A Leap of Faith

With 9/11 as a catalyst, a campus institute encourages students to let down their guard and talk about religion.

By Jenny Price ’96

We grow up being told that certain topics aren’t considered polite conversation at the dinner table. But each month, a group of UW students gathers to take a calculated risk. They talk about religion.

People may avoid discussing religion for fear of offending others or because they are wary of defending their beliefs in the face of skepticism or outright ignorance. But the students involved in these conversations — raised in different faiths, coming from diverse cultures, and following different academic paths — share a hunger for something that has been hard to find on campus: a chance to talk with others their age who also regard their faith as an essential part of who they are.

These interfaith discussions are central to the work and mission of the UW’s Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions, established to promote mutual understanding and civility among Jews, Christians, and Muslims after tensions arose following 9/11.

“I have always viewed [the institute] as a safe space to ask the hard questions,” says Laura Partain ’13, a Christian who was an undergraduate fellow with the institute as a sophomore and continued to attend its interfaith forums while studying Arabic, Biblical Hebrew, and Rabbinic Hebrew, and earning a degree in religious studies and a certificate in Middle East studies.

The phrase safe space comes up frequently when participants describe these forums. Students demonstrate their methods of prayer, talk about why they wear certain articles of clothing, and even discuss aspects of their religion that they don’t like. Students within the same faith sometimes have fundamental disagreements about controversial issues such as abortion and homosexuality.

“Whenever I would talk about faith before joining Lubar, it would always be among other Muslims,” says Lamin...
A reflection on what it means to be a Catholic living in a religiously diverse world. How does my Catholic identity shape the way I view other religions, and how does that affect my interactions with them? How am I being called to live out my faith in ways that respect others while also presenting my own views boldly? I now know the importance of building and actually getting to know other people. I know the importance of challenges to my deeply rooted assumptions about my faith and my beliefs. Though I’m still a committed Catholic, I know the importance of interfaith as a vital antidote to the tendency to retreat into what is familiar and comfortable in my own faith.

Stephen Bunting ’14, Catholic from Brookfield, Wisconsin

Reflections

Manneh ’13, who came to the UW from The Gambia, “I would never get a chance to really sit down and ask a Christian, ‘What do you think?’ You’re shy, you’re wondering. ‘Are they going to be really insulted?’”

A Part of Civil Life

Each year the Lubar Institute accepts eight or nine undergraduate fellows who organize the forums, which draw about two dozen students and take part in interfaith service projects in the Madison community. They also advise house fellows in campus residence halls about how to talk with students who have questions about faith-related topics such as their roommates’ unfamiliar religious rituals or dress.

“These aren’t deep theological questions, but they’re the kinds of personal interactions that occur all the time,” says Charles Cohen, a professor of history and religious studies and the institute’s director. During the past summer, the institute staffed a table alongside other student organizations at SOAR (Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration), and handed out lists of both religious studies courses and the more than two dozen student organizations connected to religion, including the campus chapter of Atheists, Humanists, and Agnostics. They also offered M&Ms printed with images of a cross, a star and crescent, and a quote a Morgan Freeman line from束E*Mer" The movie comedy in which he plays God. But the students tuck some tough and tense topics in the forum, too.

“The more interesting ones are the ones where people actually get real — where there isn’t just everyone saying, ‘Oh, that’s nice,’ ” Bunting says. In recent years, the group watched the movie The Help, a movie comedy in which he played God. But the students tuck some tough and tense topics in the forum, too.

“Many of the specifics were different — different languages, different leaders of services — but the core of it, very similar,” says Ben Agastin ’15, a Jewish junior who joined the institute hoping to form a more diverse group of friends. “And I think that until you go all three, you don’t really realize the similarities.”

Manneh, an Muslim student, started attending interfaith forums during his sophomore year after two friends from the Muslim Students Association invited him to attend a Catholic Mass with them. He was hooked and was accepted as a fellow during his junior year. He graduated in May with degrees in history and political science and is making plans to study African history in graduate school, but he hopes to start a similar forum for children in his country, where there is a Muslim majority and a Christian minority.

“We don’t have tensions — it’s very peaceful between the two groups, and we share the same culture — but when we talk about each other’s religions, it’s not talked about positively at all,” he says. “You don’t understand it; you don’t know why they do it. You don’t see the essence of it, so you can’t appreciate it.”

Giving Credit

At the UW, the monthly discussions give students the opportunity to explore more of those connections — and where they diverge. Last year’s final forum, for example, focused on the relationship between religion and the environment. Rosen- hagen ceded much of that session to the students, with representatives from each of the three faiths highlighting how their religious traditions are tied to environmentalism. Bunting took the lead on Christianity and discussed Franciscan spirituality, which focuses on living in poverty and renouncing worldly goods, as a potential means to protect the earth. At St. Paul’s Catholic Church, located on the UW’s Library Mall, that concept sparked a student group, Vita Pura, which encourages students to live more simply. Carly Braun ’15, a Catholic, said helping beyond the group, says it’s focused on small steps to help the planet, such as taking one cold shower a week. She jokes that she can’t get into that shower unless she reminds herself, “This is for Jesus.”

Rachel Lerman ’13 explained EarthHour, herself, “This is for Jesus.”
a center focused on Judaism and environmentalism. There, Lerman connected her Jewish faith with those concerns, living in a tent and working on an organic farm to grow the food she needed.

“It’s consciously thinking about what we really need to live,” she said.

Saad Siddiqui ’13 presented from the Islamic perspective, telling the group that the concept of stewardship is inherent in the Qur’an and referencing a verse that he cited as, “We offered the trust unto the heavens and earth and the hills.”

The sessions are what alumni Sheldon ’51, LLB ’53 and Marianne x’55 Lubar had in mind when they established the institute to promote mutual understanding and civility among Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

Although the student fellows do not receive academic credit for their participation, at the end of their yearlong experience, they give credit — by writing reflections (see sidebars) about how the forums helped them learn about their own beliefs and those of others, and how they’ve grown as people and critical thinkers.

“I originally went in kind of with the wrong idea, because I had come to this campus and had to defend my faith so many times [when asked], ‘What do you believe? Why do you believe this?’ ” says Partain, who today is at the University of Texas at Austin, studying conflict and conflict resolution with a focus on the role of religious identities. “I grew into just really wanting to hear other people’s stories and to hear where they came from.”

Jenny Price ’96 is senior writer for On Wisconsin.

**REFLECTIONS**

My rabbi emphasizes the importance of growth … whether it occurs in one’s own faith, in regard to one’s relationships with others, or just in one’s general progress in life, growth is key to maintaining a fulfilling life. As I look back to September 2012, I remember walking into the first [forum] with high expectations and even higher nerves. Compared to where I am now, it is almost comical to remember how nervous I was to discuss interfaith issues. … I was constantly engaged, challenged, and forced to reconsider my views on religion and the world. Unlike any other student organization I am involved with, the Lubar Institute has forced me to think globally.

Ben Agatston x’15, Jewish from Monroe, Connecticut