

# Abrahamic Reflections

*The 2015 Interfaith Fellows' Journal*



Dr. Ulrich  
Rosenhagen

Naomi  
Frisch

Steven  
Suh

Tasneem  
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Jackie  
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Jonathan  
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Kurt  
Wieters

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

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

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

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

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# A Letter from the Associate Director

*Dr. Ulrich Rosenhagen, Pr.*

In September 2012, in the midst of the presidential election campaign, *Religion News Service* reported that Republican candidate Mitt Romney appealed to voters by repeatedly emphasizing the “Judeo-Christian tradition” of America. His running mate, Paul Ryan, suggested that President Barack Obama’s political plans would threaten the “Judeo-Christian values” that “made us a great nation in the first place.”

However, the Judeo-Christian rhetoric of old no longer resonated with the majority of Americans. Obama was re-elected. The rhetoric had become reminiscent of a different time when public figures cast their civic principles and values in a language that referred exclusively to Jews and Christians. But in an America that has become “the world’s most religiously diverse nation” (Diana Eck) the Judeo-Christian paradigm—which had such political resonance earlier in the twentieth-century—no longer symbolizes the nation’s civic creed. A once popular concept of inclusion had morphed into an exclusivist term of social conservatives.

What, if anything, has taken the place of the Judeo-Christian paradigm? How has religious pluralism in recent decades affected the civic faith

of the American people? How can there be a common “religion of the public” (Sidney Mead) that does not sacrifice the integrity of the different religious traditions?

One striking feature of both recent academic and non-academic interreligious discourse is the frequent invocation of the biblical patriarch Abraham, a crucial figure in the sacred narratives of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Despite the different stories these sibling religions tell about him, Abraham is essential in the theological concepts, rituals, and liturgies of his children. The figure of Abraham has ascended rapidly as the grand symbol for inter-religious dialogue, bridge building, and unity despite difference. Abraham has become a counter-metaphor amidst all inter-religious quarrels. Inspired by Bruce

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Feiler's 2002 bestseller: *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, the American magazine *Time* even put an image of Abraham from Rembrandt's "The Sacrifice of Isaac" from a painting of Abraham on its cover with the subtitle: "Abraham: Muslims, Christians and Jews all claim him as their father. A new book explores the challenge of turning him into their peacemaker." It seems as if the decline of the Judeo-Christian paradigm has been paralleled by the rise of a more inclusive and pluralistic *Abrahamic* paradigm.

The agenda of Abraham as peacemaker, as grand symbol for interreligious dialogue, and counter-metaphor amidst interreligious strife, is reflected by the numerous initiatives, which have blossomed and flourished over the last 15 years or so. *The Faith Club*, for instance, is a group of three women from New York (a Muslim, a Christian, and a Jew) who reached out to each other in the months after 9/11. They have traveled around the country to inspire their audience to mutually search for religious and civic understanding of the other.

A pastor, a rabbi, and a sheik from Seattle are *Getting to the Heart of Interfaith* (2009) as their book title promises us. Or, too, the Lubar Institute's Student Fellows here at UW-Madison, who throughout last year were engaged in very personal and intimate interreligious conversations drawing on their own faith practices as well as moral convictions, their religious sentiments as well as civic involvements.

Our Lubar Interfaith Fellows have begun to imagine their different Abrahamic narratives as a common source

of civility and peacemaking. In their mutual concern for the ways Americans can live together as members of civil society, common features of these different Abraham stories appeared. While the children of Abraham always knew of the emancipatory and reconciling power of faith, our Student Fellows now started to wonder how their beliefs could be beneficial for social coexistence and peace. What could the people of the Abrahamic religions do to help overcome religious intolerance? In a religiously diverse society, how could Jews, Christians, and Muslims establish relationships across the boundaries of their respective communities? What aspects of the Abraham narratives would inspire the building of interfaith friendships, and thereby thicken civil society?

As in previous years, *Abrahamic Reflections* is a compendium of our Fellows' thoughts and reflections about their experience at the Lubar Institute. To me, these short essays are testimony to the fact that the Abrahamic paradigm might indeed be the new master narrative of active engagement with the religious commitments of one's fellow citizens and neighbors.

So once again, I'm indebted to a group of wonderfully inquisitive college students, committed to explore their own religious traditions and moral imaginations. So it is now for me to say: Thank you, Fellows, for a magnificent year of mutual conversation and learning. Thank you for all you brought to the Lubar Institute. Thank you for building those interfaith connections and for creating the texture of this great American fabric. Twenty-first-century America is in good hands with you.



# Jonathan Formella

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The experiences I have had so far in the Lubar Interfaith Student Fellows group have been fantastic. An aspect that I really enjoy about the Lubar Institute is that it lets me get away from my normal studies in History and East Asian Studies to focus on religion and spirituality, which I believe is an important aspect of university culture. I have also really enjoyed the readings from religious scriptures and from contemporary books. Most of all I have enjoyed getting to know the other Fellows and interacting with members of the Forum. It's one thing to read about different religions or denominations from a text but it's quite thrilling to see a piece of each religious story being acted out in real life.

One of the major issues we discussed this semester was the issue of women's education and its conflict with extremist elements of Islam. I really enjoyed reading the book, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, which overall I thought was very well written and presented. By itself, the incident in which Taliban assassins shot Malala Yousafzai at point blank range and failed was remarkable. One of my friends even sug-

gested that divine intervention had saved Malala as a sign of God's favor towards her cause. Both her survival and defiant attitude against the challenges of universal education are miraculous indeed.

There were definitely many issues I struggled with while reading this book. I was very frustrated by the legion of obstacles confronting Malala and her campaign, especially in the form of the Taliban. Seeing the Twin Towers fall to

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I think that these discussions and answering some of the basic questions about each religion is exciting, as we explore a diverse world that readily coexists on our campus.

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the Al-Qaeda terrorists and their allies leaves little room for sympathy in my heart, but I hope Christians will continue to pray for the Middle East and Central Asia even as America does what it must to destroy the terrorist threat. The United States certainly has received a lot of heat for its occupation of Afghanistan; however in the book I was frustrated by a lack of viable solutions for the long-term stabilization of Afghanistan.

Though violence is mournful, it is noble to struggle for just causes such as the protection of Pakistani girls seeking education. At some point, the universal rights of humanity, including the right to education, may conflict with some of the indigenous traditions and values. However, I believe that in the instance of the Taliban opposition to female education, some traditions are meant to be changed. I believe most Christians—especially the Catholic Church—value universal education as part of the dignity of every human being. Universal rights and civil liberties are every human's birthright, but that does not mean the realization of these rights does not need to have a Pakistani face.

Besides engaging with adherents of the Islamic, Jewish, and other Christian faiths, I met some local secularists who were organized into the UW–Madison Atheists, Humanists, and Agnostics (AHA) and the Madison Skeptics. This was earlier in the semester when Badger Catholic had organized a debate between AHA and Catholic students, which was very interesting to stay the least. Afterwards, AHA invited me and my pastor friend downstairs where I met some of their members as well as their more senior counterparts in Mad-

ison Skeptics. I decided to go because I wanted to use some of the spirit of interfaith dialogue to engage with these secularists in the community. We might have disagreed more often than not, but at the end of the night I enjoyed a good beer and made a new friend.

Growing up in a predominantly Christian community in Central Wisconsin where I attended both Protestant and Catholic services, I usually encountered people who were at least familiar with Biblical stories and references. Even if people were not practical Christians, many understood the basic tenets of Christianity which they might have been exposed to in Sunday school as children or in catechism classes. However, at UW–Madison, I feel this is no longer the case, as demonstrated by some of the discussions we have had over the essentials of each faith during the Forum. I think that these discussions and answering some of the basic questions about each religion is exciting, as we explore a diverse world that readily coexists on our campus.

Dr. Rosenhagen, our advisor, has said that one of the topics we have enjoyed talking about as Fellows is the theology of each religion. I definitely would agree as so far we have had some great discussions of basic theological beliefs of each faith. I was very surprised to learn about the Muslim and, especially, Jewish beliefs concerning the afterlife. To Christians, the afterlife is an incredibly relevant topic to our faith practices and beliefs. However, I was surprised to find out that in the Judaic tradition there is no solid consensus on the afterlife. Our session ended before we could discuss further but I'm

excited to continue to explore this and other “high theology” issues.

Another topic we covered this semester was the teachings of tolerance among the Abrahamic religions. I believed all the articles in this section were very well written even if I did not fully agree with their content. I especially liked the article about tolerance in Islam written by El Fadl. However, I struggled to agree with some aspects of the article written by McLaren and Sacks, mainly because both writers implied that serious deviations from traditional theologies in Christianity and Judaism were necessary for tolerance.

Though his article was very well-written and displayed a deep familiarity with the Bible, I overall felt that McLaren did not well represent the majority of mainstream Christianity. Most mainstream Christians would probably consider him on the fringe of Christianity—if in it at all—since many of his views conflict with the Apostles’ Creed. In my opinion, his viewpoints suggest Christians can reach out and be tolerant towards others by engaging in religious syncretism and joining in other faith communities while retaining their own beliefs. While in the history of Christianity the Church has often been enriched by accepting a variety of cultural practices, I believe infiltrating other faith communities in order to convert them may be disrespectful to them and at the same time pose an internal conflict for people who profess in two belief systems.

While Rabbi Sacks makes some great points about the value of strangers in religion, I do not necessarily agree with his ideas that God intentionally

made men have different faiths in order to teach one another moral values. I personally believe that individual free will allows human beings to assume their own identity which is unique and valued by God. However, the idea that God’s Truth is not something one religion can cover—and therefore all religions are equal—does not necessarily need to be adopted in order for interfaith dialogue to be sustained. I believe it is every individual’s right to believe in his or her religion to the fullest extent and even believe that his or her religion is the fullest form of divine truth.

Overall, the issue I found with both the Jewish and the Christian articles on interfaith tolerance was that they both suggested an adjustment of theology in order to be more tolerant of other faiths. These clergymen are obviously free to practice religion how they wish, but theologically speaking I don’t believe any adjustments need to be made at least from a Christian theological standpoint in order to become more tolerant. I believe it is not only theologically correct but also realistic to understand that most Christian believers are not going to transition from mainstream Christianity to a new age of theological experimentation, nor does it need to. From the beginning of the Christian Church, tolerance and love has been a core component of our faith and deviance from this rule calls for reform rather than a transition to a “new kind of Christianity.”

This past November, the Lubar Institute hosted the Rudolph Otto conference. Unfortunately, many of the discussion panels conflicted with my classes so I only ended up going to Rob-

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No matter where each Fellow is in his or her faith journey or what path he or she follows, we can come together into peaceful coexistence and dialogue without sacrificing individual uniqueness or belief.

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ert Orsi's address. I really enjoyed seeing so many scholars interested in the topic of the holy in a secular world. As I mentioned before, it is important to keep some element of religious study in the academic setting as the mysteries of the universe will always be contemplated in the minds of students and often times affect their daily lives and decision making.

So far, this year with the Lubar Fellows has been an outstanding experience. It's important to realize that no matter where each Fellow is in his or her faith journey or what path he or she follows, we can come together into

peaceful coexistence and dialogue without sacrificing individual uniqueness or belief. And I don't think the Lubar Fellows and professors are the only ones out there who are willing to engage in dialogue and building frameworks for peaceful coexistence. Despite the endless reports of violence and terrorism, there are a lot of people across the globe ready and willing to struggle for coexistence and peace. I believe the founders and leaders of the Lubar Institute have displayed significant moral courage for this cause and I am motivated to continue the study of Abrahamic religions.

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## SECOND REFLECTION

Over winter break I have had a great time resting from school while enjoying the beautiful scenery and friendly company in Costa Rica. Unfortunately, over winter break, there have been a series of terrorist attacks in France, most notably against *Charlie Hebdo's* office. These despicable attacks have reignited some serious religious discussions that are at the center of what the Lubar Institute seeks to address.

After the Paris attacks, many people began to blame the writers at *Charlie Hebdo* for their own misfortune. *Charlie Hebdo's* critics said that this media agency was asking for it because of their long string of blasphemous and intolerant publications. Though *Charlie Hebdo* published material that was very offensive to Muslims and Catholics, at one point depicting a pope wearing a condom, I feel absolutely terrible for the tragedy which occurred. Even though

they published incredibly rude material, under a democratic society they should have the freedom and protection to be able to do so without fear. The right to freedom of expression is a sacred right. While it can certainly be misused, I feel *Charlie Hebdo* and organizations like it should never be restricted legally from publishing crude material.

When any extremists commit violence in the name of religion, it quickly follows suit that the whole religion is blamed. There are a number of logical reasons why this is flawed. Historically, every major religious movement has had violent extremists. In Western-centric history classes, many people fail to learn that the samurai warriors fought in the service of Buddhist monasteries. Many people are quick to forget the violent persecutions executed by aggressively atheist regimes. In reality, no religion or ideology is without sin.

It's not right to attempt an absurd religious calculus to determine which religions are the most just based upon a percentage of followers that commit crimes against humanity. In Genesis 18.22-33, Abraham learns that God is willing to spare destruction of a city for the lives of a handful of the righteous. I believe we too should not damn an entire religion, nation, or race for the actions or beliefs of some people.

It's better to let God do the judging in the end. People commit deeds both good and bad. The best that people can do is to uphold natural law to allow for limited government interference and allow maximum freedom for each and every citizen to act according to his or her own conscience. So long as the basic rights of others are respected, Muslims and all other believers and non-believers should be allowed to adhere to their spiritual tenets to the fullest.

One of the most common fears about Muslims in the United States is that they will try to impose Sharia law on the country. While this may be true, it is also important to recognize that there are plenty of American Muslims who uphold the values of democracy in America while piously practicing their religion.

It's very frustrating when people in America who supposedly love the Bill of Rights and its protection of religious expression continue to single out Islam as an Anti-American religion which should be struggled against. Lots of religions, notably Catholicism and Mormonism, were irrationally deemed anti-American and subversive. Under the American democratic system, in its pure form, all religions and non-religions can

evidently coexist peacefully so long as their adherents respect the alienable rights of others.

With regard to Sharia law, people should obviously be allowed to voluntarily observe its rules to the degree of strictness they desire. Many Catholics voluntarily observe some very strict rules that challenge one to grow spiritually. Opus Dei has many rigid rules that help people sanctify themselves, while many Catholic religious brothers and sisters voluntarily cloister themselves and don very modest garments as an act of religious expression. If Muslims are restricted from observing Sharia law on a private level, it isn't much of a stretch to say strictly observant traditions in other religions are threatened. Ironically, the recent Islamophobia in America, while professing to be true to American values, has much more in common with Bolshevism than it does the vision of the Founding Fathers.

Another issue facing the world today is the racial crisis caused by police deaths. The dignity of all human life is violated when police forces are quick to shoot first and ask questions later. This is a serious threat to all human dignity, but as a Catholic and humanist I find it an issue infused with both spiritual and political significance.

The obsessive glorification of race is nothing new to the present era. In the era of the Nazi Third Reich, Pope Pius XI warned against racial obsessions in Germany in the encyclical titled *Mit Brennender Sorge*. Pope Pius XI writes of race, "whoever raises these notions above their standard value and divinizes them to an idolatrous level, distorts and perverts an order of the

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world planned and created by God.” While it’s certainly respectable and good to respect the ancestral and racial heritage of individuals in the private sphere, using racial differences as weapons to gain political or socioeconomic advantages over other people is certainly a structural sin which erodes the very foundations of American democracy and human equality.

When addressing the recent problems caused by police brutality and

race riots, it is important to base solutions on firm democratic ideology rather than seeking to employ reactionary solutions which are simply the opposite side of the rotten racially obsessed coin. The legendary Indian leader Gandhi once said, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” In the infinite eyes of the Creator, the dignity of the children of God is not based upon one’s racial designation, but the divine value of each individual soul.

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### THIRD REFLECTION

The end of a school year is always a time of mixed emotions for me. I really enjoy the blossoming trees and taking long runs in the spring heat that was just recently the biting chill of Wisconsin’s March. However, at this time I have to say goodbye to some good friends and professors that have made a great impact on my time at UW–Madison. Some of them I will see in the future and some of them I will not. The thing that I will definitely miss the most about this year, however, are the unique experiences of deep spiritual contemplation and interfaith dialogue I have had. With the ending of the Lubar fellowship this week, I am sad we will no longer meet regularly, but I know that this year has infused me with a sense of hope as we go on into the future.

I have really enjoyed the experiences brought to me inside and outside our discussions. During this year we have had some fascinating discussions as Fellows and in the Forum. Probably my favorites have been discussing the afterlife in each religion and the cultural

aspects that come along with practicing religion. I really liked the discussions about ghosts, exorcisms, and the Final Judgment as well. I think our last discussion about the frustrations we have about our own traditions was especially thought-provoking. Complaining is always fun but it was great to do so in a constructive and analytical way.

Besides our weekly discussions and monthly Forums, there have been some events outside of the Lubar Institute where I have enjoyed the company of my fellows. One of the most powerful experiences for me was joining with people from diverse backgrounds and faiths as we gathered at a vigil at a library court to remember the tragedy of Pakistani students who were tragically murdered. Regardless of our religious, national, or cultural identity, we stood in solidarity against violence and raised our candles to hope for a future of peaceful coexistence.

I also enjoyed visiting the mosque, synagogue, and the church during our Houses of Worship tour. I really enjoyed

the Middle Eastern aesthetics of the mosque and the spiritual atmosphere there. Next I went to the Reform Services at the Hillel Center with some of my friends from church. I enjoyed the singing of the services and the delicious meal at Hillel. On Sunday at the Pan-Asian Church, the service reminded me of growing up attending services at my mother's non-denominational church. I definitely appreciate the multilingual hymn sung by some of the parishioners there. This weekend demonstrated that we may be different in our traditions but united in our desire for coexistence and love of humankind and right to exercise freedom of religion.

We recognize that there is a dark side and a light side to the Abrahamic traditions. We have histories full of violence and struggle, but also moments of peace and love. Anti-religious phobias violate some of the most hallowed traditions of freedom of religion in our country and the spiritual dignity of each and every individual. When one faith is attacked, we all are. I personally will strive to make sure everyone is allowed to practice their religion free in accordance with the democratic tradition and the most basic laws of human decency under Heaven.

One of my favorite moments this spring was meeting up with some of my Lubar student group friends on State Street and being able to socialize outside of our meetings. We had a great night of fun, as nights on State Street always are when a study break is needed. During the holiday season, it was really an honor to be invited to Jackie's house for the Hanukkah party. I enjoyed the singing and the history about

Hanukkah traditions and all the people gathered there who were not necessarily Jewish but wanted to support their Jewish friends in celebration.

Another aspect I really enjoyed was the Lubar Institute's "Religion on Film" series. My favorite film was about the epic road trip about a father and son to Mecca. In religion, there are not only conflicts between religions but between generations as well. Religion can both cause divisions and heal them as demonstrated by this film. I felt sympathetic to this movie and the father and son because I also enjoy taking road trips and talking with my dad even though our journey may be tumultuous at times. I hope the Lubar Institute continues this to use multimedia for religious education and that future Lubar Interfaith Student Group participants can catch of view of some religious movies in their spare time.

In religion, there always the theme of a cycle. I think this time of turning over the reins to the new Lubar Fellows made me think of this. One of my favorite verses from the Bible is from the book of Ecclesiastes (3:1-2) "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot." The Lubar Fellows this year have planted a seed. We hope that seed joins with the other saplings of those who have gone before us and inspire those that will come after. For now, some of us must uproot ourselves as others stay behind.

Being part of the Lubar Fellowship has been one of the highest honors of my life. It has been a great pleasure to meet these great friends and to work

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with Ulrich. It has been outstanding to meet their communities and take part in their traditions. I would like to thank Ulrich and the Lubar Institute for accepting me into this program and to the Fellows for making this experience so meaningful. I know that I can count on each and every one of them to be a force for peace in this chaotic world.

It's hard to say goodbye to my friends and this year in the Lubar Institute program. However, we must now say farewell. A new world is coming and we welcome it. Wherever we find ourselves, we will infuse it with our hopes of peace and dreams of human brotherhood and sisterhood. Amen.

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# Naomi Frisch

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I thought becoming a Lubar Fellow would be a really cool experience where I could talk about my Jewish religion, learn a lot about Islam and Christianity, and go through a new sort of process with a group of students who were looking for a similar experience. I did not think that being a Lubar Fellow would challenge me as much as it has, though. I do not mean that I dread going to meetings or dislike the readings, I mean that my challenge was realizing how little I had been pushed to think about my Judaism before.

I grew up in a progressive, Conservative synagogue on the north shore of Chicago and went to Hebrew school for nine years. I grew up going to a Jewish Zionist summer camp and am still a counselor there. I studied abroad in Israel for a semester in high school where I received most of my knowledge of Jewish scripture and history. After high school I went to Israel for a year with my Youth movement and learned about Israeli and Jewish history through the lens of the state of Israel. On my gap year I also taught English and ran after-school programming for Israeli children. Those experiences

shaped how I feel about being Jewish. Before joining the Lubar Institute I was very content with how I expressed my Judaism as a 20-year-old.

The topics of our weekly meetings so far have been really interesting and ones that I have never delved into with a religious perspective. Initially I was very excited to read the assigned passages and partake in interfaith dialogue. But after the first meeting when we read parts of the New Testament, Torah, and Qur'an, I felt a shift in my mindset. I was intimidated by how much knowledge the other Fellows had on their respective scripture. I was

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amazed with the initial understanding the other Fellows had of the readings and of the knowledge base they had to refer to in general, something I did not feel that I possessed. The few times I had learned directly from the Jewish Bible were few and far between and I was not taught to interpret it, just knew how the passages connected to different sites in Israel or different Jewish holidays. I was struck by the feeling that what I could contribute was not as valuable as what the other Fellows could.

We had a meeting where we talked about women in Abraham's time and I was really excited to see what each religion had to offer on the subject. I was overwhelmed by the text. I felt that I was behind the other Fellows, as if when I read I was trying to *understand* the story and the other Fellows *understood* the story and were onto further interpreting it. I was also so captivated by how Charlotte Gordon could be raised in one religion and wanted to convert to another, but felt torn because of her struggles with characters from a story who had lived over thousands of years ago. My religion, that was so simple and innate to me, was slowly unraveling to a more strict and knowledge-base idea and I was struggling to bring all the pieces back together in a way that let me feel proud and confident.

I am mostly proud of the pluralism that exists in Judaism. I appreciate that some of my best friends keep Kosher and that others only go to synagogue twice a year, but we all accept that each other as Jewish. I also condemn the secular for bashing the ultra-religious and vice versa, but in the end I believe the pluralism is positive in Judaism.

I wish that I could say now that in the months since those initial meetings I have come to great new revelations that I feel sound about, but I cannot. I have started to uncover parts of my identity that this fellowship can help shape. I still feel really proud and confident in my religion, but I appreciate being able to add fundamental knowledge that is creating a new facet to how I connect with Judaism. I appreciate the challenge to my religiosity that the Lubar Institute has ignited, which I had not had from summer camp, Hebrew school, and travel to Israel.

Some of the moments that stand out most for me from my time as a Lubar Interfaith Student Fellow have been the open conversations where we can ask questions and hear new, interesting facts we never knew about each others' religions and backgrounds. I think there is a lot to learn from the texts of a religion, but I think the most I have to learn is from the experiences of all the other Fellows within their own religions.

What I have appreciated most from talking though religious texts is how our three religions fundamentally intersect. Beyond that, I have learned the most through conversation about traditions and practices that we all individually follow. Being a Lubar Fellow and meeting a handful of different Christian guys and Muslim girls has broadened my interest in getting to know even more people from all three faiths.

I can grasp the pluralism in Judaism, but I would like to understand how pluralism is present in the other two monotheistic religions. Because of my upbringing, to me Judaism is very much based in culture and traditions. I know

the other Jewish Fellow has a different perspective than me, just as all the other Fellows have different views than others within their same faith. I am excited to continue to learn about how our faiths differ from each other and connect throughout the rest of the year.

I was quite surprised when I saw on my calendar that our first reflection was due already. I feel like we have created

a really great environment, but it still seems so new to me. I feel that we have only just started to delve into the many topics of interfaith dialogue. I really appreciate how open the atmosphere of our meetings are. I believe that we have built a space where we can ask questions that may ignorant, with the understanding that it comes from a place of respect and curiosity.

## SECOND REFLECTION

Though I do not feel that much time has passed since our first reflection paper, as I look back a lot has happened. We only met three times since then, but one of those meeting stands out very well in my memory. Our meeting was on the Abrahamic Holy Scriptures: the Torah, Bible, and Qur'an. I had never given thought to the significance of the other faith's physical texts. I have grown up knowing the significance and sacredness that the Torah holds, and I was surprised to learn at how unique that was to Judaism. I thought it was very interesting that the Christian Bible, physically, was no more holy than a regular book. I found the connection between how much Christians read and were familiar with the text and the "normalness" of the book interesting. If Judaism was similar, maybe Jews would have a more thorough knowledge of the words of the Torah.

I would also like to point out, before I explore more about my wonderings of Jews and scripture, that the Islamic tradition of "freedom" with the Qur'an while one is teaching with it makes a lot

of sense within their culture and I admire it.

In my first reflection paper I focused on my lack of knowledge of Jewish scripture. I wrote about how I am struggling with this fact but accepting of it. I was content with what I said in the reflection and felt good moving on with my life. Then, over winter break I went to Israel. I have been to Israel many times, I have spent significant time there, but this trip was different. I was on a seminar with my youth movement for two weeks and we talked a lot about Israel, the peace process, Judaism, and topics in between. Honestly, many of the topics were not new to me. I have learned about Israel in many ways and for many years I've talked about the peace process in my youth movement—but I noticed how I was very much thinking about Judaism differently because of my involvement in the Fellows program.

In my past when I thought about Judaism I thought about it in the context of other Jews I knew, my Jewish past and such, but now my experience as a Fellow comes to mind. In Israel

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In our last meeting someone defined the feeling of our weekly meetings as “comfortably uncomfortable” and I really appreciated that.

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we talked a lot about Jewish literacy: a well-rounded knowledge of Jewish peoplehood, scripture, history, and tradition. I feel that I am missing a few aspects to call myself “literate.” I know a lot about Jewish tradition and a fair amount about language and peoplehood. I thought about potentially speaking with a rabbi at UW Hillel to learn more, and maybe take a class, but then I came upon an even better “answer.” When my brother graduated Hebrew school in eighth grade he received a book called *Jewish Literacy* and it is a book for people just like me! So I am currently reading it and I am excited to see how it affects my religiosity and my Lubar fellowship.

Before winter break we also had a Forum meeting about Abrahamic religions and their portrayal in mass media. I noticed a common theme in this meeting that I have found in different aspects of these religions. We have talked a lot about how Islam and Judaism are cultural religions, more so than Christianity. This was very apparent in this Forum meeting. When the Muslim Fellows presented, they explained the prejudices against people who wear hi-

jobs and the wrongful connections between Muslim people and terrorists—both assumptions that were made about cultural rituals. That week I presented on how Jews are assumed to be wealthy, greedy, and have big noses—aspects of “Jewish life” that are not religious. When the Christian Fellows presented they talked about how mass media portrays them as people who angrily preach and condemn people because of their religious beliefs.

It made me also think about different times I have seen all three religions in different movies or TV shows. It is true that there are more cultural traditions in daily life for Jewish and Muslims than Christians, but I don’t know what that all means. I think it is hard to have your culture or your religion attacked in media. I would like to explore this idea more this semester.

I am looking forward to starting a new semester as a Fellow with the knowledge of last semester and the feelings from winter break and to hear how everyone else is doing. I am excited to continue to read my book and see how it connects to my daily life and to the discussions I have with my fellow Fellows.

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## THIRD REFLECTION

Deciding to be a Lubar Fellow was one of the best decisions I have made so far in as a UW student. I did not realize that something I decided to do on a whim could influence me the way that it has. In our last meeting someone defined the feeling of our weekly meetings as “comfortably uncomfortable” and I really appreciated that. I have previous-

ly talked about my discomfort within my own faith, but there were other aspects that were just as challenging and rewarding.

When we started our journey as Lubar Fellows I felt that each of us were there to represent our faiths as a whole. We asked each other questions and expected an answer that embodied the

faith in question. The answers gave us the fundamental knowledge to understand the three Abrahamic religions.

One of the biggest changes I noticed has been the transition from seeing each of the other Fellows as representatives of their faiths to individuals within their faith. I think this is a very important distinction. I understood the pluralism within my own faith, but couldn't understand the plurality in Christianity and Islam because I never thought about it, but also because I just didn't have enough information to form an opinion. I don't know when the shift happened, but I believe that once we all felt comfortable with each other and felt that we had a understanding of the differences in our faiths, we were able to talk about our own differences. This aspect was very special for me.

It was important for me to feel free to talk about the differences between myself and the other Jewish Fellow and it was important for me to understand how diversity and choice worked in the other faiths. We all came to this program with different understandings of our own faiths, each other's faiths, and ourselves and I think that is really cool.

The relationships I made throughout my year as a Lubar Fellow have been by far the most rewarding. The friendships I made are relationships that I would not have had without the fellowship. These relationships were not superficial or simply just acquaintances, we invited each other to speakers that we may not have otherwise known about, we got dinner together, we participated in events outside of Lubar together, and most rewarding for me, we questioned these events.

One event from this semester stands out particularly in my memory. There was a speaker who came to our campus that angered many people in the Jewish community. The same night, the Jewish community held another event about similar issues, but both speakers held differing views.

The two events created a lot of buzz and discomfort on our campus, in my opinion. This event and the reactions towards both of them greatly affected how I felt about our campus and how I felt about my Jewish community. Though we didn't talk about these events formally in a meeting, I engaged with my fellow Lubar friends when grappling with my thoughts.

I decided to support my friends who were putting on the event that upset some Jews on campus even though I knew that I would disagree with a lot of what the speaker was saying. I felt very comfortable going to this event, listening to what the speaker said, and then debriefing with a few Fellows. We obviously connected to different things that the speaker said. I felt that I got so much more out of the speaker because I could have honest conversations about what he said with a group of people that wasn't homogeneous. No other group I have found on campus has allowed me to have this type of dialogue formally or informally. These experiences have peaked my interest in finding more ways to create these types of conversations.

I believe that anyone who seeks to engage in interfaith dialogue has aspects of leadership within. Though it may not seem explicitly like a leadership role, having the desire to under-

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I am fortunate to have realized that I want to continue exploring my religiosity at a young age and look forward to seeing how I grow in the next few years.

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stand others and discuss differences is a great quality in a leader. Towards the end of the semester we read a few articles about interfaith leadership on campuses and I felt very inspired.

I reflected on my time as a Fellow and realized that we had not taken up this opportunity of leadership on campus as much as we could have. We ran a few events around campus, were seen as leaders for the monthly forum, and held leadership around campus through other organizations, but I wished that we had been able to, as a group, lead our campus to be more interfaith friendly. I am excited to be a Forum member next year and figure out how to continue to improve the already valuable student arm of the Lubar Institute.

“L’dor v’dor” is a saying in Judaism that means “from generation to generation.” My friend who was a Fellow last year recruited me, and this year I have recruited another friend and I hope we can keep passing on through “generations.” I do not mean just by a lineage of people that I am a friend to, but also the program in general. I hope that the Lubar Interfaith Student Groups continue to impact people’s lives, as it has mine, and continues to grow as a program with each new incoming group.

Even with the best things in life, there can be parts we don’t like. Our last two meetings of the fellowship were talking about what we don’t like about our religions. I think being critical of

something in a group like this, at a point of time like we were, at is really beneficial. We had spent a year discussing our religions, learning, and growing, and at the end we got to critique. I had a really nice feeling of knowing that we were all being critical, but not in a destructive way. We all had aspects of our religions that we weren’t happy with, but they were things that we wanted to change, not that we were discouraged from. I found that really remarkable. I saw this same critique happen when we evaluated our fellowship at the end and this is where I see change happening “l’dor v’dor.” We could openly talk about aspects of the Fellowship that weren’t perfect, again, not in a negative way; it was in a progressive effort to better the program in the future.

As I have already said, I am really happy to get to be in Madison for the next couple years to see the Interfaith Student Groups flourish and continue to positively impact our campus. I will continue to grow with the friends and lessons of exploration I have gained from being a Fellow.

I am fortunate to have realized that I want to continue exploring my religiosity at a young age and look forward to seeing how I grow in the next few years. I hope that I can find other opportunities like this in my future to continue to challenge myself and explore new horizons.



# Jackie Goldman

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Being a Lubar Fellow has truly been a joy thus far. I can say, without any hesitation or false praise, that our meetings are the highlight of my week—every week. I have never had the ability to build such strong bonds with people so different, but so fundamentally similar, and it is truly something to be grateful for.

I had decided to apply to be a Fellow because of wanting to deepen my religious community in Madison. After living in India for a year, I craved a space in which I could talk about my faith as well as deepen my understanding of Abrahamic religions. Applying was one of the best decisions that I made, seeing as my experience has been unexpectedly positive.

I never expected to develop such deep connections to the Fellows so quickly. A friend of mine, a person who was previously a Fellow, had mentioned that the Fellows from her year really had become so close throughout the year. For whatever reason, I was unsure that this would occur again. I was dubious of the fact that people of such different backgrounds, educational in-

terests, and geographic origins, would be able to become close and develop unbreakable bonds of trust. Boy, was I wrong.

Something about being raised with an Abrahamic faith created a uniting factor. The religions really do uphold and preach many of the same morals and ideals, and those characteristics, being fundamental to all of us, united us. We seem to hold many of the same virtues dear and why I had not anticipated this will still remain a mystery to me. I can say that the other Fellows are some of the best people I have ever met in terms of moral caliber and the amount that they care for others. My guess is that part of that comes from the fact that we all chose to join a group whose purpose is community

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These bonds  
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building and dialogue. We, as Fellows, have made it a point to get to know each other as people outside of the Fellows program. These bonds between us are going to be lasting, I can tell.

Since we have developed these bonds, we are able to have amazing conversations about our differences as well as our similarities. One of the most interesting and involved conversations thus far was the discussion of the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah and the role of Hagar. In Judaism, we are taught that Abraham was told to kill his son Isaac in order to prove his fealty to God. Christianity shares this story. In Islam, the story is that Abraham was told to sacrifice his son Ishmael, who is the son of Hagar.

In Judaism, Hagar is not depicted as a role model for women; however, in Islam the depiction is totally different. She is an empowered mother and woman, who does what is necessary for her and her son to survive. I actually like this description of Hagar so much better. In my Jewish education, I felt that my teachers tried to cultivate a feeling of disdain toward Hagar, and I never quite understood it. The story from the Qur'an is so much more appealing as a woman. The description of Hagar is so much more positive and, in many ways, more realistic and certainly more comprehensible from my point of view. As to the binding, and who was bound, that will remain a mystery, but I know that in my future, I will think of Hagar as depicted in the Muslim tradition.

This conversation was a great example of how we were able to talk about something controversial with the utmost respect for one another. I can un-

derstand that this debate between the traditions is a big one that often causes tension and anger. With us, it was really peaceful and if anything was fueled by intrigue and respect. For me at least, I was fascinated at how the three faiths view this one event. For all three traditions, the event is essential; it is the moment when Abraham has demonstrated his allegiance to God as well as other negative traits like his blind obedience to God and his lack of communication with his wife.

In Judaism, this portion of the Torah is read on Rosh Hashanah, one of the most important days of the year. The holiday is about setting oneself up for repentance and the cleansing of sin. Rabbis comment on how in this Torah portion, Abraham remains present in what he is doing. When God asks Abraham where he is, he responds with "I am here." People use this to explain how we must remain mentally present in the serious time of repentance. For me, it always seemed that Abraham was coasting through the motions by agreeing to sacrifice his son without thought to his wife, his future, or the future of the Jewish people. The story was, and still is, baffling but the discussion of this portion in the context of Abrahamic religions helped to clear up some of my confusion and put some of my wrestling with this to the side.

Another meeting that stood out was the session on foods from our traditions. The day before, I was talking with Naomi, one of the other Jewish Fellows, and we were discussing what we had thought about making. We of course, came up with the same foods: kugel, latkes, hamantaschen, challah, and

matzo-ball soup. We narrowed it down to foods that were not too difficult to make and I decided to make potato latkes, and she decided to make charoset, a traditional Passover food. Of course, the first thing I did once I decided to make latkes was call my mother for a recipe. And even though I followed her instructions, which were vague at best, my latkes were not nearly as good as hers. I told Naomi this and she said something along the lines of, “it is never possible to cook as well as your mother.”

I walked into the meeting feeling self-conscious of my latkes, but was really eager to see what the other Fellows came up with. What a treat! I walked out of that meeting feeling stuffed and satisfied, but more than that, I was able to see how important food was to everyone. When we discussed our foods, we all mentioned our families, communities, and memories that were distinct to us. It was amazing looking into people’s upbringings and fondest memories through food. It was obvious to me that people had very visceral memories attached with the foods they brought.

The foods are so much more than a way to satiate hunger; they present distinct memories, associations with specific people and holidays, certain times of year, and even biblical or textual stories.

I cannot wait to see what the rest of the year has in store. I know that throughout the year, we will continue to learn together and grow together. I am already dreading the end to this year—graduation—and no longer having this time to interact with the other Lubar Fellows. If anything, I wished we met more than once a week so that we would have more reasons to see each other. We have met up outside of official meetings. Even without having a specific topic, we end up having deep and meaningful conversation. The Lubar Institute has allowed me to build the connections as well as explore who I am and what religion means to me and how I want to fit it in with the rest of my life. The weekly meetings and readings are helping me cultivate my Jewish identity, as well as my ability to understand people of other backgrounds.

## SECOND REFLECTION

Taking a break from the Fellows program over winter break was hard, I have to say. I came to realize that our weekly meetings were so important to me. The people that I get to interact with on a weekly basis provide me with food for thought that I do not get from other sources. The first meeting of the second semester came like a breath of fresh air, renewing my curiosity and my ability to learn more about people that

I have come to know and love. The part of my brain where I think about interfaith dialogue was turned on again and allowed to function at its best.

Even though the first few weeks of the semester were personally challenging, I looked forward to our weekly meetings like never before. After learning that a good friend had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and my grandfather died while I took the GRE, I looked for

When we discussed our foods, we all mentioned our families, communities, and memories that were distinct to us.

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comfort in a group of people whom I trust and know will support me. They did not fail to provide me with the comfort that I needed. Also, as is always the case, they gave me things to mull over.

A conversation that I have been continuing to think about since its inception was the one on gender roles and female leadership in the Abrahamic religions. We began this conversation at a meeting of the Fellows and continued it in the Forum on the following Sunday. I, of course, was much more interested to hear what other people had to say than to talk about my own stance. Of course, I also came in with my assumptions of what people were going to say, and like always, I was wrong.

I expected answers to be pretty conservative, as in: women should not hold leadership positions. That was what I anticipated from the non-Jewish students, at least. I know that Naomi and I have a similar practice, and were brought up in similar sects of Judaism. I had a good feeling that Naomi and I would agree that women and men should be equals both in the community and in leadership, and I was correct.

What I had not realized is that members of the other faiths would also, for the most part, agree that women should have an equal position in the community. One of the Catholic Fellows shared a video called “Ordain a Lady.” This video was a spoof of the Carly Rae Jepsen song, “Call Me Maybe,” and pushed for the Catholic ordination of female priests. I had not realized that Catholics even considered the ordination of women, and I was pleasantly surprised. One Fellow did, however, assert that since men had always been the lead-

ers, they should continue to do so, but by and large there was discussion of the need for reinterpretation of the text.

It was really interesting to hear about a mosque that had an only-female worship once a month that was headed by women. This mosque had just opened up a few days before our meeting; the timing seemed extraordinarily perfect. We discussed how even though this community was empowering women, it was not solving the problem of gender inequality in certain Muslim communities. Separating the genders will not end the problems of gender inequality within religion. The female Muslim Fellows discussed how they did not like having to pray in separate rooms from males and preferred praying in rows behind them without a divider. They explained that they liked to be able to see the Imam leading prayers, and liked to feel integrated in the community.

I was totally able to identify with this, seeing as in some Orthodox Jewish communities women pray on the other side of a wall from the men. In some synagogues, the wall, or *machitza*, is used to separate men from women in such a way that women cannot see the rabbi. When I have prayed in these communities, I have felt separated and even marginalized in a sense. Some communities are so traditional that women cannot even raise their voice loud enough to be heard by men because of the distraction. I have family that practices Judaism in this manner, and I have never enjoyed going to these functions. I do not like to feel that because of my gender that my prayer is a distraction, thereby being a negative instead of a positive. The female students, both Jewish and Muslim

(there are no female Christian Fellows this year), agreed that it is nice to feel like a part of the community.

The more interesting part of the conversation was talking about the gender binary, or lack thereof, and how religion is closely intertwined in this. As we come to understand that gender is fluid and not a simply binary, we have to question our religious practices and gender segregation. Our religions do not address this problem. It is a taboo topic that no one wants to talk about.

I do not see how a person identifying as neither gender could participate in an Orthodox Jewish community. It is a shame that we have not started to tackle this problem in our faiths. I realize that the idea that gender is not binary is very new and still not mainstream in any form, but I look forward to a time when people outside of the gender binary can fit into these religious spaces that are gender-segregated.

The conversation about gender roles continued in the Forum, talking about our religions' stance on LGBTQI issues. We mostly talked about how in our religions this topic is taboo and not discussed. I presented the Jewish beliefs on the topic and was very proud to see that both Conservative and Reform Judaism accepts both congregants and clergy who identify as LGBTQI.

At one point, a male member of the Forum asked if Abrahamic religions were implicitly bad or harmful to wom-

en. I was very intrigued by this question, and the logic of asking it. The act of asking the question implied that he saw, or he felt, that these religions implicitly repress women in their non-egalitarian way. I guess I understand where the question came from, but I also got to thinking how the Abrahamic religions empower women.

At least in my own tradition, I feel that women have an extremely important place and are equal to men. There is a line in the Torah that mentions that we have to adjust with the times and take laws from thousands of years ago under review. With this in mind, I do not see how Judaism can be seen as being bad for women. Many of my role models are strong Jewish females who use the religion as a source of strength, and that is what it is for me.

I find that my practice of Judaism has allowed me to be a strong female leader both in a religious and secular context. Many of the people I regularly consult on all matters are other female role models, who also happen to be Jewish. I have learned from my faith to embrace my inner-strength as a female, and as a human in general.

I cannot wait to see the conversations that we will have this semester. I look forward to the week of worship with the other Fellows and Forum members. I hope that this semester proves to be as thought-provoking and challenging as the past one.

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### THIRD REFLECTION

How is it already the end of my fellowship with the Lubar Institute? I still

remember walking into the first meeting and being so hesitant. I had no idea

I cannot wait to see the conversations that we will have this semester.

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So what is it that took eight strangers and enabled them to form such deep and meaningful connections?

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whether the seven other individuals would become my friends or just be people I was forced to talk to once or twice a week. Well, they became some of the most important people to me this year. I would be lying if I said that my last semester on campus were a purely good one. I dealt with myriad emotional and personal obstacles and as it turned out, the people I wanted to be with were the Fellows.

So what is it that took eight strangers and enabled them to form such deep and meaningful connections? It was a progression of so many things; it was the evolution of conversation from theology, to spirituality, to personal struggle and experience. The year started with straight-up theology where we, as Fellows, tried to speak as delegates on behalf of our respective religions. We used liturgical and official rationales in order to not put ourselves in the vulnerable position of speaking from personal experience. We did not want anyone to think that our personal practice reflected that of the religion as a whole. As we opened up about our personal religious practices, we noticed that our comfort with each other had grown and the conversations were so much more fulfilling.

Our last two meetings were about what we did not like in our own religion. Much like Martin Luther, one of the Catholic Fellows began with a written list of things he would have changed about the Church. We joked that he should take the list and nail it on St. Paul's door.

All jokes aside, we all had a great amount to say about things we would change and all of it came from really personal places. For one Fellow, it was

the fact that religious practice could conflict with her social views. For me, it was that the Jewish community is very stratified by perceived wealth and materialism. I did come out of the meeting feeling really proud of the fact that Judaism does value questioning and reinterpreting the religion, but I digress. The best part of these final conversations is that we spoke not as delegates of the Jewish, Muslim, or Christian faiths, but as individuals with a unique individual experience.

Even before this, before we could talk as individuals who belonged to a religion, we had to experience religion from each others' perspectives. The weekend of interfaith worship was so formative in my thinking about religion. I only wish it had happened last semester. We kicked it off my going to Jum'u'ah prayer at the mosque, then we all celebrated Shabbat, and then on Sunday we went to the Harvest Church. I extended the week and went to candlelight mass at St. Paul's with one of the Catholic Fellows on the following Wednesday.

Every service was unique and each service emphasized different elements of faith, at least in my opinion. At the mosque, I was very aware of how my physical actions and my breath were tied with the recitations of the Qur'an. I joined in rows with my sisters and went through the rounds of prostration. I had never experienced a physically based prayer. I enjoyed how the congregation moved as one. There was an increased awareness of the role of the body in prayer. When I am in a Jewish service, I notice that people slump, or balance their weight between their legs

and overall produce a really disinterested posture. That could not be said for the way that my Muslim friends pray. I enjoyed how they were physically, mentally, and spiritually engaged. As a lover of moving meditation, I found myself wondering why Jews had not incorporated physical manifestations of prayer into practice. I mean, there are times where we bend at the waist, but nothing rivaled the movement involved in Muslim worship.

In my own service, during Shabbat, I was very aware of what it was like for strangers to experience a service in which most of the liturgy is in Hebrew. While Jumu'ah prayers were conducted in Arabic, the sermon, which took most of the time, was in English. The two church services I attended were in English. The Shabbat service is mostly in Hebrew, with the exception of a brief sermon. I somehow wanted to enable my non-Jewish friends the power of participation. I wanted them to sing with me, especially seeing that we were singing psalms that at least exist in Christian liturgy. I was aware of the fact that as much as I wanted my friends to participate, there was a barrier.

The two church services were very different. The service at the Harvest Church was so modern and so full of technology. I never associate technology with religion because of how Judaism purposefully prohibits technology use during the celebration of Shabbat. There were electric instruments, television screens with all the songs, and also short films made for teaching about Jesus. Even though I felt incredibly out of place at the service, the members of the community seemed so spiritually

connected to what they were doing and what they were saying. Most community members had their eyes closed and seemed to focus all of their energy on their words. They were singing what sounded like Christian Rock and not like traditional liturgy. Even though I felt comfortably uncomfortable with the service, the members of the community seemed completely enthralled.

This differs greatly from the candlelight mass at St. Paul's. This service was beautiful and was traditional in respect to music, liturgy, and the manner in which the service was carried out. Well, it is not like the community members were using a prayer book, but the liturgy did seem to be text based. The priest read from the Old and New Testaments and the singing was done by the congregation without musical accompaniment.

I enjoyed the silences in the service. I have never knelt while praying before, and though I did not recite the Jesus-based liturgy (which was most of it), I knelt and recited my own prayers. I enjoyed being able to compare two greatly different Christian worship services. Witnessing worship of all of the congregations allowed me to better understand the other Fellows.

I am deeply saddened by the fact that we have reached this place, but now have to hand off the torch to the next class of Fellows. We recently met the next cohort of Fellows, and I am so excited to see so many interested people who are passionate about interfaith.

I am also really jealous. They have not started their fellowship yet. They have a whole year to build their own relationships and have their own

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mind-opening experiences. They have a whole year of this while I have to move away from Madison and leave many members of my cohort.

I am excited, though, to see so many fresh faces ready to participate as Lubar Fellows. Future Fellows, if you read this,

be sure to be thankful of every minute you have in the fellowship. If you are as lucky as I am, you will meet some of the kindest, most compassionate, most giving, and most inspiring people that you are likely to encounter during your undergraduate education.

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# Tasneem Hamdan

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

*Bismi-Ilāhi Al-Rahmāni Al-Rahīm*

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

**I grew up around Muslims. I attended a small Islamic school and although I participated in interfaith programs at a young age, I never needed to explain myself to others. Growing up around people who identify with the same things that I identified with, we never needed to explain to one another why we do what we do, why we believe all that we believe, or why this is the life we choose to live.**

I had some fears coming into the Lubar Interfaith Student Fellows program, because for the first time people would actually ask me questions and I would need to generate an answer that they would understand, one that I was content with and, most importantly, one that was correct. Although we were told in our first meeting that you represent yourself and not your entire faith, I continue to find that statement untrue to a certain degree. All of the

Fellows are bringing beliefs and practices of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism to the table to share and learn: beliefs and practices that do in fact hold a representation of the faiths.

These beliefs and practices, to my amusement, have been extremely similar to one another. Obviously the religions that trace back to Prophet Ibrahim (PBUH) would have similarities but I never realized how much we all have in common, more specifi-

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cally the Jewish and Islamic traditions. We recently had an "Essentials of the Abrahamic Religions" presentation in the Forum. During the presentation about Judaism I found myself excited at the fact that I understood almost everything that was being presented. Everything made complete sense to me because they were so similar to the Islamic traditions and beliefs I grew up with.

With all of the similarities that I continue to find, it's even more interesting to me that I never had a Jewish friend before, even though growing up as an Arab, my family and I referred to the Jews as our "cousins."

After our first meeting last year with the outgoing Fellows, I recall walking out with another Muslim Fellow and looking forward to changing that. To be completely honest I also had concerns with this. I was fearful that politics would get in the way of building such friendships. After our first couple of meetings I had no intention of mentioning that I was Palestinian, for I did not find it necessary seeing as we were only there to discuss religion. That was of course naïve of me, because sooner or later the question of "where are you from?" would be asked. I am glad to see that we all do a good job at separating religion and politics and are able to come to the table and focus on the topics at hand.

The topics that we discuss help me recall all that I have learned since childhood, stories and concepts that in all honesty I hadn't thought about enough. I was always one to ask simple questions of why and how, because that is what I was encouraged to do. I was

encouraged by my teachers to challenge the faith and go searching for answers. But looking back now I don't think I challenged myself enough. When I would find myself wondering, I would push those thoughts aside because they took too much effort and emotion to worry about. But that wondering became a constant thing, especially after leaving my Muslim safe haven in Milwaukee and coming to Madison, a place I described as a "jungle" in my first few days here.

I was having an identity crisis. Everything I identified with growing up, things that were beautiful and warm to me, were seen as controversial and cold by others. I was definitely aware of this before, but was never really exposed to it until I got to college. That was difficult to deal with along with the stresses of school and adapting to being away from home for the first time.

I grew to have an awkward relationship with my faith. While I was questioning it I was also pulling my beliefs and practices closer to me. While my mind was constantly running, I was making sure I was conducting all of my prayers on time, all the time. Not missing one. After moving out of my childhood home, making my prayers was the only time during the day that I felt safe, participating in something familiar and comfortable to me. My prayers became my escape from the stresses. I learned that it was a comfort zone that connected me to home and to God. I found myself turning to Him more than ever, asking for guidance and to my calm my heart through these chaotic times.

Everyone goes through times of questioning what is real and what is

not. We all have different questions and are constantly searching for the answers. I saw this in some of the Fellows who were honest in saying they don't know if they even believe that there is a God or not. I often thought it would be difficult for me to discuss something with which I have an awkward relationship. Knowing that some of us are in the same boat helps ease the pressure and make you feel as if there is no judgment or expectations there that might cause discouragement. I respect that honesty.

Even with that honesty though, I sometimes feel that we, the Fellows, are very careful of certain boundaries with one another. Too careful. I get the feeling that not everything that wants to be said is being said. To be fair, one hour a week is not enough to discuss such dense topics, but I wonder if later on when we grow more comfortable with one another, will we ask those questions that pop into our heads, that we fear might be offensive to the other?

We tend to not discuss the elephants in the room and stray away from bringing up the things that might be harder to talk about. By doing so I think we are

not being completely honest with one another or ourselves. The world is not butterflies and *knafah* (a traditional Arabic sweet; the best is made in Nablus) all the time. Yes, the world holds beautiful things that we could talk about for days. But those beautiful things are accompanied with ugly things that also need some attention. Without recognizing the ugly, discussing and understanding its depths, how will we ever be able to get rid of it?

I hope with time we will get past those walls and be comfortable enough with one another to mention those kinds of things and discuss them, argue a little—maybe even get emotional about something and still walk out of the room smiling. After doing so, I think we will grow to have a different kind of friendship, that others may not come by often. A uniquely strong friendship is built on respect, tolerance, and understanding of differences. I am excited for what is to come and always look forward to our Wednesday meetings that provide some freshness from the usually suffocating schoolwork.

## SECOND REFLECTION

*Bismi-Ilāhi Al-Rahmāni Al-Rahīm*

This winter break was a fairly eventful one to say the least. It was refreshing to have had that much-needed break from school, of course, to spend some time with family and friends and, most importantly catch up on sleep. But what is life nowadays without certain individuals catching the world's attention with their desire to "defend the honor"

of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and shoot up a satirical magazine's office, or to kill anyone or anything that stands against them. ISIS, I am referring to you. Yes, the attention seeking, drama queen more commonly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Which to be clear is anything short of a state and its actions are anything but Islamic.

I would much rather start my re-

I wonder if later on when we grow more comfortable with one another, will we ask those questions that pop into our heads, that we fear might be offensive to the other?

## Abrahamic Reflections

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The things I was learning and doing with the Fellows were also becoming concepts or topics that I was often referring to in conversations with friends and family.

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lections talking about the more beautiful things in life. For example, how the words of a sixth grader on the “Humans of New York” Facebook page was able to raise over a million dollars for his school. Perhaps even discuss the beauty that is my mother’s cooking. But as we can see those tend to be overshadowed by the ugliness that has begun to tire me.

As if struggling as a *hijabi*—at times ignored, or the center of attention on campus (depending on class size), or at times stared down at the grocery store—wasn’t difficult enough, these people hijacking my faith are making matters a lot worse. With every thing they do the stares Muslims get become more intense and Islamophobia grows. Those men who took it upon themselves to avenge the Prophet (PBUH) did nothing but tarnish his image even further.

Of course with every situation there is a bit of good that comes with it (trying to practice being a more positive person here). Curious individuals who choose to think past what they see and read in the news do their own research to learn the true nature of Muslims and Islam. To solve the confusion that arises I think it is important that everyone be more careful where they use the term “Islamic.”

When the mental and emotional strain from thinking of these things becomes overwhelming, I try to tell myself not to even get upset anymore, as the majority of the world should have discovered by now that these people have no religion. They must know that ISIS is actually killing more Muslims than anything. Of course, this feeling does not last very long. As in the case of ISIS, they come up with more creative ideas,

such as the burning of a Jordanian pilot (may all the victims rest in peace) last week, to make my head hurt again.

But interestingly enough, soon after most of these things happened I found myself thinking of the other Fellows. What are their thoughts on *Charlie Hebdo*? How would we discuss the issues that the movie *American Sniper* has brought on? I really did miss our meetings every week during the break. I did not realize this until our first meeting of the semester, when I became very excited to see everyone, catch up, and start up again.

After the first meeting I also noticed a change in myself. I was speaking a little more with ease. Before there was always something holding my tongue, holding me back from contributing to the conversation. I also found that the things I was learning and doing with the Fellows were also becoming concepts or topics that I was often referring to in conversations with friends and family.

At different times it became a debate sparker within my family. For example, one week we were discussing religious scriptures. I brought a Qur’an and passed it around for the other Fellows to look at. I did not find anything wrong with others holding our holy book, as it was a learning environment and for learning purposes.

That weekend I went home wondering if I had done something inappropriate. I asked my mother if that was okay. She referred to a verse in the Qur’an from the chapter *Al-Waqi’a* (The Event), which stated that only the purified ones could touch the Qur’an. She then told me to make sure with my father. He had a different opinion and

said there is nothing wrong with it. Soon a debate broke out between both of them, bringing different scholarly ideas to the table. They eventually lost me when they were using big Arabic terms that I wasn't familiar with—but I enjoyed it nonetheless.

In family discussions at the dinner table I mentioned different stories and

rulings I learned about from our meetings. This made me appreciate the fellowship I had joined and allowed me to use all the new information to add depth to our discussions on religion, life, language, politics, or even food. For this, I am eager to see what else I learn in the rest of the semester.

### THIRD REFLECTION

*Bismi-llāhi Al-Rahmāni Al-Rahīm*

I felt a sense of sadness in the first meeting where recruitment for the following year's Fellows was discussed. It would only get stronger from there as the number of meetings left for the year was decreasing quickly. It made me realize how blessed I was to have been a part of this opportunity to connect with people who were complete strangers to me at one point, on such a personal level. I learned a great deal about myself during this process: how much I was painting certain things all the same color, including my own faith, how I needed to consider and challenge things I never thought about growing up, and how some fears I had about discussing certain topics did not need to be.

A topic we discussed in one of our last meetings was about what we did not particularly like about the practices. At this point in the year we were more comfortable with each other, making it easy to listen and speak about such things. It seemed as though the majority of us didn't have a lot of problems with the faiths themselves, but we were not particularly fond of things the community in our practices took part in,

whether that be judgmental mentalities or the lack of women in high positions. One of the fellows mentioned how it may be difficult to overcome this mental barrier we've put up when it comes to not liking something about the actual tradition. You come across something but find it easier to suppress it and store it away in your memory rather than actually face the difficulties of seeing your faith with unappealing aspects. I recall a few times where I thought to myself "what? that's stupid" when something I did not quite understand was being talked about.

With all of these things that we have difficulty with, one of them is the pressures that come along with being of a certain faith. Most of my youth and growing up was done in a post-9/11 society that did not understand me or my practices. I told the Fellows the story of how every time we went on field trips in my Islamic school, all the children were gathered in the gym and talked to. We were told on almost a daily basis that we "represent the family, the school, the Milwaukee Muslim community, and Islam." So if we wanted to act out or be silly as normal kids would, we needed

You come across something but find it easier to suppress it and store it away in your memory rather than actually face the difficulties of seeing your faith with unappealing aspects.

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I hope that we continue to seek knowledge and maintain this eagerness of understanding the “other,” or things/practices/issues that never made sense before.

to second-guess our actions. If I was disruptive, all Muslim children would be deemed disruptive and if I didn't want to smile at every stranger that day, all Muslims would be deemed angry bitter people (someone actually told me they thought this, because of the lack of smiling they witnessed by a few Muslim individuals).

This conversation led to a discussion on the pressures of being a Muslim *hijabi* in particular. We were asked what we think needs to change in order for us to be more comfortable in certain settings, like a beach or swimming pool. I answered: I understand myself, why I choose to do certain things, uphold certain practices, and continue to choose to put my scarf on every morning. I don't like the idea of conforming to the society and changing what I believe. Rather, I think society needs to change in taking the needed steps to understand that one idea (meaning their particular idea) of what is right is not what's seen as right around the world or even by their next door neighbor, that everyone has their own limits and interpretations of

what is right and what is wrong. Once people understand this I don't think the long stares and uncomfortable body language will be an issue I need to face regularly.

With our fellowship coming to an end, I feel hopeful. We have learned so much from one another, influenced each other for the better, and pushed the things we thought we knew to new limits. I am hopeful that this dialogue will continue on our campus and eventually reach different corners of our country (ambitious, but why not?). I hope that we continue to seek knowledge and maintain this eagerness of understanding the “other,” or things/practices/issues that never made sense before.

At a certain point I may have had the thought of “What is this doing? We are just talking.” I realized soon after that it is more than just talking. It is sharing, listening, empathizing: all stronger things that lead to doors opening. I will miss my fellows, and pray that the doors of good will constantly be open for them.

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# Asha Hassan

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I have many expectations for the Lubar Interfaith Student Fellows program this year. My college experience so far at the University of Wisconsin–Madison has been filled with opportunities. The ones I have found most meaningful have been those of self-growth. These are the learning moments you usually cannot find in the traditional classroom setting. More fluidly, my greatest expectation was to find the inspiration and drive to grow spiritually and intellectually.

This past year I have made many changes in how I view and perceive the world—a direct effect on having traveled and explored different cultures and communities. Also living briefly in Kenya, a country with a high level of religiosity and faith diversity, yet with few religious conflicts, has allowed me to see spirituality as a medium of understanding. I hope to one day work in public health in similar communities. The question that arose for me was how I was going to relate and communicate with people of vastly different backgrounds if I have never been taught intercultural and religious dialogue. The Lubar Institute has helped achieve

these goals for me and continues to present itself as an opportunity to perceive the world and myself differently.

I have really struggled in writing this reflection for the first part of the year. There are so many things we have talked about and discussed that have left a profound effect on the way I think and process things, especially in regard to belief systems and how they are communicated in academic settings. While this is not the first time I have talked about religious perspective with people of other faiths, this is the first time I have done so in a formal setting with the goal of creating useful and evolving dialogue. I find it

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How do I get others to see my religion for what it is: a peaceful form of spiritual expression?

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extremely fortunate to be having these conversations in a year that the Go Big Read book encompasses the life experiences of a Muslim girl and for us, the Lubar Fellows, to have read this in a religious context. For the first time in my life, I have had to reflect on how and if religion has impacted my academic experience and how culture and Islam intersect in both the media, my life, and the Muslim world in general.

I was not excited to read *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*. I already perceived her role in the media as a form of tokenism. To many she represents the oppression of Muslim women and girls, a trope that I have long been uncomfortable with on an individual level and disagreed with on a universal one. It broke my heart that anyone would use Islam as a reason for repressing the education of girls, but I have long felt this is a result of cultural and traditional values that are separate to religion but have evolved to be interpreted as one and the same.

In the Forum and within the Fellows, many expressed that they see religion and culture as interwoven structures that mostly complement each other. This idea does not reflect the way Islam was taught to me nor the way I have grown to see it. There are aspects of my own Somali culture, such as female genital mutilation and acceptability of certain drugs, that I believe not only have no religious bearing but are contradictory to Islamic teachings. Education of women in the Pashtun region of Afghanistan and Pakistan is a manifestation of one of these clashes of culture and religion.

There is a well recorded hadith (saying or action of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW)) which says, "Attainment of knowledge is a must for every Muslim." This is both religious knowledge, for the hereafter, and secular knowledge, for today. "Every Muslim" clearly includes women. My parents very seriously pressed on the importance of education and higher learning. Going to college was never a question. My father especially would often say that paying for me and my siblings to go to college was of utmost importance even if that required hefty financial sacrifices.

I do, however, recognize that this has not always been the case in my family. My parents' elder female siblings never went to school. It was perceived that a girl's place was in the home, but with time this changed. My mother's older sister was not only the first woman in my family to go to elementary school, but the first to get a Doctoral degree. I reflect back on these opinions as a cultural ideology on women, not a religious one.

I really appreciated the conversations with Fellows on how culture and religion impact each other. I also appreciate the trips we took to the dorms. Dr. Rosenhagen said something that resonated with me about which people we think of representing Buddhism and Islam. The Dalai Lama was the answer for Buddhism and Osama Bin Laden for Islam. This hurt, but it was very true. I began to think critically on how to change this narrative. How do I get others to see my religion for what it is: a peaceful form of spiritual expression? I don't know yet, but I'll keep you posted.

## SECOND REFLECTION

These past few months, especially over December break, I've had a lot of time to think about how spirituality affects my life, what ideas of interfaith mean to me, and how I want that to reflect in the things I do.

Over December break, I went back home to Georgia for the first time in a year. This is where I grew up and still have many relatives and friends. This was also the first time I'd seen many of these loved ones since coming back from my summer in Africa and starting college.

I noticed very quickly that they recognized that I was different: I was no longer quiet and agreeable, I spoke what I thought, and was unafraid of showing emotion and conviction in what I believed in. I'm going to attribute this to three things: dialogues I've had in the Fellows program, my trip to Kenya, and new engagement in social justice on campus.

I feel like I have gained a consciousness that I did not have before, but this is quickly becoming my favorite quality in myself. Awareness of self is truly the most important lesson you can learn. I find myself negotiating my identities to find my own personal niche. I've come to understand that people who share my Muslim identity may not understand other aspects of who I am. That is okay. I don't have to put myself in a box. My identity doesn't have clean lines but translucent membranes that makes distinctions unclear, if not unimportant.

My favorite conversation we had in the Fellows program was on the topic of women and the Abrahamic traditions.

This tied in some ideas that I'd pondered from the discussion we had earlier this year about the women in Abraham's life, as well as an event the Muslim Students Association had on women and Islam. For me, as a self-identified feminist and an aspiring women's health advocate, it has been central to my spiritual growth these past few months to find out how to find empowerment and space as a woman within the patriarchal structure of religion. Is it okay for me to go against the grain of culturally and religiously inspired gender roles? If I do, does this somehow change the legitimacy of the commitment I have to my faith?

The one thing I appreciate most about being a Fellow is that it gives me the avenues to think about these spiritual questions but doesn't expect a single or simple answer. Religion isn't simple. It doesn't always make sense or make life any easier, but it still sculpts us into the people we are. I got to think about Amina Wadud and the concept of female Imams, women leading prayer, and having more say as scriptural scholars. Women in leadership is nothing new to Islam, but it is definitely something that has dwindled and never been extremely prominent. I think there is momentum for a change to occur and hope to see more of this in my lifetime.

When we first started last semester, I felt that being a Fellow would be a great opportunity to be involved in something I was passionate about. I did not foresee that I'd look forward to assigned readings and discussing topics each week. I had anticipated it to be a class that, as time went on, I would find

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I have questioned the way I was taught my religion and whether the diversity of thought is a good or bad thing, what my role should be as a woman, as a Muslim in America, and as a practitioner of Somali-Kenyan culture.

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to be a chore more than a fun activity. I now stand corrected.

The readings have been thorough and in-depth. I really appreciated the Amina Wadud piece, which allowed me to think critically of the intersection of gender and Islam. Coincidentally, that week, Amina Wadud and I interacted on social media. This was really cool for me! Despite how I may have conflicting feelings about her work, I do respect her drive in leadership and passion for religious dialogue.

Unrelated to the Lubar Institute, these few months have been riddled with social justice as a transformative element of identity. Events involving the worth of black lives and Muslim lives occurred. Both are important aspects of my identity that I feel are largely stereotyped and misunderstood by the larger American public. I don't believe dialogue is the only answer, but I do believe it is an important step to community cohesiveness and mutual understanding.

This is the halfway point in the fellowship and there is truly a lot to reflect on. The other Fellows and I have taken a larger initiative to hang out outside of our weekly meeting and get to know each other outside the context of religion. I've really treasured this—I've always been lucky to have a diverse group of friends with varying opinions, but I can honestly say I have found life-long friends in the Fellows. I also feel that our discussions have moved from trying to represent our respective religions to representing ourselves and sharing personal concepts of spirituality.

In addition to this, I have gained an immense amount of respect for the

other Abrahamic religions. We all come from rich traditions. Despite potentially having different relationships with God, we each wish to continue the lessons and aspects of community religion has taught us. I think this is one of the greatest lessons one can hope to gain from interfaith dialogue: love and mutual respect is the end goal. In all honesty, there are parts of Christianity and Judaism—sometimes even my own religion—that I won't be able to fully understand or see logic in, but this does not mean that these beliefs are not legitimate.

By the end of the fellowship year, I hope to be able to have a more solid grasp of my spiritual identity. This is a lofty goal and if anything my ideas on spirituality have become more complex. I have questioned the way I was taught my religion and whether the diversity of thought is a good or bad thing, what my role should be as a woman, as a Muslim in America, and as a practitioner of Somali-Kenyan culture.

I hope to build on my understanding of Christian and Jewish tradition and integrate interfaith into my career and life goals. I hope to one day work in religiously diverse communities. What I will have gained from the Fellows program will help foster that.

The Forum has worked to ring in all the ideas we hash out in fellowship. It works like neatly tied bow on a wrapped present. The Forum's agenda is: this is what our tradition, history, and culture says about this topic, so let's talk about it. Fellows meetings are more along the lines of: this is what I believe, struggle with, and gain from this topic in my religion. Both of these spaces were neces-

sary for me to get to the point I am at in the Lubar program. I liked the juxtaposition between the personal small

groups and the broad large group discussions and look forward to continuing with this for spring semester.

## THIRD REFLECTION

Wow! It's so hard to believe that the school year is about to come to a close and, more tragically, my time as a Lubar Fellow. This journey has been both an important spiritual experience and meaningful life lesson. Interfaith is not something I understood in such detail before. Now I can say I have been exposed to real-life dialogue and situations that have changed my worldview. Judaism and Christianity are no longer as foreign or distant to me and I feel like I now have the ability to prescribe to a pluralistic approach to interfaith.

My feelings about the Lubar Institute can be best summarized by the Dalai Lama, "I appreciate any organization or individual people who sincerely make an effort to promote harmony between humanity, and particularly harmony between the various religions. I consider it very sacred work and very important work."

I have great faith that my cohort of Fellows will do great things in promoting interfaith communication in any direction we choose to go. Some of us are graduating now, like Jackie, who is heading off to do volunteer work for AmeriCorps, and others plan on continuing with the Lubar Institute by staying involved in the Forum. Regardless, I think I can speak for all of us when I say that we are ready to tackle new challenges with the Lubar fellowship as a handy tool in our backpacks.

My second favorite topic of this quarter was our discussion of Jerusalem. During our first meeting in early September, this was easily the conversation I most dreaded. Despite all the good discussions we'd had all semester, it was clear that Jerusalem, and more specifically the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was too personal to go smoothly. Many of us had heard that this became a heated conversation the year before, that it went from a one week scheduled discussion to a two-week encore, and that some of the fellows were hurt (although later agreed to disagree).

The knowledge of this story definitely affected the way our conversation went. We largely avoided anything outside of the readings at first, choosing to ignore the elephant in the room. Eventually, it came out, but the conversation was tiptoed. I don't think the dialogue was productive since we didn't want to hurt each other's feelings.

Following this, a campus organization, Students for Justice in Palestine, and UW Hillel organized two separate events on the conflict. These were scheduled at the same time on the same day, after a Fellows meeting. I ended up being extremely impressed when one of the Fellows attended the event with the opposite view of what she held. She eloquently said, "I already know about the other talk, I want to see this event so I can understand the other view." I re-

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## Abrahamic Reflections

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It's not possible to write into words all the things I learned as a Fellow this year, but there is one thing I can clearly articulate: I learned more about my own beliefs than I thought I would.

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member thinking, this is decision making influenced by interfaith dialogue!

My favorite event of the semester, however, was the House of Worship weekend. Although I was unable to make the church service, I was able to go to both Hillel and the campus mosque for the first time. The mosque was structured like many I have been to before and we were there for Friday prayer. I have been to Friday prayer many times with my family at home but this was the first time I had gone to a mosque with mostly student parishioners. I was disappointed by the *khutba*, which in my opinion was not done well, but I had to keep it in mind that these were scheduled on a volunteer basis. I was pleasantly surprised that many visitors that day found comfort and easy bonding due to gender segregation. In fact, I think many were surprised that they did.

That night, we attended service at Hillel and had the choice of attending either an Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform service. I chose to sit in on the Conservative service, which two of the Fellows attend regularly. I was surprised by how much singing was involved. Almost all the prayers were sung in Hebrew and in unison. I could feel the spirituality in the room. However, it was definitely difficult to follow along in the prayer book for a non-Hebrew reader. After the service, there was an organized dinner with matzo ball soup, salad, and challah bread. For dessert there was a traditional stuffed pastry. Everything was delicious.

Sunday morning we went to Harvest Church. Unfortunately, I wasn't there for the service but made it in time for the discussion afterwards. It was a great discussion! We talked about what we liked and didn't like, what we learned and didn't understand, and many more things over pizza and soda in a room in the church. I thought it was interesting that the church's parishioners were mostly Asian and how some people speak in tongues. It was definitely a unique church and unlike any I had been to before.

It's not possible to write into words all the things I learned as a Fellow this year, or even this semester, but there is one thing I can clearly articulate: I learned more about my own beliefs than I thought I would.

I hope to use this knowledge to make the world a better place. As Dorothy Day once said, "What we would like to do is change the world—make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended for them to do. And, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, of the poor, of the destitute...We can, to a certain extent, change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever-widening circle will reach around the world. We repeat, there is nothing that we can do but love, and, dear God, please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy as well as our friend."



# Heba Saeed

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I came into the Lubar Interfaith Student Fellows program not knowing much about how the structures of the discussions would be and what type of people I would be surrounded with, but I knew I had an interest in interfaith dialogue and getting to know people of different backgrounds and faiths. I was a bit hesitant at first because, although I have talked about religion with people who follow different branches of Christianity, I hadn't had much discussion about religion with people who practiced different aspects of Judaism. It might be the fact that I've interacted with more people who follow Christianity because there is a larger population of Christians than Jews in the United States. Maybe I haven't had the space to do so, or simply because of the political issues in Palestine and Israel that naturally creates tension between Muslims and Jews.

I think that personally it has been difficult for me to separate the politics from the religion in this instance because a lot of the time religion and politics intertwine. With the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it becomes a larger issue because it involves two different religions and cultures and has been a controversial and sensitive topic to

discuss not only with Muslims and Jews but people in general. Obviously just because you follow a certain faith doesn't mean you agree with everything in the religion or things that people are doing in the name of your religion, but I think in this instance it has made me a little afraid to discuss this specific conflict with fear of offending

**Abrahamic  
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I know that I come with an open mind and an open heart and want to hear the opinions of others, just as I want them to listen to me and my opinions.

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people or the discussion becoming too overwhelming. I think getting to know people more personally throughout the semester has helped me become more comfortable discussing topics, but I also feel like we haven't hit on anything controversial yet, so I don't really know what that will bring. I know that I come with an open mind and an open heart and want to hear the opinions of others, just as I want them to listen to me and my opinions. I'm grateful to have a group that has the confidence to agree and disagree with one another and to create good dialogue.

I think so far that the structures of the meetings have been going well and that we've had lots of interesting discussions around the articles and the *I Am Malala* book. It's been nice to have more laid-back discussions instead of things being strictly structured because it makes the mood easier to talk in. It makes me personally feel like I can contribute more because it's more informal.

Sometimes I wish we had more time to discuss at our Fellows meetings. I feel like we run out of time a lot or we don't really get to discuss as much as we want to because it is such a short amount of time. I know that I spend a lot of time thinking about what I want to say before I say it. I enjoy hearing other people's perspectives before contributing my own, so it's been a bit difficult to contribute my opinions because I'm not as talkative and the time isn't very long. I know that is something that I personally need to work on, so that I can contribute more to the discussions versus listening the entire time. I think that I have a very open minded and intelligent group and I'm very thankful for that.

The articles that we've discussed have really opened my eyes to the similarities between the Abrahamic religions. Some of the things I was aware of, but the articles really went into depth about how the different religions overlap in their thinking. The article that really stood out to me was the one about "Sarai/Sarah" and the story of Abraham. It was interesting to see the storyline and how there were similarities in Islam, although we put more emphasis on Hagar versus Sarah. There are of course differences too, but the articles really give me a way to tie all three of the Abrahamic religions together.

A huge part of our discussions have revolved around the *I Am Malala* book this semester. I think it was interesting that we had presentations on the Malala book from different religious backgrounds, although Malala herself is a Muslim girl. I think the book should be read with an open mind and with different perspectives because it has so much information within it. It not only talks about a girl who is Muslim, but also from Pakistan, from Swat, and also who is struggling with getting an education in a war/conflict area. At first, I was skeptical about reading the book because I knew that some people had voiced opinions about the book outside of the Interfaith Student Groups and on social media—about the book being controversial and about how it didn't portray the region, country, or the religion correctly. I know that everyone's opinions are different and everyone can come at the book from different perspectives. It can almost be sensitive when you are actually from the region or from the country itself. I think

for me personally it was the fact that the book portrayed a girl on the cover with a scarf on, which automatically attached her to the religion, regardless of whether this was a religious book or not (which I personally don't think it is). I believe it is a story about a girl and her struggles about getting an education, who happens to be from Pakistan and happens to be Muslim. I think that people can struggle with getting education anywhere in the world, even here in the United States. Obviously there are more deeply rooted issues with this particular situation, but at the end of the day it's a personal story of one girl who went through this traumatic experience. I believe that everyone needs to look at the book critically and not just read it like a regular text. It's been a book that has spread across campus and has reached media attention as well, so it is something that needs to be discussed.

I think personally for me from the Muslim perspective, I got a little defensive at first because it did mention aspects of Islam and it worried me that people would mix up the culture and religion and not be able to differentiate the two, if not educated on what the religion is about. The fact that to this day people think that Islam doesn't

preach equality for both men and women really upsets me. It's a religion that is constantly brought up in the news, so I would hope that people would care even a little to educate themselves. We spend so much time in school learning about math, science, history, English, and so on, but we forget to even learn about the people around us, to even learn about our different faiths, cultures, and backgrounds. We are here so concerned about a girl halfway across the world not getting an education, when we ourselves are taking our education for granted and not using it to its full potential.

I think a lot of positive things have come out of me reading the book. It has made me look at my own religion and religious texts to reconfirm what I have learned with what was discussed in the book. It's also made me feel confident in what I can discuss with people because I got to do my own research and studying to make sure I could fully contribute to conversations and have my own facts about my religion right.

I think that overall I'm really happy with the way that things are going and I'm looking forward to the future discussions that we are going to have both in the Forum and the Fellows meetings.

## SECOND REFLECTION

Happiness is something that we as humans are always trying to achieve. But what is happiness? Is it getting a perfect score on your exam, buying a new car, or winning a trip to some exotic destination? Do we look for happiness in our relationships, whether with

family, friends or a significant other? Is it being part of a religious group and following specific beliefs that makes us happy? These were questions that I asked myself as I navigated through this past semester. I took a look at my success and failures in my education, emo-

We spend so much time in school learning about math, science, history, English, and so on, but we forget to even learn about the people around us, to even learn about our different faiths, cultures, and backgrounds.

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Finding common ground is always the first way to connect with someone, such as meeting new people in the Lubar Interfaith Student groups, who share similar overlapping beliefs and have a sense of spirituality.

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tional health, and spirituality and faith. I also began to ask myself questions like: What is the source of my happiness or unhappiness? And what changes could I make in my life to keep myself happy? There were four things that I learned over time that would keep me happy. First, keeping a positive attitude even when things don't go as planned. Second, surrounding yourself with positive people and people who care about your well-being. Third, finding an outlet when things are stressful or you're feeling down. Fourth, increasing my spirituality.

The first thing that I learned is keeping a positive attitude even when things aren't going your way. Life will never be perfect and will always throw you curve balls. So it's knowing the way to react when things don't go well. Whether it's failing an exam in one of your classes or not getting the job you wanted, it's all about the way you look at things. When you begin to think this way, things always turn out for the better.

I truly believe that everything happens for a reason, so why dwell on things and get worked up over them when you can't change it? The past is the past and the one thing to do is stay positive and move forward with your life. During the past semester, I had times where I wanted to give up on my school work and education because I wasn't getting the results that I wanted. Whether I was getting bad grades on my exams or not getting positive feedbacks on my project, I knew at the end of the day it was all about my outlook on life that was going to change the way I felt when things didn't go well. Staying positive through tough situations was not only going to

make me feel better in my health because I wouldn't stress out as much but also turn those negative moments in my life into learning experiences.

The second lesson I learned is surrounding myself with positive people. I believe the people you surround yourself with really dictate the way you go about your life. Having a good support system and removing negative people has really made a positive impact on me and my outlook on life. Finding the right people to be around has been a journey. Until you get to know someone well and let them into your life, you'll never know if they are negatively or positively affecting your life. But once finding that out, if they're having a negative or positive impact on your life, it's your choice to remove or keep them. Nobody should dictate your happiness, but people should add to your already existing happiness, not take away from it. Once you find people like that, you know you've found good people.

Finding common ground is always the first way to connect with someone, whether it's through the interior architecture program that I am in and finding people who share similar passions and career goals in life, or the local mosque and sharing the same belief systems and rituals, or even meeting new people in the Lubar Interfaith Student groups who share similar overlapping beliefs and have a sense of spirituality.

Although these groups of people may be different and impact your life in unique ways, they all add to your life and have a positive effect.

The third lesson I learned is finding an outlet when things are not going well in your life. There are several ways

that I've found that have helped me do so. The first is going to the gym. Fitness is something that has always made me feel good about myself. As they say, "nobody ever regrets a workout, no matter how sore you feel afterwards." It's because the benefits of working out are always positive. It is a healthy way to relieve your stress and it also improves your overall physique.

A second outlet is joining organizations and groups that have an uplifting atmosphere. Whether it's a religious group like the Muslim Students Association, where I can find people who believe in God and have the same beliefs as me. Finding people within the group who keep me focused on my religion and who create a safe space for me to discuss religious topics. Also being a part of the Lubar Institute has allowed me to have something to look forward to weekly where I can be in an environment where people are open and willing to discuss religion. It's a place where you can find similarities and differences and learn so many things about other people and their beliefs.

All of these things I learned to improve my outlook on life are all positive and have had a good impact on me. But the last, and the one that I have been trying to focus on more than the others, to increase my happiness, is increasing my spirituality. It's easy to say that you're part of a religious group and follow specific practices, but what about it is making you continue to follow it or feel like it brings meaning to your life and makes you happy?

I believe personally that prayer has always been a good outlet for me to bring positivity and peace into my life. I

think because I'm an active person and don't like to sit in one spot for too long, having a prayer that makes you constantly do motions is perfect for me. Although it has specific guidelines to follow that complete the prayer, you can also make it personal by choosing what chapters in the Qur'an that you want to read or what supplications you want to read after you're done. It becomes a personal connection with you and God and allows you to have that time to yourself without any distractions. It is also a constant reminder to me about God and allows me to have a moment to not think about anything else in my busy day. When I go through the motions it automatically relaxes me.

Even if you look at prayer in a non-religious or spiritual sense, the motions themselves allow you to be relaxed because you're moving your body in different positions. It is similar to the relaxation and tranquility people feel after yoga, which also has the body move into different positions, which allow you to stretch your muscles, be silent and find inner peace.

The combination of having a positive outlook on life, surrounding myself with positive people, finding a good outlook when things are stressful and increasing my spirituality have all changed my life. I not only am able to get through tough situations but I now feel like I can create my own happiness. I don't have to depend on others to bring happiness into my life or focus on materialistic things to bring that either. It is finding an inner peace and satisfaction with my life that has turned things around for me. Even though this semester has barely started, I notice how

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I got the opportunity to challenge myself to outwardly speak more about how I feel about something, which not only prepares me in discussions on interfaith but also other discussions where I need to express an opinion.

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much more productive I've been when I combined these four changes into my life. I believe that overall, if I keep im-

plementing these four learned lessons into my life, I will always have a positive outlook on life and keep myself happy.

### THIRD REFLECTION

When I first started as a Lubar Fellow, I didn't know what to expect and what I would get out of it. I knew that it was a group which would meet once a week and discuss our individual religions and the differences and similarities between them. Coming into it I believed that this space would become an interfaith environment where we could openly discuss and share our own beliefs and customs with each other. But what I wasn't prepared for wasn't how much I would learn from others about their religions, but how much I would learn about my own religion.

At the beginning of the year, I came in with a strong view of how I viewed my religion and where I believed I stood as an American Muslim. I am someone who has immigrant parents from Sudan, but yet my siblings and I are all born here, giving us a "best of both worlds" situation. Yet that comes with its own complications as I have learned throughout my life. I thought my identity as an American Muslim was already set, and that the several questions that I had already been asked before, like "why do you wear hijab?" and so on, would be questions I could easily answer. But I was missing the biggest part of the picture. I wasn't coming into a situation where people were ignorant or trying to bash my beliefs or religion, but people who went out of their way to join an interfaith group. This is a group

of people who are highly intellectual and open to discussing how and why we practice our beliefs.

After a couple months in the Fellows program I began to speak a bit more during the discussions, as I read more of the readings and began to analyze what I had known about others' beliefs and my own and what I was learning now. I had to put myself in the spotlight when answering questions that were directed at me, but it allowed me to step back and think about what I really thought about a certain view or topic. I remember the discussion on women in power in our faiths and the "all female mosque" and how that was something growing up I never even thought about. I believe that I am an open person, but with this reading and several others, it challenged me to think more outside the box and really delve into how I felt about them.

Looking back at the year, I feel that I have more power to discuss my religion with people outside of the Lubar Institute and other interfaith groups. I feel like I got the opportunity to challenge myself to outwardly speak more about how I feel about something, which not only prepares me in discussions on interfaith but also other discussions where I need to express an opinion. I believe that, overall, the Fellows program is a place to find yourself, to challenge yourself, and to ultimately better yourself.



# Steven Suh

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I am a junior at the University, studying biology and hoping to go into medical school. Relatively speaking, I feel a bit out of place next to some humanities-focused students who are interested in interfaith dialogue. However, something I bring to the table is that I am a practicing non-denominational Christian. That is part of why I want to participate in the Lubar Institute: I want to grow in my understanding of multiple faiths to engage in informed conversation.

I think a lot of major conflicts, in the world and in daily life, can be avoided to a certain extent if people stop and take a moment to listen and try to understand each other. It seems to me that often a key factor in such conflicts is flat out ignorance, and I think these sorts of discussions are major steps in dispelling false notions. I see that though this may be a lofty ideal, it is nonetheless one I want to strive for and encourage for others.

I think a lot of it comes from wanting to be an active, participating member of an open, accepting, and understanding community. I think I often reject things that I'm not familiar with,

other religions and cultures included. That being said, I have had many discussions, to put it lightly, with other people discussing faith matters. It seems a lack of understanding goes both ways and often exacerbates the problem. I want to learn about other faith communities to have reasonable and intelligent conversations that actually go somewhere. Considering that the Abrahamic traditions have overlap in our history, it seems like a great place to learn how facilitate these exchanges. Eventually, I hope to be able to start and maintain such discussions outside of this "controlled environment."

Furthermore, as a growing mem-

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Not only will I be challenged to think about various questions in discussions and debates, but I think merely articulating my core principles to others will help me conceptualize them.

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ber of my own religion, this seems like a great opportunity to develop in my own understanding of Christianity. Not only will I be challenged to think about various questions in discussions and debates, but I think merely articulating my core principles to others will help me conceptualize them. I expect to be stretched in ways that will help me realize the ways I am being ignorant in my own faith, but primarily in Judaism and Islam. Having relationships with people who are part of these religions is something that I want to push for myself. That may be one of the best ways to put away prejudice. Ideally, I hope learning new perspectives stretches me as well.

To put the focus less on myself, I also think that my participation could benefit others. All of these things might happen for another person as well, possibly from other religions. Though I may disagree with their beliefs, I must encourage these ideals for the community despite the differences. To be honest, I

am somewhat concerned about controversies and debates getting out of hand, but I think that these might almost be necessary, and healthy to come to mutual understanding. As a Lubar Fellow I hope to accomplish all these things and communicate with other people who are more than willing to do the same. I want it to be pretty intense, in a respectful manner of course.

I'm really curious as to how different traditions view core principles and practices, which is pretty much everything. I'm not even particularly familiar with Christian theology, and I hope to learn what the Abrahamic traditions hold in common as well as the major differences. It amazes me to find the tangency between the Abrahamic traditions, and I want to explore that more.

Overall I am very excited this year being in the Lubar Fellows program and hope to learn and grow a lot. I am interested in listening to what people have to say about their traditions and to share my own views as well.

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## SECOND REFLECTION

These days, I am doing a lot more personal reflection on my life than in most times, largely due to the fact that I am graduating soon, taking a gap year, and thinking about my future in medicine. In many good ways, I have also begun thinking about interfaith interactions, both good and bad, as well as the importance and gravity of the contemporary cross-cultural issues on the international scale. Without the Lubar Program, I would not have had the

opportunity to be intellectually challenged in these ways.

When I was younger, much media simply didn't reach me because I wasn't plugged into it that much. I was certainly a sheltered child. As I grew up, I experienced relative religious freedom and the ability to decide much of my adult life for myself. I projected this image of modernity onto the international scale, assuming what happened in my microcosm was true of a large part, if not all, of the world. However, with my

gradual introduction to the constant bombardment of information we call the media, I am confronted with many examples of religious oppression, much of which I had thought humanity had “grown out of.”

Passing out of my teens, I became more aware of negativity specifically towards Christians and Christianity. In retrospect, it is amazing that I had not noticed such negativity until these last couple years. In some circles, Christians receive vociferous condemnation on par with the mistreatment of many minority groups. Despite these circulating ideas, I am not surprised at the passionate disapproval of “Christian” behavior.

While I had been unaware of the discontentment with Christians, I was also foolish towards the history of the activity of Christians as well. Much of people’s objections were all too reasonably grounded. Stepping back from evaluating either side, I have begun to realize people are human, and prone to pointing fingers and establishing self-righteousness. Fortunately, there are people all around that are attempting to establish peaceable relationships to people of different religions, and, ultimately, different backgrounds. Unfortunately, the amount of effort required to destroy is far less relative to the effort necessary to create.

As it stands, humans of one group struggle to forgive another group of people for truly horrible acts, for understandable reasons. Recalling the religious Crusades of old, it is startling what people will do with the justification of religion. It is especially disappointing that these people don’t even

really follow their own justifying principles, such as in the infamous Fourth Crusade, when crusaders sacked Constantinople, the Orthodox Christian city, in 1204. A contemporary example is the actions of ISIS, often exacerbated by biased media coverage.

Outside of direct religious influences, such as the immediate actions of religious groups, there are other issues with religious overtones. For example, “Christian” objectives in political circles have a surprisingly important role. Religion, for better or worse, has a large part in political and social circles. I am sad to see that “Christianity” is often used as a term to denote social or political associations, rather than actually meaning to label a follower of Jesus. While faith may certainly play a role in a candidate’s ideology, it is easy to suspect that their religious labeling is simply for support from voters.

Speaking of religion (and humanity) as a whole, there are clearly many issues when ideologies clash. I firmly believe that interfaith dialogue such as what is happening in the Lubar Interfaith Student program is critical for cross-cultural peacemaking opportunities. The Lubar Forum has introduced me into this realm of religious issues and encouraged me to evaluate these conflicts, for which I am grateful.

In the past, I did not think that I would be as religiously oriented as I am, with my faith and Religious Studies certificate. Despite never expecting it, I am happy to say that I am keenly interested on these issues as well as growing my own philosophy of religion and humanity. Something that I have been introduced to through various sources

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is postmodernism, and varying world-views. Without going into all the details, for I don't know them all myself, I have begun to realize the deep roots this movement has on humanity's understanding of the world. However, I have also realized that though I may have been somewhat postmodern, as I have developed, I have actually become much more modernist than postmodern. While postmodernists would say things such as, "there is no absolute truth," modernists would question, "is that absolutely true?"

This of course has huge repercussions on the ways I approach interfaith and, if I may say, intrafaith (within Christianity itself) interactions. That being said, to somewhat qualify my modernism, I have been realizing the importance of experiences and meaning in a personal context, as well as the history of theology and the Christian church. Though I am tempted to think that church history is to have no impact on my practice today, I am realizing there is much to learn from my own tradition, in the most literal sense of the word, as well as my tradition's history of interactions with other traditions.

Just this winter break, I visited Paris with my mother. Amidst the beautiful chapels and castles, I realized the history of Paris is steeped in the Christian

tradition. Without fail, in every castle there was an ornate chapel, fitted with traditional pews, vaulted ceilings, and stained glass windows. In a particularly memorable castle, etched into the wall by an Irish guard well after the castle had been built was the phrase, "Man's anger does not accomplish God's justice." Upon perusal of various historic places, I realized it was nearly impossible to review the area's history without coming up against Christian influences, for better or worse. Though, in retrospect, it doesn't sound incredible, I was shocked at how pervasive Christianity was in the story of Paris and, in general, France. This goes to show my unawareness towards the intertwining of religion and culture. Upon such an experience, I have been realizing and accepting that across the world, religion and culture are more cohesive than I imagined.

These past few years have been monumental for me in my establishment of life principles and perspective. While I had been horrendously in the dark about many contemporary issues, through various ways such as the Lubar Institute I have been introduced these problems. It seems that interfaith and crosscultural dialogue must take a turn for the better, and in my own way, I want to contribute to this goal.

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### THIRD REFLECTION

Questions of religious dialogue have been on my mind these days, largely due to the Lubar Interfaith Student program. Coming from a predominantly conservative Evangelical Christian

background, I believe the fact of the inevitability and necessity of interfaith dialogue is a critical issue in this era. However, it is difficult to balance openness to other religions and religious

“truths” while remaining committed to my own faith. I even question whether it is theoretically, let alone practically, possible to be able to have both commitment and openness without sacrificing one or the other.

Logically speaking, it seems that ascribing to a certain uniqueness or specialness (one that the New Testament speaks of) excludes the possibility of valuing other religions equally, precisely because of the specialness. The question then becomes how are we going to read this text that seems to indicate such. I’m honestly not sure myself how to approach this issue on many levels. Understanding the context of the society and culture that the work was written into is one thing, but it is a difficult notion to have to rework, add, or remove ideas from what was originally written, even for notions modern society considers completely unrealistic.

Aside from these concerns, there are a couple things that I think are goals for myself as well as aspects that I would like to see in other people. First is a firm conviction and experience of their own faith or beliefs in general. This may sound counterintuitive, but I think that without these convictions there is significantly less incentive to engage in religious discussion in a cooperative manner. Directly speaking, many religions support good relations between people. “Love your neighbor as yourself,” etc. Even those that don’t, hopefully, can find some common ground in our fundamental humanity.

Another is a religious ethic. This becomes clear in discussion when religious truths are in conflict with one another. Despite these theological dif-

ferences, people can appreciate the differences in the understanding of the holy in respective faiths as well as agreeing not to impose their own truth system on others.

Other people, particularly within the Lubar program, might go further to say that there should be an ideal of religious pluralism. In some senses, I agree that we must acknowledge that there are certainly other ways to understand religious, or ultimate truths. However, I personally struggle to affirm the validity of such truth claims. Some might advocate a theology of religious pluralism—that all religions have a certain truth value to them. Despite learning a lot through the Lubar program, I am not one to affirm all religions in this sense. I think Bishop Lesslie Newbigin accurately describes how I would approach interfaith dialogue in this quote:

[My] position is *exclusivist* in the sense that it affirms the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but it is not exclusivist in the sense of denying the possibility of the salvation of the non-Christian. It is *inclusivist* in the sense that it refuses to limit the saving grace of God to the members of the Christian church, but it rejects the inclusivism which regards the non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. It is *pluralist* in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings, but it rejects a pluralism which denies the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

In some senses, I agree that we must acknowledge that there are certainly other ways to understand religious, or ultimate truths. However, I personally struggle to affirm the validity of such truth claims.

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The interactions I've had with people of other faiths have helped me appreciate them outside of the comfort zone of my own religion.

This is a good summary of my own stance towards the issue, and it is decidedly not pluralistic in the sense that religions are all equal in their value. I do ascribe to a Christian “specialness” in Jesus and without that conception, I do not think I would be committed to it in the first place. This, relatively speaking, puts me at a more conservative angle.

Nonetheless, that is not to say that religions should clash and disagree all the time. Many times I think religious groups can band together because of common moral and ethical beliefs. Furthermore, I actually believe that this can happen outside of the religious convictions of people in any case. That being said, I would argue that progress and peace in this age is impossible without intelligent and civil religious dialogue, because of the deep roots religion has in the life of much of the world. I think there should be major organization within and between religious institutions and laypeople encouraging this.

Though people may like to explain

away religion, it seems that, at least for the time being, religion will be a major factor in the motivations and behavior of human beings. I reason that people can cooperate despite chasms of difference in their belief on certain social issues. In some respects, I think we can agree to cooperate, even if we may disagree.

I think the Lubar Fellows program has significantly advanced my understanding of the importance of such and the interactions I've had with people of other faiths have helped me appreciate them outside of the comfort zone of my own religion. On an essential level, the Lubar program has forced me to ask questions about the common ground between all humans, and especially those between the Abrahamic traditions. The answers to these questions are far from completely distilled, and this program has sparked a process that I think will be in continual motion until the very end.

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# Kurt Wieters

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**My motivation for joining the Lubar Fellows program** came from an experience I had last year at the Lubar Forum's Open Houses of Worship. I joined the Fellows because I was searching for a way in which to describe my experience attending Friday prayer service at a mosque and Shabbat service at Hillel Center. In my academic life as Religious Studies major, I have read about Shabbat, the lighting of candles, the singing of the Shema, and I had seen videos of Muslims performing Salaat, lining up in the mosque and prostrating. But it was only after engaging in these traditions myself that I began to question what impact they might have on my identity as a Christian.

It was only after I felt the embrace of the men at the mosque, the sides of our feet and shoulders touching, as I stood in the prayer line that I began to wonder if my God would recognize these postures as prayer. It was only after I left Hillel, after I watched the sun descend and dim into darkness during the Shabbat service and I walked out into that absorbing darkness, that I began to wonder if my God could be

present in this way. My motivation to join the Lubar Interfaith Student program came from an urge to better understand the religious traditions which stood behind these experiences. Additionally, I was searching for a way in which to describe the experience I had during these moments. How, exactly does a Catholic find meaning in a mosque? Or, what can a Christian learn from a Shabbat service?

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I have come to realize that my interest in finding meaning in Judaism and Islam occurs because I am Catholic and because engaging in interfaith dialogue is an important part of the tradition I believe in and belong to.

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My experience with the Lubar Fellowship has provided unexpected answers to the questions which I brought to the fellowship. Meeting with Jewish, Muslim and Christian students every week has been a humbling experience. To be sure, we have much in common in our religious lives. Yet, what has stood out to me the most has been how very different Judaism, Islam, and Christianity are. By engaging in dialogue with students of the Abrahamic faiths, I have realized that the answers to the questions I brought with me will be found by digging deeper into my own Catholicism, than by looking without. In other words, meeting with Jewish, Muslim, and Christian students has made me realize just how much Catholicism has influenced the way I understand and talk about religion.

At the beginning of the semester, we began our Fellows meetings by discussing a set of rules for dialogue. One issue that I thought was important was the need to articulate a shared religious vocabulary in order to express the different religious backgrounds which we were bringing to the group. I had a sort of naïve hope that we might find a language in which we could somehow stand outside of our religious traditions and share what was most fundamental about them; a language that would be neutral and objective, yet effectively communicate the essence of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

To be sure, throughout the semester the Fellows have discussed many aspects which are shared among the Abrahamic religions. All three of our traditions trace our origins back to Abraham and all three express the need to show

tolerance toward the other Abrahamic religions. Yet, what I have been most impacted by this semester is just how different all three religions are from one another. While we all trace our religious traditions back to Abraham, our understandings of the role this patriarch plays within our traditions vary greatly. Moreover, while we all believe tolerance for religious difference is an important part of our religious traditions, the way in which each religion understands this need for tolerance is very different from one another.

This recognition of religious difference has made me realize that the questions I originally brought to the Lubar fellows stem from my own Catholicism rather than a neutral and objective curiosity about the Abrahamic religions. That is to say, I have come to realize that my interest in finding meaning in Judaism and Islam occurs because I am Catholic and because engaging in interfaith dialogue is an important part of the tradition I believe in and belong to.

When I talk about the need to embrace those who are religiously other, I cannot speak from a position somehow outside of any religious affiliation. I speak about this because I am Catholic. Before this semester, I had thought that interfaith understanding would happen by going outside of our respective religious traditions. Yet, I am struck by the thought that what I was searching for is uniquely Catholic and that I can only find that by looking deeper within my own tradition because what I was searching for occurs because of my Catholicism.

## SECOND REFLECTION

I remember a piece of advice given to me by uncle. He was reflecting upon life when he told me, “Be sure to get yourself a kitchen table when you get older.” This was puzzling advice to me at the time, but my uncle continued, “The best moments I have had in life were spent seated around a table listening to the stories of others.” Indeed, my childhood memories of Christmas, Easter, and family reunions consist of my extended family gathered around a table and sharing our stories.

For me, the symbol of the table is invariably connected with my family, but it is also a symbol of my faith. Every Sunday, Catholics gather around a table and share a communal meal during the mass. The mass commemorates a time when Jesus and his disciples gathered together to share the last supper. My family is an important part of the reason that I am Catholic, and Catholicism has played an influential role in shaping my family’s values.

In many ways, my fellowship with the Lubar Institute allows me to honor aspects of both my faith and my family. Foremost is the opportunity to speak candidly about my Catholicism. Each week the Fellows are faced with a general aspect or quality of religion that we can discuss. Some aspects of religion that we have discussed this past semester have included religious foods, symbols, texts, and holidays. In order to discuss these aspects of Catholicism with the Fellows, I often have to look back to the Catholic traditions passed on to me by my family. Every week, gathered around a table with the Lubar Fellows, I

feel that I am honoring the adults in my family who taught me how to interact with others and that I am also honoring an integral part of my Catholicism.

For me, one of the most intriguing aspects of the Lubar fellowship are the differences between the Abrahamic religions that become apparent in our weekly discussions. During our discussion on the topic of religious tolerance, it became clear to me that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have very different histories. That difference is significant when it comes to the topic of religious tolerance.

As a Christian, when I consider the role of religious tolerance, I am forced to confront a long history of Christian intolerance toward other religions. The Muslim Fellows in our discussion expressed a similar sentiment. Both Christian and Muslim Fellows expressed a desire to see religious tolerance as something to be embraced by our respective communities. Yet, the Jewish Fellows articulated an opinion quite different from the one that I held. In their experience, Judaism has always embraced the ideal of religious tolerance. I was intrigued by this comment because I think it highlights that, though all the Fellows collectively value religious pluralism, the role that pluralism plays in our respective religions is different. That is to say, the motivation for myself, a Catholic Christian, to engage in interfaith dialogue stems from something unique to Catholicism, as I am sure it does for the rest of the Fellows.

Another great discussion with the Fellows involved a time when we each

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I think all too often religion is seen as an abstract question that does not have any practical or daily influence.

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brought in a symbol from our respective traditions. There was no doubt in my mind what I would bring to the discussion. On the wall in my apartment hangs a wooden crucifix that I inherited from my grandmother. The crucifix is a traditional catholic one, with a crucified body and a sign the reads INRI. In my mind, the crucifix is the iconic Catholic symbol. Walk into any Catholic church, and you will immediately be confronted by the cross. I find the crucifix to be such a central symbol to my faith and a powerful symbol as well.

Until my discussion with the other Fellows, I had taken for granted that all the Abrahamic religions had a central symbol which could communicate the sacred meaning of that religion. Indeed, I even have a flag on the wall in my apartment which proclaims, "Co-exist," written in the symbols of the different world religions: a crescent moon and star form the "C," the Magen David forms the "X," and a cross completes the word as the "T." In discussion with the other Fellows, I learned that while the Muslim and Jewish Fellows felt that though their traditions certainly had symbols, there was not a central or most important symbol. I was greatly surprised by this. Not only because of my previously held assumptions, but because I am greatly attached to the symbolism of Catholicism. When I think about my faith, I think about it largely in symbols.

Religious symbolism played a role in a very different way when one of our discussions revolved around religious foods. I chose to bring a traditional cookie that my family makes for Easter. The bird's nest cookie consists of choc-

olate and chow-mein noodle formed in the shape of a wreath with three jelly beans in the center. However, my favorite contribution was from Jackie, who brought in latkes, which her family traditionally makes around Hanukkah. My favorite part of this tradition though is when Jackie said that the connection between a fried food, like latkes, and Hanukkah is because of the oil that lasted for eight days in the temple. I like this tradition because I think this is a great way of commemorating a religious holiday, but also because I cannot of thing of anything similar in Catholicism.

Our discussion for this week also touched upon the dietary laws of Judaism and Islam. As a Catholic, I have never put much thought into the religious dimension of food, other than abstaining from meat on Fridays during Lent. I remember one of the Fellows, prior to the discussion, posted on our Facebook page asking if anyone objected to alcohol being used in the preparation of one of our food items. Tasneem, a Muslim, politely declined. I knew that Muslims didn't drink alcohol, but later in the discussion Tasneem said that this prohibition also applied to foods with alcohol in them. When I am not at school, I work at a restaurant which uses vodka in the preparation of fried cheese curds. It is fascinating for me to think that a something as small and simple as a cheese curd might have a religious dimension.

I really admire this aspect of my friend's religion. I think all too often religion is seen as an abstract question that does not have any practical or daily influence. Religion causes some people to become conscious about what they

consume. That is an ideal I would love to magnify in my own tradition.

I feel that our fellowship has grown since September. The conversations we have about religion are richer and more honest than they were at first. I feel as if we are more open about our faith identities. I think in part this is due to the tangibility of our most recent discussions. By this I mean that we have shared not

only ideas but physical markers of our identities. This tangible sharing has occurred through physical copies of the Tanakh, Bible, and Qur'an, through foods like latkes and bird's nests, and through symbols like a prayer rug, or a Magen David, or a crucifix. Being able to touch and to taste the items of my Fellows' religious life makes religion all the more real.

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### THIRD REFLECTION

My experience as a Lubar Fellow has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my undergraduate experience at UW–Madison. I have looked forward to meeting with the other fellows every week and discussing our religious traditions.

As a Religious Studies major, I love learning about religion, but in an academic setting there is rarely a chance to talk candidly about my own experience with religion and the tradition that I come from. I found this opportunity in the Fellowship. While I feel that studying religion in an academic setting is valuable, I have found that in order to really know what I understand religion to be, I have had to delve into my own religion and religious upbringing. This is why I have learned so much through the Lubar Institute. Growing up as a Catholic, I have certain assumptions about what religion is. Being a Fellow has allowed me to take this into account as I engage with people of different religions and learn about their traditions.

Through doing the Lubar Fellowship I have learned about myself and the religious tradition that I come from

through talking with others who come from different religions. Learning about one another's traditions really brings out the aspects of your own tradition. Strangely, for an interfaith group, what I will take away from my Lubar experience is just how different the Abrahamic religions are. What I have learned through talking with the other fellows is that each of our traditions endows different aspects of life with the sacred.

Our fellowship meetings were organized around these different areas of life, such as food, holidays, space, symbols, race, culture, to name just a few. For some fellows, certain aspects were enormously important to how they practice their religion and for others they were not. Often, it was very easy for me to think about what I would talk about in our meetings because the topic was on a particular aspect of life that my religion emphasizes. When I had difficulty speaking on a particular topic, it was because that was an aspect of life that my tradition doesn't emphasize. Even more interesting to me were the disagreements that arose because I valued a particular aspect which my

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## Abrahamic Reflections

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tradition emphasized, but that another Fellow didn't feel strongly about.

I remember the conversation we had about sacred space and the buildings where we practice our religion. Part of what I realized through this particular conversation is that my Catholicism involves an attachment to church buildings. I realized that what I love about Catholicism is the large, ornate churches with stained glass windows and spires. What made me realize this though, was something that another Fellow said. She remarked that the reason church buildings are so large and tower above the skyline is because it was a not-so-subtle way of expressing Christian dominance and power over an area.

This was the first time I had ever been offended by the comments of another fellow. Yet, what I have learned from my experience as a Fellow is that disagreements such as this are an opportune way of learning about one another's religion, rather than a situation for offense. Though I have never felt that way about a church, I can see how people from other religious traditions might feel this way. Different individuals might not emphasize sacred space in their religious practice. In fact, this other Fellow, a Conservative Jew, ex-

pressed that what was more important to her than the building where religion is practiced is the community of individuals that worship together. So, through this disagreement, I learned what is important to me in my Catholicism. Yet, I learned this through hearing what a person who belongs to a faith different than my own emphasizes in her religious practice.

What I will take away from the Lubar Interfaith Student Groups program and into my future is an appreciation of difference. I think that difference and disagreement are actually amazing opportunities to learn about one another. To me, this was the essence of my experience in the fellowship.

When we met with the incoming Fellows for next year, this was the advice that I gave to them: Don't be afraid to disagree with one another and if you feel that your religion is not being fairly represented, then speak up about it.

What I will take away is the knowledge that when religious people disagree, there is a reason for that which stems from how that individual emphasizes in their religious practice. Rather than being offended, this is an opportunity to learn about religion and religious difference.





**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 Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions**

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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.