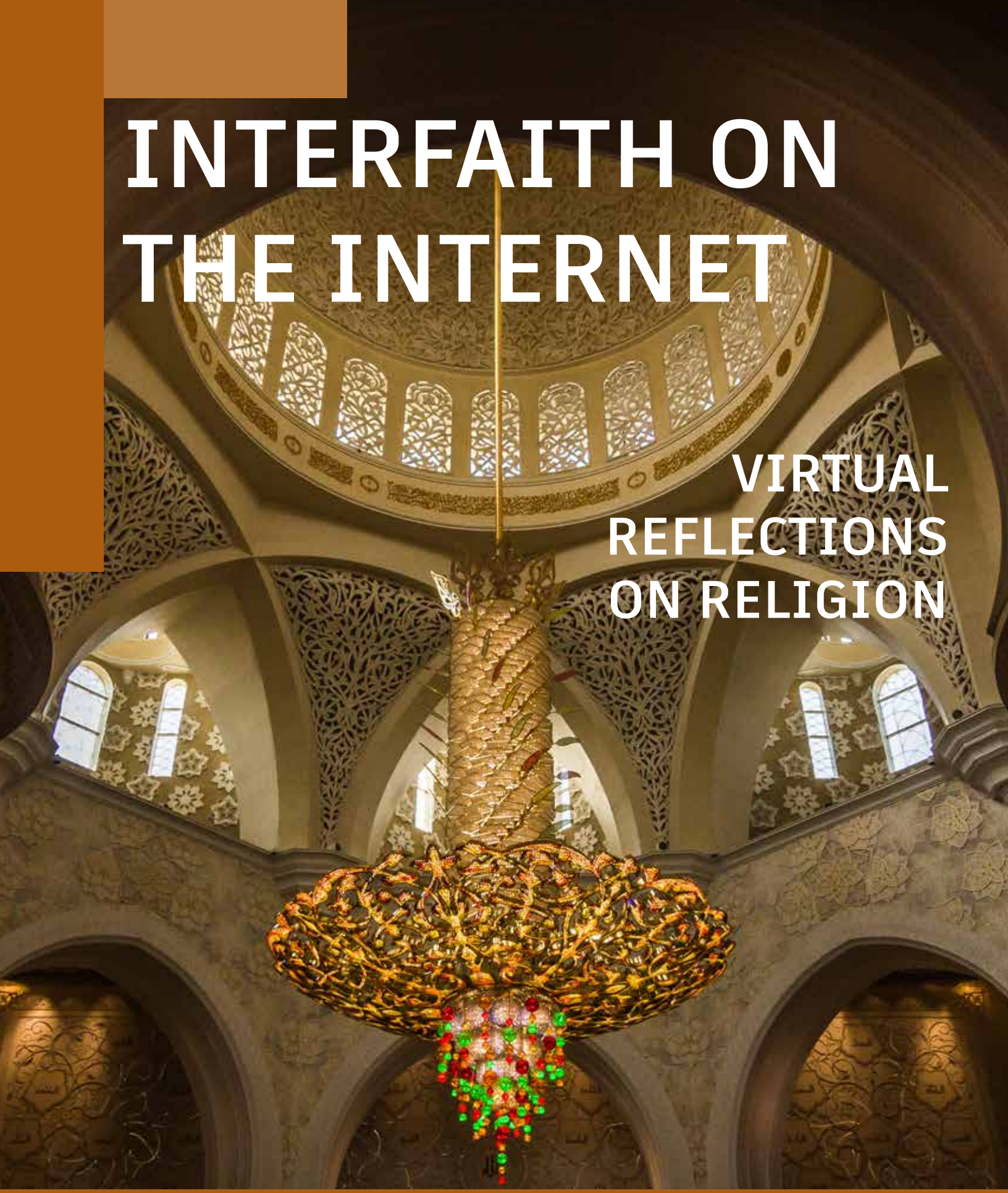
INTERFAITH ON THE INTERNET

VIRTUAL REFLECTIONS ON RELIGION



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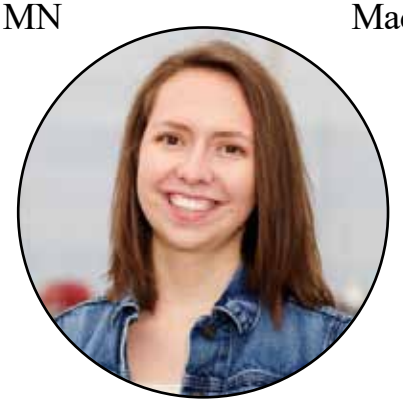

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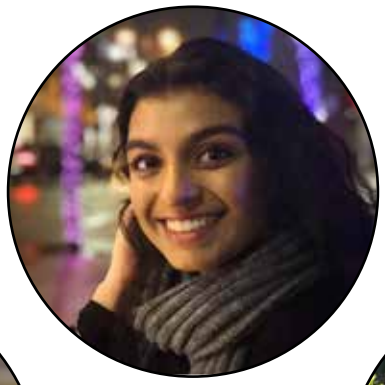

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Introduction

Greetings,

Since 2007, I have directed interreligious conversations at UW-Madison. When I was first getting started here, one of the first books that landed on my desk was *The Faith Club* (2007). In it we see Priscilla, Suzanne, and Ranya, three middle age women from New York City, one of them Jewish, one Christian, and one Muslim. They are in the midst of brutally unfiltered conversations about religion—engaging topics like prayer, ritual, mortality, and holidays. Priscilla, Suzanne, and Ranya address stereotypes, different and shared beliefs, and they often feel hurt and misunderstood. They wrestle with each other's religious convictions and practices, but they know that none of them has a monopoly on religious truth. And they never cease to engage in conversation or lose their deep respect for and appreciation of the other.

The Faith Club was very much a response to life in New York City in a post 9/11 world. Our interfaith fellows had barely started elementary school when it was published. Since then, the world has changed. We are less concerned about violence infused by religious teachings, and look at religion as a resource for the soul in the middle of the pandemic. Our conversations have changed as well, as we have shifted from the Lubar Institute, studying and seeking out a common Abrahamic space, to now the Center for Religion and Global Citizenry, which includes a greater variety of religious as well as agnostic and secular student voices. In the past year, our students learned about different contemplative practices, discussed the intersection of race and religion, religion and the environment, and religious responses to the pandemic. Our conversations often moved from religious literacy to shared religious responsibility.

But the general message of The Faith Club has not changed. The interfaith fellows share the Faith Club's desire to overcome strife and reach for mutual respect and understanding. Like Priscilla, Suzanne, and Ranya, throughout the year at the Center our fellows showed deep appreciation for each other's faiths and practices. And they easily agreed that all their different religious traditions help to navigate life and answer the question of who they are and who they might become in this world.

I am profoundly happy that after five years without a student journal, this year's twenty-one interfaith fellows decided to document their deliberations in an old-fashioned printed journal. Under the pressures of the pandemic, this was a student-led project from start to finish. I am enormously proud of the students for the labor they put in the project and their tenacity to finish it. I am grateful for our students and for everyone who contributed to this journal one way or the other. I hope that everyone will enjoy reading these contributions as much as I will.

Dr. Ulrich Rosenhagen

Director,

Center for Religion and Global Citizenry

Introduction

Dear Fellows,

It has been my true pleasure to get to know you this year. When the pandemic reared its ugly head last spring, though we quickly adapted to hosting dialogues online, we were still nervous about how an online fellowship would go. We were pleasantly surprised by what we were able to do this year, taking advantage of the digital medium. But most importantly, it was your contributions that made the fellowship so meaningful: despite rampant Zoom fatigue, you showed up week after week, bringing your full selves to dialogue, clearly committed to listening and learning from one another.

For those readers who aren't fellows, and for you who are reading this months or years down the road, let me remind you what we did this year. In the fall, we took several weeks to have you introduce yourselves through personal videos and discussion. Anticipating the 2020 election, we discussed religion and politics, grappling with their intersection and the proper boundaries between them. Later in the fall we had the opportunity to learn about contemplative spirituality with comparative theologian Paul Knitter. Starting in fall and extending into our spring semester, you taught one another about your religious (and non-religious) traditions in the "Religion 101" series. Interspersed between these presentations were discussions on transcendent experiences, religion and art, as well as a two-part series on religion and race, led by former fellows. We examined the intersection of race and religion on campus and in our broader lives. In spring we talked about religion and the pandemic and reflected on the value of interreligious dialogue. We ended the semester by planning and executing a public presentation about our common interfaith experience this year. In addition to all of this, you put on a movie night, a trivia event, and put together this very journal!

I thoroughly enjoyed reading and helping you edit your posts through the year. I'm sure you all enjoyed me asking you to further deepen your analysis—my standard request. Little joke. I cannot speak to everything I observed, but there are a few things that stuck out to me: In general, I was struck by the depth of thought, vulnerability, and willingness to pursue challenging issues in your writing. I was particularly drawn to posts which reflected on the ways you navigated your religiosity or worldview—wrestling with what's important to you. And I saw genuine growth this year, as you made personal discoveries and increasingly developed your own voice and authority—not only finding language for your evolving viewpoints, but also recognizing the limits of what you know, naming your uncertainty and seeming open to further learning and exploration. Part of what makes these posts so meaningful is that they are quite personal. I learned so much, reading about how you are exploring your identities, balancing family backgrounds and traditions with the lived realities of this American generation.

Needless to say, as I read these I found myself reflecting on my own beliefs and values, gaining fresh inspiration. Whether you read these throughout the year or are now reading them for the first time, I hope you are similarly moved by the wealth of insight and thoughtfulness in the forthcoming pages. — Thank you, fellows, for all the hard work you put in this year. May this experience and your growth support you as you go on to live and lead in our pluralistic world. I feel deeply blessed to have gotten to know you, and hope that we might speak again soon. Please be in touch!

Wishing you all the best,

David Schulz

Program Coordinator,

Center for Religion and Global Citizenry

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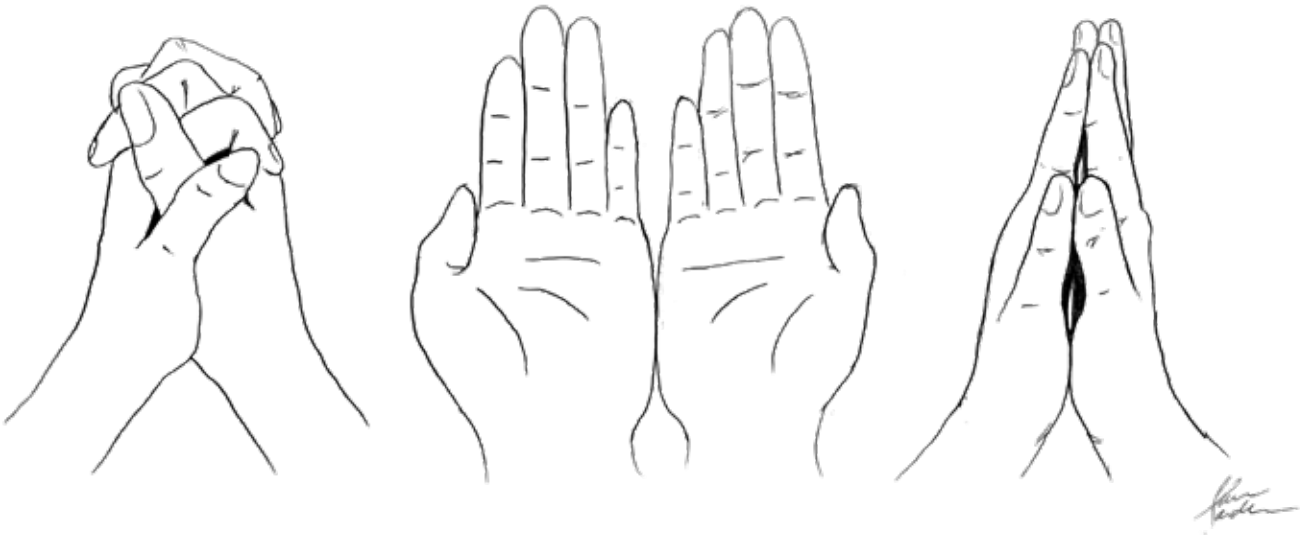


Discussion questions

- What does your faith teach about seasons of faith or how to navigate changes in your life? For those without a religion, how do you navigate these things? What is a lesson you learned during the pandemic that you will take with you?
- What has your religious experience been like during the pandemic? Have those in your faith community taken COVID-19 seriously, or have they disregarded rules and medical advice?
- What has been a source of hope during this pandemic?
- How does constancy in your life help you when you are going through a life-altering circumstance? What in your life gives you constancy?

Religion as A Form of Constancy During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Aitan S Maeir

Judaism • 09/08/20

The coronavirus pandemic continues to change modern-day society. Whether these changes are economic, social, political or of another kind, they are clear changes that are extremely visible and life-changing for many demographics. However, as someone who has an affinity for religion, specifically Judaism, I have come to the understanding that religion is the only constant for me during this pandemic. Although I might not be able to go to my normal synagogue to pray and rejoice with other members, the Jewish doctrine and philosophy of religion has not changed as a result of the current pandemic.

Throughout my daily life, I deal with depression, feelings of not being wanted, and a lack of self-esteem. There are some aspects of my life that depress me. However, there are also many aspects of my life that I am extremely grateful for—particularly those that offer constancy. I have come to the understanding that constancy (and with it, predictability) are features that aid me in managing my depression and its various connected consequences. The constancy and predictability of certain areas of Judaism allow me to continue my religious life without stopping and reexamining despite various changes during the pandemic. I look forward to meals over the Sabbath at home and the Chabad (a center for Jewish life) here on campus. I also look forward to prayers and other cherished facets of Judaism because they ground me and thrill me, and because I know that they happen regardless of whether or not there is a global pandemic. In this sense, the constancy in religion provides me something to look forward to every week, something that I can rely on.

I have immense gratitude for the constancy and beauty I find in religion. I believe that my gratitude is encapsulated in an utterance that I state every time I say Hallel (a Jewish prayer said on various holidays and festivities that is a compilation of verses from Psalms). The utterance, "Praise the LORD, for He is good, His steadfast love is eternal" or in Hebrew "הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה כִּי־טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ" (Psalms 118:1). In my opinion, I believe that God loves everyone and that no matter what event or circumstance, God's love is constant. In addition to the doctrine and philosophy being constant, so too for me is God's love.

God's love, doctrine, and philosophy, which manifest themselves in Judaism, are all constant. This fact does not negate the hardships that we continue to endure during this pandemic. Rather, I believe that it enhances those hardships. For me, the constancy in religion has allowed me to focus on other areas of my life that have not been as constant lately. Religion has not "taken a back seat." I have faith that the constancy in my religion will guide me through the vicissitudes that the pandemic has to offer. The constancy of religion is a comfort for me that I do not take for granted and I thank God every day that I have Judaism to comfort me in times of distress, despair, and chaos.

Throughout this interfaith fellowship, I hope to explore how constancy manifests itself in other global religions. In addition, I desire to explore how that constancy helps us become more adept at dealing with the various changes that are thrown our way in life.

Navigating the Pandemic with Faith

Mukadas Abdullah

Islam • 09/14/20

Ever since the Pandemic started, so many unknowns have entered our lives, more than ever before. It seems as if things that were certainties, like our fall semester in college that includes game days, hangouts, and sitting on the terrace with friends, have forever changed. With mask mandates, social distancing, and limited gatherings, the way we celebrate and socially interact is adjusting. In these times of uncertainty, I lean even more on religion as no one seems to have the answers and things are always fluctuating. Leaning on Allah (the word for God in Arabic), for me during this time makes me believe it will be okay even if I don't know what tomorrow may be like.

As a Muslim woman who was born and raised in predominantly Christian nations such as Russia and the USA, I have always interacted with those who are of different faiths. My religion of Islam has always brought me comfort in times of uncertainty, hardship, and loneliness. Whenever I have felt let down in life or alone, I have come to realize there was a being greater than me, Allah (God) who I could lean on. To me, my faith has meant hope and throughout my life I have met others who find comfort in leaning on something that is greater than them and the circumstances they are in.

This pandemic has made it harder to meet new people due to fears of contracting COVID-19. Despite these circumstances, I am excited that I will have an opportunity through the CRGC fellowship to interact and meet with new people. I am looking forward to understanding what others lean on for support in these uncertain times, and engaging in dialogues with people of different faiths. Discussing faith can be polarizing at times but I want to learn how to facilitate discussions that instead bring us to a greater understanding of one another's faiths. Having friends who are of different faiths like Christianity, Hinduism, and other sects of Islam, I have seen how most faiths are united in their concepts of believing in a being who is greater than us, who made the world, and helps those less fortunate. Seeing the similarities in the religions I encountered, especially the ones that are monotheistic or of Abrahamic tradition, I wondered why it is so difficult to engage in respectful conversations and coexist.

This feels particularly potent for me as a Muslim, as I see my religion so often misunderstood and misrepresented, especially in the media. As a Muslim I believe we are representations of our faith and this has made me want to become a CRGC fellow, to teach others about it. Many people don't know Muslims personally and have only heard of the religion when it has been associated with violence. This has made me feel like my faith, which has brought me so much peace and comfort and taught so much good, has been hijacked by extremists. So along with learning about other religions and belief systems, I hope to show a different perspective about my own faith while engaging in civil and respectful dialogue.

Unmasking Faith

Grace Landrum

Christianity • 02/08/21

I read an editorial by Pope Francis published by the New York Times a couple months ago entitled "A Crisis Reveals What Is in Our Hearts" about the COVID-19 pandemic. The piece was fittingly published the morning after a decision by the U.S. Supreme Court to strike down restrictions of religious gathering sizes in New York. Pope Francis wrote about responses to restrictions put in place by governments to quell outbreaks around the world. He wrote:

> "[G]roups protested, refusing to keep their distance, marching against travel restrictions – as if measures that governments must impose for the good of their people constitute some kind of political assault on autonomy or personal freedom! Looking to the common good is much more than the sum of what is good for individuals. It means having a regard for all citizens and seeking to respond effectively to the needs of the least fortunate."

I am not a Catholic, but I find his words to be a perfect response to this moment.

As I watched a church service from a computer screen where dozens of unmasked churchgoers sat in the pews, I thought of the Pope's statements again. I found myself struggling to listen to anything the pastor said, instead fixating on those who chose not to wear a mask. Many Christian churches refuse to take this pandemic seriously - specifically my family's church. I know not all Christian churches are as reckless as my own, but I am certain that my experience is not novel. This issue is personal for me because it affects many others around the world. My father is an infectious disease specialist at a local hospital. Over the course of this pandemic, I have watched him work extraordinarily long hours, constantly field phone calls and text messages from coworkers and family alike, and treat hundreds of COVID patients. He has watched as so many people – from the young and healthy to elderly and frail patients – lost their lives to COVID.

It seems a failure of my church, and maybe more broadly of Christians in America, that so many who say they are Christians choose not to wear a mask. Have these Christians refusing to wear a mask any concern for humanity? What of the common good and Jesus' command to love others? I believe that Pope Francis presents us with a genuinely Christian (and human) call to action:

> "The pandemic has reminded us that no one is saved alone. What ties us to one another is what we commonly call solidarity. Solidarity is more than acts of generosity, important as they are; it is the call to embrace the reality that we are bound by bonds of reciprocity. On this solid foundation we can build a better, different, human future."

This call to action is a comfort when my own religious community has chosen to reject our reality.

My own experience has left a rather sour taste in my mouth when it comes to Christianity and religious community.

COVID and Religious Conspiracy Theories

Laura Alvarez

Christianity • 03/11/21

Seeing the COVID pandemic unfold through the eyes of the Christian church has troubled me. As we continue to encourage people to vaccinate themselves, I have seen some Christians online claim the vaccine is the "mark of the beast" – a mark which will bar you from the gates of heaven. For example, I have seen people use Revelation 13:16-18 from the New Testament as justification for this conspiracy. It says:

> "And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: 17 And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. 18 Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six."

People specifically connect verse 17 with the vaccine, since rumors claim that vaccination may become mandatory to travel, work, or generally function in society.

Additionally, it was rumored that the vaccine contained luciferase, a compound whose name makes people think of Lucifer–the devil. Luckily, pharmaceutical companies have made the vaccine's ingredient list available, laying these false claims to rest. Although I have seen the "mark of the beast" conspiracy circulate the internet a few times, the most popular conspiracy theory I have seen is that masks are harming us and that the real pandemic is fear. In their minds, the church ought to teach "faith over fear" because fear and panic are said to not come from the Lord.

I find it concerning that those representing the church cannot distinguish between healthy caution and panic, as it is the recklessness of not exerting proper precautions that has led to the pandemic's prolongation. Masks have been proven to significantly reduce transmission of COVID while not limiting our capacity to breath; yet, recently I saw that a pastor my mom was watching was spreading anti-mask propaganda on national television. Although I agree that we should not go into panic mode, spreading the narrative that masks should not be worn is extremely dangerous and selfish. Personally, I saw my step-dad's church suffer the consequences of not taking proper precautions: a couple months ago, the entire church caught the virus at the same time, ultimately killing the pastor and making many others sick.

Hope for After the Plague?

Aerin Leigh Lammers

Reform Judaism • 04/08/21

There are many topics that came to mind when deciding what to write about for this post, but to be candid, I am burnt out. Every idea that came to me seemed too cliche, too boring, or too laborious to attempt. 2020 was a tough year, and 2021 has been more of the same. Every day, week, and month passes both too quickly and too slowly. None of us seem able to catch a break, especially when UW-Madison refuses to give us one.

However, there are brief pauses in the day-to-day monotony, slight glimmers of hope that pop-up now and again. For me this past week, the Jewish holiday of Passover or Pesach gave me the pep in my step to get through another week of zoom lectures. Pesach is the week long remembrance of the ancient Hebrews being liberated from slavery in Egypt. It is celebrated by large dinners called Seders on the first and second nights where we tell the story of Moses demanding Pharaoh to "Let my people go" (if you are looking to watch a fantastic movie and learn more about the story I could not recommend watching the Prince of Egypt enough). While recounting the story this year, I couldn't help but feel the similarities between the predicament of the ancient Hebrews and being a college student today. Disclaimer: being a college student in the time of COVID is obviously not the same level of misery as slavery, but there are similarities that jumped out at me while recounting the passover story, and I wanted to share them with you.

For those less familiar with the story, around 4,000 years ago the Jewish people were enslaved in Egypt. Moses, a Jewish man himself who had previously been raised as a son of the Pharaoh, came back to Egypt and declared that he is going to free the Hebrews from the bonds of slavery. He marched up to the Pharaoh, whom he used to call brother, and demanded that he "let my people go," to which the Pharaoh replied "no." This happened 10 times and each "no" brought about a new plague onto the Egyptian people. Finally, after the worst plague, the Pharaoh relented and let the Jewish people go free from slavery.

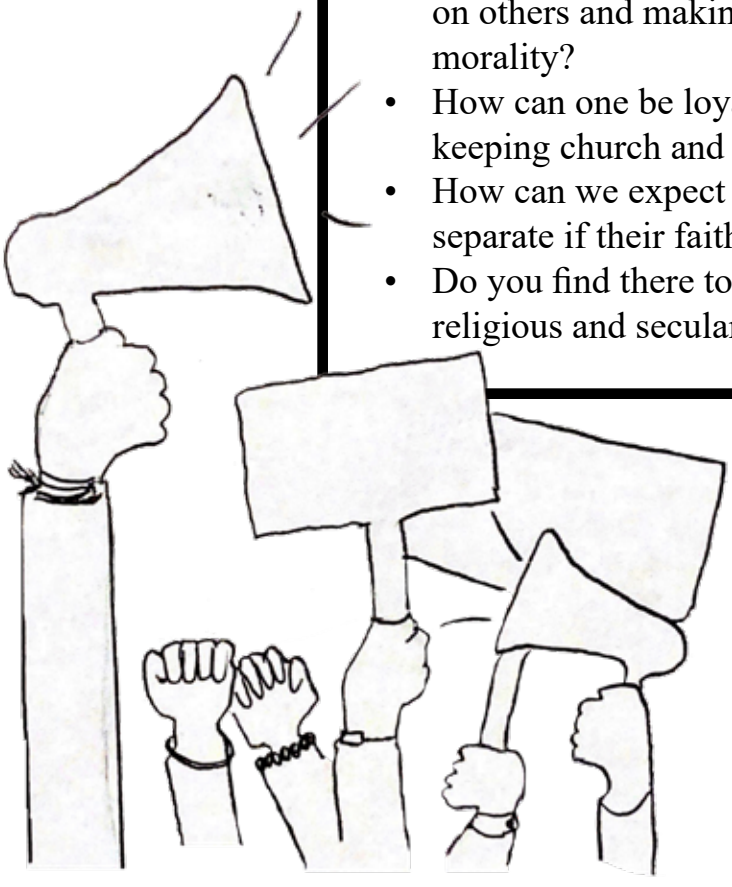
To me, it feels like we, as a society, are the ancient Hebrews on the day that Moses shows up to free us. In our recent past, COVID has, in some sense, enslaved us, constraining our ability to live life to the fullest. But we've been given hope: with the vaccination rollout, we're beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson and Johnson are the proverbial Moses going to COVID and asking to "let my people go". And we are, just as the ancient Hebrews were, a little skeptical yet extremely hopeful that Moses's pleas will work and free us from our less than ideal circumstances. Just like the Jewish people, we do not know how this story is going to end. We can only hope and continue to believe that someday we will make it to the metaphorical Promise Land of being able to leave the house, see our loved ones, and enjoy life without a mask.

So while Passover this year did not provide a literal break from the stress of school, it did provide a bit of hope that perhaps we are closer to the end of this plague than we realize.

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

Discussion questions

- With the struggle for social justice we saw represented in the 2020 presidential election, can we still love others regardless of how they chose to vote? Does your religion call upon you to “love thy neighbor”?
- How do you distinguish between imposing religion on others and making a decision on the basis of your morality?
- How can one be loyal to faith and identity while still keeping church and state separate?
- How can we expect a person to keep church and state separate if their faith is essential to their being?
- Do you find there to be an internal struggle between your religious and secular identities?



New Atheism and Its Discontents

Benjamin Sevart

Atheism • 10/08/20

I don't like saying I'm an atheist to people who aren't. It feels like I'm saying they're wrong about the world in the most profound and consequential way possible. It feels like I'm implicating myself in a whole stream of atheism—dubbed New Atheism—that prizes confrontation, polemics, and bigotry over the universal respect for humanity its adherents claim is so hindered by religion. To be clear, I am an atheist, but I reject New Atheism. Maybe I am wrong; maybe I have been conditioned by my particular experience; maybe New Atheism is valuable, and I should start shouting back at the street preachers who occasionally inhabit Library Mall here in Madison. Does this theory add up?

Perhaps I can chalk up my lack of hostility towards religion to an upbringing without it, especially without the oppressive forms of religion (of any tradition) that feature so heavily in the narratives of some militant 'converts' to atheism. Familiarity breeds contempt, but this cannot explain New Atheism, since the power and influence of organized religion in the Anglosphere only decreased throughout the period before New Atheism and after its decline.

Perhaps it is my gender. I do not face, and could never face, those particularized forms of legal and social violence against women that permeate some religious societies (again, of any tradition). Yet I find this unconvincing too, since the leading New Atheists—the so-called 'Four Horsemen' of Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett—are male as well. There are female New Atheists too, but there was also Phyllis Schlafly.

Perhaps it is my age, as I experienced neither the Moral Majority, nor 9/11, nor Creationism in public schools, nor the worst of the moral panic around homosexuality and AIDS. My age means that while Pat Robertson still thumps his Bible on television, he does not run for President; it means too that the President, despite his insipid Bible photo-ops, clearly cares no more for religion than a fish does for a bicycle. However, this is not a counter argument but my point exactly.

Whatever value New Atheism once had (and I do not concede much) is gone. Times have changed. Religion is simply no longer as important a force for conflict and oppression as to warrant such vigorous opposition. The Global War on Terror, once seemingly the fruition of Huntington's Clash of Civilizations between Islam and the (Christian) West, has devolved into pragmatic geopolitical rivalries between state actors and their bumbling proxies. Meanwhile, the spectre of Christian theocracy, articulated so starkly by Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, loses some relevance when the major achievements of a Republican administration in control of all branches of government for two years were a trade war, a tax cut, and withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accords.

As these examples show, it is nation-state violence, global capitalism, and climate change that worry me. What is the role of religion? It is my sincere hope that religion (1) allows for broader international peace and cooperation, as Interfaith movements from the fight against Apartheid to the dismantling of Jim Crow demonstrate; (2) reminds people that there is meaning and value outside of things that can be bought and sold, that we are not *Homo economicus* but *Homo sapiens*; (3) mobilizes people against the logic of unlimited resource extraction and exploitation that threatens the planet we all share.

New Atheism misdiagnoses problems, alienates potential allies, and sets up for failure the frankly tiny minority of committed atheists. These are the reasons why I reject it.

On the Separation of Church and State

Kally Leidig

Atheism • 10/19/20

For the longest time my favorite President was, and to some degree still is, Thomas Jefferson. My affection was not the result of his inventing the swivel chair, introducing the United States to ice cream, or constantly searching for a then-extinct Mastodon. Instead, it was tethered to his position on Church and State. His call for a "wall of separation" between the two seemed like a brilliant policy to ensure religious freedom by disentangling two deeply complicated features of the human condition. Jefferson likely meant this wall more as a prohibition of a state religion than the current nuanced debate surrounding the state-religion relationship.

My reverence for his 'wall of separation' continued subconsciously until my roommate said: "why can't Christians leave the Bible out of politics?" I soon found myself arguing against the secularization of the public sphere. My stance was so shocking I wasn't sure if It was simply a devil's advocate tendency or if I actually believed what I said.

As it turns out, and contrary to my ardent atheism, I was greatly in favor of upholding religion's role in government. I was reminded of Van Orden v. Perry, a Supreme Court case, which argued the Ten Commandments could be secular because they were used to shape the Constitution.

If that is true, and I believe it is, can this country ever escape its religious roots? And what about people's personal constitutions: the thoughts, ideas, and worldviews that shape our fundamental beliefs, morality, and purpose? For many people this figurative constitution is their religion. To ask someone to 'keep the Bible out of their politics' is to ask someone to keep their morals and other fundamental commitments out of politics. The removal of morality from the public sphere cannot be the answer to this, as it is essential for social progress and prosperity. However, this raises an interesting question: where is the line between imposing your religion on others and making a decision on the basis of your morality?

After reflecting upon this question, I have found no algorithm to distinguish the two and I don't know if there is one. In order to exploit one for the sake of humanity, perhaps we must tolerate the other; or maybe not. I am comforted by the belief that morality is far from stagnant and that no religion, opinion, or view is free from evolving further. As a society, we have a lot of power in choosing what is viewed as a moral overreach and what is basic human decency. Although these social norms can partially regulate the religious imposition grey area, we shouldn't stop striving to gain headway on a more quantitative answer. We must think carefully and deeply and try to understand the positions and intentions of our opponents. Too often, energy is wasted in futile efforts of persuasion simply because we fail to acknowledge the validity of alternative schools of thought and speak in terms only we understand.

Halloween and Holding Identities

Jake Henry

Judaism • 10/29/20

Halloween is just around the corner, and I cannot tell you how excited I am. As a horror movie fan, a former special effects makeup artist, and someone who loves demanding free candy from strangers, this holiday has always been one of my favorite times of the year. Yet, it's a pretty un-Jewish holiday. Its origins date back to the Celtic celebration of Samhain, which was altered by Roman occupation and then by Christianity, turning it into a celebration of saints. So if we're keeping track of that, Halloween originated in polytheism, was further altered by another polytheistic group, and was finally impacted by a religion that fundamentally differs from Judaism.

Beyond all of that, so much of Halloween centers on the dead (ghosts are out and about, the line between the worlds of the living and the dead is thinnest, etc.), which is antithetical to Judaism. Judaism speaks very little on death in our texts. Like all things in Judaism, different denominations may differ on very specific points, but a general lack of fixation on death is very common across all denominations. Judaism's mourning traditions function to ensure that the dead get their respect while ensuring the living don't experience an excess of grief, gradually enabling them to move forward.

Along with these themes, Halloween also has a familiar cast of characters: The Vampire, Frankenstein's Monster, The Werewolf, and The Mummy to name a few. For me, however, the most iconic Halloween cast member is the classic witch. Green skin, a wart on her nose, and the trademark hat among other traits make the witch "The Witch". Even beyond Halloween, my favorite characters in any movie or tv show have always been the witches. However, you may be shocked to learn that the common portrayal of witches is an antisemitic caricature of Jewish women. The green skin (indicating general inhumanity), the big hooked nose, modest clothing (associated with orthodox women), the cackle (showing loudness and rudeness), and the use of magic are all common stereotypes Jewish people have dealt with for centuries. This is not the most comfortable feeling, knowing that some of my favorite characters are rooted in sexist and antisemitic tropes.

In conclusion, I have none. The only thing I can leave you with is this: dissonance between my secular and Jewish identities is common, not just on October 31st. It leads to me feeling a need to sacrifice either my Jewish joy or my non-Jewish joy; thus far I have never achieved true peace in either identity. Maybe it's a cop-out, but in Judaism, there is a belief that if you are born Jewish or convert to Judaism, you are and you will always be Jewish. Meaning you cannot convert from Judaism, nor act in such a way that would take away your Jewish identity. It's a bit of a loophole, but I find some sort of peace in knowing that no matter how I choose to act, I am still Jewish. I may be considered a bad Jew, but I am Jewish nonetheless, and that is fine by me.

Loving Thy Neighbor in an Election Year: An Impossible Task?

Grace Landrum

Christianity • 11/02/20

Tomorrow is the United States Presidential election. I am sure you already knew that, though. It's hard to miss with the constant barrage of advertisements, the slew of social media posts, and lots of yard signage. I know for me personally, I feel a great sense of anxiety regarding tomorrow's election results. Regardless of what side of the aisle you are on, I am sure you feel anxious too.

I have found myself reflecting on the intersection of politics and religion in the United States over the past few months. These are typically portrayed as some of the most polarizing topics to bring up in a casual conversation. I suppose that is because we are so often entrenched in our views and cannot possibly imagine finding common ground with individuals who have different views than our own.

I can say with confidence that my experience with the CRGC fellowship thus far has proven that there is much common ground to be found among different religious groups. Politics, however, I am not so sure about. In a country that is increasingly polarized, with political party values so diametrically opposed, I find myself truly unable to understand the views of the party which I am not a member of.

In the Christian faith, Jesus says "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." From our CRGC fellowship meetings, it has become apparent that the "Golden Rule" is a part of many religious traditions, not just Christianity. Yet, this year it feels much harder to practice loving others in this way. I still believe that all individuals are deserving of dignity, but are they deserving of our love? How do we learn to love others even when we disagree with them? And what do we do when they are hateful?

Twentieth century Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr had some thoughts on this matter. In his book Love and Justice, he argues that there truly is no way to practice the kind of love that we are called to in the Gospels. As a part of the Neo-Orthodoxy movement, he stood firm in his belief that "the saints are tempted to continue to see that grace may abound, while sinners toil and sweat to make human relations a little more tolerable and slightly more just." Maybe our religious optimism and fervent belief in the "Golden Rule" are unsuited for the modern era. Possibly our focus on loving everyone leads us to tolerate too much and neglect the pursuit of justice.

But there's more. In Matthew 5 (part of the Christian New Testament) we are told directly by Jesus to love our enemies: "you have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." However, loving your enemies is so very difficult. Maybe the past several years have made me a cynic, because I must admit I find Niebuhr's ideas appealing. His views feel like an "out" of sorts. They feel like justification for my inability to love those whom I cannot agree with. But if I cannot love others and forgive them for their hatred, how am I any better than them?

Reflecting on this Political Moment

Calvin Floyd

Christianity • 11/19/20

As someone who was beginning to come of age four years ago, this year and, this election in particular, allow for an interesting time to reflect, both on myself and my country. Four years ago, in the fall of my junior year of high school, I began to develop my first political ideologies and understanding of the world just as Donald Trump became president. This was a fraught time to come of age—a time of division, polarization and divisiveness. At the same time that I was learning more about who I was and what I believed in, much of the social fabric of our nation was being torn down the middle.

The question of religion and its role in our democracy was at the center of these divisions. I was growing in my personal faith journey and forming a relationship with God. I saw how many of these national issues seemed to group the religious communities I considered myself a part of on one side of these debates, and the political spectrum in general—almost always the side I wasn't on. This made it harder for me to feel a deep connection to my faith community and, at times, with God.

I grew up in the era of Donald Trump, but more importantly, the era of polarization in America. Sometimes, this division was described as the Evangelical right on one side, and the "woke" left on the other side. My Christian values taught me to fight for justice, love my neighbor, and fight for the oppressed. Because of this, I began to believe in causes on the left yet, I felt like everyone around me assumed that, because of my religious beliefs, I must have been the enemy, unwilling to fight for social justice. In a country with a myriad of beautiful religions and traditions and, unfortunately, just as many opinions about each of them and what they imply, it can feel hard to be grounded in one's beliefs and faith—and that's coming from someone whose religious community has controlled the dominant narrative in this nation since its founding.

2020 is teaching me, and this country, a lot about who we are. In many ways, I see 2020 as a climax of undercurrents that have been at work for many years, brought to the forefront in a year of unrest and uncertainty. We're facing a global pandemic, a nationwide racial reckoning, a mounting climate crisis, and a presidential transition. 2020 is teaching me that faith and community are more important now than ever: we must come together in shared community, with a faith in each other and whatever it is we may believe in. This is because, when we are together, respecting one other and our beliefs, we are unstoppable, as demonstrated by democracy and activism in this election. This time of reflection has allowed me to understand that if I am a Christian who disagrees with the hatred and polarization sometimes attributed to its followers, I don't need to explain myself because I know that isn't what it means to be a Christian. Faith is too important to let go of because of other peoples' judgments. I've learned that, in this moment, it is important to be true to ourselves and our beliefs and to accept others on that basis. 2020 has also taught me that there is so much potential for love and community in this nation, and it starts with having faith, respecting one another's beliefs, and not being afraid to use our voice.

Keep the Faith?

Danielle Wendricks

Spirituality • 11/23/20

As you may or may not remember from my last blog post, I have a slight obsession with news programming. In the aftermath of the election, I was camped out on the couch, glued to the television, watching the news to ease my anxieties (though really maybe intensifying them). Simply put, that week was a sleepless and emotion-filled blur. I heard commentary on the endless counting of absentee ballots, announcements of states turning red or blue, analyses of the demographics of counties, and most relevant to this blog post, a sprinkle of Christian euphemisms and quotes.

Throughout the week, Joe Biden reminded his fellow Americans to "keep the faith." In his Saturday night speech after being announced as the elected President, Biden shared a rendition of a popular bible verse, "to everything there is a season: a time to build, a time to reap, and a time to sow and a time to heal," and a hymn that he associated with his deceased son, Beau: "And he will raise you up on eagles' wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, and make you to shine like the sun and hold you in the palm of his hand."

I feel like I'm at a crossroads with these religious undertones within our political sphere.

I don't consider myself very religious anymore, but like Biden, I've leaned on religious texts during emotionally charged times in my life. Ironically enough, it was Biden's book, Promise Me, Dad, that I cherished during an especially uncertain time a few years back. It is very clear that Biden is a man of God and that his faith has been his rock as he has navigated his life.

While religious text and references to Christianity can make me feel like I'm wrapped in a hug from my grandparents, they can also stimulate a sudden cringe that causes my body to curl up. I am often bothered by the constant presence of Christianity in society. The traditions are exclusive and don't represent or encompass the ideals of so many of my fellow Americans. Biden is looking to unify our nation, but Christianity is not something we all have in common. To many, Christianity or even the mention of God brings an overwhelming sense of division and harm due to the history of using the religion as a weapon to control, assimilate, colonize, and oppress particular identity groups.

Unlike our often polarized news programming, I empathize and see value in both sides. While Biden exemplifies so many of the privileged identity types, it does kind of feel like a double standard to deprive him of his religious identity. That said, could he tone down the religious references? I'd say so. But also, I suppose maybe he was using Christianity to round up some conservative support? Is oppressing some folks to please other folks okay? I don't find that morally right. Clearly, I still don't have an insightful answer or opinion to how to negotiate identity and religion within the political sphere.

To get down to the bottom of this debate, I think we all need to hold close to heart a sentiment that President-Elect Biden communicated in his acceptance speech. He said that he wants to have an America where we all "listen to each other again." I share this dream with him. I'd like to live in a country where folks of all religious backgrounds can talk and listen and question the systems of power. Maybe once we listen to folks again, and especially folks that our system has relentlessly oppressed, we can make decisions that reflect the good of all people.

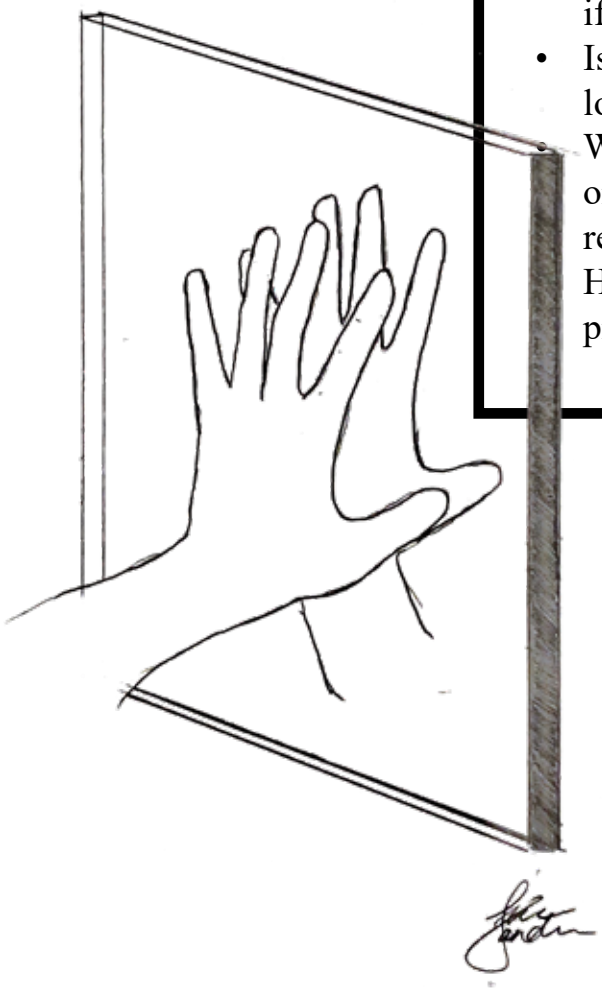
BORDER & PLACE

Discussion questions

- How has your upbringing influenced your relationship with yourself and your identity? How do you hope to grow with your philosophy and spirituality?
- What are some intersections between culture and religion that you have observed within your own religion? Do these intersections cause any problems, if so how can they be resolved?
- Is your religion connected to a specific country or location? Does it have a regional or global diaspora?

What experiences have you had with the practices or traditions of other faith groups? How have you responded to these experiences?

How do you respond in moments when religious practices or places do not meet your expectations?



Bridge Between Cultures

Simran Kaur Sandhu

Sikhi • 08/31/20

Growing up as a first-generation American is challenging at times: we're the bridge between cultures, the children of the immigrants that have served as the backbone for this nation they call home.

I was brought up in a Punjabi Sikh family, and my parents were strict but nurturing. They put me and my siblings through school with many extracurricular activities and kept us busy with academic summer camps and jobs. They prioritized our education, character, and work ethic, as these were the biggest reasons for their success in their lives before and after they immigrated to America. "Without a good education and personality (excellent academic profile) and having a good job (doctor, engineer, lawyer), leading a comfortable life would be hard," they would say. Speaking to us in Punjabi, my parents taught us our heritage, and took us to Gurdwara (Sikh temple) to foster our bond with our faith and the foundation of our lifestyle, Sikhi. In addition to raising us like they were raised, my parents brought us up as American as they could. What they couldn't prevent, though, was the clash of cultures that we were inevitably going to face and continue to face.

On the one hand, we want to be like everyone else (many who are white and "American") and seek acceptance from a group that doesn't value our "foreign" heritage. We whitewash our names, taking up "American" names to accommodate. In an effort to feel accepted by American society and by becoming complacent with the pronunciation of our names, we become foreigners to our heritage. The tradeoff between accepting and compromising our identities leaves us feeling like we have to be validated by others. We feel incomplete because at home we're American, and out in the world we're from whatever country our skin suggests. Like a bridge, we're stuck between two banks, two cliffs, two worlds with what seems like an insurmountable divide, but nevertheless, we persist.

This summer, I spent my time indoors because of the pandemic. During this time, I've been trying to practice better mental health habits because I was able to realize the acceptance I had sought for so long was something I first had to give myself. Things like validation or forgiveness were easy to provide others, but giving these to myself was something I rarely did. I was so consumed by being a bridge for others that I wasn't even thinking about maintaining the bridge with myself.

I applied for this fellowship with the CRGC because I believe that it will offer me space where I can rebuild the bridge with myself by embarking with others on this part of my journey with Sikh Philosophy. In the past, I've experienced the most learning about myself with the company of others, especially with those who show a genuine interest to unapologetically share their thoughts and beliefs. I hope that with this fellowship, I grow personally and get to share that experience with my peers.

Religion: A Topic of Unity, Connection, and Memories

Amanjot (Amy) Yadev

Sikhi • 09/03/20

My first meaningful discussion about religion on the UW-Madison campus occurred at the residence hall I stayed at my freshmen year. A floormate and I were the only two people sitting in the lounge that day, and we had recently begun to become friends. She started the conversation by asking me what my thoughts were about religion. I didn't know how to respond—as my mind raced with thoughts, I wondered if she would think I was weird if I admitted how much my religion has truly influenced my life. As we discussed the role of our religious beliefs in shaping who we were as people, I was surprised to see how much in common we both had. My friend did not have any specific religion she observed but still expressed feeling spiritual.

We expressed many commonalities about the role of religion: we both agreed that many religions strive to promote peace among their devotees and emphasize the goal for one to be the best version of themselves. At the end of the conversation, I was surprised at how smoothly the conversation had gone and how much I had enjoyed it. Typically, religion was not a topic that was discussed in my high school classes. In fact, religion was considered a divisive topic. This is because many people associated religion with religious extremists that resort to violence if they feel there is a threat to their faith. Furthermore, because religions often provide guidance to their followers on how to be moral, they can create divides between who is a good vs. bad person. After the conversation with my friend, though, I realized that instead of being divisive, religion could be a topic of unity. We both had respect for each other's opinions and beliefs and made a conscious effort to understand how those beliefs guided our daily actions and interactions with other people.

After this conversation, I wanted to seek out more opportunities that would allow me to learn about various religions, beliefs, customs and how others worship (or do not worship) on campus. My desire was further fueled by memories of my childhood trips to India. When I visited India, we not only visited the holiest site for Sikhs (the Golden Temple or Darbar Sahib) but also various Hindu temples or Mandirs. I had the opportunity to witness pujas (Hindu worship ritual) being performed. In my grandparents' village, located close to the Gurdwara (Sikh Temple) where we went every day, was a Mosque. Every morning and evening, I heard prayers recited over the loudspeaker from the Mosque. It was beautiful to see how peacefully people of many religious backgrounds co-existed in the village.

Putting together my experiences of religion, I realized religion impacts the lives of people in all parts of the world—from Punjab, India to the Leopold dorm in Madison, WI. Historically, religion is responsible for many of the world's cultural and civilizational developments, influencing law, politics, literature, music, education, and much more. As an Interfaith Fellow, I will have the chance to better understand how religion functions in our culture. I am excited to expand on that initial discussion about religion with my friend and build deeper, meaningful connections with the other CRGC fellows and our campus community.

Life Among Others

Osama Fattouh

Islam • 10/12/20

Growing up in Middleton, WI, I was always both an ethnic and religious minority. My peers and friends were all Christians practicing to various degrees, but nevertheless still identified as Christian. I, on the other hand, was a Sunni Muslim which made me feel as if I didn't fit in with the rest of the group. This feeling of being "different" made me insecure about my religion and my identity as a whole. When my parents called me out of school for the religious holiday of Eid, I would tell my friends that I was sick that day. Or, for instance, when I would be at a friends house and it was time for me to pray, I would make a random excuse as to why I had to leave. This continued throughout elementary school and into middle school.

However, as I grew older and began learning more about my religion, my faith only strengthened. As I learned about Islam and began applying its teachings in my day-to-day life, I began to feel better about who I was. I could slowly feel the insecurity of my uniqueness fade away with every prayer. I finally began to feel proud about being Muslim. I stopped making excuses and began telling my friends that I had 5 daily prayers that I must attend to. I told my friends about the holidays I celebrated and how they were different from theirs. I also answered my friends' questions about my religion and clarified misconceptions they saw in mainstream media. As I became more open about my religious identity, I felt prouder and my faith only got stronger.

My love for my religion is what drove me to join the CRGC. The main reason I used to be insecure about my religion was the mainstream media's depiction of it. They made it seem as if all Muslims were terrorists and that all we want is bloodshed and violence. When in reality, and in my own experience, Islam is all about peace and heavily scrutinizing violence to the point that it condemns anyone who participates in actions that harm others.

I joined the CRGC so I could help clear up those misconceptions and help lead society one step closer toward global peace and harmony. People from all religions and no religion need to come together and teach one another about their traditions and worldviews so that we can all accept and respect each other. In the end, we are all humans trying to figure out our purpose on this planet. Who are we to judge each other when we don't even know the complete answer ourselves?

Chemistry of Religion and Culture

Osama Fattouh

Islam • 03/07/21

Islam is a highly diverse religion with adherents all over the world. In my case, I am the son of two Syrian immigrants who are Sunni Muslim. With Muslims being from all around the world, intersections between culture and religion create slight differences in the way Islam is practiced. For example, Muslims greet each other or say goodbye with the phrase "Asalamualaikum" which simply means "peace be upon you"; however, you will commonly hear Muslims from Pakistan or India say "Allah Hafiz" for a goodbye, which means "May God be your Guardian". Most of the differences in Islamic practice are small like this.

Unfortunately, the intersectionality of culture and religion can create problems when Muslims conflate their country's culture with their religion. A prime example of this is the role xenophobia has in marriage. Like other countries around the world, many Islamic countries foster xenophobia, meaning that members of one country hold unfair prejudice against members of another. You will see many Muslims telling their children that they must marry someone from their own country or from a country that is "favorable". The parents would say that Islam justifies this, when in reality nowhere in the religion does it state you have to marry someone from your country.

This example is one of many that Muslims around the world will experience. With globalization, Muslims need to have a better understanding of their religion now more than ever—particularly in places like the United States where the Muslim population is ethnically diverse. If allowed to divide Muslims from one another, the culturally-diverse expressions of Islam endanger the Ummah.

The Muslim community, or the Ummah as the Prophet calls it, is very important to maintain. Muslims are supposed to work together and help each other rather than fight over problems that are insignificant. How is the Muslim Ummah supposed to help and support people of all religions across the world if we are not even working together?

Luckily, the new generation of Muslims in America are from all across the world and have grown up together in the Mosques, forging beautiful relationships with one another across national differences. Muslims in the new generations are friends with Muslims and non-Muslims from around the world. Embracing this diversity within the Ummah is helping it become more cohesive, interconnected, and ultimately stronger—allowing Muslims to be able to help humanity and improve the lives of everyone.

All's Well that Ends (Western) Wall

Jake Henry

Judaism • 03/18/21

Jews have a very strong connection to Israel. One of our names is "The Children of Israel" because one of our Patriarchs, Jacob, changed his name to Israel. And while the founding of the modern State of Israel was unethical in many ways (and continues to operate in unethical ways), many Jewish people see Israel as a country that helped save Jews from antisemitism in Europe and the rest of the world. Jewish people grow up hearing a lot about Israel, which over time can lead to seeing it through rose-colored glasses.

On my trip to Israel, one thing I eagerly anticipated was visiting the Western Wall. The Western Wall is the last remaining wall of the second temple that was destroyed—and it is considered the holiest site in Judaism. So you can imagine there was anticipation building between me and the other students, so much so that the staff on the trip actually gave us a pep talk, saying that a lot of people are very underwhelmed by the wall because of how much they've heard about it growing up. Even with the talk, I was excited. As we entered the plaza, it was so hot. I was separated from my female friends because some Jewish religious spaces are like that, and a guy kept calling me and my group mates "fake Jews" for not wearing certain optional religious items—but even with all that, I was still excited.

We finally got to the wall, past all of the other people. I looked at it, I touched it, and... it really was just a wall—a tall, old wall, made of tan bricks, dry rooty vegetation spilling out at random points from the face, cracks filled with scrolls of prayers and wishes written by those who have visited, but still just a wall. I kept waiting and waiting to feel this deep religious experience I had been expecting, but nothing came. Gd didn't come down from the sky; there was no red sea parting, I didn't have a vision of The Temple in its former glory. I was expecting to feel this chain of connection to all of Judaism, a sense of purpose and religious clarity, but instead I was just getting sunburned in Jerusalem, feeling oddly lonely and disconnected. But others around me felt differently, as 15 feet away a group of Orthodox Israelis were dancing and praying; I could hear voices all around me filled with emotion and religious purpose. I envied them then, and I envy them now.

The Western Wall is simultaneously mundane and holy, so it retains wonder even in the absence of novelty. Up until then, my Jewish Identity was very comfortable to me, but this was only because of my lack of experience in the Jewish world. It was only after this trip that I started to learn more about Judaism, becoming more religious, experiencing different Jewish communities, and doing the work to learn about my religion. I can't say that I have a rock solid confidence in my identity as a Jew, but with all I've learned and done, I'm ready for round two with the Wall.

A Small Church in Suzdal'

Maya Reinfeldt

Russian Orthodoxy • 03/25/21

The summer after my freshman year of college, I toured the Golden Ring of Russia, a Soviet-era tourist route consisting of a series of medieval cities not far from Moscow. Specifically, my family and I traveled to Vladimir, Suzdal', Kostroma, Ples, Yaroslavl', Rostov, and Sergiev Posad: I know most readers of this post won't be familiar with these cities, but it's important to me that I name them as grateful acknowledgment of the way they changed me. When we first boarded the tour bus on a chilly, early morning in Moscow, I expected that the coming trip would bring history lessons, ancient architecture, and small-town museums. I looked forward to good food and peaceful scenes of Russian country life. I certainly wasn't disappointed. In fact, I gained so much more than I anticipated: during my time in these cities, I connected with my faith in a way that I had previously tried and failed to do.

Growing up in the States, I sporadically attended whatever Orthodox church — Russian or Greek — was closest to us on the Easter and Christmas holidays. Sitting in the pews, my silk headscarf tied lightly around my head, not understanding much of the Church Slavonic service, I always felt out of place. The unfamiliar smell of incense filled me with such an awe, and I remember desperately wanting to connect with the God for whom such beautiful buildings like the churches I went to could be built. I wanted to connect with the same Jesus who was painstakingly painted in bright colors on the wall above me. Until Russia, that sense of belonging never clicked. I felt like I was faking a membership in my own religion, despite my baptism and the cross necklace I never took off.

In Suzdal', we visited a small, wooden church with simply painted icons of Jesus, Mary, and numerous saints covering the walls. The lighting was warm and yellow, and a few bouquets of bright pink flowers lined the altar. This church hadn't changed much over the years, and it remained the same type of building that Russian peasants would have frequented centuries ago. It felt right to be standing there in that small church, the summer breeze bringing a fresh smell through the open doors. Though I might not fully understand the services, I shared an experience with illiterate villagers of the past who could not read the Bible; the kind eyes looking down from icons on the walls connected anyone who saw them with God, language irrelevant. In that church I felt grounded, one with the beautiful Russian landscape surrounding us, the wood of the structure taken from nearby forests. I felt understood, seen, and comfortable. There was a sense of fullness brought on by the simplicity of the church, and in that fullness I felt connected to generations of those before me who came to worship, to love, to get married, to grieve. I was organically connected to God, and to the God of my ancestors, for the first time in my life.

The rest of the Golden Ring tour brought similar experiences, shifts of perspective, and feelings of fulfillment. We saw monasteries nestled in green, rolling fields near the crook of a sparkling river, a beautiful white church with nothing but a lone birch tree beside it, and domed cathedrals bedazzled with gold stars. I understood why someone born and raised in lands such as these would devote themselves to God: in summer, the landscape inspires joy and gratitude, while in winter, one prays for warmth and safety. Though we soon returned to the soaring metropolis of Moscow and from there flew back to Madison, the feelings I experienced in that little wooden church remain tucked away in my memory, ready to call upon when I need to feel grounded and loved. I never again have to doubt the validity of my faith, for what else could bring such elation, yet such peace?

“Let Them Worship How, Where, or What They May”

Bryce Couperus
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints • 03/31/21

One of the greatest experiences of my life was the opportunity to serve a two-year mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a volunteer in Russia and Kazakhstan. During that time as a representative of my church, I was able to interact with and be enriched by the religious practices of a diverse range of individuals with different nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, and religious traditions.

One specific experience took place while I was living in a Western Siberian city called Tyumen. I had some friends that had never been in a Russian Orthodox temple, and I wanted to show them the beautiful architecture and religious icons that were so meaningful to many of the Russian people. On a holiday evening we went to the Holy Trinity Monastery, and to my pleasant surprise a worship service began while we were visiting. There we were in the dimly candle-lit temple amid a growing mass of people, with the scent of burning incense permeating the air. Everyone was standing together, and I quickly felt as though the mass of worshipers had become a cluster not unlike a human can of sardines. The leader of the worship service chanted prayers in Church Slavonic, the vocal choir replied with a beautifully harmonious strain, and the congregation crossed themselves while praying under their breath. It was such a different form of worship than what I was used to, yet it was beautiful in its own way.

That evening I recorded a few thoughts from my experience in my personal journal:

> “I saw the goodness of their hearts. It was reflected in their faces how much that opportunity to be there and pray meant to them. It was reflected as I saw a woman with tears streaming down her face worship the Lord—it was personally meaningful to her. It was reflected by this very old babushka kneeling before a priest, struggling due to her age to be on the ground and participating in some form of confession. It was reflected by all those faithful dedicated believers being there on this holiday evening (Russia Day). Their hearts are so good… They are so wonderful, so noble, so easy to love… I hope I never forget that feeling of standing among the congregation, the dark temple interior, the smell of candles burning, the prayers being read and choir singing, the people so reverent–just it all.”

This was one of my many experiences in Russia, but it has had a deep impact on how I interact with others from different religious backgrounds. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has thirteen Articles of Faith that represent brief statements of doctrine we believe in, the eleventh of which states, “We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may.” Essentially, this doctrine states that we believe in the freedom for all individuals to worship in ways they feel best expresses their connection to the object of their worship, and that inherent right should be respected by all. I didn’t understand all of the rituals or symbolic meanings represented in that Russian Orthodox temple, but I left understanding that those people were worshiping in a way that was meaningful for them. I firmly believe that all individuals should have that freedom, as well as the respect of others, and I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to experience and be enriched by others as they practice their own religious beliefs and traditions.

LEFT: The Nauvoo Illinois Temple is a temple for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Temples are sacred and holy locations where members draw nearer to Heavenly Father, make covenants, and learn of God's plan. (July 2015). [Credit Bryce Couperus]

BELOW: Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, MN during the week following the murder of George Floyd by members of the Minneapolis Police Department. Due to protesting in response to Floyd's death, many local businesses and grocery stores were no longer open in the area, and community members were not able to acquire necessities. The image shows a donation drive hosted by the church, which represents the people of Minneapolis coming together and supporting one another in times of crisis. (June 2020). [Credit Milan Stolpman]

NEXT PAGE, TOP: Holy Name Cathedral, a Catholic church in Chicago, IL. This church looked like a typical church from the outside. When I walked in, I was in awe by the beauty that was inside. This church reminded me of the importance of visiting the sanctuaries of different faiths. Although our religions may vary, our love for our creators is the same. There is nothing more humbling than seeing the product of someone's love for their God, regardless of the faith they belong to. (2017). [Credit Yaseen Najeeb]

NEXT PAGE, BOTTOM: Sheikh Zayed Mosque in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. This mosque in Abu Dhabi is frequented by thousands upon thousands of worshipers each day. With nearly 100 domes, crystal chandeliers, and glassy tranquil water, it was empowering seeing my faith manifested in such beautiful architecture. To me, this mosque was a love letter from its designer to the divine. (2018). [Credit Yaseen Najeeb]

LEFT: The Russian Orthodox church referenced in the article "A Small Church in Suzdal"' on page 22. (August 2019). [Credit Maya Reinfeldt]

DIAGONAL: Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. In the Christian faith, this is believed to be the location that Jesus was hung on the cross. It was an incredibly moving experience to be in the space that is so pivotal to the stories I grew up hearing. (January 2019). [Credit Danielle Wendricks]

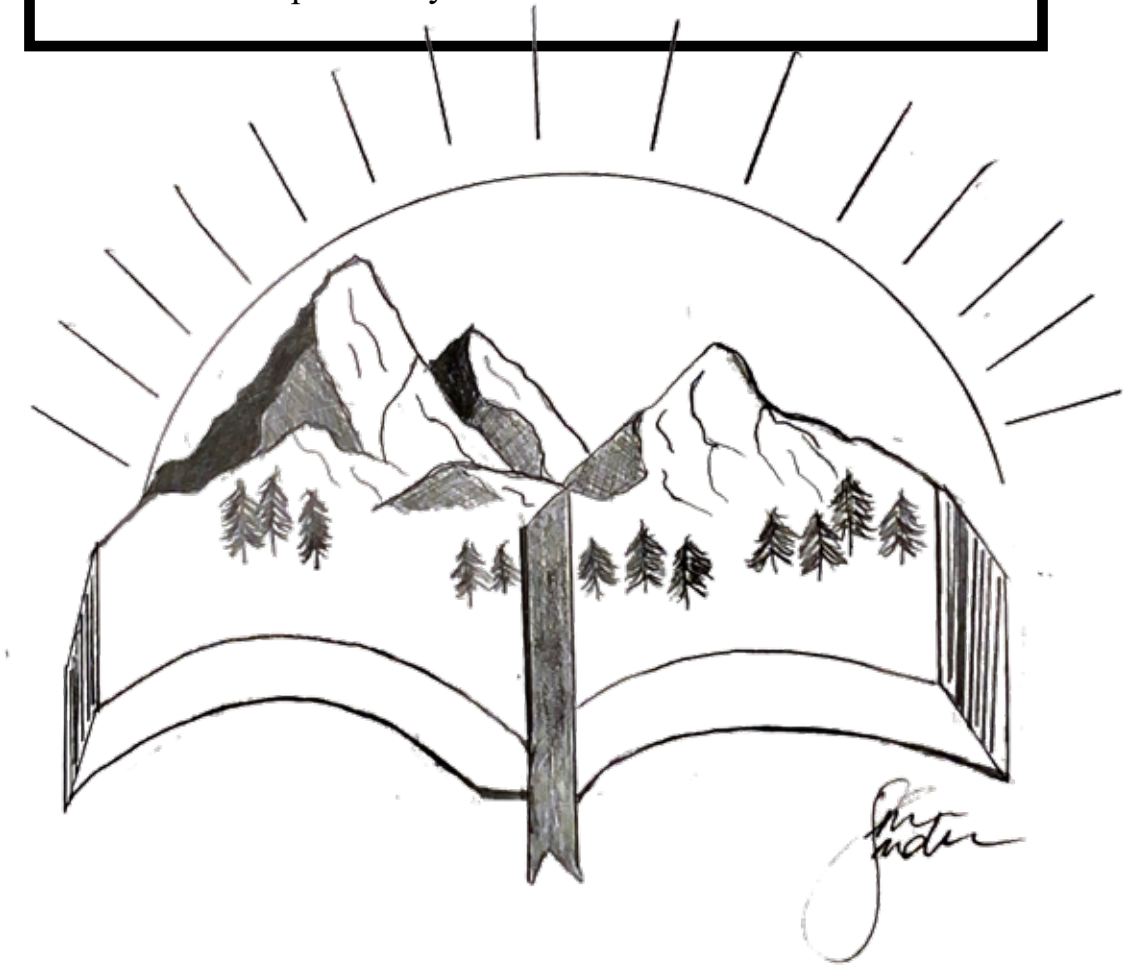
BELOW: Wat Phra That Doi Suthep is a Theravada Buddhist temple located on top of Doi Suthep, one of two twin peaks of a mountain west of Chiang Mai, Thailand. The legend of the temple's origins involves a monk named Sumanathera who is said to have found Gautama Buddha's shoulder bone, which was later tied to the back of a white elephant released into the jungle. It is said that the elephant climbed Doi Suthep, called out three times, and dropped dead. Interpreted as an omen, the elephant's death led King Nu Naone to order the construction of the temple in the 14th century. Taken while on a UW Hmong Studies in Thailand summer study abroad trip. (June 2018). [Credit Katherine O'Brien]

NEXT PAGE: Russian Orthodox church in Yaroslavl, Russia. Icons are very important to the Russian Orthodox tradition, and this interior is painted with beautiful icon frescoes. (August 2019). [Credit Maya Reinfeldt]

SCHOLARSHIP

Discussion questions

- What steps can be taken to increase the quality of religious education in schools?
- How can educators teach about religions that are minoritized in the United States without placing an unfair burden on the students that practice these faiths to educate their classmates?
- When teaching others about your faith or religious background, how important is it to present factual information, and how important is it to convey your own lived experiences?
- What is the value of the academic study of religion? What can it do specifically for Interfaith work?



To Teach is to Learn Twice

Azariah Horowitz

Judaism • 10/15/20

Last fall, I started teaching Hebrew school at a synagogue off campus. Repeatedly throughout the course of that whole first year of teaching, I found myself having to step back and reevaluate key things about my religion.

In December, my kids traipsed into the synagogue building after school dragging slush in on oversized snow boots and bundled up to their noses in fleecy scarves. They hung their hats in the back of our classroom, and we studied the Amidah, one of the central prayers in a standard Jewish service.

Beyond teaching them how to read the Hebrew letters in the siddur and when to sit, stand, and bow, I grappled with how to make prayer meaningful for these fifth graders who could barely sound out the words on the page, let alone understand their meaning. How could the Amidah be relevant when it sometimes just sounds like gibberish? How could something be both spiritual and yet so technical at the same time? In planning these lessons, I was forced to take a step back and rethink my own process of praying (I still don't understand every word of the Hebrew, and the prayers in Aramaic I don't understand at all, so what's the point, then?). Beyond just the process, what was the point of praying at all? What was I really trying to accomplish every Friday night and Saturday morning at services?

Another incident: one afternoon in February, I drew a spectrum of the branches of Judaism on the whiteboard, then called for volunteers to fill in the blanks and walk us through what they had written. After a few minutes of passing the expo marker back and forth and hopping up on chairs to reach the top of the board, one kid walked confidently up to the front of the room and announced, "Conservative Jews (our branch) are the best because," motioning to the Orthodox end of the spectrum, "these guys are crazy and don't treat women equally, and these guys," gesturing to the Reform/Reconstructionist side of the spectrum, "are basically not even Jewish anymore. Like they probably don't even believe in G-d!"

"David, you can't say things like that!" I instinctively blurted. I found myself immediately backpedaling, trying to correct for this bias I wasn't even conscious I had. And yet here were my kids, parroting it back to me in a larger-than-life, caricatured form.

Again and again throughout the year, my kids brought up more and more holes and inconsistencies—some small, and others not so small—that I had developed in my view of my religion. With ten year olds, no question is off-limits, and no subject is taboo. Lots of times, I found that the conversations that came up with my fifth graders in Hebrew school were infinitely more honest and probing than any conversation I had with my Jewish peers on campus.

Going into this first year of teaching I thought that my view of religion, my relationship with G-d, and my practice of ritual were all things I was supposed to have figured out already. I was the teacher, I told myself. Instead, my kids taught me that none of these things are static. A big part of being a person of any faith is being ready and open to adjust and tweak your beliefs. As we continue this year in Interfaith, I look forward to seeing what kinds of things will come up now that the questions I am asking and being asked come from people of all kinds of religious and non-religious backgrounds completely different from my own.

The Bias in Religious Education

Osama Fattouh

Islam • 02/15/21

I went to a high school that was majority white and majority Christian. There was only one other Muslim student in my grade, and to this day we are still friends. I remember that during my sophomore year, I was enrolled in a class called "History of Religion," in which we learned about a number of the world's religions. In the first unit we learned about Buddhism and Sikhism, the second unit covered Judaism, the third Islam, and the final unit Christianity. When we got to Islam there were a number of problems. The first was the fact that this unit was literally two weeks long. All the other units were at least a month if not longer, and yet Islam, which is the fastest growing and one of the largest (if not the largest) religions in the world, was covered in only two weeks. The second problem I had was that the class was very inaccurate and didn't correctly portray what the religion was truly about.

I remember feeling very uncomfortable during this part of the class due to it completely alienating me and what I believed in. The teacher and the whole department didn't take the time to fact-check anything they said; this made me feel responsible to ensure that my religion was truthfully shown to the class. Throughout the course, I raised my hand and corrected the teacher whenever she was wrong. The fact that I had to teach the class my religion as opposed to a teacher who was supposed to be an expert on this subject made me feel out of place. If I hadn't been in that particular class, my peers would've soaked up false information about Islam, as did the classes before and after mine. I felt as if no one cared about me, my fellow Muslims, or how our religion was portrayed.

I remember wondering at the time how something like this can be fixed, but I was too young to understand. However, as I grow older, I see how American society is beginning to be more progressive and understanding. I have begun to be more hopeful that one day my religion can be taught correctly. It is important that we support organizations that bring people from all religions together to have dialogue and find ways to support each other. I also know that if people from all religions can work together, we can help pass policy that will make religious education of all religions an important part of American education. This would lead schools to ensure that our teachers are truly qualified in this subject and teach every religion equally and with respect.

Nevertheless, in this moment, in comparison to any other religion in the world I can confidently claim that no religion is depicted as negatively as Islam. For example, in China, Uyghur Muslims are being put into concentration camps for their religion. In France, Macron has declared war against Islam itself, forcing Masjids to close left and right, preventing Muslims from practicing, and more. For whatever reason, so many media outlets and politicians lie about Islam. To me, it is very disrespectful and sad to see how much these evil people have hated my religion for no reason other than to hate.

I hope one day that people can truly see what Islam is about and understand it is a religion of peace and community. A religion that values family, peace, and love. A religion that stands for the oppressed and scrutinizes the oppressor. A religion that helps the poor and stops the greedy intentions of those who abuse their wealth. A religion that is here to protect both humans and animals. A religion that protects the planet on which we pray. A religion that has stood the test of time and will continue to do so.

School in Jerusalem

Azariah Horowitz

Judaism • 02/25/21

After high school, I spent a few months in Jerusalem learning Hebrew in an Ulpan, an intensive Hebrew language program for new immigrants and Palestinians entering the Israeli university system. After growing up in a majority white, Catholic neighborhood in the Midwest, it was a huge and exhilarating change to suddenly be surrounded by classmates from Turkey, East Jerusalem, and Siberia. I quickly found that I was learning just as much from my peers as from my teachers.

One of the first big changes I experienced in moving to Israel was that I was suddenly in the religious majority. All of a sudden, most people around me were Jewish, had grown up with the same holidays as I did, and shared many of the same customs.

But within this basic oneness, as I spent more time in Israel the beauty of Jewish diversity became more and more visible to me. In the chaos of the Central Bus Station on Friday afternoons as everyone scrambled to catch a ride home for Shabbat, I remember pausing to take in the wonder of it all: huge religious families, young secular travelers with their overstuffed daypacks, and Chabad volunteers handing out Shabbat candles to all the women rushing by, Yemenite, French, Ethiopian, and Ukrainian.

I quickly began to grasp how much more diverse Jews are than I could have imagined growing up in the US, where the vast majority of Jews are Ashkenazi (of Eastern European descent). In this realization came a simultaneous sense of both connection to my people and disconnect from them. I began to see differences in the foods we eat, our appearances, the histories of our grandparents as immigrants or refugees, and in every facet of our lives.

I remember being shocked one afternoon to learn that bagels and lox, probably the most stereotypical Jewish food in the US, is actually not kosher for Sefardi Jews. “We don’t want to eat that weird Ashkenazi food anyway!” one of my friends from Latin America joked when I started going on about how sad it was to miss out on cream cheese and fish.

Because I had such blonde hair in a place where almost no one is blonde, people took to stopping me in the hallways or on the streets and speaking to me in Russian. “Sorry, I’m American, sorry!” I would respond, feeling a kind of weird sadness, an impossibly wide gap from these people whose families had stayed in Russia when mine had left.

But then other things would happen, and I would be reminded that despite being scattered for so many centuries to so many vastly different regions of the world, Jews really are one people. One day in class, our teacher put on a kids’ song for Rosh Hashanah, and almost all of the Jewish students instantly recognized it, despite the fact that we had learned it by rote growing up, and never really understood the words. It felt almost magical that a song which for me evoked memories of back-to-school time, raking leaves, and apples and honey, brought up a parallel and yet vastly different vision of growing up in Istanbul for the Turkish boys sitting in the back corner.

Among the million little insights I took away from my time in Ulpan, I walked away with a new sense of who Jews are and how we relate to one another. Jews are one people, and yet we are not a monolith; we are diverse in a variety of ways.

And against this diverse backdrop, Jewish unity is accentuated in an entirely unique way. There is new power for me now in shared practice, holy texts, and sacred geography. I feel this in the Kiddush prayer that all Jews chant every Friday night at Shabbat, in the universal holiness of Jerusalem, and in the peace felt in slipping a note in between the stones of the Western Wall.

Four Theses on Religion

Benjamin Sevart

Atheism • 04/12/21

Throughout this Fellowship, people have shared many of their person, familial, theological, or scriptural perspectives on religion, especially during our "Religion 101" sessions. When I was asked to put on an "Atheism 101" session with Kally, at first my mind drew a blank. What is there to talk about in non-belief? We have no founding prophet, no holy books, only one (atheological) tenet, and no holidays (sorry, Festivus).

So, our discussion of atheism *per se* was relatively quick. Yet we needed to fill the time, and we realized that one thing we had not heard all semester was the critique or study of religion as a cultural object. From my coursework, I have some experience in this. I will take some of the major thinkers we talked about, and some we did not, and sketch their perspectives on religion, not to settle once and for all their interminable debates but to highlight the things we might learn from them and apply to Interfaith work.

Karl Marx wrote famously that religion was the "opium of the people," meaning that it assuages and obscures the pain and suffering of the working class that capitalism necessarily causes — a polemical statement, to be sure. Yet many religions offer healing of pains spiritual and corporeal, some more obviously (Buddhism) or cynically (fraudster Peter Popoff comes to mind) than others. Might the Interfaith practitioner come to respect other religions in their utilitarian value as pathways to healing, and by doing so understand why they are appealing despite one's profound disagreements about the theology?

Émile Durkheim defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden," in opposition to those profane things of everyday life. The church is sacred; the car you park there is profane. These distinctions are neither random nor a matter of individual choice. The morals of a social group are products of and subconsciously stand for the group itself, especially when challenged. Might the Interfaith practitioner gain an understanding of the survival of moral rules that have an apparent insignificance or disproportionate seriousness?

Michel Foucault was interested in the interplay between power and knowledge, the way that discourses can produce knowledge either to sustain or challenge established authority. He focused especially on human bodies—how they are punished, disciplined, controlled, regulated, and even constituted by systems of power. By pointing past abstract theologies to bodies and spaces, Foucault challenges us to critically examine how we act and what we do, not just what we think or feel. Might the Interfaith practitioner gain an appreciation for the role of hierarchy (or its relative absence) in structuring both religious lives and Interfaith work itself?

Clifford Geertz wrote that "a religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." Quite a mouthful. In practice, through his anthropological work, he understood religious systems as 'social texts,' fields of symbols on which play the drama of human lives. Might the Interfaith practitioner gain an appreciation for the way that both their own and others' religions both provide for and circumscribe the limits of meaning-making in an otherwise (for Geertz) ultimately pointless, chaotic world?

There are others still, and the study of religion continues even today in inventive and thoughtful directions. And unlike these famous four, it is not only atheists (nor white men) engaged in this work. But I hope to have traced some thought-provoking ways to think about religion outside the usual modes.

The Value of Relative Accuracy

Simran Kaur Sandhu

Sikhi • 04/15/21

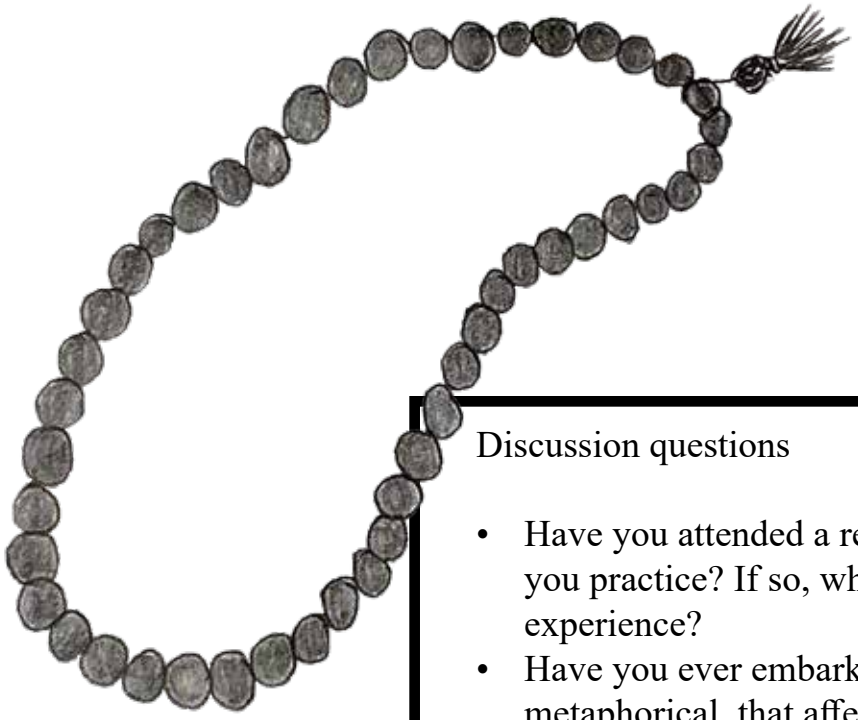
Being a part of the Sikh diaspora is something I find difficult to put into words at times because most of my life has been dominated by my Desi appearance. I didn't mind it as a child since I was one of the few Desi students at my small K-8 school. But even then, I understood that "being Indian" was not a monolith and among the Desi minority, I was religiously minoritized.

I started to care about how my identity was perceived in sophomore year of high school, especially during our few lessons on Indian History in AP World History. My AP World teacher was pivotal in my growth as a student and as a person. He was the first and only teacher I have had who knew about Sikhism without me having to explain it. It was my favorite class, but it almost lost that status because of our textbook.

During our unit on India and South Asia, we were assigned to read about religions observed throughout the subcontinent. Unlike my knowledgeable teacher, our textbook fell short of the nuance for India that it had been able to provide for other parts of the world. The textbook had explicitly written that Sikhism was a "syncretic religion," essentially a mixture of Hinduism and Islam. This was a disappointment; the idea is not entirely wrong, but is not the first or most important thing about Sikhism. I was determined that day to call him out, since most of his lectures had been based on the content from our chapters. However, by the time we met at the end of the day, he had already been corrected by my cousin, who was in my teacher's 3rd hour AP World. I was relieved because as much as I had prepared myself to politely but effectively correct my teacher, I was worried about how many people's eyes would roll. I don't know how many people actually cared about the clarification my teacher had made regarding the textbook and its shallow summarization of Sikhism, but for me it meant a lot because it showed that my teacher actually cared enough to do his due diligence to make me feel seen.

Here's another consideration of accuracy: As a Sikh (ਸਿਖ student, learner), I believe the best way to practice my faith is to stay true to the fundamental values of Ek Onkar (ੴ there is Oneness), and the "Three Pillars," which are Naam Japna (ਨਾਮ ਜਪਣਾ meditate on the name of Waheguru), Kirat Karni (ਕਿਰਤ ਕਰਨੀ work honestly) and Vand Ke Chakna (ਵੰਡ ਕੇ ਛਕਨਾ share with others). While there aren't any denominations in Sikhism, practices of Sikhi lay on a spectrum, influenced by one's culture and how one defines "accuracy" for their lifestyle. Yet, all Sikhs will agree that Ek Onkar and "Three Pillars" are fundamental values of Sikhi. Accuracy matters when learning to understand the essence of one's beliefs, but ultimately it should serve as a tool to promote unity over division.

RITUAL & PRACTICE



Discussion questions

- Have you attended a religious service other than the one you practice? If so, what were your takeaways from the experience?
- Have you ever embarked on a journey, physical or metaphorical, that affected you spiritually?
- Have you struggled with how to celebrate religious holidays outside of your tradition or even holidays within your own belief system?
- How do you respond in moments when religious practices or places do not meet your expectations?

Religious Parallelism: Hinduism and Christianity

Milan Stolpman

Roman Catholicism • 09/17/20

The setting sun had given the sky a hazy, amber glow, and we set out for the Sri Kalikamba temple on the village's outskirts. Although low to the ground and constructed with a thatch roof, the house of worship was immaculately maintained. Preparing for the ceremony (or puja), a woman arrived with a chicken and a blade and spilled its blood across an altar outside the temple with a well-practiced swipe.

The priest emerged and beckoned us inside to commence the ceremony. One by one, he lit a series of candles, illuminating a large shrine that had been erected in the center of the space. The temple had been devoted to Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction and rebirth, who is worshiped by my family. The goddess's appearance was remarkable. She sat on an ornate throne, dressed in a silk-like garment, adorned with floral garlands and her face painted red.

I had just completed my first semester of college and was visiting India with my mother. While our primary destination was the metropolis of Bengaluru, we had traveled to our family's ancestral home—the small desert village of Yedavani.

The increasingly dark sky emphasized the flickering candles, which cast striking shadows on the face of the goddess. The priest proceeded to strike a large gong—the reverberations creating a claustrophobic sensation inside the space. As the priest moved a candle around the face of Kali in a circular motion, illuminating her large eyes and crimson features, I felt as though I was locked in a hypnotic trance. The impenetrable eyes of the deity stared into mine with a paralyzing gaze. At first, I reacted to the sensation with panic and anxiety. After all, the practice contrasted sharply from my own construction of what religion was "supposed to look like." Familiar imagery of churchgoers dressed in their Sunday best, a choir and organ accompanist, and the Nativity scene flashed through my mind.

As I continued to engage with the ceremony, though, my initial hesitation suddenly dissipated. I realized that I had already witnessed these practices first hand, although in a different form. Parallels between my world and this one became apparent. While the Hindu ceremony had been predicated on the sacrifice of the chicken, I noted that Christianity is predicated on the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ. While the Hindu priest had placed Tilak on my forehead, the Catholic priest's placement of Chrism oil on my forehead was no different.

The practices I partook in were not strange, nor different. They simply were. In India, religion is not merely a component of one's weekly schedule, as it was for myself. Instead, it is a way of life. In fact, religion and life are not separate entities. In this rural village, they were one and the same. I went on to remind myself of the fact that my own ancestors had stood in the same spot as I, worshiping, for thousands of years.

I returned to Minnesota the following Sunday, and I attended church for the first time in over a year. I listened earnestly to the sermon—something I'd never done before. A sense of guilt came over me, as it dawned on me that I had long neglected my Catholic upbringing. Had a family member from Yedavani attended the mass, they surely would have reacted to this religious ritual with the same awe and admiration I had expressed for their practices. This realization instilled in me a renewed passion for religion in ways I am still attempting to understand.

While my identity as a Catholic has not changed, witnessing the indescribable power of religion firsthand has added nuance to my spirituality. With the CRGC this year, I am looking forward to further debriefing our experiences, analyzing cross-cultural and religious interactions such as this one, and—in the words of interfaith leader Eboo Patel—exploring the "ineffable dimensions of the divine."

An Enlightened Journey: Part 1

Yaseen Najeeb

Islam • 11/05/20

During our conversations over Zoom, some of the fellows in my cohort expressed interest in the Islamic pilgrimage, Hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam. Two years ago, I had the privilege of going on Umrah, the lesser pilgrimage. I decided to share my reflections on that enlightening journey, though to do it justice I will do it in two blog posts.

> "Labbayka-Allaahumma-labbayk! Labbayka-laa-shareeka-laka-labbayk!"
>
> ("Here I am, O Allah, here I am. Here I am, You have no partner, here I am.")

The mass of voices in the airplane rang out with these beautiful words as we descended into Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The entire plane was filled with people of all ages and colors, coming from different backgrounds and social classes, many wearing nothing more than two large white cloths. These simple clothes are called the 'ihram' which pilgrims wear to humble ourselves as we present ourselves to our Lord.

I look out the window, eagerly waiting for the plane to touch down so I can continue my journey to one of the holiest places in the world, Mecca. As we arrived, the spiritual energy in the air was tangible.

I had yearned to see the Kaaba for as long as I could remember.

After settling down in my hotel, I began walking the couple blocks towards the religious symbol that Muslims all over the world know as the Kaaba. My family and I lowered our eyes and pushed through the crowds, staying as close as possible, then all together we lifted our eyes. We saw a box-shaped structure, shrouded by a sleek black robe with intricate gold patterns. The Kaaba itself is not what melts the hearts of the 1.6 billion Muslims around the world. It is what the Kaaba represents. It is a symbol of God's pact with Prophet Abraham, his son Ishmael, and devout Muslims.

As I watched the tens of thousands of Muslims circling the structure, I stood in awe, realizing that I was at the center of Islamic history. The Kaaba was built by Prophet Ibraheem (Abraham), as the first structure built on earth for the worship of the one God, and a symbol Muslims use to connect with their Creator.

I began the ritual of walking around the Kaaba seven times, glorifying God. As I got closer to the Kaaba, I lost myself amongst the swarms of people. At first, I watched the people walking by me, all so different yet all there for the same reason, reconnecting with God and asking for His mercy. There was not a single dry eye in the sacred place. Then I turned my attention to the Kaaba. This was the direction toward which all Muslims in the world turn their faces countless times a day during our prayers, symbolically showing that they worship the God of Abraham.

An Enlightened Journey: Part 2

Yaseen Najeeb

Islam • 11/09/20

After circumambulating the Kaaba, we proceeded to the next part of our journey, fulfilling the ritual of Sai'. Sai' is the commemoration of the long search Hajar (Hagar) took alone from Mount Safa to Mount Marwah in a frantic search for water for her and Prophet Abraham's child, Ishmael. Ishmael is an ancestor of the Prophet Muhammad and is also regarded as a Prophet. I watched as my 75-year-old grandma trekked the long distance from mount to mount, without a single complaint. This tradition shows us how valuable the love of a mother is. And considering Hagar was an African woman from a beautiful continent, it is amazing to know that God chose her as the role model for the more than 10 million Muslim men and women of all races and colors who each year follow in her footsteps.

The next day we began our journey to the Enlightened City: Medina. Ever since I was young, I was told stories of the serenity that surrounds the city of Medina. When I arrived, I realized that the stories did no justice to what my eyes beheld. There was an unspoken and invisible feeling that shrouded all of the city—a calm, hushing sensation that flowed through every person's heart.

This was the city with generous and kind people that welcomed the Prophet and his followers after they were kicked out of the city of Mecca that they were born and grew up in, making them refugees. The city and the people were beloved to the Prophet and Messenger Muhammad (peace be upon him), but it also is the city that contains his grave and the graves of his two closest companions. Everything about the Prophet's Mosque was beautiful, from the elegant gates, the countless minarets, to the stunning umbrellas shading the sun. As I walked into the Prophet's Mosque for the first time, I felt a wave of emotions come over me.

Muslims are taught from a young age that the Prophet had the utmost modesty, the greatest character, and the kindest personality. He was the prime example, the epitome of role models. As I passed by his grave, I thought of all the lessons he had taught me through his sayings and actions, and I asked God to send peace and blessings upon him.

Finally, the trip had come to an end. What I gained from this trip cannot even begin to compare to anything I have ever experienced. I felt such a newfound connection to my faith that I have never felt before. Not only did I feel closer to all the stories I learned as a child about the Prophet and his companions, but I felt closer to all the other Muslims in the world. Regardless of our past decisions, level of faith, socioeconomic status, race, and age, we all joined together on this spiritual trip, engaged in conversations with each other, and bonded over our one connection that we have: our love for our faith. The feeling a person gets when in a place that they feel so connected to and have so much love for is a feeling that is indescribable. My soul and heart felt renewed and even to this day, I feel as though my faith is unwavering. I felt heartsick leaving the Enlightened City, but I realized that the lessons, conversations, and experiences I had gained would hopefully light the way for the rest of my life.

Celebrating Christmas as a non-Christian Sikh

Amanjot (Amy) Yadev

Sikhi • 12/17/20

As the holiday season approaches, I can't help but reflect on my experiences regarding this time, which for many of us means enjoying a break from work, school and other obligations. As a child, I associated the holiday season with Christmas. While I did not understand the religious reason for Christmas, I could always feel the aura of festivity, positive spirit and joy around me. When we decorated a small Christmas tree in our house and put gifts beneath it, I did not understand why—all I knew was that I was going to receive gifts, wrap them for others, sing at the elementary school holiday sing-along, and decorate cookies. However, as I got older and began to question the religious basis for Christmas, I realized that its purpose was to celebrate the birth of Jesus, which holds tremendous religious significance for Christians.

As a result of questioning the religious basis for Christmas, I began to investigate the religious significance of holidays celebrated in my own faith of Sikhi. While in Sikhi there is not one day deemed holier or more momentous than any other, there are days that have historical significance based on events that defined and shaped Sikhi. I asked my parents about Guru Nanak Dev Ji's Gurpurab (the celebration of the Sikh founder Guru Nanak Dev Ji's birthday), which is typically celebrated in the second half of November. My parents described the Gurpurab of Guru Nanak as a day to remember his teachings—the three pillars of Sikhi and the message of Ik Onkar (the power of the oneness that holds all creatures on Earth together). Similarly, I learned that the week of Christmas is actually a time of somber remembrance for Sikhs as they remember the martyrdom of the two younger Sahibzadas (two of the four sons of the last Sikh Guru–Guru Gobind Singh Ji) who were bricked alive for refusing to give up Sikhi. During this time of curiosity, I also explored the meaning and religious significance of other holidays that are commonly celebrated in December, such as Hanukkah. By listening to my Jewish peers, I have learned that Hanukkah is not the Jewish equivalent of Christmas (which I believed for so long) and is actually considered to be a minor holiday within the Jewish faith.

Ultimately, learning about the reasons behind religious celebrations in Sikhi led me to appreciate them to a higher degree. Despite this, I struggled to understand how to celebrate Christmas, a joyous occasion, while also acknowledging the remembrance of a somber and heavy period critical to Sikhi's history. At this point, I questioned how Christmas fit into my religious journey. Christianity was not the religion that my family followed, so was it right for me to enjoy the festivities accompanying Christmas without acknowledging its religious aspect? I often sign emails with "Merry Christmas" during the holiday season, and now I wonder whether the recipients even celebrate Christmas.

Ultimately, I am still at an impasse with these questions; nevertheless, I find myself appreciating other religious traditions that are not my own. Understanding and respecting traditions of all faiths is a step towards peace and mutual understanding. And my new-found appreciation guides how I celebrate Christmas with my family. While we do not go to Christmas mass or celebrate the birth of Jesus, I have a great appreciation for the religious significance as it is important to many of my Christian peers. Furthermore, I am also able to partake in other aspects of the holiday season, such as the spirit of giving.

My Take on Mechitzot: The Gender Affinity Behind Segregated Prayer

Aitan S Maeir

Judaism • 02/04/21

One of the key aspects of my life as a modern Orthodox Jew is prayer, and in religious communities, one of the physical particulars of prayer is gender segregation. In prayer spaces in religious synagogues, there exists a dividing wall or curtain between the men's side and the women's side known in Hebrew as a mechitza (הציחמ), which in English literally means partition or division.

My experiences with mechitzot have not only occurred in synagogues but also in the various day schools that I have attended throughout my life, and my opinions and thoughts about mechitzot have changed throughout this period. These shifts in my understanding of mechitzot have been due to the fact that not all my experiences with Jewish prayer have been in spaces where mechitzot exist. For example, the Jewish high school that I attended belonged to the Jewish Conservative movement, which does not segregate genders during prayer, whereas the elementary school belonged to the Jewish Orthodox movement, which does. When I first entered high school, I was not used to the mixed prayer; however, I grew to enjoy it.

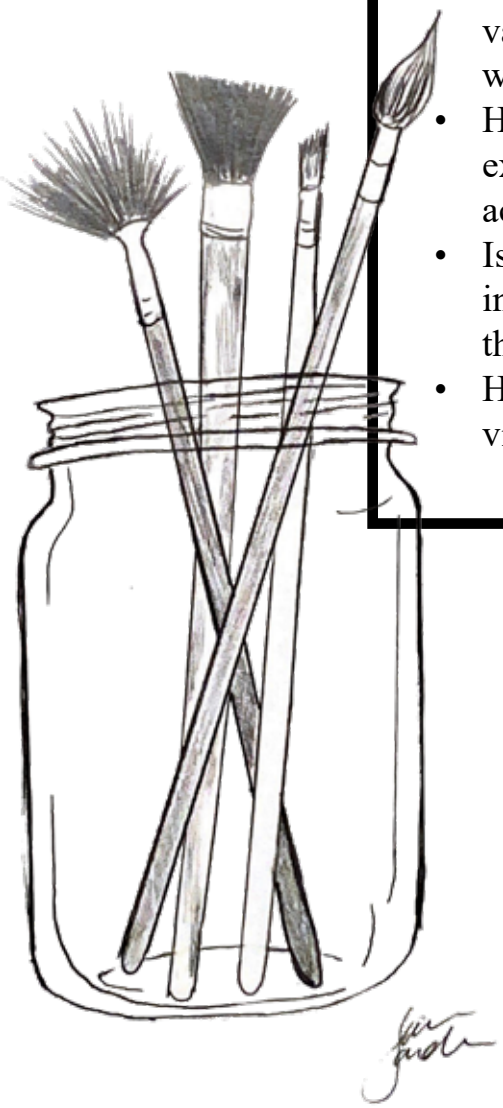
As I became more familiar with mixed prayer spaces, I began to speculate as to some of the reasons why more religious or Orthodox spaces, similar to my own synagogue, segregated genders. One undeveloped speculation that I had was that the division in Orthodox spaces was due a desire to set the tone that men and women are unequal in their participation in the services. In reality, most synagogues with mechitzot are congregations where women are not allowed to participate in the prayer service. To be frank, I believed the division was unfair and a nod to chauvinist underpinnings in the traditional Jewish faith.

Throughout my time at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I have become very involved with the Chabad on campus, and I have also developed very close relationships with the rabbi, his wife, and their children. In the numerous conversations I have had with the rabbi, I brought up some of my sentiments regarding the use of mechitzot in religious prayer spaces. He explained to me that the intention of the Rabbinic rulings and laws surrounding segregated prayer was, among other reasons, to foster a sense of gender affinity within the respective genders. Generally speaking, gender affinity is the love or bond that one has for their respective gender. The point of cultivating gender affinity is not to privilege one gender over the other but rather to convey and reinforce strong feelings of connection to one's gender. In addition to fostering gender affinity, I also contend that mechitzot help communicate the understanding that women and men have varying prayer experiences and this variance is unique and beautiful. The variance reminds us that while we are all Jewish people, we also have different genders, which is beautiful.

My adoration for mechitzot does not come without my understanding that mechitzot are not completely comfortable or accessible for folks who do not fit into the biological or social constructs of gender.

Ultimately, mechitzot are extremely important to me because they separate the normal from the holy. More explicitly, in my everyday life, I interact with people from a variety of genders, and that is normal. However, when I walk into spaces where mechitzot exist, I am reminded that there is an inherent sacredness in the place because we are separated, unlike the rest of the day when we are all together. I believe that a firm separation helps to maintain the sacredness and holiness of the prayer space.

ARTS & LITERATURE



Discussion questions

- To what extent should religious texts be taken at face value, and to what extent are they up for interpretation as works of literature?
- How does art help people make sense of our biggest existential questions and values? How does religious art achieve this goal?
- Is there a work of art or literature that has significantly influenced your spiritual development? How did it do that?
- How can people appreciate religious art from a secular viewpoint, or from that of another religious tradition?

The Challenge of Boundaries and What the Bible Says About it

Laura Alvarez

Christianity • 09/28/20

Growing up, it was difficult for me to establish, express, and maintain boundaries. I feared being perceived as "selfish" and, therefore, struggled to acknowledge and respect my own needs and desires. Thinking I was nice for never saying "no," led me to believe that on the rare occasions I dared to ask someone a favor, I was entitled to also hear the words "yes" or "okay" be uttered. Evidently, not everyone has poor boundaries. So, whenever I heard the word "no," I panicked inside and thought it was something personal - that I did something for them to dislike me. I did not realize that their "no" had nothing to do with me. I often asked for explanations or tried to push their boundaries in attempts to avoid feeling rejected or disliked. Needless to say, I have forgiven my past-self for believing this as it is hard to respect other people's boundaries when you don't even know how to honor your own.

A big part of my self-development came from learning that I have to take care of myself and that doing so is not selfish. As I set out to learn how to establish boundaries and honor myself, I came across Boundaries by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend, a book written specifically for Christians because they "often focus so much on being loving and giving that they forget their own limitations." Of course, it is not only Christians who struggle with giving too much and not taking care of themselves. However, since many of the points in this book are supported by text taken from the Bible, it is important to clarify.

My lack of boundaries were rooted in fears of not being liked and this led me to give reluctantly or compulsively. The authors of Boundaries remind us, "these motives can't exist side by side with love, because 'there is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear' (1 John 4:18). Each of us must give as we have made up our minds. When we are afraid to say no, our yes is compromised" and more importantly, "Matthew 9:13 says that God desires 'compassion and not sacrifice'. In other words, God wants us to be compliant from the inside out (compassionate), not compliant on the outside and resentful on the inside (sacrificial)."

It was imperative that the Bible (the key text of my religion) supported my quest to develop boundaries and to stop making decisions based on the approval of others. The thought of God supporting my decision changed my perspective on boundaries. I switched from thinking that they were selfish, to thinking of them as good and loving. I no longer breed guilt or resentment for the choices I make when I decide to put my self-care before the care of others.

Final remark: Like flight attendants remind us every time, you have to put the oxygen mask on yourself first before assisting others!

A Student's Thoughts on "The Student"

Maya Reinfeldt

Russian Orthodoxy • 12/07/20

There's nothing quite so touching as a passionate piece of writing that fervently expresses the innermost workings of the author's soul. From a childhood lost in Narnia and Harry Potter to a college career devoted to hefty classics like War and Peace, I've always relied on literature to shape, challenge, and inform my views on the world. It then follows that my understanding of my Eastern Orthodox faith was formed mainly through engaging with the works of the Russian greats: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. Most recently, I was deeply struck by a short story from Chekhov, the prominent playwright and author. In "The Student", he manages to portray such a vivid, hopeful faith that it reinvigorated my own relationship with religion (and made me cry a little, too).

"The Student" begins with Ivan Velikopolsky, a seminary student in rural Russia, making his way home through miserable weather, feeling thoroughly hopeless at the state of human suffering in Russian peasant life. He stops to warm himself at a fire to which two poor women are tending, mother and daughter. Ivan finds himself telling them the story of the Apostle Peter on a similarly despondent night, and of Peter's immeasurable grief after he denies knowing Jesus. Touched profoundly by the idea of Peter's suffering, the mother begins to weep, surprising Ivan. On his way home, Ivan experiences an epiphany, and rather than paraphrasing, I'll share Chekhov's striking description of this emotional revelation:

> "And all at once he felt a stirring of joy in his soul and even paused for a moment to catch his breath. The past, he thought, is tied to the present in an unbroken chain of events flowing one out of the other. And he felt he had just seen both ends of that chain: he had touched one end and the other had moved.
>
> And when ferrying across the river and later climbing the hill he gazed at his native village and to the west of it, where a narrow strip of cold, crimson twilight still shone, he kept thinking of how the truth and beauty guiding human life back there in the garden and the high priest's courtyard carried on unceasingly to this day and had in all likelihood and at all times been the essence of human life and everything on earth, and a feeling of youth, health, strength—he was only twenty-two—and an ineffably sweet anticipation of happiness, unknown and mysterious, gradually took possession of him, and life appeared wondrous, marvelous, and filled with lofty meaning."

To me, there was something so profoundly beautiful and comforting about the idea that all of humanity is linked across the ages through truth and beauty, which are the essence of human life, and implied to be the work of God. Regardless of your faith, it's so wonderful to imagine that humans, in their truest form, with all of their complex and messy emotions yet all of their beauty, have been and will be around for ages, and that there is something great linking us together. It is lovely to know that, simply by nature of our existence as human beings, we are unified across time and space. Chekhov doesn't attempt to proselytize, explain the deep feeling of faith he proposes, or assign some sort of purpose to the beautiful existence of humanity which he describes through Ivan. He simply leaves the reader feeling similarly wondrous, full of lofty meaning.

Having grappled with some difficult and frightening questions in my faith recently, as a result of the often tragic state of the world, this piece was a breath of fresh air. It was a chance to bring new life to my relationship not only with God but with humanity as a whole.

Crash Course: The Book of Mormon

Bryce Couperus
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints • 12/14/20

The Book of Mormon is a sacred text in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Like many other aspects of my religion, as well as other faith traditions, it is often misunderstood and misrepresented. For example, the popular musical The Book of Mormon distorts and takes many teachings/beliefs from the Book of Mormon, as well as other teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, out of context. This misrepresentation has led to many misunderstandings of my faith and the teachings we believe in, especially the Book of Mormon. So, what exactly is the Book of Mormon? Where does it come from? What purpose does it serve? To provide some accurate information, here is a brief crash course to answer these questions!

The Book of Mormon is a record of God's interactions with His children on the ancient American continent and another testament of Jesus Christ. It was written through revelation and prophecy by ancient prophets, who engraved their words on gold plates that were passed from prophet to prophet. Before the plates were buried under God's direction, a prophet named Mormon quoted and compiled the writings to form an abridged version of the plates. Those plates were later shown to the prophet Joseph Smith, who by the power of God, translated them into the first English edition which was published in 1830 as "The Book of Mormon."

The central purpose of the Book of Mormon is to show all who may read it the tender mercies of God and to convince all that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. In my religion, the Book of Mormon complements the Bible and helps to further explain its teachings, as well as to provide a "fulness of the everlasting gospel" by telling all "what they must do to obtain peace in this life and eternal salvation in the life to come." We read both the Bible and the Book of Mormon as two separate testaments of Jesus Christ and His teachings.

For me personally, the Book of Mormon has been instrumental in helping me to learn about Jesus Christ and develop my faith in Him as well as God's plan for His children. It is my favorite book and one I turn to daily to find inspiration and peace. I often read through the stories and return to passages that have become meaningful for me, reflecting on what is taught, and applying these principles in my personal experience. I consider it a handbook of instructions for my life that helps me to draw closer to my Heavenly Father and Savior Jesus Christ on a daily basis.

This brief description obviously does not capture all the details that can be shared in regards to the Book of Mormon, but it does provide an accurate and basic description of what the Book of Mormon is, while also touching on its origin and purpose.

Pluralism in Religion and Film

Ethan C. Dickler

Roman Catholicism • 01/28/21

One of our first readings for the Interfaith Fellows program was a chapter from Diana Eck's book about pluralism, Encountering God. She writes, "Truth is not the exclusive or inclusive possession of any one tradition or community." However, my first encounter with pluralism was not with Eck's book but several months prior during a conversation I had with a friend on an exceedingly different topic: movies.

It was a Sunday afternoon in the winter of 2020. I arrived at the campus theater early and started talking with my friend Henry about movies. We were both in WUD Film (the Wisconsin Union Directorate Film Committee) together, but he was much more knowledgeable on film than I. After some general remarks about the movie we were about to watch, he mentioned that he admired the Resident Evil film franchise. Now, the Resident Evil movies may be fun to watch, but they are incredibly pop and not critically celebrated like most of the movies I talk about with Henry. I was surprised that someone who cared so deeply for filmmaking as a craft would consider an obvious money-grab like the Resident Evil franchise to be well-made.

Henry explained to me that the Resident Evil franchise was based on a video game and wanted to feel like a video game. He argued that there was a self-aware element to the movies. So, ridiculous action sequences or cheesy smash cuts were meant to capture the adrenaline rush video games can offer, while still functioning as a movie. Henry argued that movies needed to be considered on their own terms. Instead of approaching every movie as part of the same tradition, many films emerged from traditions which were not always understood or appreciated by mainstream critics. After our conversation, I realized how unfair I had been to many movies. However, months later, while reading the Eck chapter, it also occurred to me that I had been unfair to more than just movies, but entire cultures and religions.

In high school, I took classes about the Roman Catholic faith prior to the sacrament of confirmation. I was taught that Catholicism was the only religion containing Truth because it was the first Christian religion and the only one with evidence of divine revelation. After reading the aforementioned chapter about pluralism, I reevaluated how I thought about this. Instead of thinking about Roman Catholicism as containing the only Truth, I began to think about it pluralistically.

A few months ago, Yaseen wrote two blog posts about his journey to Mecca to complete the Islamic pillar of Hajj, a key tenet of his faith. While there are pilgrimages in Roman Catholicism, they are not sacraments of our faith the way Hajj is for Muslims. It would be unfair for me to say that Muslims are wasting their time with a pilgrimage because it is not a sacrament of Roman Catholicism, as it is unfair to view religions as needing to fulfill requirements of different faiths. However, with a pluralistic view, I see that each religion fulfills on its own terms its aims of finding truth and meaning. Through pluralism, there can be more than one Truth.

My favorite movie is Federico Fellini's 8 ½ (1963). It is pretentious, incredibly Catholic, and a personal movie for me. I will likely never entirely understand the critic who thinks about the Resident Evil franchise the way I think about 8 ½. Similarly, I will likely never understand Hinduism or Islam the way I understand Roman Catholicism. However, that does not mean that I should pretend that Roman Catholicism is the only religion that contains Truth.

Poetry and Theodicy

Benjamin Sevart

Atheism • 02/18/21

Allen Ginsberg's Howl was not, I believe, written to be read in a book (much less off a screen) but told as a warning by a stark raving mad lunatic who accosts you on the street, his voice alternating between a conspiratorial whisper and a bellowing denunciation. Nonetheless I will quote a bit, and make you supply the voices:

> What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?
>
> Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!
>
> Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!
>
> Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments!
>
> Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!
>
> Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smoke-stacks and antennae crown the cities!

Ginsberg is speaking of what evil ruined his friends, the people he saw "destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging them through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix." The culprit is Moloch, obviously—not the god of the Canaanites per se but his ideal: his manifestation as war, as murder, as avarice and ignorance and arrogance.

Surely a more thorough exegesis could and has been done, delving into the poet's life to find the actual people and events who served as inspiration. Or, one could provide a detailed political account, situating the poem and its author in the early rumblings of the gay liberation movement and a protracted controversy over obscenity and free expression.

Yet, this is not how I have come to understand this piece. When I read it, I feel more than anything a scream, a rising shriek—a howl. Yes, more so than a 70-year-old political context or a dead eccentric's dead friends, I hear and feel a frenzied epiphanic shout. I realize it is not Moloch who stands in judgment above us demanding sacrifice, but we who look down into the abyss on Moloch, imaging red eyes in empty darkness.

Reading the laundry list of his crimes, I realize he is innocent, for everything of which he is accused is done by us. He is a powerless, ancient fiction. He does not demand a sacrifice lest the crops fail, raise the edifices of torture, or sit on war councils in the world's great capitals. The laws of matter and energy make wheat grow, whereas the properties of concrete and gunpowder enable us to exploit them. No demon is involved, and nothing except the structure of society demands we act the way we do. This structure is itself our history, determined through conflicts long-ago settled and those that rage still today.

In this way we are both innocent and guilty—innocent of the crimes of our ancestors, but thoroughly and egregiously guilty of those of today and tomorrow. We are guilty for the crimes of Moloch, even as he is a stand-in for our society's prevailing ideology. But it is delusional to expect that the world's evils could be ended today through the massive spontaneous adoption of the 'correct' religion, ideology, or principle. However, it is equally unwise to expect a meaningfully better world of tomorrow unless things change. That is, unless we change them.

EXPERIENCING THE DIVINE

Discussion questions

- What does it mean to be a true believer? Which pillars of your faith do you refuse to compromise on, and which others do you believe should be subject to change?
- What is the sharpest instance of doubt you've felt over the past few years? Have you ever felt insecure about your religion or knew anyone that was? How have you dealt with it? What expressions of your faith help you cope?
- In what ways has your faith or worldview provided you perspective and/or hope in the world we live in today? How do people's lifestyles allow them to focus on the little instead of worrying about the big picture?
- Have there been practices or traditions you learned as a kid, but which didn't make sense until you were older? How have you found the strength to strive for your goals and face your fears?
- Do you see your institution as synonymous with who/what you worship? What's the relationship between your personal practice, and fidelity to the institution?

The Illuminating Power of Doubt

Maya Reinfeldt

Russian Orthodoxy • 09/24/20

An increasingly common sentiment among my friends, peers, and community is that the past few years have been chaotic, confusing, and upsetting. Both domestically and globally, tragedy overlaps with injustice, people polarize at alarming speeds, and the planet is simultaneously ravaged by climate disasters and a pandemic. Thus, I'm quite certain that I'm not alone in feeling something very troubling for any person of faith: doubt.

My religious identity is a creative, albeit confusing mix of a Russian Orthodox background and elements of spirituality, morality, and ethics that I've picked up throughout life. Two things I know for certain: I believe there is a God, and I believe that this God is good and loves humanity unconditionally. In light of this, the past few years have raised some upsetting questions that I'm certainly not the first to grapple with. Why is any of this happening? How could a God that loves his people allow so many of them to suffer, die, and live under the grip of oppression? How could a benevolent higher power let innocent lives be lost to a deadly virus? And finally, am I a bad believer for entertaining these doubts? In response to such concerns, one could search the Bible — or any religious text — for answers, consider the element of free will and consequences, attempt to find a moral justification for humanity's suffering, or simply lose faith.

I don't pretend to have any answers for my doubts, nor for the same doubts that have plagued religious peoples for centuries. I don't personally believe that any tragedy, be it a disease, natural disaster, or social injustice, is a punishment from above, nor do I believe anyone deserves to suffer. I also don't believe that my God would love me less for raising and entertaining such questions. But can I explain why the God I have put my faith in let this happen? No. Thousands have attempted to tackle these bewildering issues, and thousands more will.

I have come to see, however, that for every instance of doubt there follows something that only affirms my belief in the power of a good and loving God and his spirit in humanity. I see this confirmation in basic, mundane human kindness, in protests for what is right, in those who risk their lives to save others, and in anyone who continues to persevere despite what's been leveled at them. Though I'll never know why tragedy occurs, I certainly see the best of humanity pushing its way forward with every fire put out, every COVID patient saved, and every child fed. Knowing myself, I'll never be fully satisfied with an unjust world, but these slivers of faith are enough to go on for this lifetime. They are enough to give me the strength to help others and fight for what is good.

There's something that I've realized, and it's quite wonderful. Without doubt, faith wouldn't be exactly what it is: faith. A deep belief in something you can't see or know, a trust, a bond beyond logic and without proof. If we knew for certain that there exists a God or any higher power, if we could speak to its motives, we would lose the beauty and elation of true, irrational, passionate faith.

Focusing on the Little Things

Aerin Leigh Lammers

Reform Judaism • 10/01/20

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur recently started off the Jewish New Year. Frankly, the year 5781 is off to a rough start. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a prominent figure in not only the American political world, but the Jewish one as well, passed away on Rosh Hashanah. That, coupled with a global pandemic, a crisis of racial injustice, and the global climate nearing a point of no return makes 5781 look bleak indeed.

But then, there are little things that happen that give me hope for the coming year. A barista recently charged me for a small, but gave me a large. I finally assembled a bedside table and headboard. I started my position as Vice Chair of an organization close to my heart. These things, while little, give me hope going into the New Year.

Hope is something that is discussed often in my tradition of Reform Judaism. There were many times in our history as a people that we needed to hold onto the little things. It's a common joke that our holidays are separated into two categories: ones about food, and ones about someone trying to kill us, and us miraculously surviving. The stories told around the dinner table often detail the big things: the plagues that ended our enslavement, the oil that lasted 8 days, the woman who managed to save our entire people. But on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, there aren't big stories for us to share. Rather, it's a time to reflect on the big and little that happened to us and plan for the big and little ahead.

This year, I plan to focus more on the little things that give me hope, rather than the big that do nothing but take it away. While many of us aren't celebrating a New Year right now, I think that the Jewish New Year actually comes at the most opportune time to start over. With the school year barely beginning and the weather changing, it feels like there was a shift already and I, for one, am taking advantage of that shift to give myself space to be hopeful and focus on the details.

Right now, I find it important to focus on the fact that my new mask matches my outfit, rather than the global pandemic that necessitated mask-wearing in the first place. It is okay, perhaps even admirable, to give yourself the grace and space to focus on the little things that give you hope. We all need to take care of ourselves going into this New Year, and while so much of the media is focused on physical health, it is important to remind yourself to focus on mental health as well.

Perspective and Hope

Bryce Couperus
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints • 10/26/20

We live in a time and world full of natural disasters, social/political unrest, and widespread suffering from a host of ailments. If we let it, that weight and chaos can cloud and darken what hope we may have left for the future. Although the outlook may seem bleak, I am convinced that things will eventually get better. This hope comes from the perspective that my personal beliefs provide, despite the challenging circumstances of our day.

During my two years as a volunteer for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Central Russia, some of my favorite conversations occurred in a city square along the banks of the Iset River, where the large letters atop an adjacent building state «Кто мы, откуда, куда мы идём?» In English, who are we, where are we from, where are we going? These are what I consider 'questions of the soul' and my personal beliefs have laid a foundation for how I answer them.

In my church, we believe that we lived before this life with our loving Heavenly Father, God, as His spirit children. He prepared a plan to allow for us to come to earth and receive a physical body that would help us to learn and grow, while becoming more like Him. This learning and growth is made possible by our Savior Jesus Christ, who set an example and provided the means by which we can overcome weaknesses, sin, suffering, and all that may be unfair in this life. After death, we believe that all will eventually have the opportunity for their bodies and spirits to be reunited and live in a kingdom of glory prepared by a loving Heavenly Father. This heavenly plan has given me perspective to see the difficult moments of this life as temporary conditions that serve a larger purpose of helping me to become more like my Heavenly Father. I consider my time on this earth as a "probationary state; a time to prepare to meet God" (Alma 12:24). Thanks to this perspective, I am filled with hope and daily assurance that all my experiences and trials in this life are for my good, and that all suffering and injustice will be made right in a coming day.

Another source of perspective for my life comes from the Book of Mormon, which is a volume of holy scripture, along with the Bible and other sacred texts. For me, the verses and stories within the Book of Mormon have become a moral and guiding compass in these uncertain times. One of my favorite verses states that whoever "believeth in God might with surety hope for a better world…which hope cometh of faith, maketh an anchor to the souls of men, which would make them sure and steadfast" (Ether 12:4). In simpler terms, this verse states that faith in God leads to hope for a better world, and that hope provides a steady belief we can rely on. My hope and sure belief is that our Redeemer Jesus Christ will make right all that is wrong or unfair in this world, which is the central point of the plan provided by our loving Heavenly Father. This perspective gives me optimism and confidence that things will get better, despite the challenges we now face. I look forward to this better world and with an anchor of perspective and hope wait until that day may come.

God Is Within Me

Anusha Mehta

Hinduism/Jainism • 11/12/20

When I was a little kid, my mom would have to drag my sister and I to put on our itchy, uncomfortable, but beautiful Salwaar Kameez (traditional Indian wear) to go to the temple. I didn't want to, but I was forced to. I never knew what to do there. Every time, we would stand before one of the deities, put our hands together, and close our eyes, copying what my mom would do; she would tell us to pray, yet I stood there with a blank mind. I couldn't understand the importance of faith and religion. To me, all it meant was celebrating holidays with a party, going to the temple during our religious observances, and going through the motions of praying without a connection to god. It wasn't until high school through my Hindu youth group, Balvihar, that I was inspired to think of religion in a way that made sense to me, enabling me to find that connection.

During my sophomore year, it was time to think about some of the most pressing decisions of my life, like what and where I wanted to study for college, and what career I wanted to pursue. It was a lot of pressure, and I felt completely lost. I thought back to something that my youth group emphasized: that god is within each and every one of us, and we should use that not only to better ourselves, but also to benefit the greater world, and communities around us. I applied that to my own life, understood my faith at a personal level, and added meaning to the prayers my mom made me learn.

Now when I go to the temple, or even at home with the mini shrine in my bedroom, I can put my hands together, close my eyes, and my mind isn't blank anymore. It was filled with prayers asking god to give me hope and confidence in the face of the obstacles of that day, week, or month. This new-found realization gives me the tools to take god with me wherever I go. To me god isn't distant, but something I have within me, and can reach wherever I am. Even being miles away from home, I can sit either in my college apartment or in a cramped lecture hall, close my eyes, and have a quick conversation with god.

Those Sunday mornings spent with my youth group taught me more about myself and this world than I'd ever expected. God, religion, and faith are there to have something to believe in, because everyone needs and deserves these to push them to strive for their goals, face their fears, and make sense of the world. I believe that it is this common goal of finding something to believe in that can unite us. As Americans, we focus on the ways we are different. Though that is important, it is also vital that we find ways to connect and bring unity to our communities. This is the importance of interfaith, and the reason I was inspired to get involved in it throughout high school and now again in college. Each and every religion, faith and culture is there to give people something to believe in. The specifics are unique to each group or individual, but why we believe in it is what should be emphasized to help bring communities closer together.

Are We All Non-believers?

Kally Leidig

Atheism • 12/10/20

Until very recently I thought the term "non-believer was just a semi-patronizing, yet endearing term my best friends used to describe me or other atheists. However, over Thanksgiving I decided to inquire about this and it turns out that when they say non-believer, it means everyone who doesn't believe in the Christian God. In hindsight, this makes a lot of sense, However, in my atheist mind, everyone who follows faith was inherently a believer.

This sparked a series of conversations with my friends, whom I would describe as very Christian and pretty liberal. I asked about something I really struggle to comprehend about Christianity: the coexistence of humbleness and thinking there is only one true religion, In my mind there was a pretty large disconnect between being humble and thinking that only your interpretation of the world is right.

I should note, everyone I talked to expressed great levels of respect and tolerance for people no matter their religion. There also was a reverence for the concept of faith no matter the belief. Also, what I have just said is an extremely brief summary of long conversations and is void of some necessary nuances.

Nonetheless, these conversations led me to wonder: when fellows are informing you on what they believe, of course you value and respect it, but do you think it is correct? Are other religions speaking the truth? What is at stake for you to say another religion is true? Or furthermore, is your religion true?

As I type this I am surrounded by Chaunaka decorations, Christmas decor, and one very extensive Pitbull (i.e. Mr. Worldwide) shrine, all of which make me extremely aware that such questions may be divisive or accomplish nothing. Perhaps being respectful and curious is all that is needed. Despite that, I can't help but be troubled by the idea: "I am right and you are wrong." The purpose of this blog post wasn't to highlight conversations that may or may not be representative of a group. Rather, it was to question what the implications could be of learning about others and respecting them, while also not believing what they say.

I often find questions like these are much better posed in person (where you can alter them depending on the person, their responses, or the situation). Nowadays (during the COVID-19 Pandemic) we aren't getting much time in-person, so I hope despite the less than optimal medium for these thoughts, they weren't presented too poorly. I also hope that despite the negative tone of my words everyone can take solace in the fact that we are all united in the fact that some out there would consider you a non-believer.

Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself.

Milan Stolpman
Roman Catholicism • 01/25/21

I'm a microbiology major. My classes concern religious usage of the scientific method: proposing hypotheses, outlining and performing procedures, and drawing conclusions. To the greatest extent, science is founded in objectivity and fact. During the school year, my brain is in full gear, traveling at 1,000 miles/minute or—equivalently—26,822.4 meters/second. My days are largely compartmentalized, neatly scheduled in my planner: class is at 11:30AM, I go to the grocery store after lecture, and I try to get to bed before 10:30PM.

However, with my new-found winter break free-time, my days were consumed with the more-than-occasional nap and some much-needed reflection on my faith and spirituality. At one point, I even considered picking up the Bible, although I abruptly put it down.

Over break, I dusted off a decrepit box and opened it up, that of my Catholicism. As opposed to microbiology, religion concerns the super-natural, extending beyond the realm of scientific explanation. Instead of describing the world through enzymatic activity, religion makes sense of our world through beliefs and traditions.

Seeing the difference between my personality both on and off school duty, I realized that I live and assume a multitude of lives and personalities. I hold a commitment to science, yet also a passion for religion, for example. These different facets of myself inevitably contradict, which is why I keep them separate, avoiding internal strife. Though science and religion are not mutually exclusive, if I am to de-compartmentalize these two entities, and thus de-compartmentalize myself, there will surely be conflict.

How can I simultaneously believe Darwin's Theory of Evolution and Creationism? If I am justified in refuting a biblical teaching in response to overwhelming scientific evidence (and in this case, I am), then what stops me from doing the same with any other component of Christianity? To make my religious upbringing more compatible with my education, it seems to me like I must selectively decide which components I believe in and which ones I do not.

Theologians from St. Augustine and Martin Luther to those in the present have weighed in on these questions—reflecting on what it means to be a believer in relationship to the knowledge of their day. Although I do not pretend to understand all of their arguments, I find it reassuring that, despite their differences, these great intellects shared certain fundamental beliefs that form the basis of modern Christianity: that God exists and is all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient), and wholly good. This is what I believe.

Beyond these fundamentals, though, I find a bit more flexibility. Church teachings regarding morality follow from the Divine, yet humans are flawed. Because of this, attempts to transfer the perfect essence of God into a codified morality (on subjects such as abortion and capital punishment), which we might refer to as the "teachings of the church," are not necessarily infallible.

The Church offers a framework for what it is to be a Christian; yet it is ultimately a human institution, and subject to change as humans, society, and science evolve. Some of their views will change over time, and so I find it alright for me to disagree with them on certain things. In this way, simplified though it may be, I am able to identify as a Christian with a clear conscience, while simultaneously embracing science and logic. This is how I justify my seemingly disparate belief system.

The Separation of Church and Religion

Anna Aversa

Roman Catholicism • 02/01/21

Every person's religion is a way of life. If a person is religious, it helps them form their beliefs and may influence their decisions. But what do we do with the fact that we often learn about our gods through institutions or organized traditions? As a Roman Catholic, religion surrounds the God I worship through the large and expansive institution I worship in. Catholicism has created a culture around its version of Christianity, which exerts major influence on its adherents, even those who hardly attend Mass.

I once had a conversation with a friend where she joked that being Catholic is nothing more than saying you are Catholic. In the Church people joke about "Cafeteria Catholics"; individuals who identify as Catholics, but don't live out the teachings of Catholicism. The majority of Catholics I know do not attend mass on a regular basis. In fact, the majority of Catholics I know only attend church a handful of times a year, but still have crosses all over their homes and pray before they eat. I also haven't attended mass (in person) in quite some time due to the pandemic.

What is interesting to me about this, is that many Catholics use their religion as justification for their traditional lifestyles or political affiliation, but don't seem to value communication with God. Though they hardly attend mass, they are eager to follow their local congregation's cultural and political directives. For them, God and the Church are synonymous. The Church is the only way to God, even when they are not frequently attending mass. For example, some Catholics don't believe in gay marriage and, as a result, will not accept gay individuals. While the Catholic church will not marry gay people, Jesus preached acceptance for all his children, which, for me, means accepting and supporting gay individuals. To me, there are disconnects between the Bible, God, and the teachings of the Church. And when there is a disconnect, oftentimes 'Cultural Catholics' or 'Cafeteria Catholics' default to the Church's teaching, never considering whether this is truly of God or in line with Jesus' teachings.

They practice Catholicism one way, but there are plenty of ways. Just consider my family: My father rarely attends mass, while my mother often goes after work on Saturday nights. My next door neighbors sent their children to Catholic school but only attended mass on Christmas. My 'Italian Catholic' Nonna puts prayer cards in birthday cards and attends mass at her elderly community home. My Grandma on my mother's side was an 'Irish Catholic' that grew up going to Catholic schools and told me "swearing isn't against the 10 Commandments." The bottom line is that every Catholic I know worships slightly different. There are over 1.2 billion Catholics in the world and everyone practices in the way they see fit.

I also practice as I see fit. I'm a Catholic, and feel justified in not following the Church's every teaching—because, for me, God is ultimately without a church. God is simply too large to fit in one religion, and with an institution as murky as the Catholic Church, I can't be sure that Catholicism is the one true religion. Nonetheless, I admire the tradition of the Church and it remains important to me. The Church has taught me the love of God and God has taught me to love my brothers and sisters (my neighbors, those in need, and all human beings). I will never worship an institution, but by remaining a part of the Church, I can do my part to help it improve. Catholicism is not my way of life—pursuing God is—Catholicism is a means to an end.

Lake Michigan, Saint Anthony, and Parashat Beresheet

Azariah Horowitz

Judaism • 04/21/21

Some Interfaith thoughts for Earth Day:

In Judaism, we read the Torah cyclically over and over again every year. Each week gets its own chapter, its own *parsha*. There is an idea in some branches of Judaism that the parsha of your birth week impacts you as a person. In this way, it is the chapters of our holy book that mark our time, that mysteriously predict things about us instead of the stars or a system of astrology. Orthodox families will often name their children based on the parsha of their birth week, like my cousin Mainoah, named for the "waters of Noah," the centerpiece of the chapter of the Torah read during the week she was born.

The parsha of my birth week, which was also the parsha of my Bat Mitzvah, was Beresheet, the very first chapter of the Torah, which opens like this:

> בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ… וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמָּיִם

> In the beginning G-d created heaven and earth… and the spirit of G-d swept over the face of the water.

I like the reassuring power of the idea that this parsha has something to say about my life and where it will go. That there is something beyond me working behind the scenes, weaving me into a web of forces that are greater than me. That because of the time I was born, I will have a special connection to water as a place to find G-d.

At home in Milwaukee, my friends and I call the Lake *Mama Mich*. When we are away we miss it more than almost anything else, and when we are home, we love to get up early when it is still cold and dawn, and watch the sunrise over the Lake. When we first get down to the beach, the sky is a gentle purple and the sun still sleeps under the water. We sit still and quiet on the pebbles on the shore, and we watch and we wait. It is here that I feel the power of G-d more than anywhere else.

Then all of a sudden, the sun breaks through the water, poking its head out of the waves, fiery and orange against Lake Michigan's blue. It casts a trail of light on the water like liquid gold, the brush strokes of an impressionist painting over the waves.

One morning last summer after sunrise, my friend Emma, who is deeply Catholic, starts telling me about a new idea she has just learned about her faith—that G-d created not one, but two holy books. One, written on paper, is the Bible, and the other is the Earth itself. The idea, she tells me, is rooted in the story of Saint Anthony, an early Christian ascetic who lived in a cave in the desert and paved the way for generations of Christian monks.

Once, a philosopher came to Saint Anthony's cave and asked him, "How can you get close to G-d? How can you become holy, when you live in this cave where there are no books, and no Bible?" Saint Anthony sat back on his heels and smiled and responded simply, "Because G-d did not just create one holy book. My book is the nature of created things, and as often as I have a mind to read the words of G-d, they are at my hand."

I love this idea and ever since that morning in the summer, I have latched onto it. If G-d created two holy books, then as much as I can learn from the Torah, I can learn from the Earth. As much as I can get out of reading Parashat Beresheet, I can receive sitting quietly by Lake Michigan and observing this majestic thing that G-d created. This is my connection to the water and the Lake that I feel in my bones. This is the spirit of G-d over the water from Parashat Beresheet, and this is the synthesis of G-d's two holy books.

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Cover photo is Sheikh Zayed Mosque in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Muslims abstain from depicting religious figures in human form, but this does not mean mosques are wanting in art. Note the detail in the calligraphy, geometric shapes, arches, and the chandelier. Even without earthly depictions of religion, the devotion to God is clear. (2018). [Credit Yaseen Najeeb]

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Views expressed here are those of the individual students and are not statements on behalf of the CRGC.

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