christian Fellow, I found myself trying to get in the minds of my colleagues and experience the mov-

ie, through laughs and stereotypes, through the eyes of others. And perhaps that is the most valuable lesson I have learned in the Lubar interfaith student group, that even in the tension that is often found within interfaith dialogues, I have the capability to empathize and attempt to understand the situation beyond my own context.

THIRD REFLECTION

My last meeting as a Lubar Institute Fellow also marked the first meeting for the incoming Fellows for the coming year. It is hard to believe that, only a year ago, I was at a similar meeting, and that the people sitting next to me would become my close friends and colleagues. We gathered in Memorial Union, chewed on lukewarm slices of pizza, and listened as the exiting Fellows each gave a brief testimony and vision for what being a Lubar Fellow was to them, what they learned, and what they would do going forward. They gave us advice on how to get the most out of our year as Fellows, and reflected on discussion areas where they hoped we would have more success.

The most important thing they told us was to get to know each other and spend time together outside of meetings. Inside Lubar, we were colleagues and students. But, since the beginning of the year, we took steps to move past those things. We held several outings with Fellows, whether it was getting dinner, coffee, or commuting to events together. It was during these times that we got to know each other on personal levels, learning where each of us came

from, what we were interested in, etc. This was important in humanizing each Fellow, as it is easy to see each other only as representatives of Abrahamic traditions, especially in meetings. But this notion of lived religion that we so value is much easier to understand in others when you know and are connected to the persons who are living their religions. It is one thing to hear someone say “my family celebrates Passover this way,” but it is a much more sincere and effective experience to listen to a friend say the same thing, because you know about that person's background, their experience, and other pieces of information that are most purely learned through discussions at the dinner table or questions asked over a cup of coffee.

Furthermore, these relationships transform the ways in which one engages in interfaith discourses. As I stated above, it is easy to see each other only as representatives of Abrahamic traditions. When discussions take on more controversial topics, such as discussing Israel, it is too easy to understand each other only as members of a tradition. Without background knowledge gained through friendship, the

It is one thing to hear someone say “my family celebrates Passover this way,” but it is a much more sincere and effective experience to listen to a friend say the same thing.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

I realized just how much I have grown as a participant, facilitator, and leader in interfaith dialogue.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

most emphasized categories accessible are our traditions. These relationships help us, in some ways, see beyond these categories, and remind us that there is a person with a unique experience, and thus they deserve the opportunity to be heard. It is no question that interfaith dialogues can become heated quickly, between and within traditions, and having a foundation of friendship to fall back on in these situations makes it that much easier to engage in a way that promotes learning and understanding rather than “winning an argument.”

But, most importantly, the value of these relationships lies in the memories and friendships that I have with each of the Fellows, because—beyond our traditions, beyond our discussions—there are so many memories that bring a smile to my face.

Looking back on our year, making corny Christian-themed puns, talking over dinner about our future plans, or making up great nicknames for our wonderful advisor, the “Great Reverend Doctor Professor Ulrich ‘Rosie’ Rosenhagen,” I have been blessed with a group of amazing friends who can challenge and support me intellectually, academically, and spiritually.

My fondest memory, or “Lubar moment,” involves what happened when, after a presentation at one of the residence halls on campus during the winter, we were walking back to our homes. We were joking around and having fun, and one of the Muslim Fellows humorously pushed me into a huge pile of fresh snow. It happened so fast that my brain had to process just how profoundly rare an experience it was. Never in my three years of college did I ever think I would

be able to say that: 1) I have not one but several Muslim friends, and 2) I have been hip-checked by a hijabi. Because of the Lubar Institute, and the experiences we’ve shared, I am proud to be able to say that both of those statements above are true.

As our meetings came to a close, Professor Cohen asked each of us to reflect on some skills that we’ve developed that we will carry and use in the future. I realized just how much I have grown as a participant, facilitator, and leader in interfaith dialogue. Being able to establish relationships and friendships across traditions is incredibly important, and the Institute has given me the space and opportunities to develop the skill of using those relationships to have a respectful and mutually advantageous attitude.

Having a basic understanding of different religious traditions through Lubar meetings and Forums is great preparation for working with people of diverse backgrounds in the future. But, as a Fellow, being comfortable acknowledging and valuing people’s individual experiences with their own vernacular and institutionalized religious traditions, and being able to be a leader and facilitator of discussion of these topics is an even more beneficial skill, and one that is not often taught in most leadership seminars or workshops.

Overall, I cannot put my gratitude for the opportunity to participate in this program and be a Lubar Fellow this year into words. It has been a life-changing experience that truly has forced me to see the world and myself in a new, more informed light. As stated throughout this reflection, the people and friend-

ships that I have been blessed with will continue to directly impact my world-view and understanding, and for these I am most thankful. I frequently recommend this program to so many people around me interested in religious studies, and I am excited to see how the new Fellows shape the atmosphere and culture of Lubar in the years to come.

**Abrahamic
Reflections**

*The 2014
Undergraduate
Journal*



Carly Ann Braun



Junior
Class of 2015
Religious Studies +
Sociology
Manitowoc,
Wisconsin

Abrahamic
Reflections
*The 2014
Undergraduate
Journal*

One of the most extraordinary things that the Lubar Institute Fellows group offers to me and the other Fellows is a safe space to encounter each other in dialogue. The dialogue that takes place here is so valuable to me, but more important than just the words that are spoken are the people and personalities that speak them. In a room full of eight strangers, it would be very easy for all of us to tone down our opinions, to play nice, and to leave with everyone feeling warm and fuzzy inside. It has been a tremendous blessing that this is not the case. The Fellows are rough around the edges. Some of us are hotheads, others are class clowns. We interrupt each other, we tease each other, and more often than not, we disagree.

Most of my suburban middle-class life experience has left my feathers generally unruffled, but I firmly believe that easiness and shallowness are not qualities of a life filled with variety and flavor. The Lubar Institute gives me an opportunity to meet people with more than just polite social etiquette, it forces me to employ respect and curiosity in an encounter with people very different from myself. Our discussions are anything but shallow, and I wouldn't

have it any other way. It is a unique experience to be able to connect with someone who isn't my sister or my best friend and see into their life in an intimate way; it's often deeper than anything I get at my own church. We infiltrate one another's lives in a way that is tragically rare amid the bustling of our vast, often vacuous, campus.

It is a breath of fresh air to be in a room where there is such a perfect hodgepodge of people, personalities

and opinions. The boys are intelligent, articulate and very sweet, yet they all bring an invaluable and unique genius to the group. As far as the girls go, I think the Institute may have managed to wrangle up the four most passionate, fervent, fiery females on campus. Being a part of this group of women is the most empowering experience I've had on campus in my three years here.

The eight of us together are certainly a charismatic party of ragamuffins. I cherish the moments when a single comment leads to an eruption of loud voices, building with finger pointing and table slapping until the uproar crashes into the brick wall of tranquility constructed by the peaceful, well-thought-out statement of a gentle and articulate Fellow. It is a mix of personalities and opinions bouncing and weaving around each other, doing a beautiful and challenging swing-dance, and it quickly led me to fall in love with the Institute.

When we had our discussion on religious food, two of the boys put in the incredibly touching extra effort into preparing food that was kosher for the Jewish girls, and even used locally sourced meat for me. It was the sweetest thing.

In contrast, our discussion on religion and culture had real passion behind it, and real disagreement (real volume, too). It was not sweet, but it was awesome. These two meetings couldn't have been more different, but they are both examples of us connecting with each other in very real ways, engaging in dialogue that is challenging but worth it. The eight of us challenge each other. We disagree with each other. We care for each other.

The beautiful and challenging experience that I get from the program is mirrored, but softened, in the monthly Forum. With a year and a half of Forum experience under my belt I feel comfortable saying that the discussions there are much more informational and intellectual. It lacks the intimate connection that I feel in the Fellows' meetings. The Forum is by no means lackluster or ineffective; rather, people hold back from bold or provocative statements in the large group. It is all the more clear to me that the eight of us have a rare opportunity as Fellows. Our situation is not easily created, and we should not take it for granted. Our Tuesday meetings are the highlight of my week. I feel so blessed to be put into this leadership role, and I could not ask for a more perfect mix of unique peers and friends to surround me.

As a Religious Studies major I spend a lot of time studying religion, but these people have given faces to the unfamiliar subjects of my studies. It is a profound thing to realize that religion contained solely within doctrine and scripture, while deprived of a human element, is dead. Religion breathes and moves through people, each person giving it their unique spirit and flavor. Every tradition has variations within itself, which is cool and complicated at the same time.

I see this most vibrantly in our two Muslim Fellows, who could not be more different from each other. They are both teaching me about Islam (a religion I don't know nearly as much about as I thought I did) in very different ways, each uniquely lovely and amazing. Seeing them reach across their cultural and

The eight of us challenge each other. We disagree with each other. We care for each other.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

I believe that education and understanding, through human interaction, not just learning about rules or history, can make the world a more loving and peaceful place.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

religious divisions and embrace each other is absolutely beautiful and has increased my own faith.

Our discussion on holy scripture was very impactful for me. I connected with other Christians on the Gospel passages that were most meaningful for us. I learned more about the Qur'an and the Torah and how the people of these books approach them. I was impressed by the intense reverence that both Jews and Muslims show for their holy texts and the written or spoken name of God. I think that this is something that Christians lack, and it is a pity. Reverence for the name of God is an ancient practice that I would hate to see be lost from my tradition.

Furthermore, it was astonishing for me to learn that Muslims believe in Jesus the Messiah and revere him as a prophet. I had no idea that this religion, which is often so hated by Christians, actually venerates Jesus and, moreover, looks to many of the same biblical figures and prophets for spiritual truth as Christians. After this discussion, I truly realized the fantastic gift that the Institute brings to campus. I believe that education and understanding, through human interaction, not just learning about rules or history, can make the world a more loving and peaceful place.

The God in whom we all share common belief is the creator of all things, who created us all to connect with each other through love. I firmly believe that, when we connect with each other, we break down the boundaries of isolation and ignorance. When we meet each other on God's turf, we leave transformed. This is not easy. It would be simpler to just remain in my own com-

fort zone, to associate only with people like me, but if I am never challenged, I firmly believe that I will never grow.

During our second meeting, another Fellow looked me in the eyes and said something I don't hear very often: "I disagree with you." I want to credit my lack of experience with this phrase to being intimidatingly articulate, but I think that it's really because I most often associate with people with the same opinions as mine. I don't lack encounters with disagreements because I'm really convincing, but because the people I'm around don't need convincing. It's a little bit jarring to experience this for the first time, but it's also exhilarating. Variety is the spice of life, and, for me, variety comes in the form of dicey religious debates.

Not everything we discuss is always contentious; sometimes the sessions are just really informational and interesting. At the beginning of the semester, the two Jewish Fellows shared a lot of information with us about the holidays Rosh Hashana, Sukkot, and Yom Kippur. I was excited to learn so much about the Jewish holiday season from something other than a text book. Hearing about the different traditions that each family had made the holidays so much more accessible.

In this meeting we also discussed different Muslim and Christian holidays, and in learning about each other's religions, we also learned about each other as people. During a discussion on theology or doctrine we learn what everyone knows, but during a discussion on culture or practice we learn about everyone's lives. These discussions are so extraordinary because we get a

glimpse into the life of someone very different from ourselves. I firmly believe that to encounter another person is to encounter God, and, to encounter God, at the very least, is to gain powerful insight into the purpose of our lives. Then, to get to know someone different

from oneself is to gain especially unique insight. The lessons we learn at the Lubar Institute are truly powerful and precious, our discussions are valuable and challenging, our relationships are beautiful and complicated.

SECOND REFLECTION

In December the Institute showed the British comedy *The Infidel* at the Marquee in Union South. Erika, another Fellow, and I were in charge of advertising for the event. I loved having this job because I've never done anything like that before, so it taught me a lot. Clearly the Lubar Institute is reaching out to serve many groups of people who are very diverse; trying to think of a way to reach all of them took a lot of planning and creativity.

All the Fellows put up posters in their respective faith communities and around campus, and the Lubar Institute sent out informational emails to their contact list. These were quick and easy ways to reach a lot of people, but I wanted to challenge myself to find a more eye-catching and creative way to get the word out. We decided to work with Peet's Coffee in the Memorial Union to put stickers that advertised the event on the coffee cup sleeves. In the time that I was doing this, I felt as I was half graphic designer and half PR manager while still remaining a 100% inexperienced twenty-year-old. It was an exhilarating and empowering experience.

I learned a lot about event-planning and group organizing, which is a really important part of any organization's

ability to spread their message. In addition, I learned a lot about myself, such as my strong ability to think creatively, make decisions, and be a leader, or my weaknesses when it comes to deadlines and scheduling. The event planning was also an opportunity for Erika and me to work together more. I learned that the two of us make a pretty good team. We get along well, and I felt that our talents complemented each other's nicely. Overall I think that being in this position gave us invaluable practice as a leaders, whether in interfaith roles or otherwise.

The viewing of *The Infidel* and the discussion that followed was a very interesting event. There were a few jokes in the movie that made me very uncomfortable because I was afraid they were offensive to my Jewish and Muslim friends sitting in the theater with me. I was right to be uncomfortable. There were two jokes that referenced the Holocaust which did not sit well with anyone in the group, especially the Jewish students, and there were a couple of occasions where there were depictions and imagery of Islam that the Muslim students found offensive. Besides these instances, the movie had a really good interfaith theme, and it was genuinely

I learned a lot about myself, such as my strong ability to think creatively, make decisions, and be a leader.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

What I took away from the movie is that peace and understanding will be created through encounter and relationships.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

very funny, but it made me think a lot about whether or not we could accept this movie with the good and the bad. Should we disregard it for crossing the line or do we run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water?

This decision first fell on the shoulders of Annie and Yasmine, Jewish and Muslim Fellows respectively, when we were deciding whether or not to show the movie. I think that these two women knew exactly what they were doing when they decided we should show it. As our discussion leaders, they presented the offensive moments in the movie as food for thought and through that stimulated a fruitful discussion. They realized that interfaith is, in fact, a messy topic in a world full of political incorrectness, rudeness and ignorance, whereas a discussion on how to deal with that is extraordinarily relevant.

As a sociologist, I was intrigued by the discussion questions about what is funny, who can tell certain jokes, and who can laugh at them. Due to its personal nature, religion is often a touchy subject; like race, sexuality, politics, and gender, what is “politically correct” or socially acceptable is subject to change. Even in our discussion at the theater, two Pakistani women had different views about a racial slur that was used, exemplifying how attitudes towards religious or racial sensitivity can vary greatly from group to group or even person to person.

I felt that the movie was aware of itself in this way and, in the end, the two men who were at first separated by their religious identities become friends and have a lot of respect for each other. However, they don't stop making fun of

each other or calling each other names. What I took away from the movie is that peace and understanding will be created through encounter and relationships. I believe that those words and images were created by hate and that is what made them powerful and damaging. Now, those words are offensive to us because they remind us of the hate behind them, but I feel that the movie showed that, with enough understanding and enough love, you can disarm just about anything.

The discussion that we had in December on gender roles, sexual ethics, and dating in religion was one of our best this year. This was one of our most fluid discussions; it felt as if the time ran out way too fast, and we could have talked for twice as long. Each tradition had genuine insights and thought-provoking questions about gender roles. The conversation was definitely dominated by the diverse feminist perspectives in the group. As a feminist myself, I found this discussion really enlightening. It was so valuable to see the different perspectives of the religious women in the group.

I also learned a lot about women's roles in the religions of my peers. It was cool to see the differences in the struggles, and even cooler to see the similarities. It was a great example of the power of interfaith dialogue because it made me feel more connected to everyone. I saw another example of the power of dialogue and the beauty of understanding.

David Schulz and I have been involved in Lubar Institute student groups together for the last two years. For as long as I can remember, we've

been talking about going to each other's churches to learn more about a different Christian denomination. Two weeks before Christmas I finally made it to a service at Blackhawk Church held at the Majestic Theater on King Street. This was my first time ever attending a Christian service that was not Catholic. I had been to both Jewish and Muslim worship services but never to a Christian one. I'm glad I finally got around to it because it was awesome.

Every Catholic Mass is almost identical. Whether it's happening in Peru, Wisconsin or Japan, we are all saying the same prayers, reading the same scripture, and performing the same rituals. This uniformity is a unique characteristic of my faith tradition, and so it was cool for me to go to a service where the preacher can talk on whatever subject he or she wants. (It was also cool to be in the legendary Majestic Theater.)

This particular pastor gave a sermon on the Christmas carol, "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." It has since become my favorite Christmas song. He went over the lyrics, to which I had never

paid attention before, and explained them. As it turns out, the song was originally a poem written as a protest song against the Mexican-American War. This was so cool, because I had been thinking a lot about peace during this Christmas/Advent season, and the lyrics really spoke to me. I took what I learned from his sermon and used it in my own prayer and with my Catholic friends and family.

I had previously known that the Catholic church teaches that the other Christian denominations hold truths and that we can learn from them, but I don't think I ever really understood that until I went to Blackhawk. The experience I had at there with David taught me so much, and I feel so blessed to have had that opportunity because of the Lubar Institute. As a woman of strong faith, I see myself being challenged by my experiences at the Institute. Not challenges that are detrimental to my faith, but challenges that invite me to grow in my faith, in knowledge and love.

THIRD REFLECTION

This past year as a Fellow, I have learned so much about interfaith relationships. I think that it is the relationships we formed which were the most valuable to me. If I hadn't become involved in the Lubar Institute, I wouldn't know any Muslim students personally, I would have very few Jewish or Protestant friends, and I would be missing insight into the minds and hearts of many of my Catholic friends.

Being a Fellow creates a space where dialogue can happen, but, most importantly, it creates a space for encounter. When I first applied to be in the Forum my sophomore year, I expected to be doing a lot of learning and idea-sharing solely for the purpose of knowledge. For the most part, that is what the Forum is best for. Going into the Fellows group I expected much of the same. I thought that the Fellows group would

As a woman of strong faith, I see myself being challenged by my experiences at the Institute. Not challenges that are detrimental to my faith, but challenges that invite me to grow in my faith, in knowledge and love.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

Openness to growing and learning is one of the greatest tools I have learned as a Fellow.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

be an extension of the Forum, with more time to go in-depth on each topic. This was not exactly the case. Instead of using PowerPoints and hand-raising to develop a formulaic situation for dialogue, the Fellows meetings were just conversations. To be honest, I rarely did the assigned readings, but the topics selected always pointed our group in the right direction. Our conversations in the one-hour sessions were based on genuine curiosity and a desire to understand each other better. It was also a place for all of us to share our passions with new, interested people.

The mutual curiosity of the group was a defining feature of this year's Fellows. As the year went on, our desire to know about each other's religion grew into a desire to simply know about our friend's life. Our rules for dialogue reminded us that, in this setting, we spoke only for ourselves and our experiences, not as representatives for an entire religious population. I think that this rule magnified the presence of curiosity, mutual learning, and friendship among the eight of us. I think that it is a beautiful thing when we can learn about only an individual, and understand not only that we are exposed to that individual religious person, but also that any religion is made up of individual experiences. To know one individual experience is to understand the whole a little better.

I look forward to using the skills that I've learned this year as a Fellow to get to know individuals of varying religious experiences for the rest of my life. I believe that a rich and fulfilling life will always be full of people different from oneself. I could choose to encoun-

ter those people with a closed mind and a predetermined set of values, or I can choose to allow each person I meet to expand my understanding of life and God a little further. Openness to growing and learning is one of the greatest tools I have learned as a Fellow. My experience has helped me to realize how little I know and how little I will ever know. This, not surprisingly, was especially true in my relationships with the two Muslim Fellows. My friendship with these amazing women has taught me so much. I wasn't just learning, I was also just laughing, chatting, and hanging out with genuinely cool people. This has given me a better understanding of my own perspective, and my own ignorance, which allows me to learn a little more from every individual.

It was the amazing individuals in this group which made it so special as a whole. One of the other Fellows describes our group as a "faith community." The use of this term, (which I had so often heard and used in a way describing a community of the same faith) really struck me. The Fellows don't fit my picture of a typical "faith community." It felt strange for me to consider that I might have two faith communities, as if I might be "cheating" on one or the other. But when I thought about what defines my Catholic faith community—shared space, idea-sharing, love, respect, friendship—I realized that the Fellows were indeed another faith community. It has been an incredible blessing for me to be a part of this faith community for the last nine months, and I know that we have formed strong friendships that will unite us for the

rest of our lives. Each Fellow has made a lasting impact on my life.

The conversation that we had at the end of the year about disagreements we had with our own faiths was really awesome, and I wish we had done it earlier. Listening to my friends discuss their struggles with the cultures, institutions, and laws within religions that they loved was so honest and human. We had spent the entire semester talking about what we loved about our faiths. We discussed what inspired us, what we were obedient to, what we were raised with, and even what we ate, but we never really got into the dirty, human side of religion. This is the side I believe we all experience.

I will never experience a childhood filled with fasting, daily prayer, and Eid celebrations. I will never attend Lutheran Sunday school or a Jewish summer camp. But I have experienced the feeling of being in love with a faith—and yet totally doubtful, disgusted, or discouraged by it—and I will again. I think I can speak for all of us when I say that it was a very unifying experience to share our disagreements. I am a strong believer in the messiness and beauty of life. I have no doubt that the friendships formed between the eight of us were strengthened equally when we shared our joys and our struggles.

I think I can speak for all of us when I say that it was a very unifying experience to share our disagreements.

**Abrahamic
Reflections**

*The 2014
Undergraduate
Journal*



Erika Cummins



Senior
Class of 2014
Communication Arts
+ Religious Studies
+ Digital Studies
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Abrahamic Reflections

*The 2014
Undergraduate
Journal*

Since I am a Religious Studies major and someone interested in different faith traditions, the Lubar Institute sounded like the perfect fit for me. I applied to become a Fellow because I wanted to be a part of interfaith communication. With each week and each new topic, I feel more strongly about working with this type of dialogue, and continue to learn more about each of the Fellows and their individual beliefs. Each of the seven other Fellows has an abundance of knowledge, not only in their own traditions but across other religions as well. It is inspiring to be surrounded by such opinionated, well-spoken, considerate, and intelligent people. The ability that each of the Fellows has to truly listen to the views of the others in both the Fellows group and the Forum while remaining respectful yet full of questions is remarkable. This group of students has worked together to encourage some fantastic conversations.

There have been several conversations which have stuck out to me the most during this semester. The first came from a comment made by one of the Fellows in which she suggested that despite our religious beliefs, we each pray to the same G-d. I had al-

ways considered the G-d I pray to as a conception of my own that differed from anyone else's, including those in my own tradition. This is not to say that I believe each person has an individual G-d, but rather to say that I may have a different relationship with G-d

than my sister or my friend. However, to think that a Muslim prays to the same G-d as a Christian was mind-boggling to me. Although there was not much discussion of this during our meeting, it was an idea that I continued to think about for several weeks.

When I say the *Sh'ma* in Hebrew, does the G-d that hears my words also hear the words of my friend crossing herself as she repeats the Trinity or my Muslim friend reciting the Qur'an? While I do not know if I believe this is possible, the possibility provoked me to think that, if every person believed there exists only one G-d, then perhaps all that exists with religious misunderstanding and religious violence could disappear. If there is one G-d, perhaps people can learn to be one as well.

It was this small statement about a conception of G-d that began to fuel my fire to know all that I could about others' conceptions. As one of our choice discussions, we chose to have a conversation about our individual views of G-d. Some brought in scripture or objects to demonstrate what G-d meant to him or her or how he or she understood G-d to exist.

A lot of the ideas that were raised seem to connect back to one of the readings we had done earlier in the semester. There was a text we had read in which three men of the three Abrahamic traditions shared a piece of scripture that he believed to be the most important text in his respective religion. As each Fellow shared his or her conception of G-d, the scriptures from the reading were repeated, whether exactly, such as the *Sh'ma*, or indirectly, as the Christian ideal to love your neighbor. Despite

the different sects that exist within the Abrahamic religions, there seemed to be a somewhat similar understanding of G-d within the separate religions.

There also exist similar ideals within each respective tradition on Jesus. Coming from a Jewish background, I had very little knowledge about the man who means so much to so many. I knew that Jesus was Jewish and that his ideals were used to create Christianity. However, beyond that I was at a loss. The Christian Fellows helped explain that Jesus was believed to be the son of G-d or perhaps the mortal incarnation of G-d on earth.

What I found the most interesting was that the four Christian Fellows struggled to explain a finite conception of Jesus. I had always understood him as a man, yet they felt he was far more. Then the two Muslim students shared the importance of Jesus in Islam. He is recognized to be one of their prophets. While each of the Abrahamic traditions recognizes the existence of Jesus Christ, there are very different conceptions of him and his importance in each religion.

Perhaps the conversation I found most interesting, however, was turned to a debate of whether or not religion and culture should coexist or do coexist. It has always been my belief that religion and culture are intertwined, and that their combination is part of the beauty of faith. Culture influences practice and individual understanding. From a Geertzian perspective, culture is "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about

Perhaps the conversation I found most interesting was turned to a debate of whether or not religion and culture should coexist or do coexist.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

I do not think that most of us realized how Abraham was important to the religions which were not our own.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

and attitudes toward life.” It is with this conception of culture that I find it to be impossible to live religion sans culture. However, while I understand culture and religion to coexist, that was not the case for all of the Fellows.

An argument was raised that culture and religion do not and should not exist together, as this position would not allow a person to live “correct religion.” My first thought was, what does it mean to live “correct religion?” I then realized that “correct religion” cannot exist, and that culture and religion have to exist together. If one woman wears a hijab and another woman does not yet they both follow all of the tenets of Islam, is one living her life as a better Muslim? Or if one Jewish person eats bacon and the other does not, yet they both go to services every Shabbat and go to temple for each holiday, is one living his or her life as a better Jew?

I continued to think of more examples, and they all led me to one conclusion: culture can exist without religion, but religion *cannot* exist with culture. It is my Jewish culture that I am the most proud of. While I do not attend services every Friday night, nor do I keep kosher, I feel a strong connection to my tradition. It is the ways in which my family has celebrated the holidays over the years and the necklace I wear with my Hebrew name, the Yiddish I sporadically use in day-to-day conversation, and my dad wishing me *laila tov* (“good night”). It is saying the mourner’s *kaddish* for my Poppy when I miss him or eating latkes on Hanukkah. It is those things which are special to me, those things which have been molded by my

culture, that are the most important aspects of my religion to me.

What I have found to be the most interesting aspect of this experience thus far are the differences that exist within the same tradition and the similarities that exist across faiths. In one of our Forum conversations, we discussed religious stereotypes. During this discussion there were prevalent differences among the Jewish tradition. On one side there was the idea that making light of Judaism, especially when it is done by a Jew, is entertaining. However, on the opposing side, there was the idea that Jewish comedians or Jewish people in the media making fun of their own religion only perpetuates the stereotypes and allows for non-Jews to participate in creating Jewish stereotypes.

In some cases things will be cohesive for just two of the traditions. In another conversation, we discussed Abraham and his importance to the three traditions. While they are called the Abrahamic religions, I do not think that most of us realized how Abraham was important to the religions which were not our own. For example, we discussed the story when G-d commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. For the Christian and Jewish faiths, the story is told essentially the same. However, in the Islamic tradition, it is Ishmael whom Abraham is told to sacrifice, and, in their rendition of the story, Ishmael was aware that he was to be used as a sacrifice. In a conversation about holy scriptures, it was the Jewish and Muslim faiths which seemed to have the most similarities in terms of the importance of the text itself. It is in these similarities and differences that we

learn about one another. Those aspects of our religions which are similar help us to feel a connection to one another. They teach us that we are not as different as we may have previously thought. However, it is the differences that are

perhaps the most beautiful, because it is in those that we are able to gain a new perspective and learn to appreciate the values and practices of a faith different than our own.

SECOND REFLECTION

Over the past semester, and as my time goes on as a Lubar Fellow, I continue to find similarities along with the many differences that exist across the Abrahamic religions. These similarities make the connections to one another feel more real than I ever would have thought possible before participating in this program.

While I find the differences among the faiths beautiful and wonderfully interesting, those aspects which are similar to one another help us understand and find meaning in a faith that is not our own.

For one of our meetings this past semester, each Fellow was asked to bring an item related to a holiday in his or her tradition. One Fellow brought in a small metal *hamsa* to demonstrate the importance of the symbol in Islam. The same symbol is common in Judaism, and I own several pieces of jewelry and art work that have a *hamsa* on it. Little did either of us know that the *hamsa* existed in the other tradition. While this is a small example, there have been many similarities found in our different holy scriptures or practices. These similarities have encouraged another form of curiosity within the interfaith dialogue in which we are taking part.

As we continue to delve into inter-

faith dialogue, I am constantly learning not only about the two other faith traditions but about my own religious beliefs as well.

In day-to-day life, I automatically identify as a Jew. Despite other qualifications, my faith is perhaps the foremost way I would choose to categorize myself. However, while I would not say I blindly follow my faith, I do find that it has been years since I have truly considered what aspects of my religion I connect with and which components I disagree or struggle with.

It is amazing and intimidating to take part in discussion with the other Fellows and Forum members and realize how solid they seem to be in their religion. Many of them attend services and are a part of organizations which tie them back to their particular religion. In my liberal and open approach to Judaism, I perhaps have less of an understanding of the fundamentals of my religion and rather have a broader understanding of the way I want to live my own life and the aspects which I find to be the most important.

However, what this first semester as a Lubar Fellow has taught me is to question those things which I do not understand or do not agree with. This is true for my own religion as well as the other

While I find the differences among the faiths beautiful and wonderfully interesting, those aspects which are similar to one another help us understand and find meaning in a faith that is not our own.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

I have not only gained perspective on religious beliefs, but also cultivated my abilities to be curious yet mindful.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

Abrahamic traditions. In questioning I have the ability to learn as much as I possibly can while learning what is important to me as well.

With this curiosity I have indulged in this past semester I have finally begun to understand the importance of Jesus to Muslims and Christians. I have come to understand the differences in culture that come with exposure to a specific religion. I have learned the importance of the different scriptures across the three traditions. The list of realizations and things I have learned this past semester goes on. There are questions I never realized I needed the answer to and aspects of religion that I never knew I never knew. I have not only gained perspective on religious beliefs, but also cultivated my abilities to be curious yet mindful.

This curiosity was further encouraged during an event in January. During winter break, some of the current and previous Fellows finally had the chance to work with other students to encourage positive modes of interfaith communication. We attended a house fellow training day in which we had a slot of time to discuss issues that may or have been raised between roommates in terms of religious acceptance. For the most part, I felt confident in answering the questions that the house fellows raised. Most of the problems could be resolved by having roommates share their beliefs at the beginning of the year and figuring out what things each of the roommates felt were important and necessary to maintain.

However, one question stumped me. One of the house fellows shared a situation in which two females were

living together; one was a lesbian, and the other was a devout and fundamental Christian. The Christian roommate had strong feelings against homosexuality, which forced the lesbian roommate into an uncomfortable living situation. While the lesbian roommate had no hard feelings against her Christian roommate, she was bound to feel attacked and disheartened by the religious beliefs of the person she was forced to live with. The two girls' beliefs, one of a religious nature and one of a biological disposition, made for a nearly impossible roommate situation.

So how is the house fellow to reconcile these differences? The only solution I could find was that the two girls had to come to a compromise. Perhaps that meant that, for several hours, a day the lesbian roommate could have the dorm to herself to spend time with her girlfriend, while the Christian roommate could have the dorm for several hours to pray or take part in religious practice. However, that did not seem to be a final enough answer, and we seemed to leave the question open-ended and unanswered.

Another issue I came across this past semester was with the movie we screened as a Lubar Institute event. *The Infidel*, the story of a Muslim man who finds out he was adopted and that his birth parents were Jewish, was meant to be a comedy. However, as I watched the film, I struggled to understand the humor. While I liked the fact that the film explored the main character's faith struggle, I was frustrated by some aspects of *The Infidel*. For example, there is one scene in which the main character has just found out he comes from a

Jewish family, and things keep switching from something traditionally Muslim to something traditionally Jewish. The Qur'an transforms into a bagel, and so forth. The issue I found with this is when the main character is shown wearing traditional Islamic garb and it transforms into striped pajamas with a Jewish star sewn on. I believe that to bring any aspect of the Holocaust into a comedic arena is disrespectful and highly inappropriate. Continually, I was bothered by the burning of the yarmulke as well as the issues raised concerning Palestine and Israel. Overall, I felt the film focused on stereotypical aspects of religion and instead of remaining light and humorous, it went into the material too deeply and realistically.

With these difficult encounters this semester, I was forced to recognize

what my own beliefs were. There are so many aspects to religion and interfaith dialogue that are controversial and problematic. While the questions that may be raised in relation to religion are perhaps endless, there are certain questions that need to be answered. I found that I had stronger opinions than I had ever realized and more curiosity than ever before. While some may believe that it is not polite or politically correct to discuss religion openly and in a casual setting, I think that this notion should be changed. It is only in discussion and questioning that one can truly understand why he or she practices or does not practice a certain religion. I look forward to this upcoming semester and what issues are raised, what problems we come across, and what answers and conclusions we come to.

THIRD REFLECTION

The final few months as a Lubar Institute Fellow were the ones in which I was pushed the farthest and perhaps learned the most. It is not often that you can have your boundaries pushed so far by another person yet maintain a friendship. It is also not often that you may have the opportunity or the desire to examine what faith, tradition, and culture mean to you. My final few months as a Fellow made these things, and more, come to fruition.

The conversation that immediately comes to mind when I think of the last couple of months is the one in which we discussed Jerusalem. It was the most intense conflict we had come across as Fellows and the only time I can think

of where the rules we created at the beginning of the year became necessary. However, during the conversation about Jerusalem, I also learned the viewpoints of other faiths on the topic of this holy land.

Jerusalem, for the Jews, is not only a place of biblical importance, but Israel is also the only nation that is Jewish. There is nowhere else in the world that a Jewish person can go where the city shuts down on Shabbat. There is nowhere else in the world where a Jewish person does not have to fight to maintain his or her faith because it is already ingrained in the city and the country. However, from the Muslim point of view, they too have the rights to this

It is not often that you can have your boundaries pushed so far by another person yet maintain a friendship.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

In a group which discusses interfaith, it is important to remember that it is easy to step outside of appropriate bounds and that any one of us could have easily done it too.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

land. They believe there are three holy lands, which include Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. The Qur'an demonstrates the importance of Jerusalem, and it is believed that Muslims are meant to rule Jerusalem. There also exists significance of Jerusalem in Christianity, as it is biblically important; however, in our discussion, the conflicts that arose were between the Jews and the Muslims.

The foremost aspect on which was difficult to come to an agreement was the idea that Jews do not have any other land that is their own. There are a number of Muslim countries in which the call to prayer can be heard five times a day and in which the majority of the country practices Islam. However, Israel is the only place in the world, and it is not a large one, in which the majority of the country is Jewish. In our debate, it felt that there was a sense of greed from the Muslims, as they not only have Muslim countries, but they also have the holy lands of Mecca and Medina. After some debate, the Muslim Fellows agreed that there should be a land for Jews, yet it should not be Jerusalem. In that idea, the conflict grew.

As we continued, the conversation moved on to the conflict between Palestine and Israel. Although I am not well versed in this conflict, I do believe there are wrongdoings occurring on both sides. However, this topic was the boiling point of the conversation. As we discussed the atrocities occurring over land, one of the Muslim Fellows compared what is happening to the Palestinian people by the hands of the Israelis to what happened to the Jews by the hands of the Nazis. To compare any

other event to that of the Holocaust is beyond me. Unlike the case in the Palestine-Israel conflict, during the Holocaust the Jews could not fight back. They were removed from their homes, separated from their families, tortured, abused, used for scientific experiments, and murdered. To have someone try to compare another occurrence to that of the Holocaust was mindboggling and beyond what I could bear to listen to. It was the only time during my year as a Fellow that I had to remove myself from the conversation because I feared my emotions would get the best of me.

Although the comment was not meant to be hurtful, it was the first time that a Fellow needed to be reminded to be mindful and recognize what had just been said. In a heated moment it is easy to forget what might be insensitive or inappropriate. However, after removing myself from the conversation and receiving an apology from the Muslim Fellow, I was able to put aside my emotions and forgive her.

In a group which discusses interfaith, it is important to remember that it is easy to step outside of appropriate bounds and that any one of us could have easily done it too. What this conversation helped me understand was that Jerusalem should not necessarily be a Jewish land; yet, there is not foreseeable solution to the issue.

Another experience that I found interesting this semester was our trip to Capitol Lakes. I did not know what to expect when we began our talk. However, after each Fellow explained a little bit about his or her own religion and experience with Lubar, we asked the residents to share their own stories.

At first, there were no volunteers to share, but one person shared her story, and then a number of other residents felt comfortable to share as well. They told of the religions they grew up with and their understandings of their faith now, they spoke about their interest in interfaith dialogue, and they spoke about having the opportunity to meet people of other traditions while living at Capitol Lakes. The high level of interest in interfaith dialogue and what we as Fellows did for Lubar was inspiring. They wanted to know what we had achieved in our time as Fellows and were very encouraging about the program. After our talk, we each had the chance to talk one-on-one with several of the residents and it was wonderful to see how interested they were in interfaith. As I had not known what to expect, I was more than pleased with the outcome at Capitol Lakes.

The past few months, and the year as a whole as a Lubar Fellow, have taught me a lot. I know more about the other two Abrahamic traditions and understand that there are issues among the three faiths that I never knew existed. The friendships I have made with the other Fellows and Forum members this past year have helped break the bounds that different religions can place on a friendship. I am so happy that I had the opportunity to learn about other religions and to explore aspects of my own religion. Interfaith dialogue is so important in today's world, and I am proud that I am well versed in engaging in conversations about both my own religion and other faiths as well. This interfaith student group has taught me more than I ever could have imagined and I am so thankful for this past year as a Fellow.

Interfaith dialogue is so important in today's world, and I am proud that I am well versed in engaging in conversations about both my own religion and other faiths as well.

**Abrahamic
Reflections**

*The 2014
Undergraduate
Journal*



Alaa Fleifel



Sophomore
Class of 2016
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Community and
Non-Profit + Sociology
(+ Criminal Justice +
African Studies)

Abrahamic Reflections

*The 2014
Undergraduate
Journal*

Faith—my personalized Iman—has been a great journey. As I strive to reach to a point where I can understand how I fit into my culture, religion, and personal growth, I can not help but wonder how others struggle too. Being able to engage in controversial yet maintained dialogue helped strengthen my own views on faith. I realized that not everyone has it as easy as it may be perceived, and being thrown into a group of wonderful strong-willed individuals with distinct personalities helped me realize that. Through many heated conversations, I learned that it is possible to still be friends at the end of the day, no matter your views, religion, or personal opinions.

When I first was introduced to everyone from the group, I honestly thought it was going to be cool, calm and collected dialogue every single week. Little did I know that every week was going to be a great, loaded, insightful discussion. I really like how each of us are able to share and get across what we are thinking or feeling without offending anyone. We have become so comfortable with each other over the past couple of weeks that I honestly and truly know that, if something

is bothering me, I can go to any of the Fellow members and they will help me though it.

Going in, I was kind of hesitant. I was not sure what to expect. I thought it was going to be super formal and tightly scheduled. I like how we have quick announcements, for the most part, and then we have an open discussion. I feel that the open discussion helps us see one another's different viewpoints, as well as the viewpoints from which each of us interprets the

text that was assigned. Something that's interesting is how people of the same faith can either agree or disagree completely on a certain topic. Honestly, it is the best when someone of the same religion agrees with me, because it makes it seem more credible, but it is also interesting when there is disagreement and I try to understand the logic behind it.

I thoroughly enjoyed Willow Wilson. She was a great, charismatic speaker who was easily to relate to. I loved the dialogue we were able to have with her, rather than attending the huge Forum. I felt as if the audience was way too engaged and devoted to participating that if someone else wanted to ask a question, it wouldn't have been as easy as it was at our smaller discussion. There are things that she said that I did not necessarily agree with, for example, when she was talking about "Fatih Al-Islam" and how they are classified as a terrorist group in Egypt. I know she was just trying to make a point of how much Egypt's "democracy" is corrupt, but when this is being explained to people who do not follow Egypt's issues, it may come off as "Islam" being a terrorist group all together. But, overall, she had some great points, and the way she conveyed them was to her credit. I liked when she did not know how to answer a question, she would simply say she is not a scholar. That response is something I will definitely use if someone

asks me for my opinion on something religious I am not sure about.

The Forums we have every Sunday, in my opinion, are longer than they need to be. I do not think we need two hours. If we stuck with our plan, twenty minutes presentation for each religion, I truly believe we can have a collective discussion for thirty minutes. They are sort of insightful, but I benefit much more from our Tuesday discussion than the Sunday one.

For a self-evaluation, I think I can have a really strong opinion. I know I need to work on containing it sometimes, but I feel as if I cannot contain my opinions because that is the way I feel. I do try to keep my opinions about religion more low-key than my normal ones because I do not intended to offend anyone. This has been a learning experience, and I hope that I keep on learning and understanding all the different perspectives.

To be a part of the group, and to have an opportunity to be able to have a fruitful dialogue and understand and know that other people's views differ than mine is a blessing. I am so thankful to have a great opportunity to be able to met great people. College is a time where you "find yourself," and through a lot of programs and events that I have been a part of, including the Lubar Institute, and it has shaped the way I see and notice many things.

To be a part of the group, and to have an opportunity to be able to have a fruitful dialogue and understand and know that other people's views differ than mine is a blessing.

SECOND REFLECTION

Being thrown into an unknown environment can be a bit intimidating. In some cases, the situation comes out

horribly. In others, the experience turns out to be great. So far, the Lubar Institute has been nothing but great. Every-

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

No matter our differences, we manage to laugh and have a great time with each other.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

one in the group has been generously supportive and loving. No matter our differences, we manage to laugh and have a great time with each other. We normally end up going over time, and even though Ulrich tries really hard to finish exactly on time, we always have inquiries that lead to grandiose discussion. Although most times have been good, there is one memory that is not so favorable. Even then, I managed to bond with another member of the Forum over a similar dislike.

This not-so-favorable memory is a movie that I was not a fan of showing—*The Infidel*. Not that I am opposed to comedy, but to pointless jokes at serious matters. The way I saw the movie, it was trying to turn serious situations into jokes. The one thing I hate is taking matters that people are dying for in large quantities, making a profit off outrageously absurd jokes and showing it to the world as if it is something that we all should laugh about. Though this is an extreme view, and there are two sides to look at it, this movie made me furious. Not to mention, I did not laugh. Not once.

One thing that bothered me about the movie is that it fueled stereotypes. Why was the Desi community portrayed as taxi drivers? That characterization completely disregards the fact that many Desis are doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc. This is why so many people think that minorities are “good for nothing” but driving them around, and that it is weird when some of them try to get a higher education. Also, not all Muslims talk badly about other religions and cultures. Why was it emphasized that, while the Muslims were

together, they were backbiting about Jews. That puts Muslims in a bad light of non-acceptance, whereas, in Islam, we accept and are supposed to treat everyone equally. Another stereotype was about Jews and binge drinking. I know a lot of Jews who do not drink. It is amazing how one person can make an impression on the whole Jewish community. Also, the nose joke, “Jews have big noses.” The problem I have with this is that a lot of people struggle with their image. When something that God has created you with keeps being pointed out as something negative, it may psychologically get to a person. Beauty is already judged everyday: from the media, by guys, and even our own mothers, no there is need to be constantly making fun of something you are born with.

Prayer is really sacred in Islam, and the most important action of prayer is when a person is prostrated. During prostration, it is said, a person is closest to God. When they showed the main character sleeping during that portion of prayer, I got really upset. Not because it was not funny, but because it is very disrespectful. We pray five an obligatory times a day to keep our minds and body spiritually connected to God. One of the prayers is even conducted before dawn, meaning that we get up from our sleep in order to worship. Once prayer is made fun of by some incompetent person sleeping on God during an afternoon prayer, the line is crossed. Making fun of culture fans the flames of the plethora of stereotypes that are not entirely true, but making fun of something so blessed in Islam is a boundary that should never be pushed.

The movie showing aside, every-

thing has been going great! I have been feeling very comfortable talking about my religion, culture and self with everyone. Ulrich has been a great facilitator. I can come off as a bit agitated, it is never intentionally towards him. I truly

appreciate all the time, effort and dedication he puts into making our group run as smoothly as possible. So thank you for that! I look forward for the rest of the semester!

THIRD REFLECTION

Not the end, but the beginning.

Everyday, we walk past people, sit next to them, or even have an awkward eye glance while riding the bus. We do not know their stories, nor do we know where they come from or their background. No matter your religion, race, culture or ethnicity, everyone has a story and along with that story an adverse struggle within. How do we start understanding each other without knowing one another? A skill that I was able to acquire throughout this year was how to appreciate that an outside appearance of a person does not tell their story alone. Listening and discussing with the Fellows who were in my cohort this year at the Lubar Institute gave me a better understanding of how to dig deeper into and better accept a different point of view.

This year has had its ups and downs, but I do not regret anything of it. While I watched everyone grow and express his or her own beliefs, I did as well. There were times when I did not necessarily agree with anything anyone was saying, which resulted in arguments, but that helped me become a better person. It is baffling that arguing can help someone become better, but doing so opened up my eyes to the destination. People argue

in order for their ideas to be heard and noted, but, eventually, arguing leads to a common ground of agreeing to disagree. With all the political and social tension that we hear could possibly be solved through interfaith dialogue. When we talked about Jerusalem, I understood why it was so important to the Jews, when all this time I never knew the significance it held. Being able to hold a conversation, even though it can get controversial, and still be friends at the end of the day, means that there is progress within this generation. Moving forward and figuring out how to solve problems rather than shoving them under the rug is innovation. Being in Lubar gave me hope that one day many people will be able to get together and express their concerns with people who have opposing views and still be able to benefit from the conversation.

I believe that one day there will be less racism and prejudice than there is today. I have faith in a bright future. A future that, one day, can include people of all races and religions living in one region without having animosity towards one another. I have hope: hope that one day people will understand that each person has a story, and you will never know that story unless you ask.

Being able to hold a conversation, even though it can get controversial, and still be friends at the end of the day, means that there is progress within this generation.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal



Yasmine Flodin-Ali



Senior
Class of 2014
Brooklyn, New York
Anthropology
(+ South Asian Studies
+ African Studies)

Abrahamic Reflections

*The 2014
Undergraduate
Journal*

When I was studying in Morocco last semester, one of the closest friends that I made was a former fundamentalist Christian. One day we got into a very heated argument about whether you could truly respect someone if you believed in your heart that they weren't "saved," i.e. that they were condemned to hell because they hadn't accepted Christ as their lord and savior. His position was that you could in fact respect someone despite believing that they weren't saved, and mine was that you couldn't.

I have returned to that conversation many times throughout the course of our Forums and Fellow meetings. I couldn't articulate it then but, armed now with the experience of a few months of interfaith dialogue, I now know that my conversation with my friend was a debate over the nature of tolerance. Is tolerance merely the acceptance of the existence of the other, or is it something deeper? This question, though never stated so bluntly, has come up numerous times in conversations between me and other Fellows. Some struggle with reconciling their pursuit of a singular higher truth

with in their own faith-tradition with the idea of pluralism. Others believe that only adherents of their own religion will be admitted to heaven.

I know that my own definition of tolerance may be a bit unorthodox within my own tradition. I have always taken it for granted that people who do good deeds go to heaven, regardless of their religious background. I believe that there is some religious backing for this, particularly when it comes to *ahl-al-kitab*, or People of the Book, a phrase used numerous times throughout the Qur'an that refers to Christians and Jews. The Jewish and Christian

texts are also considered holy in Islam, albeit not the final word of God as the Qur'an is. Some passages in the Qur'an actually seem to presume a familiarity with Old Testament stories. Muslim men are also permitted to marry Jewish and Christian women. It seems logical to me that God would not permit this if those women were "infidels."

There are multiple verses that laud religious pluralism in the Qur'an. One of the most-often repeated is ayah 148 of Surat Al-Baqarah, which states that: "To each [religious community] we have given a direction which it follows, so compete [all together] in [the performance of] good deeds. Whosoever you may be, God shall certainly gather you. God certainly has power over all things." In other words, we should take advantage of the existence of diversity in faith to compete against one another in good deeds and prompt one another to be better people, rather than wasting our time fighting over who is right and wrong. Divine judgment is not a human task it is up to God to sort us according to our deeds on the Day of Judgment.

I know that not all Muslims believe that non-Muslims can go to heaven, and even fewer believe that atheists and followers of non-Abrahamic religions can go to heaven. I personally believe that there are multiple, equally viable paths to God, and that, ultimately, we are all judged by the deeds that we perform on earth. I don't think that holding this idea makes me less Muslim. Islam is my path, and, in fact, the more I learn about the other two Abrahamic faiths, the firmer I am in my Islamic conviction. This is in large part because learning about other faiths and seeing overlaps

practices, and being exposed to new ideas helps to reinvigorate my own beliefs.

In the beginning of the semester I genuinely thought that, unless someone felt that there was more than one way to access God, they couldn't be tolerant. Over the course of the semester, I've reflected on this idea and come to the conclusion that it is, ironically, not a very tolerant one. Many of the Fellows and Forum members whom I've interacted with don't feel this way but have been wonderful participants in conversation and are willing and eager to listen to other points of view. There is a lot to be said for this earthly version of tolerance, which allows for conflict management between communities and a respect for one another on the basis of a common humanity. One moment that really stood out to me during our last Forum meeting was when David explained to me that one way of explaining how, within a Christian understanding, people could be saved by Christ without actually being Christian is that Christ could be working through them without their knowing it. Initially I found this idea a little pedantic and belittling, but I now think that it's not such a bad way of conceptualizing things if it reconciles a notion of higher truth with the reality of religious diversity.

I recognize that my views on tolerance have been shaped in large part by my personal background. Half of my family isn't Muslim, and I couldn't believe in a God that would send my Christian mother to hell. Similarly if my mother believed that I wasn't saved by Jesus Christ and was thus condemned, that would be really problematic for our

There is a lot to be said for this earthly version of tolerance, which allows for conflict management between communities and a respect for one another on the basis of a common humanity.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

We have fewer differences than we do commonalities and that there is a way to accommodate and be respectful of diversity, including religious diversity, without sacrificing one's own beliefs.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

relationship, not to mention that, if that were the case, she obviously wouldn't have agreed to raise her children as Muslims.

It isn't that I believe that all religious doctrines are the same—I certainly don't think so—but I do think that there is room (at least within Islam as I personally understand it; I won't presume to speak for the adherents of the other Abrahamic faiths) in my own faith-tradition for a deeper understanding of tolerance that includes acceptance of non-Muslims not just here in earth but also in the next life time. I think that Aviva and Annie also articulated a similar desire in our last Forum discussion when they talked about how they struggle with the idea of Jews being the chosen people. Annie has said a few times in our Fellow meetings that this is not an idea that resonates with her

personally. I feel the same way about the idea that only Muslims could be admitted to heaven, or indeed that anyone who has committed good deeds on earth would not be admitted to heaven; it feels unnecessarily exclusivist to me, and I think it's possible based on Islamic doctrine to come to a different conclusion.

My personal idea of tolerance is still acceptance of the beliefs of others as containing an element of something that is sacred and a viable path to God. I realize now that not everyone has to feel this way to be tolerant, and that my views on tolerance are shaped in large part by my background. Perhaps tolerance requires an active and informed interest in beliefs other than one's own, but not necessarily the notion that beliefs other than one's own could also be sacred.

SECOND REFLECTION

The Lubar Institute screening of the movie, *The Infidel*, ended last semester on an interesting note. We had a decent turnout considering the timing of the screening, in the middle of the week and right before finals started. The nice thing about screening the movie at Union South is that we also had a few people in our audience who just came to watch the movie and had not heard of the Lubar Institute before. It was refreshing to have a discussion with a mixed group of students and non-students.

It was interesting to see the range of reactions that people in the audience had to the movie. Some Muslims

and Jews left halfway through because they were uncomfortable with the content being portrayed. I had watched the movie previously and felt that, despite a silly cop-out ending and a few questionable moments, it was light-hearted and had a positive, relatable message. I still think that the movie does a good job advancing its main message, which is that we have fewer differences than we do commonalities and that there is a way to accommodate and be respectful of diversity, including religious diversity, without sacrificing one's own beliefs.

Having said that, I felt much more uncomfortable watching the movie the second time around. I had watched the

movie alone before the event. It was interesting to see how the environment of the movie theater changed my perspective and made me feel more self-conscious. At the public screening I sat next to a Muslim friend whom I had personally asked to come to the event. Sitting next to her made me wish that I had clarified my intentions in showing the film. I wanted to show the film because I thought it would spark an interesting, productive conversation. It definitely did, and I don't regret showing it at all. However, I think that others could not appreciate some of the message I perceived in it as fully as I did because of their sensitivity to the imagery and language used.

In retrospect, I wish I had been a little more respectful of that point of view and those sensibilities, and had perhaps provided a caveat or a brief explanation of why some of us had chosen to show the movie before the screening, so it didn't seem as if Lubar as an institution endorsed everything that the movie implied. Though I had no problem with the movie's main message, there were a few smaller implications that I took issue with (and I noticed them even more on my second viewing) and that I wish we had had more opportunity to discuss and flesh out.

One of these issues is that conservative pious people are automatically backwards and repressive/repressed, while liberal, less-practicing, and non-religious (or only "culturally religious") people are more enlightened. This is obviously a false dichotomy; there are lots of nonpracticing religious people who are crappy human beings who do

horrible things, and there are lots of wonderful pious people in the world.

For example, it is horribly offensive that, at the wedding in the film, the bride and former stepdaughter of the conservative Egyptian mullah is shown without her hijab, happy and dancing. The message is clear: she was repressed before, but look—now she's free, and she can dance! This feeds into a terrible stereotype that wearing the hijab is oppressive, rather than the reality that it is a choice that the majority of women make of their own free will because of their understanding of Islam. This stereotype and the movie's subliminal messaging in this case is part of a larger problematic narrative that Islam is in need of being saved by the West (i.e., the world of the non-Muslim majority).

I think that Islam in the West is fascinating because of the necessary cultural adaptations that are taking place, but that does not mean that Islam practiced in a non-Muslim majority context is any better than Islam as practiced in Indonesia, or Morocco, or anywhere else in the Muslim-majority world. There are a couple of crazy people out there, but the vast majority of Muslims around the world are peaceful people. Even allowing for some of the diversity of interpretation around what constitutes Islam, 90% of all issues that are at the most basic and core of being a practicing Muslim are agreed upon by almost all Muslims. Islam itself does not have to be changed.

Another issue that came up during the screening of *The Infidel* is whether religion and humor can be mixed together. On this account, I have still held on to my original pre-Lubar posi-

I think that Islam in the West is fascinating because of the necessary cultural adaptations that are taking place.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

This group was a safe space for me to explore my faith through teaching and learning from others.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

tion that they absolutely can be, if approached in the right way (i.e., in a way that is not disrespectful or overly generalizing). I would not appreciate comedy that made fun of the fundamental tenets of Islam itself as a faith. For instance, I would never purposefully or willingly watch, read, or look at any material that made fun of the notion of God, of the Qur'an as divine revelation and the direct word of God, or of the legitimacy of the Prophet Muhammad's role as a messenger of God and a receiver of God's word. Essentially, I don't appreciate comedic attempts to make light of Islam, a belief system that is sacred, beautiful, and beyond mundane crude

spaces such as the stage of a comedy show.

However I take no issue with comedy that makes fun of Muslims, because Muslims are a self-identified category of people who come from a very wide variety of backgrounds and have a large spectrum of understanding about some of the finer points of what constitutes a correct way of practicing Islam. Islam is sacred. Muslims are not. I think that *The Infidel*, despite its risqué approach (which sometimes goes beyond my personal comfort zone and sensibilities), is ultimately a movie with a commendable message of religious pluralism that pokes fun not at Judaism and Islam, but at Jews and Muslims.

THIRD REFLECTION

This past year as a Muslim Fellow with the Lubar Institute has been an amazing experience. This group was a safe space for me to explore my faith through teaching and learning from others. Talking with the other Muslim Fellow along with the Christian and Jewish Fellows challenged preconceived notions that I didn't even know I had, greatly improved my knowledge of the basic tenets of Judaism and Christianity (which was embarrassingly sparse before), and deepened my connection to my own faith.

This is the religious community that I have felt closest to in college. I wish that I had become involved earlier! Part of my reluctance for becoming involved, and I suspect why many people are not confident enough to join, is that I was worried that I was not enough of

an "expert" and that I was not the right person to represent the faith accurately. As I have gotten older, I have come to embrace the beauty of diversity of interpretation in Islam.

All Muslims hold the same basic principles and core beliefs, but I believe that there is still a lot of room for respectful differences in interpretation. Furthermore, those differences should be a cause for productive conversation and exchange. Participating in interfaith dialogue through Lubar has helped give me the tools not only to talk communicate to people with different religious beliefs than my own, but also to communicate more effectively to people who interpret Islam differently than I do. I have also come to realize that ordinary people have an important place in interfaith dialogue, and that if

real change is to occur in terms of religious acceptance and a deeper religious pluralism in this country than more people will have to talk to each other than just the “experts,” whoever they may be.

I really liked the rule the Fellows came up with this year as part of our rules of engagement which requires us always to speak in “I statements.” I found that it is important for me to strike a balance between speaking on behalf of all Muslims (which is possible in some instances, i.e., basic beliefs such as the oneness of God, the Prophet Muhammad being the last prophet, etc.) and speaking on behalf of religious and cultural communities that I am a part of, speaking for my family, and speaking for myself.

I felt that the connections I made with the other Fellows were deeper because I saw them not just as Christians, Jews and Muslims, but also as individuals. Throughout the year when the Fellows spoke they went from being “the Catholic,” the “Lutheran,” “the Conservative Jew,” to friends whose life experiences and opinions I greatly respected, even when they differed greatly from my own.

I have several favorite memories from this past semester. I hope that some of these events are replicated in the programming next year! I thought that the Jerusalem topic was hard, but important. It would be disingenuous to engage in interfaith dialogue but ignore the hard topics, the topics that are the most intensely personal. I know that it got rough at certain points but I think that in the end it was a conversation worth having. It was a testament to the

friendships that we had built that we didn’t let those arguments deteriorate our relationships with one another. Another weekly Fellows discussion that I enjoyed was the sex topic. There is very little space to talk about sex in religious settings (at least as far as I have experienced) so it was cool to have a space to explore different ideas on sex and religion and to hear about people’s personal choices. The last topic that I really loved was “problems with your own faith tradition.” I think that may have been my favorite topic that we covered all year. I wish that we had had that conversation earlier. I was struck by how similar many of our gripes were including issues such as sectarianism, backbiting in communities, and women’s participation. It was also just nice to know that everyone struggles with his or her faith-traditions and to think about the best way to deal with those disagreements.

The last event this semester that I will really remember and cherish was the talk that we gave (or really as it turned out, facilitated) at the retirement home. It was amazing learning from and hearing about people’s life experiences and to get the perspective of a very different demographic than the freshmen in the dorms, whom we usually have to lure in with free food. Not surprisingly, the people in the retirement community had so much more life experience to reflect on! I was surprised by how little basic information the fairly educated group that we talked to had about Islam. They were lovely and very open to asking questions. It made me think that further down the line I would love to give basic “Intro to Islam” lectures

I felt that the connections I made with the other Fellows were deeper because I saw them not just as Christians, Jews and Muslims, but also as individuals.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

As I move forward after graduation I want to continue to seek out interfaith communities and to continue to engage in dialogue.

in retirement communities and similar settings. I think that basic level of information could do a world of difference in changing people's perspectives and dispelling stereotypes.

Interfaith dialogue of sorts has always been a part of my life because of my personal background. However, I never had the space to grow and reflect in such a conscious and thoughtful way as I have had with Lubar. I was raised as a Muslim in an interfaith household with a Christian mother and a Muslim father. My religious education was lovingly given but very basic. We practiced the "holidays and fun rituals" version of religion. I am grateful that my parents gave me so much freedom to define what Islam means to me and to what degree and how I want to practice it. As I move forward after graduation I want to continue to seek out interfaith communities and to continue to engage in dialogue.

I also hope of course to keep in close contact with all of the lovely people

whom I have met through the Lubar Institute. My experiences here have critically shaped my understanding of faith in America on both a very intimate level and on an academic one. After taking two years off from school, I hope to pursue a doctorate in Religious Studies and study Islam in America by conducting fieldwork. I am interested in looking at Islam as it operates as part of the American experience rather than as a foreign belief system. I will be thinking throughout my studies about interfaith relations in the United States.

Throughout college I have struggled but grown in my faith as a Muslim. I have so much learning and growing left to do. I have realized that to encourage my religious growth I need to be more embedded in a religious community. I am on the lookout for such a community in my next destination (Portland, Oregon), and I hope, *Inshallah*, that I am lucky enough to find a community half as supportive as the community that I found through the Lubar Institute.



Annie Glasser

“The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living.”

My sister became increasingly observant in 2007, and I made fun of her for it until her motivation was revealed to me in a paper she wrote for school. She wrote: “My mom was diagnosed with breast cancer and scheduled for a mastectomy on a Friday in July. I told my head counselor and she helped me to recite a psalm for my mother’s safety[...] It was then that I learned what prayer meant and just how powerful it was.” Her faith gave me hope and eventually led to my own personal faith. Before college I convinced myself that my wonder about finding faith had been some wild journey. I went to Israel for a semester in high school to explore my Judaism a little further. I came back with a new perspective and new priorities: I would keep stricter *kashrut*; I would observe *Shabbat* and *Haggim*.

But freshmen year, my wonder grew greater—beyond Judaism. I was under the impression that I had already gone above and beyond by breaking the or-

dinary path of following my parents’ practices. I was surprised, then, when I arrived on campus and found myself sharing my dorm room with a student from Green Bay who had attended Catholic school and had met only one Jew before meeting me. How would I go about explaining why I don’t turn on the lights from Friday night at sundown to Saturday at sundown? My roommate is now my best friend on campus and the person who inspired me to get involved in the Lubar Institute. Our conversations about our different faiths were more engaging and stimulating than any of my classes, because they applied so seriously to our realities.

So, after many long conversations with my Catholic roommate, I came to the Lubar Institute with high expectations for fruitful and meaningful conversations with the other Fellows and Forum members. My experience thus far has exceeded my expectations ten-



Sophomore
Class of 2015
Political Science
(Human Rights
Studies)
Weston, Connecticut

Abrahamic
Reflections
*The 2014
Undergraduate
Journal*

Each week I am impressed by the other Fellows' knowledge of their own faiths and am challenged on an analytical and emotional level by the concepts and ideas that we discuss.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

fold. Every Tuesday night I am guaranteed a conversation that will challenge me to familiarize myself with practices I was not previously aware of, and challenge me to look critically at my own practices.

Before joining this group, I had never had the opportunity to discuss my religion with Christians, Muslims, and other Jews all together. Not only does it sound great on that basic level, but also the seven other Fellows are genuinely excited and engaged in learning for the sake of learning, correcting misconceptions, appreciating my faith, and strengthening their own.

A few weeks ago, the Fellows had a session in which I experienced all of the above. The subject was, what is your conception of G-d? Each Fellow shared personal stories and passages that helped to support their conceptions. This brought to light the intrinsically personal and individual meaning of faith. It highlighted key differences among us. However, our discussion ended in head nods and looks of sincere appreciation. Personally, I was able to relate to each presentation on some level. To my surprise, I even related to Christian Fellows who spoke of the trinity, a concept that I feel separates my beliefs most from the Christian faith. Our conversation made me realize the multitude of commonalities on a personal level rather than on the level of Abraham and Sarah that we had previously discussed.

The eight of us are not individual Fellows working independently to promote the Institutes' mission; we are truly a fellowship. Our intimate meetings foster an environment in which we can

discuss serious and meaningful intricacies of our religions, sometimes controversial ones, and leave as friends. The friendships we are building give me greater motivation to continue learning and continue dedicating my time to interfaith dialogue on and off campus.

UW-Madison has far too few outlets for intercultural dialogue of any sort, making the Lubar Institute's interfaith student programs incredibly valuable. In my short time with the Institute, I have grown to understand my own ignorance, which has influenced my even greater sense of wonder. During Tuesday night meetings we have already discussed topics from the role of culture to cultural foods, from conceptions of G-d to outlets through which we pray to G-d. Each week I am impressed by the other Fellows' knowledge of their own faiths and am challenged on an analytical and emotional level by the concepts and ideas that we discuss.

These conversations have been complemented in the monthly Forums, where I have the opportunity to hear from an even broader range of students, who all share the same passions for religion and dialogue. For me, the most exciting part of the Forum is the increased differences between participants of the same faith. I have on occasion felt that I can relate to someone else's tradition more than someone who observes my own tradition differently.

The conversations carry out the Institute's mission to elucidate interrelationships of the Abrahamic faiths in a post-9/11 world that all too often emphasizes a discourse that promotes hatred and misunderstanding. While I have already gained so much from my

participation in the interfaith student groups, I am only still in training to be a leader in interfaith conversations.

I am inspired by the projects that Fellows and Forum members have undertaken in the past and am looking forward to acting on my curiosities by way of smaller scale conversations within the Institute, and hopefully larger events through which we can engage the entire campus and larger Madison community.

There is a widely held misconception that Muslims, Jews, and Christians are inherently incapable of interacting peacefully, of willingly committing themselves to each other for the sake

of learning and bringing about positive change. My experience so far has made me realize the truth in Rabbi Abraham Heschel's words that "life without wonder is not worth living." I have found much more meaning in my own tradition through engaging Muslims, Christians, and other Jews in conversations regarding tradition, prayer, social issues and everything in between. Any belief I had in a misconception about not interacting peacefully with other faiths has been broken. The interfaith relationships I am now a part of are among the most valuable for both a greater good and for personal growth within my own faith.

SECOND REFLECTION

While I enjoyed *The Infidel* and our discussion that followed, I think there were a few problems surrounding the event. First, the timing of the showing was not ideal. While I am happy the event happened, I think we should have considered waiting until the spring semester, when we could have potentially reached a greater number of students. I also think that more people might have stayed for the discussion if the timing had been more convenient for students academically.

Our biggest mistake was not introducing the movie properly. I think we should have given a lengthier, detailed explanation of our purpose for showing the film and encouraged people to stay for a conversation that would address the controversial use of comedy to stimulate conversation about a sensitive topic (religion). This could have

both prevented viewers from leaving offended and enabled them to recognize specific scenes to bring up later in conversation.

With the exception of these criticisms, I think the event was successful. We had a decent turnout given the close proximity of the showing to final exams. For those who stayed to discuss, I think our conversation was thought-provoking and engaging. It was great that both students and members of the Madison community partook, because it gave greater diversity, and allowed all of us to consider more perspectives.

Personally, I think comedy can be a very effective technique for inspiring dialogue. Often, though, these comedies raise questions. Where do we draw the line? If I am going to accept this approach, is it all or nothing, or is there an in-between? I am still struggling with

I have found much more meaning in my own tradition through engaging Muslims, Christians, and other Jews in conversations regarding tradition, prayer, social issues and everything in between.

Abrahamic Reflections
The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

this, because I think the movie went “too far” on a few occasions. But who decides what is too far? The question is thought-provoking, and I hope to encounter more films and texts that will help me continue to shape my opinion as this semester progresses.

There is one meeting that stands out in particular since my last written reflection. During the meeting, we shared with each other the significance of recent and upcoming holidays within each of our traditions—Eid, Christmas, and Chanukah. While learning about the holidays and hearing the other Fellows’ connections and perspectives was stimulating, it was not my main takeaway. Instead, what I appreciated most about the meeting was lighting the candles of my menorah with all the Fellows, and hearing Christmas carols while the candles burned—a real interfaith experience!

I was able to take what I learned back home over the holidays. Each year, I spend Christmas week with an interfaith family in Vermont. I have always enjoyed the excitement of opening presents and indulging in a wonderful Christmas dinner with the Martinellis. (Carly Ann made clear that this is an important part of her celebration as well.) This year the experience took on a new meaning, as I was able to reference the import of the day to what the Christian Fellows shared.

The Lubar Institute Fellowship has had a serious impact on my activities outside of the interfaith student groups. I have sought more conversations with students who are observant within my faith and of other faiths to continue learning and sharing what we have

learned in our meetings and Forums. One particularly engaging conversation was within my own faith at the Chabad House on campus. The conversation was about the ability to be fully committed to Judaism while giving credit for progress to human evolution and development, as opposed to G-d. The discussion lasted quite some time, ultimately leaving me to question my own faith.

After removing myself from the conversation and giving myself time to process the issues discussed, I realized a few things about my own beliefs that I don’t think I could have realized without being a part of the Lubar interfaith student groups. I have a fundamental issue with the foundation of my religion: the idea of being a “chosen people.” I still believe in Judaism—my version of Judaism, which has a deep foundation in ethics and values. This experience has helped me realize that each person uses religion personally, as a form of expression and self-motivation. While I was born into my religion, I also have a free will to believe differently than I was taught from birth.

Through conversations about perceptions of G-d and prayer, food and holidays, I have been exposed to various opinions and interpretations of concepts central to all of the Abrahamic religions. However, I have appreciated and respected each Fellow’s perspective as his or her personal connection.

Religion is so powerful because it is up for interpretation. A religious person can believe faithfully that G-d is the source of all that happens, or that religion is a guideline for living a righteous life. Meanwhile, religion can also be interpreted as a foundation for vi-

olence and ethnic cleansing. I want to continue considering how individuals, even within one faith, use the texts and practices to accomplish different ends. Recognizing that is helpful for me to understand and accept practices outside of my own tradition. Through this lens, I am excited to learn more about the Abrahamic religions from the other Fellows. I also hope to look at religion in the context of minority rights as a

subcategory of human rights as an independent project to supplement our work as Fellows.

Last semester ended on a great note of analytical thinking and questioning. I am excited to continue breaking down barriers and am hopeful that the other Fellows and Forum members can help me to better grasp the ideas I have been struggling with recently.

THIRD REFLECTION

I anticipated a weekly brain-exercise, one that would challenge me and teach me to become more open-minded, when I assumed my role as a Lubar Fellow this year. I imagined that meeting once each week with Muslims, Christians, and other Jewish students might enlighten me to better appreciate those around me and teach me how to engage meaningfully with them. I can say with confidence that my brain has been teased, my beliefs have been challenged, my inclination to question has grown, and my respect for all faith traditions has been illuminated.

I valued our weekly meeting as a place for intellectual curiosity and academic stimulation. The assigned texts (when I read them!) were provocative and provided an interesting base from which to jump into conversation each week. The syllabus ensured that we stayed productive, but it was structured loosely enough that we were able to add and remove topics to suit our interests. I wish it were made clear earlier in the year that we could take more control over the syllabus. While it is important

to keep a structure, it is also important to maintain the program as an undergraduate program—where the undergrads are free to express what is most important to them. By second semester our group found that balance.

The Lubar Institute quickly became a comfortable faith community for me. I was provided with resources to further my academic learning, opportunities to hear from interfaith activists, and a group of like-minded students and faculty who were always eager to engage in, and sometimes struggle through, conversations. Beyond the academics, I am excited to be leaving the fellowship with such great friends. I don't mean to sound clichéd, but the friendships the fellowship fostered were undoubtedly my biggest takeaway. Not only is it refreshing to have branched out from my smaller Jewish community, but it is also significantly easier now for me to defend arguments surrounding misconceptions. It is also easier to understand new perspectives now that I have faces to tie to those traditions.

Whether by myself or the other fel-

I can say with confidence that my brain has been teased, my beliefs have been challenged, my inclination to question has grown, and my respect for all faith traditions has been illuminated.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

lows, being constantly challenged made the experience so rewarding. I was forced to analyze my own faith with a critical eye. As a representative for my religion I learned to question my beliefs, articulate my beliefs, and consider how they might be representative or different from the majority belief of my religion. The benefit of this process was made especially clear during our last meeting, during which we discussed personal criticisms of our own religions. I think I speak for all of us in saying that always representing our tradition in the most positive light was challenging. Having an opportunity to consider our personal struggles and criticisms was revitalizing. I only wish we had the conversation earlier.

One of the most challenging meetings addressed Jerusalem as a holy city for all three Abrahamic religions. As a Zionist Jew, I have not only spent many months living in Israel, but I have also been engaged in pro-Israel activities in the United States. I had been so accustomed to talking about Israel—and “preaching to the choir.” In the context of our Fellows meeting, however, it was much harder to articulate my position, especially to do so without hurting anyone. I was certainly put off by the opinions of some other Fellows. In particular, a comment was made to compare the violations of Palestinians’ rights to the Holocaust. The comment was not only ignorant, but also damag-

ing. First, to compare anything that is not genocide to genocide is gravely irresponsible. On a more personal level, this comment made me lose hope. That someone so open-minded to be a Fellow for the Lubar Institute could be so misinformed, and so close-minded to hear another perspective, made me doubt the possibility of a peaceful resolution in the Middle East any time soon. This was my only negative experience, however, and I am happy it happened.

Our presentations at the Sellery dorm and the Capital Lakes retirement community gave me a perfect opportunity to practice interfaith leadership and gain confidence. I am hopeful to have more opportunities next year and after graduation to stay involved, with the Lubar Institute and other interfaith organizations, and continue to grow as a leader.

All in all, the program was demanding, but very rewarding. I spent more time than expected, whether pitching a movie or doing a reading, but benefited from each activity in which I was involved. The fellowship helped me to better understand my own faith and other Abrahamic traditions in a unique way. I wish Lubar had a greater reach and impact on a larger percentage of our student body, because it is an incomparable institute doing such meaningful work. Now to find a strategy to make that happen! Thanks for an important opportunity and a wonderful year!



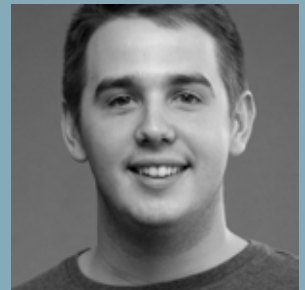
David Schulz

Life at a public university like UW–Madison is antithetical to religion. Okay, I know this is a bold claim, but don't take this to mean that I think universities instill immoral or anti-religious attitudes into their students. They simply fail to engage religion both personally and intellectually in a meaningful way; thus, they fail to get to the heart of a religious education. If one wants to *personally* engage religion, he or she can join one of the many varieties of religious organizations on campus. If one wants to *intellectually* engage religion, he or she can take courses in Religious Studies, History, or Philosophy that meet that interest.

However, I think these activities fail to fully actualize a religious education on campus. In a religious organization, one engages one's tradition with other like-minded students, either through direct practice or meaningful conversations. This meets the need to personally connect with religion, but one is contained within one's own religion. Although there is much to learn within one's own tradition (I am always learning more within Christianity), there is much to learn from others as well.

On the other hand, studying reli-

gion academically gives one a mere historical, cultural, literary—in short, an indifferent—perspective on religion without engaging it personally. A religious education is best actualized when it meets both of these elements, the personal and the intellectual. Most Badgers fail to engage both of these dimensions, and their religious education on campus, if they have one at all, is compartmentalized. For example, either I talk about religion only with other Christians (and probably only about



Senior
Class of 2014
Eau Claire, Wisconsin
Mathematics
+ Philosophy

Abrahamic Reflections

*The 2014
Undergraduate
Journal*

I wanted to bring religion into my academic experience while maintaining the intellectualism that this prestigious university offers.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

Christianity), or I study religion indifferently with a group of strangers.

To be a bit more concrete, my life here at UW–Madison reflects this tension. Most of my time at the university is spent being “academic.” Attending classes and studying take up most of my time. I primarily study math and philosophy, and so within my daily coursework, religion is seldom discussed; if I study it philosophically, religion becomes an object for argument, not that which is lived and breathed (this is one of my frustrations with philosophy on campus). Any meaningful engagement with religion has been assigned to my “spare time.”

I have been a part of two different Christian organizations over my college career and have attended church on the side. Again, I’m not complaining that campus life has prevented me from personally engaging with religion, or that it does not offer a chance to study it. Rather, my university life has thus far failed to integrate these elements, and so I’ve failed to gain a true religious education, one combining the critical, impersonal, with my own religious experience. I wanted to bring religion into my academic experience while maintaining the intellectualism that this prestigious university offers.

This is where my participation with Lubar has been the most meaningful, because my experience has satisfied my conjoined desire for a personal connection with religion on the one hand, and my passion for intellectual reflection. It’s different than a discussion section for a class, because I know all of the other Fellows, and the discussion is personal. It is a safe environment where we

can open up to one another. The Lubar interfaith groups differ from any other religious organization because we often disagree, and the discussion remains intellectual and critical. We compare our different theologies and religious conceptions and are led to critically assess our own. I will illustrate how my fellowship has brought these elements together by examining two examples.

The first example is the meeting we had October 29, which, by the Fellows’ choosing, was centered around a discussion about different notions of God. Each Fellow was to look to their tradition, holy book, and symbols, and present their conception of God (what God means to them). I thought everyone was just going to present an orthodoxy representing his or her tradition, but the presentations were much more personal, authentic, and adventurous. One of the Fellows shared a gift from her mom that helps remind her of God’s continual presence. Another told us how she struggles with her idea of God, a struggle I am sure all of us share from time to time. It wasn’t just a great meeting because I got to hear others’ opinions, but I was forced to wrestle with my own theology.

My understanding of God has grown and transformed over the last years, and so I was forced to ask myself the question: “What do I really believe?” Obviously this was a difficult question, and I’m not sure if I found a satisfying answer. Nonetheless, I was able to pick out some Bible passages that are meaningful to me, and I shared them with the other Fellows. The very act of explaining my theology to the Fellows, who now are really just my friends, was

both a personal and critical engagement with my own theological views. The best way to learn something is to teach it to somebody else, and the most critical engagement one can have with religion is to explain one's own to others. That was my experience, at least.

Another "Lubar experience" was sharing religious foods with one another. Each Fellow brought a baked good, a dish, or even just pictures that reminded them of traditional religious foods and rituals. We ate challah, date cookies, hummus, and potluck hot dishes (one of which I made in hopes of representing a good Protestant potluck), washing it all down with sparkling grape juice. It was enlightening to hear all of the different rituals and practices that were associated with these different foods. Eating and communing with others was a ground on which all of our religions stood united.

This was one of the many experiences as a Fellow where I've gotten to personally encounter other religions, and I anticipate many more. However, this meal took on another dimension, because communing itself is so integrally connected to what it is to be human, and to religious practice itself. In my own Christian tradition, the purported last experience Jesus and his disciples

shared was a supper with bread and wine. Similarly, shared meals are essential to the Jewish and Muslim experiences, for example with Passover and the feast after Ramadan, respectively. Although the meal we shared that night was not explicitly religious, it strengthened us Fellows as a community and brought us intimately together. It was an experience I will not soon forget.

Since universities are centers of learning and knowledge, it is only fitting that UW-Madison provide the opportunity for a truly religious education. This, for me, is the Lubar Institute. My personal and critical engagements with the Abrahamic religions have taught me differently than could my own religious practice, or a religious studies course. Not to say that these are not also important in a religious education, but my experience with the Lubar interfaith student groups has filled a unique role. However, my experiences thus far have been mostly private; we have not had many opportunities to reach the campus. I am confident that, when we engage the Badger community, we will advance religious education and share the personal, critical dialogue we have experienced. But I have much more to learn as well, and I cannot wait for what the future has in store!

SECOND REFLECTION

This last season of the Lubar Institute has helped orient me towards the future. I am nearing my graduation from UW-Madison, and naturally have invested more time thinking about my career. Although the planning for the

future has been in the back of my mind for a while, my experience as a Lubar Fellow has led me to gain a higher self-understanding.

The interfaith meetings are always the most exhilarating part of my week.

My personal and critical engagements with the Abrahamic religions have taught me differently than could my own religious practice, or a religious studies course.

Abrahamic Reflections
The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

The Lubar interfaith group has led me to reflect on career paths beyond that which is secured in my own tradition.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

As I noted in my last reflection, religion is hardly discussed in other classes and is a topic hidden from most student life. Besides my own personal practice, my life at UW–Madison has been concerned, for the most part, with the secular. My true passion for religious issues has shown through in the last couple of months. Having built relationships with the other Fellows, attended meetings, and participated in other campus events, I am certain that religion is not simply an *interest*, but is rather one of my primary concerns.

I have even been feeling a tug toward some form of religious vocation, whether it be pastoral, academic, or public. My father is a Lutheran pastor, and I have had experiences in ministry. Over the years, conversations with family and friends have often led to the question: “Have you thought about becoming a minister?” For much of my life, the answer was simply, “No.” It was not as if I condemned the option, but I had always thought I was meant to pursue mathematics and the hard sciences. Although my academic interests have changed over my college career, the option of ministry for a long time remained unconsidered. However, my participation in the interfaith group this last semester has required me to once more open myself to this possibility.

The Lubar interfaith group has led me to reflect on career paths *beyond* that which is secured in my own tradition. Not only will interfaith dialogue be an integral part of my profession, but I am concerned with interfaith issues at large. Specifically I want to assist in the project of leading others (and myself) to gain interfaith understanding,

engage in the project of understanding religion in modernity and a post-secular civilization, and help interpret and offer solutions to religious issues in the public sphere. Before I joined the Lubar student groups, I was certainly more apathetic towards the other traditions, although certainly not antagonistic; I had an intellectual appreciation and respect for the Abrahamic faiths. In the last months I have explored others’ religious holidays, foods, and ways of reading holy texts. Each experience has plunged me deeper into different traditions, and I have gained a personal appreciation and respect for them. They are still not for me sacred, as they are for those who actively participate in the traditions. Nonetheless, in our increasingly pluralistic society, a personal connection to the other traditions is valuable.

Interfaith dialogue is not always as cheerful and fun as I have just described it; we have met trials along the way. In November the Fellows gathered to discuss a particular method of interfaith dialogue, “Scriptural Reasoning,” whereby “[e]very text is read, studied, and critiqued inter-religiously.” Individual faith commitments are not bracketed at all, and thus conflicts may arise. While discussing this new method, we began to realize that we had various conflicting views about the status of each other’s religions, their holy books, and our own religions. This seems like an obvious conflict. Starting the year we implicitly knew that there would be fundamental disagreements, each of us representing different traditions. Nonetheless, actually expressing our conflicting ideologies was painful.

In contrast to my earlier praise of the Lubar Fellows program in its provision for an academic/religious sanctuary, at this meeting I felt alienated. I remember leaving the discussion frustrated with a sense of groundlessness; I could not justify some of my beliefs, and we had fundamental disagreements that seemed irresolvable. While listening to the firmly entrenched views of the other Fellows, whom I deeply respect, I felt my own tradition challenged in substantial ways. For example, I was led to ask myself, how much would be different were I simply raised in another tradition? Interfaith dialogue is not always fun or easy, but this session was actually closer to my original expectations for our meetings. However, the challenge of that night's discussion alerted me of the utter need for interfaith dialogue. Insofar as facing up to pluralism and one's own beliefs is difficult and creates tension, interfaith dialogue must continue.

I am now in a curious position. My Fellows experience has pointed me towards a religious vocation but has called into question my presuppositions about what that vocation could entail. My understanding of a traditional "pastor" does not include the pursuit of interfaith dialogue. I know that my vocation will differ from the religious careers of

my parents' generation. Reading articles about college professors, individuals in ministry, those who lead interfaith coalitions, I know that there is room in our world for a plethora of professions related to religion. Thus, the Lubar Institute has led me to open myself up to the possibility of pursuing some form of graduate education. Whether it be philosophy, theology, or some form of ministry program, there will be a position for me somewhere. Hopefully I become creative with my career no matter what I choose. I have already started to prepare myself for this graduate education. This semester I am taking an "Introduction to Buddhism" course, am beginning to read more theology, and will finish my Philosophy major.

By showing me my concern for religion in America and the Western world (Christian and otherwise), the Lubar Institute has helped nudge me towards a career which is sure to be religious, or at least inspired by religious concerns. Moreover, it has furnished me with the passion and skills to pursue interfaith dialogue. Because of the challenges even we Lubar Fellows have had with interreligious discussion, I understand its importance in a pluralistic society. It would be a loss for me if it was not an essential part of my adult life.

THIRD REFLECTION

I have previously reflected on particular experiences within the fellowship and how it has influenced my career goals. In my final reflection essay, I would like to discuss outreach and

my development as an interfaith leader, looking at specific instances over the past few months which have typified these issues. I will conclude with a dis-

By showing me my concern for religion in America and the Western world (Christian and otherwise), the Lubar Institute has helped nudge me towards a career which is sure to be religious, or at least inspired by religious concerns.

Abrahamic Reflections
The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

We provided for them an outlet through which they could be honest and open about their religious identities.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

cussion about how this will inform my stay in Austria next year.

Although I learned a lot about other faith traditions and made good friends, the Lubar Fellows program is designed primarily to train interfaith leaders and to be an outpost from which the university, the Madison community, and the world might engage in interfaith dialogue and service. I was a bit worried in the fall that we Fellows would merely keep to ourselves and fail to reach out. Moreover, I was concerned that I myself might simply have a good time without being motivated to use this educational experience outside the group. My worries turned out to be entirely misguided.

I missed the opportunity we had to speak at Sellery Hall in the fall, but this spring the Fellows and I led two other interfaith events in the community. The first was with house fellows during their annual training in January. Here we got to discuss interfaith issues that arose or might arise in the dorms. Some of the house fellows were concerned about some really sensitive issues; for example, one house fellow wanted to know how to better handle the situation in which some students have prejudices against homosexuality because of their religious commitments. I am still unsure whether we truly answered her question, or gave her a satisfying prescription, but it was exciting to hear of actual tangible interreligious conflict on campus.

Their concerns offered us a window into how most people engage each other between faiths (at least, those in affluent Madison, Wis.). This experience was edifying in another way, be-

cause we Fellows learned about how we might better lead these events. (We should have been more prepared, for one thing!) But I think our outreach was beneficial for the house fellows as well. We were a resource for them and, at the least, brought religious diversity into their awareness (as a leader/teacher it is just as important to change others' awareness as it is to change their minds, or teach them explicit content). I hope that Fellows continue to put on events like this on campus, learning from our successes and mistakes.

In March we put on another interfaith event in the greater Madison community, this time at a retirement center. I honestly cannot speak to the religious climate among our community's elderly, so I cannot truly know what impact we had on them. Nonetheless, I thought this was overall a positive experience. They told us a bit about ourselves, but we got to share a lot about our experience as Fellows; they were most interested in hearing about what work was being done on campus.

Just knowing that some good is being done makes a substantial difference, because it shapes the world one occupies. If I hear about a nongovernmental organization doing work abroad, even if I do not contribute to their efforts in any way, my world is nonetheless shaped. Many of the participants were vocal about how happy they were that we were a part of their community. (I think I could make the same point about our meeting with the house fellows.)

More importantly, we provided for them an outlet through which they could be honest and open about their religious identities. We did not delve

into any ‘deep’ territory so to speak, but that is beside the point. By simply being there, we created a new space between the participants, among whom they might be able to have future conversations. This may sound idealistic, but I firmly believe that by beginning to discuss that which is of the most personal content, religion, there may be fruit to harvest. Moreover, they expressed interest in having us come regularly, and so seeds were planted for future outreach as well.

Another opportunity I had for outreach was just this week, and it wasn’t even with Lubar. On happenstance I ended up studying with some old friends from high school at a local café. It was exciting to catch up with them and to be honest, we did more talking than studying. We got to talking about some other high school friends and their religious identities. One of our old friends is in a relationship and does not share some basic religious beliefs with her boyfriend. This conversation transformed into a discussion about the role of our own religious identities (although they did most of the talking).

The friends who I knew to be agnostic revealed to me, among other things, that they might want to get married in the churches they grew up in. We also talked about how their parents’ religious identities shaped their own. I had never had that kind of conversation with them before. Despite me holding a much different religious identity than them, I was able to use my new inter-

faith training to simply be open, honest, and caring.

Reflecting on this conversation, my Fellows training was brought clearly into focus. Because they were my good friends, and because we had such different religious identities, it had actually been difficult to engage this topic fruitfully. My experience as a Lubar Fellow has taught me how to ask respectful questions while being a respectful listener. Everyone has a religious identity, whether they be Christian, Buddhist, or atheist, and each person has a story to tell. It is exciting to have tangible confirmation that I can be an interreligious ambassador to my friends. This is assuredly an invaluable skill which I will carry with me into adulthood.

In September I will be flying to Austria to teach English in the upcoming school year. Because I intend to be in some sort of religious vocation, and because of my newfound passion for interreligious dialogue, I hope to get involved while abroad. Although I know little about the religious landscape in Feldkirch, Oesterreich, I know at least that there will be both Protestant and Catholic Christians, and there is a Buddhist temple in the area. I have only seven months there, but I intend to engage in interreligious dialogue if I can. If not, then I at least hope to be an ambassador for the churches there, offering them a different perspective on the Christian life, which could itself yield interreligious dialogue.

Despite me holding a much different religious identity than them, I was able to use my new interfaith training to simply be open, honest, and caring.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal



Daniel Wieber



Senior
Class of 2015
Anthropology +
Languages and
Cultures of Asia
(+ Religious Studies
+ Middle East Studies)
Mukwonago,
Wisconsin

Abrahamic
Reflections

*The 2014
Undergraduate
Journal*

In these first few months of my involvement with the Lubar Institute, I have found that our various gatherings provide a safe haven for expression and discovery. Within the Fellows meetings and Forum, I feel open to talking about my own personal ideas about religion and what I have experienced through my religious background. I believe this feeling of security is shared among the Fellows and Forum members and it creates a great foundation for learning about first-hand experiences of other faith backgrounds. Engaging in conversations with this level of trust and openness helps me see the diversity of tradition, not only between the different Abrahamic religions, but also within each particular tradition itself. The diversity is not the only important aspect of religion that I have come to experience, however. I have come to realize, more and more, that there are a great deal of common threads that tie our religions together. It seems as though the space that the Lubar Institute has opened up is necessary, not only for understanding each other, but for understanding ourselves.

One particular event was key in bringing this concept to my attention. A few weeks into the semester, the

Lubar fellows came together to talk about women in the Abrahamic tradition. To prepare for this meeting, we

explored a chapter of Charlotte Gordon's book *The Woman Who Named God*. We also had the opportunity to watch the video of her talk when she visited Madison in the previous year. Though the topic of conversation was intended to revolve around the role of women in our different faith backgrounds, another point that Gordon addressed stood out to me.

In her talk Charlotte Gordon explained that she was raised in a Christian household. Despite the fact that her father came from a Jewish background, she was never exposed to the Jewish tradition in her childhood. Through her personal exploration of her Jewish roots, Gordon discovered a love for Jewish life and practice. She began considering conversion, but she was hesitant to do so because of an intellectual and ethical conflict. To convert to Judaism, she would have had to accept Abraham and his family as her spiritual parents, but, at the time, she questioned their moral standing. Faced with this conundrum she turned to the exploration of religious texts from all the Abrahamic faiths. Delving into these texts ultimately altered her views of the patriarch and matriarchs who grounded the three Abrahamic religions, and she was able to go on with her conversion.

Gordon mentioned that, through her research, she was able to gain a new perspective on her own faith. She said that she returned to her scripture with "new eyes," and was now able to read the story of Sarah and Hagar with a new level of understanding. This was a story she had known quite well, but she had never thought to look at it through the particular lens that Islam offers. Pri-

or to her research of the Islamic texts, Gordon had seen Hagar as a woman deserving of pity but, through her exploration, she was pointed toward facts within her own tradition that allowed her to view Hagar as the strong founder of a nation. What really caught my attention here is that when rereading the Biblical story of Sarah and Hagar, with the *hadith* of Islam in mind, the Jewish and Christian scriptures did not contradict this new perspective. On the contrary, they opened Gordon's eyes to a new side of the story that she had always overlooked, due to a habit of pitying Hagar. Now she could see Hagar as the strong matriarch that she was in Islam, and she confirmed this history within her own tradition.

In this perspective, we see that the sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions are not in conflict with one another on this issue. In fact, in this instance, they are complementary; one traditional perspective was used to clarify and point out what now seems to be a very obviously plausible way of looking at Hagar within all three traditions.

As Gordon implied, this challenges us to think about what else we are overlooking. In her talk, Gordon mentioned that she decided to write her book when she heard a radio commentator refer to the war in Iraq as a war between the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael. Through her studies she was able to undermine this idea with scriptural evidence and religious commentary from all three Abrahamic faiths. She discovered that it was more plausible to say that there is evidence for an ideal of coexistence and blessing within all three traditions.

In this perspective, we see that the sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions are not in conflict with one another on this issue. In fact, in this instance, they are complementary.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

Not only are we studying texts and exploring religion side by side academically, but we are reaching out to the people of these faiths and opening ourselves up for a type of conversation that helps us gain a more holistic understanding of other religions.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

This particular meeting had an impact on me for several reasons. It helped enforce and enrich a belief that I had already held, and at the same time it helped me realize yet another important aspect of the Lubar Institute. When studying religious texts alongside one another, as Gordon has done, we can gain a better perspective on our common histories and the shared truth within them. The Lubar Institute has taken this concept a step further. Now, not only are we studying texts and exploring religion side by side academically, but we are reaching out to the people of these faiths and opening ourselves up for a type of conversation that helps us gain a more holistic understanding of other religions.

It has been great getting to know the other Abrahamic faiths as they exist in people rather than as a bunch of qualitative information compiled in articles and textbooks. Participating in interfaith dialogue has helped me realize that, no matter how much I immerse myself in religious texts, doing so will never give me the entire story of a religion. On the other hand, when we gather together and express our concepts of religion and tradition in an honest and open way, we are able to see the immense amount of common ground we share. Through the Lubar Institute, we are not only exploring our historical and theological common ground, we are also discovering our shared concepts about things such as compassion, service, devotion, and more. I believe, just as the exploration of our shared histories can help inform us on our individual histories, exploring these shared concepts through different lens-

es can help us understand more about our own religions.

Of course, it would be unfair of me to say that all we have found through our experiences thus far is common ground. In reality, we have had many conflicting opinions in our discussions as well. These differences in opinion, ideology, or practice have happened across religious lines as well as within them. But these discrepancies are not unfruitful. On the contrary, I have found them to be extremely helpful in understanding other people.

In the type of environment that the Lubar institute has provided, I do not see these conflicts dividing us. Instead, it seems, they wake us up to the reality of diversity, and this awakening is crucial to coexistence. It is impossible to understand another human being without acknowledging their differences, and the interfaith dialogue I have participated in during the last few months has helped uncover some more aspects of diversity that exist within the Abrahamic religions.

Looking back at my experiences at the Fellows meetings and the Forums, I already feel more familiar with the other Abrahamic religions. Through our studies and our dialogue, I have a better understanding of the histories and beliefs that connect us. At the same time, I have become more aware of the diversities of these beliefs and the discrepancies within our historical accounts. I have come to understand interfaith research and interfaith dialogue as a means of both understanding others' religions, as well as understanding our own. Realizing this, I have hope for what can result from this type of in-

terfaith interaction. I hope that we can take the experiences that we gain here and use them to strike at the heart of some of the conflicts that divide us.

SECOND REFLECTION

Over the past few months, I have seen my experiences as a Lubar Institute Fellow spilling over into my day-to-day life. The Forums and the Fellows meetings have been a training ground for opening up discussions about religion with my friends and colleagues in more public arenas. I now feel more comfortable bringing up religious topics with those of other faiths.

I feel as though my experiences as a Lubar undergrad have equipped me with a more mindful and knowledgeable approach to many of the situations I encounter outside of the safe space that the Lubar Institute provides. I expect that my experience as a Fellow during the rest of this academic year, along with my anticipated participation with the Forum in my remaining years at UW–Madison, will continue to cross over into my daily life. Sharing these experiences with others has become one of my greatest joys in life, and I hope to find an interfaith niche where ever my career path takes me.

Through my studies of Arabic, and the wide varieties of cultures associated with this language, I have found myself associating with many people who identify as Muslim. Shortly after I transferred to UW–Madison, I began hanging out with international students from different Muslim countries. I recall realizing, after a period of time, that I felt more fellowship with my Muslim friends than I had felt in a long time.

Many of them were very observant Sunni Muslims from rather orthodox Muslim communities, and our conversations would often gravitate toward the nature of God or stories of the prophets. Throughout all this, we also found ourselves talking about other sects and other religions. I was more of a passive listener in the beginning. Sometimes remarks about other religions were a bit one-sided and even negative at times. I found it more comfortable to listen without commenting, even if I did not agree with some of the generalizations I would encounter.

After being involved with the Lubar Institute for a number of months, however, I began to feel more knowledgeable about interfaith subjects, and more confident to confront interfaith issues openly in a way that would not offend or upset anyone. I had a sense of interfaith competence, and defended aspects of Judaism when someone would make generalizations about its creed. At times I was confronted with a situation where the topic of conversation would revolve around the differences between Sunnis and Shias, and this can be a sensitive and tense topic. Because of my experience with the Lubar Institute, I feel more able to mindfully question generalizations and stereotypes that come up during conversations about religion.

When similar situations arise now, I do not only feel prepared to discuss these issues, I also feel obligated to do

I feel more able to mindfully question generalizations and stereotypes that come up during conversations about religion.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

The Lubar Institute has allowed people of different religious backgrounds to truly get to know one another on a more personal level, and we can take these experiences and share firsthand accounts of our commonalities with people from our own faith traditions.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

so. I have come to know a variety of religious views in the Lubar Forums and fellow meetings, and I have developed an affinity with the people who hold them. I also realize that I have not, by any means, witnessed all the conceivable personal views one might hold. Even if I do not agree with the views wholeheartedly myself, I feel a need to at least mention any perspectives that may not be getting a chance to defend themselves in these contexts. Of course, I do not try to articulate the in-depth knowledge of these religious perspectives that could only come from firsthand experience of the religious individual, but I do make an effort to call for the respect of the others viewpoints, even if I do not agree with or understand them fully.

The opportunity to share what I have learned through LUBAR has presented itself in many different contexts. The Lubar Institute has allowed people of different religious backgrounds to truly get to know one another on a more personal level, and we can take these experiences and share firsthand accounts of our commonalities with people from our own faith traditions.

Even in a globalizing world, some religious communities simply do not come into contact with people from other faiths. On one occasion, I found myself explaining to an elderly Christian friend of mine some of the common ground Christianity has with Islam. She is from rural Wisconsin and has never met and, unfortunately, will likely never meet a Muslim. Not only was I able to share the common theological and historical aspects of Islam, I was able to explain that my Muslim friends are

some of the kindest and wisest people I have ever met. Indeed, there have been instances where I find myself trying to clarify some aspect of Islam to the best of my ability, or attempting to break some stereotypes of Judaism that may be offensive and flat out wrong. In truth, however, these moments of misunderstanding come up far less often than do conversations about our common traits and histories.

During one of our interfaith events I was able to get a few of my international friends to come to our showing of the British comedy, *The Infidel*. They stayed for the discussion afterwards and contributed to our fruitful conversation. Here, we were all able to share our different religious and cultural views on the relationship between stereotypes and comedy. Those who participated in the discussion were from an array of different age groups and religions, and they brought a variety of views to the table. Through our discussion, however, we all came to realize that we held similar views about where stereotypes were appropriate and where they were not. This may be because those who would stay for a discussion of this nature tend to hold similar views. Some members of the audience left during the showing of the movie because of the offensive stereotypes and crude humor. Others did not seem impressed with the movie and left right after it had ended. Nevertheless, here were people from different age groups, different religious backgrounds, and different cultures who all were participating in a discussion about religion and finding our common ground in the context of religious stereotypes.

This discussion also touched on a topic I had not thought of before. One of the discussion questions was, “Do you have to be liberal within your own tradition to be tolerant?” From what I have observed, religious conservatism is often equated with exclusivism and intolerance towards other faiths. Through this discussion, I think we were able to break yet another negative stereotype about certain aspects of religious communities. It was an honor to be able to take the safe space that the Lubar Institute provides and extend it out into the general public as a group.

I have also met some alumni Fellows. Among these Fellows I have met graduate students, those who are currently professionals, and those who are still pursuing their undergraduate degree. During a dorm event I met two former fellows who had presented at the dorms the previous year. They helped represent Islam at the event. It was great to see that fellows are still in contact with the Lubar Institute and can continue to

help promote interfaith dialogue after they carry on with their academic and professional goals. A few of the current fellows and I were also able to meet up with a former Lubar fellow who is now pursuing her master’s degree in Israel. She expressed to us that although her interfaith experience at the Lubar Institute may not always be at the forefront of what she is doing, it is always with her. She noted that this sort of religious literacy has helped her better understand some of the culture and the conflicts that she has encountered while living and working in the Middle East.

Looking forward, I hope that I can both stay in touch with the Lubar Institute as I pursue my academic and career goals, and that I can carry these experiences with me along the way. I anticipate that my involvement with the Lubar Institute will continue to be fruitful, and that I will go on to find more opportunities for interfaith dialogue after my time here at UW–Madison is over.

THIRD REFLECTION

This has been a truly incredible year. As I write this, I get to look back at all the Tuesday evenings spent with Ulrich and the fellows. I get to recall the times where we were all deeply immersed in some complex and important conversation, or the other times when we were sitting around laughing with one another and talking about nothing in particular. I am able to contemplate those quiet moments during the forum when everyone was pondering some profound thing that someone just said,

or reminisce about the heated debates that ended respectfully and fruitfully. I have the opportunity to trace the steps I took as I got to know some of the most intelligent and incredible people I have ever met. I now am able to think back to the profound unity I felt with these people and their faith communities as they welcomed me into their houses of worship. And, with all these beautiful moments in mind, I have to realize that this incredible year has come to a close. Now I am able to carry these amazing

I have the opportunity to trace the steps I took as I got to know some of the most intelligent and incredible people I have ever met.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

I felt as though I was getting a glimpse at the heart of another religion, living and breathing it alongside a group of people who believe in God in much the same way that I do.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal

experiences with me as I move on towards my future goals in life, and I hope that I can continue to benefit from the enrichment that comes through inter-faith dialogue.

One of my favorite experiences as a Lubar fellow was the weekend of Open Houses of Worship, when we all went to a mosque, a synagogue, and a church as a group. I had visited a synagogue before, but merely as a researcher. I had also visited the Islamic center a few times, but only as a guest; simply there to listen to the *khutba* and watch them preform the Friday prayer. During the Open Houses of Worship, however, we were not just invited as observers. We were invited to participate in the worship alongside their faith community and experience it firsthand.

When visiting the Islamic center for Friday prayer, we were encouraged to sit closer to the front, and, when it came time for prayer, we were invited to line up with everyone else and participate. We were allowed not only to watch the way they perform their religious rites but also invited to pray and worship alongside them. It is difficult to describe the profound unity that came from this event. We were shoulder to shoulder, with everyone moving in the same rhythmic motion, while the one who led prayer recited the beautiful and enchanting verses from the Qur'an. I felt as though I was getting a glimpse at the heart of another religion, living and breathing it alongside a group of people who believe in God in much the same way that I do. Afterwards, the feeling of community was permeating the air as everyone mulled around greeting one another and taking in this

sense of unity. This experience remains close to my heart, and I returned again to pray alongside my Muslim friends on a separate occasion.

At the synagogue, I attended the Conservative service. Yet again, it was a beautiful experience. The mesmerizing prayers filled the room, and I attempted to follow along with the meanings and the melodies. Several people from the community were invited to lead a prayer or make an announcement. The relaxed and communal nature of the service, alongside the beautiful singing, made for a very welcoming environment. After the service, we were all invited to join the Shabbat dinner. Here the welcoming sense of community continued as more beautiful prayers were sung and more announcements were made. We ate delicious food and had great conversation with anyone who happened to be sitting nearby. Being invited to share this Shabbat table with some of the members of Madison's Jewish community was both a great honor and an enriching experience.

Aside from the Open Houses of Worship, Hillel has opened their doors to us several times to celebrate and inform us about the Hand-in-Hand project in Israel, an interfaith school aimed at fostering understanding and coexistence among Israeli and Palestinian youth. Every time I go to these events, I feel like I learn more about the Jewish tradition and experience more aspects of their strong sense of community.

Going out into the faith communities of others has been a big part of my Lubar experience in the latter half of the year. For example, I was also invited to an Ash Wednesday service at

St. Paul's by one of the other fellows. During this service I was exposed to a side of Christianity that I had never seen before. I got a glimpse at the Catholic style of worship, which was previously completely unfamiliar to me. I was able not only to witness many of the rites and practices of an unfamiliar worship service but also was invited to join. I found a new affinity for liturgy and ritual. Because I was able to experience these things firsthand, I was able to see, however limited my ephemeral gaze may have been, how these things can work into the world of one's faith and serve to strengthen it. It was an amazing and beautiful service, and once again, a learning experience.

I feel blessed to have had these doors open to me. The sense of unity and closeness to God I was able to feel alongside my Jewish, Muslim, and Christian friends had a positive impact on my already present pluralistic views. Stealing a phrase from one of my fellow Lubar Fellows, Lubar had become my primary faith community in Madison. Indeed, I felt more fellowship in the safe and open place that Lubar provided than I had within the walls of my own tradition for a long time.

The most important thing that I gained from Lubar, however, was the friendships. Our group of Fellows was able to meet several times outside of the official Forum and Fellows meetings. We also had some freedom to socialize during many of the meetings due to the structure of the program this year. I personally feel that this helped solidify our connections as people rather than

merely as colleagues. We were able to engage each other as individuals, without our religious identities at the forefronts of our minds. Of course, religion was still a part of our individual selves in these instances, but I believe we were communicating first as friends, then as Jews, Christians, and Muslims. I think this factor played a huge role in creating an even safer environment within which we could discuss the more intimate aspects and perspectives held in our various traditions and backgrounds.

The safe space mentioned above does not have to exist only within Lubar however. I feel that we have developed a knack for bringing this space out into the public realm. Speaking about religion with people who hold different views than our own has become a familiar practice to us. I believe that fostering this sense of safety in the same space weekly has given us the vocabulary and the insight for creating this space elsewhere. I now find myself not only more religiously literate, but more 'dialogue literate' as well. I may have a better grasp on concepts within many religions after my experience as a Lubar fellow, but I also feel that I have a much stronger understanding of how to conduct myself in interfaith conversations. I feel as though it is easier to start these conversations with strangers and friends alike, and I am better able to express my opinions in a succinct yet mindful way. I consider this familiarity with interreligious dialogue to be an extremely important aspect of my life, and I hope to continue to practice it wherever my future happens to take me.

I felt more fellowship in the safe and open place that Lubar provided than I had within the walls of my own tradition for a long time.

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2014 Undergraduate Journal



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 them 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—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—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, students, members of those traditions, and the general public—whatever their religious commitments may (or may not) be.

The Lubar Institute carries out its mission first by running scholarly programs such as conferences, symposia, lectures, and exhibitions, often in interdisciplinary collaboration with academic units across the humanities, social sciences, and even natural sciences. It then fashions practical outlets for this knowledge through on-campus activities, such as the Interfaith Student Fellows and the Interfaith Student Forum, as well as community-oriented events. The increasing awareness among educators about the importance of pairing classroom and co-curricular learning, combined with the University's recognition that religious identity plays an important role in how many students define themselves, has led the Institute to embrace a corollary mission: to increase religious literacy and tolerance among all members of the UW–Madison campus. The merger of scholarly and practical activity exemplifies the Wisconsin Idea. First articulated by University President Charles Van Hise one hundred years ago, the Wisconsin Idea can be stated in twenty-first century terms as “the dedicated application of scholarship and teaching to public service.” By educating people about the braided histories of the Abrahamic religions and bringing different groups of people together for candid conversations about religious difference, the Institute strives to fulfill this ideal by reducing religious conflict and thereby thickening the bonds of American civil society.

The Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions

University of Wisconsin–Madison
5225 Mosse Humanities
455 N. Park St.
Madison, WI 53706

lubar.wisc.edu

