

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION



In the fifth issue of our departmental newsletter, we welcome Professor Jonathan Ebel as the new Head of the Department. Read the new director's message on page 2.

We will continue to host our Monday Coffee Hour from 12:30 to 1:30 PM in our Library. Please stop by if you happen to be on campus on a Monday. Our library in FLB Room 3014 will be open for coffee, desserts and conversation.

The picture on the left is from the first Department of Religion Reception at the AAR/SBL Meetings in San Diego, November 2019. The group gathered on the rooftop at the Rustic Root for a sunset happy hour and great conversation. In Prof. Rick Layton's words, "we are so proud that so many members of our community—including Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz, Heather Wetherholt, and Jay Twomey—continue to advance the study of religion in their new institutions." The Department of Religion looks forward to making this reception an annual event.

CENTER FOR ADVANCED STUDY (CAS) FELLOWSHIPS FOR OUR FACULTY

Professor Michael Dann was the Fall 2019 Beckman Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study, for his research into the social and discursive processes by which the Sunni-Shi'ite divide has been constructed, maintained, challenged and reconfigured throughout Islamic history. The Sunni-Shi'ite divide is commonly understood to be both the oldest and most significant sectarian divide in Islam. Like all binary identities, the existence of this divide entails a certain paradox: although each sect requires juxtaposition with the other for its own existence, they have also always shaped one another in profound and surprising ways and can never be fully separated. Prof. Michael Dann's book, *Powerful Memories, Pregnant Silences: Shi'ism and the Making of Sunni Tradition*, explores the inherently unsettled and incomplete nature of conventional narratives of this divide, highlighting in particular the ways in which an archaic form of Shi'ism has left an indelible mark on Sunnism down to the present day.

Professor Dov Weiss will be an Associate in the Center for Advanced Study during the 2020-2021 academic year, working on his forthcoming book, *Rabbinic Inferno: Hell in Classical Judaism*, the first scholarly book on afterlife retribution in the rabbinic era (70-700 CE). In their 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, the leading rabbis of American Reform Judaism declared, "we reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism the belief ... [in] Gehenna (hell)." The authors of the Oxford textbook, *Invitation to World Religions Today* (2016), studied by thousands of undergraduates across the country, seem to concur. Professor Weiss aims to show how, rather than absent in classical Jewish discourse or occupying its periphery, hell (Gehinnom in Hebrew) played a central role in ancient Jewish literature and culture. To begin to fill a scholarly lacuna within the Jewish tradition, *Rabbinic Inferno* will use ancient Jewish discourse about Gehinnom – as it emerges in rabbinic biblical interpretation – to unearth the distinctive anxieties, values, aesthetics, fantasies, and hopes within classical Jewish culture.

Congratulations to these outstanding faculty!



Message from the department head

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

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EDITOR

Rini Bhattacharya Mehta

I came to the University of Illinois fifteen years ago, eager to join a dynamic and distinguished faculty, and anxious to assure my new colleagues that they had made a good choice in hiring me. From the very beginning I benefitted from the guidance and mentorship of a group of scholars held in high esteem both in their fields of specialization and in the University of Illinois community. I learned from their examples how to balance the demands of research, teaching, and service. I also learned the importance of thinking about the future and shaping it, not simply waiting for it to arrive. I watched my colleagues envision new possibilities for what was then the Program for the Study of Religion, and then work to make those possibilities into realities. The Program for the Study of Religion became the Department of Religion. One faculty position in the study of Islam became two positions. A department that had no graduate program and no online offerings successfully developed both. In just the past two years our faculty have successfully launched an undergraduate certificate in Interfaith Studies and worked to organize a wonderful three-day symposium on interfaith understanding in cooperation with several leaders of local faith communities. And we are thrilled to announce that we are in the process of searching jointly with the Department of African American Studies for a new faculty member in African American Religions. The dynamism and the excellence that defined this unit when I arrived in 2005 define it still.

The big question that I'm wrestling with now, half-way through my first year as head, is where to go next. What do we want the Department of Religion to look like five years from now? What do we want it to look like ten years from now? As a campus with deep international connections and tens of thousands of students for whom the world will be their workplace, we need to maintain our excellence in researching and teaching about the world's major religions. As practitioners of an inherently interdisciplinary discipline, we also owe it to ourselves to seek out and collaborate with scholars on campus who are situated in different disciplines (law, political science, landscape architecture, music, computer science, psychology) but whose work involves religion. Put differently, I hope that we will grow and change by hiring new faculty and by forging new connections with faculty who are already here. These processes together will allow us to serve our students better, to prepare them more fully to understand and to shape their worlds, and more frequently to be present in the community as facilitators of interfaith interaction and cultivators of hope.

The Department of Religion has long taken seriously the challenge of giving our students, both undergraduate and graduate, the best educational experience possible. We also care deeply about students-- majors, minors, graduates, those who took a single class-- who have moved on. Please take a few minutes to send me an email at jebel@illinois.edu. Tell me about your experiences. Share your ideas for the department. And if you happen to live in the Boston area, join us next November at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion for our second annual AAR reception.

Best wishes for 2020,

Jonathan Ebel

Head, Department of Religion

SPOTLIGHT ON ALUMNUS

Michael Hamilton's coursework in the Department of Religion sent him on an intellectual journey that resulted in a dissertation, *Educational Values and Practices of Fundamentalist*

The Department of Religion is the most visible location at the University of Illinois for scholarship and teaching about religion. But it is hardly the only such place on the U of I campus. Faculty and students in African American Studies, American Indian Studies, Anthropology, English, History, Jewish Studies, and Sociology, as well as in the College of Fine and Applied Arts and the College of Education often wrestle with the complex and fascinating ways in which religion presents itself in their subject matter. For decades, University of Illinois graduate students have sought out faculty and courses in the Department of Religion as they prepare for doctoral work and for the interdisciplinary nature of twenty-first-century academia.

Michael Hamilton was no stranger to academia when he entered the doctoral program in Educational Policy in the College of Education. He was, at the time, a faculty member in the Religion and Philosophy Department at Principia College in Elsah, Illinois. Michael also knew a thing or two about serious engagement with religion. Before joining the faculty at Principia, he spent twenty years as a chaplain in the U.S. Navy, ministering to sailors and Marines. When he began working toward his Ph.D., Michael knew that he wanted to focus on the intersection of educational policy and religious difference, but he wasn't sure of the exact project or of the relevant literature that he would need to master.

Course work in the Department of Religion ended up being crucial to the intellectual journey that resulted in a dissertation, *Educational Values and Practices of Fundamentalist Mormons*, which examined approaches to education among polygamist communities in the American West. Michael's project required unprecedented access to communities that generally resist contact (not to mention sustained interviews) with those outside their circle. The knowledge that he gained of American religious history, of struggles between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the U.S. government, and of tensions and ruptures within the LDS community, helped him not only to frame his scholarly inquiry but also to relate to the contemporary realities of his subjects.

The relevance of religion to Michael's professional life has only increased over time. Since 2014, he has served as Executive Director of the Mary Baker Eddy Library in Boston, Massachusetts. Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) was the pioneering founder of the First Church of Christ, Scientist and the author of *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. As Executive Director of the library that bears Eddy's name, Michael is responsible for ensuring "public access to original materials and educational experiences about Mary Baker Eddy" and for helping educate various publics about "the ideas she advanced; her writings; and the institutions she founded and their healing mission."

Michael's path is unique. But the breadth and complexity of the issues raised by his encounters with religion are typical. The subjects of his work could fuel weeks of discussion about gender roles, bodies, education, healing, marginality, and the promises and challenges of religious freedom in the United States. The Department of Religion is proud to have played a part in preparing him for this journey.



Michael Hamilton, Executive Director,
Mary Baker Eddy Library, Boston, MA.

MORE ALUMNI NEWS

Hanan Jaber, M.A. 2019, is completing course work for her M.S. in Information Science at the University of Illinois School of Information Sciences. While studying, she has been working as a graduate assistant in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library. She writes, "I just finished cataloging and evaluating some manuscripts from the 17th and 18th centuries in the Rare Books room and am applying to jobs in special collections."

Joshua Reinke, M.A. 2018, is currently teaching humanities and serving as Vice Principal for Curriculum at the Kodaikanal International School (KIS) in Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu, India. He reports, "The students come from around the world, with most coming from South Asia, including India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and a small group of Bangladeshis. In addition, there is a . . . group of Chinese and Japanese students, as well as British, Dutch, French, and Swiss . . . and a sizable minority of Americans and Canadians."

SPECIAL FEATURE



Valerie J. Hoffman is Professor of Religion at the University of Illinois. She is the author of *The Essentials of Ibadi Islam* (Syracuse University Press, 2012) and *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt* (University of South Carolina Press, 2009).

Professor Hoffmann contributed this report to the newsletter.

CULTIVATING HOPE IN ANXIOUS TIMES

Report on the First Annual Interfaith Program, Fall 2019

Beginning in May 2018, I and two other members of the faculty in the Department of Religion, Robert McKim and Bruce Rosenstock, began meeting once a month with Pastor Michael Crosby of First Mennonite Church, Rabbi Alan Cook of Sinai Temple, Imam Ousmane Sawadogo of Central Illinois Mosque and Islamic Center (CIMIC), and former Associate Provost for International Affairs Earl Kellogg, to plan a series of events to promote interfaith understanding and collaboration on our campus and in the community. This group became the CU Campus/Community Interfaith Steering Committee, to which others were gradually added. Participants included the Interfaith Alliance of Champaign County, the University YMCA, First Mennonite Church of Urbana, Sinai Temple of Champaign-Urbana, the Central Illinois Mosque and Islamic Center, Hillel Foundation, the Muslim Student Association, Illinois Interfaith in Action, and several units at the University of Illinois: the Department of Religion, the Office of the Chancellor, the Office of the Vice Provost for International Affairs, and the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations.

The program for Fall 2019 was called “Cultivating Hope in Anxious Times.” The anxiety in the title is that caused by fear-mongering and hate crimes in our world today; hope is cultivated by reaching across boundaries to stand in solidarity with those who are threatened and to embrace the beauty of our diversities. What follows is a summary of the different events:

Francis X. Clooney, “Once Upon a Time in Kathmandu: How Hinduism Made Me a Better Catholic,” Thursday, October 31. Francis X. Clooney, Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology at Harvard Divinity School, told the story of how he grew up in Staten Island, became a Jesuit priest, and spent two years teaching in a high school in Kathmandu, Nepal. Although he knew nothing about Hinduism, he saw much that was beautiful and holy. He traveled around the country with an anthropologist, meeting with gurus and learning about Hinduism. Reading *Gitanjali*, a book of poetry by Rabindranath Tagore, turned him toward the study of Hinduism. In reading the *Bhagavad-Gita*, he saw a parallel between Arjuna’s sudden revelation that his friend Krishna was Lord of the universe with Jesus’ disciples’ growing realization of Jesus’ divine status. Interreligious study became a way of life; he has written numerous books on comparative theology. He also started a new program at Harvard in which new swamis come to Harvard Divinity School and live for a while in the Jesuit House. Professor Clooney’s approach to Hindu texts is not to accept or reject them, but to create a space where his spiritual life is deepened at the level of the imagination, and by incorporating new, enriching practices. He said we should give witness to the beauty of our faith without seeking to prove the falseness of another religion.

Eboo Patel, “Diversity Is Not Just the Differences You Like: Interfaith Leadership in the Time of Tribalism,” Thursday, November 7. Dr. Eboo Patel, a UIUC alumnus, former Rhodes scholar, and founder of Interfaith Youth Core, delivered the program’s keynote lecture to a large audience of campus and community members. He asked the audience to consider in what spaces people are more likely to cooperate. At Carle Hospital, he pointed out, there are Hindu and Muslim doctors who work together amicably, though their parents are enemies in India and Pakistan. Dr. Patel encouraged us to embrace the glory of our own traditions, to be fully grounded in our own faiths, as a basis for interfaith engagement. He pointed out that Martin Luther King, Jr., who was inspired by Gandhi,

went to India in 1959 and found that the movement Gandhi had founded had become an interfaith movement. The Palm Sunday sermon he gave when he returned reflected an acknowledgment of God's many names across different religions, but he never lost his core identity as a Baptist preacher. Dr. Patel also spoke of the amazing work of Interfaith in Action, a student group on our campus, in bringing together five thousand people to package meals for the people of Haiti after an earthquake in January 2010 created a humanitarian disaster. Dr. Patel argued that a university is an ideal place for interfaith cooperation and for the creation of interfaith leaders. We live, he said, in a moment that is ugly in its promotion of ethnic and religious bigotry, but for that very reason it is a moment of great possibility, as when, in response to anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism, Americans began to speak of "Judeo-Christian" culture, to emphasize what we have in common. Faith-based institutions play key roles in providing critical services to our communities; they can also create a new narrative by drawing a bigger circle. Rather than responding to hatred with anger, which adds to the ugliness, we should follow the advice of Edwin Markham (1852-1940), who wrote in his poem, "Outwitted":

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in!

Mark Swanson, "From Missionary 'Focus' to Neighborly 'Commitment': Chicago Lutheran Stories in Christian-Muslim Relations," Friday, November 8. Mark Swanson, the Harold S. Vogelaar Professor of Christian-Muslim Studies and Interfaith Relations and Associate Director of the Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago (LSTC), described changes in Muslim-Christian (especially Lutheran) relations in Chicago over the last few decades. In 1988, in the wake of the 1979 Iranian revolution, which caused many in the U.S. to fear Islam, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) announced a "focus on Islam" that aimed to promote learning about Islam and foster interfaith dialogue. The 1980s were a time of many new ventures in interreligious dialogue, including initiatives by the World Council of Churches and the formation of a council for the Parliament of the World's Religions. The focus was on the need for dialogue. Harold Vogelaar, pastor of the Lutheran church in Cairo, Egypt, became a professor at LSTC, where he began to teach courses jointly with Dr. Ghulam Haider Aasi of the American Islamic College. To have a Muslim professor teach at a Lutheran seminary was a new phenomenon. The two men formed the Conference for Improved Muslim-Christian Relations.



In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001 on New York and Washington, there was a surge of hate crimes against Muslims, and Muslims were constantly called on to defend their faith and denounce violence. In this new atmosphere, demonstrations of solidarity became important. LSTC established the Center of Muslim-Christian Engagement for Peace and Justice at that time, moving from dialogue to solidarity and joint activism. There is a turn toward activism in the new generation, which is passionate about inclusion and justice. In August 2019, the ELCA announced "A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment," in which love of God and neighbor are central. The document stresses mutual understanding and seeking the common good. It includes a promise to pray for Muslims, seek their counsel, stand with them in solidarity, and practice mutual hospitality.

Professor Swanson argued that there is no better way to get a Christian theological education

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than in conversation with other faiths, because it forces us to go deep. Seeing the coherence of other faiths and even glimpsing their beauty can enrich our own spiritual lives.

“Beyond Tolerance, Part 1”: Scholarly Discussion and Community Meal at the Central Illinois Mosque and Islamic Center (CIMIC), Friday, November 8. CIMIC hosted a dinner to which there was an open invitation, during which a panel of scholars representing different faith traditions were asked to consider the resources – theological, liturgical, and practice-oriented – that their faith tradition brings to the work of “empathetic citizenship.” Empathetic citizenship moves past tolerance of diversity to a vision of pluralism, in which each religious community strengthens and is strengthened by engagement with difference, and in which different religious communities collaborate to address the most significant issues of our time. The panelists were: Mark Swanson, professor of Christian-Muslim studies and interfaith relations at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago; Marcia Hermansen, professor of Islamic studies in the Department of Theology at Loyola University, Chicago; Jennifer Grayson, assistant professor of history at Hebrew Union College’s Jewish Institute of Religion and at Xavier University in Cincinnati; and Safwat Marzouk, an Egyptian professor of biblical studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

Professor Swanson cited stories in the Bible in which people who do not belong to the Bible’s faith community, such as the Good Samaritan and the “three kings” who brought gifts to the infant Jesus, played unexpectedly heroic roles. He also cited the Bible’s command to give hospitality and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Professor Hermansen analyzed the meaning of citizenship in a modern nation-state. Sometimes citizenship is fragile and unequal. If it is based on identity, it can descend into fascism. Citizenship as a commitment to the common good may be hard to translate into mobilization of resources. Muslims in the U.S., she said, are a diverse minority. The rise in identity Islam is a response to global experience. Regarding Islamic resources for promoting empathetic citizenship, she cited Islamic teachings that try to break down tribalism, and the so-called Constitution of Medina, in which the Prophet Muhammad recognized the Jewish tribes as autonomous entities in partnership with the Muslims. Islamic theology articulates duties toward all humanity and even the natural world. According to the Qur’an, Muhammad was sent as a mercy to the universes, and God shows mercy to the merciful; “those who walk gently upon the earth” receive God’s mercy. She suggested that this can even be interpreted ecologically. Many sayings attributed to the Prophet encourage empathy, such as: “None of you truly believes until he loves for someone else what he wants for himself”; “Every joint of a person must perform a charitable deed every day,” such as helping someone with his mount, speaking a good word, and removing a harmful object from the road; “A believer doesn’t eat his fill while his neighbor goes hungry.” And the Qur’an says that human diversity is part of God’s plan: “We created you from a male and a female and made you peoples and tribes, that you may know one another” (49:13). But empathetic engagement requires existential trust. Many people in the traditional majority feel that their ground has shifted, that they don’t belong. We need collective cooperation, Professor Hermansen said, toward finding a place of trust.

Professor Grayson began with her experience of being asked to evaluate an interfaith program in Israel-Palestine. All the participants said it fostered mutual respect and that everyone was exceedingly polite, but ultimately such politeness impeded communication on a deep level. How, Professor Grayson asked, can we build constructive bridges? We assume cultural diversity is new and think cultures developed separately from each other, but up to 90% of the world’s Jews lived in the Muslim world in the medieval period, and we cannot understand Judaism without understanding the Islamic context. We have always lived in a multireligious world, often with violence and humiliation. We often choose to look only at the parts of the past that fit our agenda, but a fuller understanding of history is important to learn to empathize with people of different faiths. We don’t need to agree with each other, but to empathize and work on common goals.

Today’s political culture often fosters fear of those who are different. In response, some people downplay our differences.

Cultivating Hope in Anxious Times

Schedule of Events

THU OCT 18 | 6pm | Islamic Studies in Focus: In Kalamullah: How Islamism Made Me a Better Citizen (Dr. Patrick A. Coffey, Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology at Harvard University / Room 1000 Lincoln Hall)

THU NOV 7 | 8pm | Discussion of Acts of Faith (Rene Patel, University of NYA)

THU NOV 7 | 8-9pm | Keynote: Diversity in Faith and the Difference We Make (Eboo Patel, Aziz Campbell Alumni Center Lounge & Ballroom)

FRI NOV 8 | 12-1pm | From Relationship: Christ to Neighboring Commitment (Chicago Lutheran School of Christian-Muslim Relations, Dr. Mark Swanson, St. Andrew's Lutheran Church and Campus)

FRI NOV 8 | 5-5:30pm | Beyond Tolerance: Building Mutuality and Affection through Interfaith Engagement (Part 1: Lunch and discussion with Dr. Mark Swanson, Dr. Marcia Hermansen, Dr. Jennifer Grayson, Dr. Safwat Marzouk, and Dr. Michael Daron) (Central Illinois Mosque and Islamic Center, 106 South Lincoln, Uptown)

SAT NOV 9 | 12-4pm | Beyond Tolerance: Building Mutuality and Affection through Interfaith Engagement (Part 2: Lunch and discussion with Rabbi Alan Cook, Pastor Leah Roberts-Musser, Pastor David Blackman, Imam Qusaywa Sawaghi, Ms. Amy Petty, and Dr. Nicole Anderson-Cole) (Sara Temple, 1514 West Windsor, Chicago)

SUN NOV 10 | 10am | Let's Like to Buy an Omelette (Ted & Company TheaterWorks presents / Lincoln Hall Theater)

Speakers & Performer Bios

Patrick A. Coffey, S.J., earned his doctorate in Social Action, Liturgics, and Christianity and taught at Boston College for 21 years before moving here to Loyola University Chicago. He is an author, speaker, educator, and interfaith leader. He founded Interfaith Youth Core as the idea that religion should be a bridge of cooperation rather than a barrier of division.

Dr. Mark Swanson is a senior & visiting professor of Christian-Muslim Studies and Interfaith Relations and Assistant Director of Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago.

Dr. Marcia Hermansen is a Director of the Islamic World Studies Program and Professor in the Department of Theology at Loyola University Chicago where she teaches courses in Islamic Studies and the academic study of religion. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in Islamic and Islamic Studies.

Dr. Jennifer Grayson served as Rabbi Aaron D. Parkman Assistant Professor of History at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati and at Xavier University in Cincinnati. She is currently teaching Jewish Communities in the medieval Islamic world.

Dr. Safwat Marzouk is an Associate Professor of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

Ted & Company TheaterWorks | Led by veteran actor Ted Peters, Ted & Company TheaterWorks uses humor, professional storytelling, and other types of performance to help address issues of faith and social justice.

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ILLINOIS **CU** **interfaith** **exploration**

Professor Marzouk said we should learn how to be grounded in our own faith while cooperating with those of other faiths and celebrating a diversity of views on God and the world. He argued that Micah 4:5, “All the peoples walk in the way of their god, while we worship the Lord our God forever,” is a passage that recognizes and validates religious pluralism. He also pointed to the story of conflict between Isaac and the Philistines in Genesis 26, which ended with a negotiated peace in which the two sides confronted the harm of the past and shared a meal together. Isaac’s tent was wide enough for the Philistines, said Professor Marzouk; they became equal partners in a covenant of peace.

After the dinner and panel discussion, the Muslims prayed the evening prayer, and then Rabbi Cook of Sinai Temple led Sabbath prayers in the mosque sanctuary, which was as impactful and significant as any words that had been spoken.

“Beyond Tolerance, Part 2”: Local Faith Leaders Discuss Their Experiences in Interfaith Relations, Saturday, November 9. Sinai Temple issued an open invitation to attend a study of the Torah on Saturday morning. By happy coincidence, the passage under discussion was Genesis 12, in which God told Abraham that all the families on earth would be blessed through him. This was followed by the Sabbath service. At noon there was a luncheon prepared by members of the congregation, followed by a panel of local faith leaders who discussed their experiences in interfaith relations. The speakers were: Alan Cook, Rabbi of Sinai Temple; Ousmane Sawadogo, Imam of CIMIC; Leah Roberts-Mosser, pastor of the Community United Church of Christ; Dawn Blackman, a leader at Church of the Brethren; and Amy Felty of the Baha’i Community. Dr. Nicole Anderson-Cobb moderated the discussion.

Rabbi Cook began the session by saying that forgetting that we are children of God is one of the greatest sins, and that recognizing the broader fellowship of humanity is a solution to brokenness. Most of the speakers described religious diversity in their families and personal spiritual lives. They also discussed their experiences with interfaith solidarity and cooperation, including the creation of the Avicenna Health Care Center, the Motherlands Culture Club, and the development of an interfaith Passover Seder. The anecdotes served to illustrate Dr. Patel’s point that faith communities are at the center of our communities, and cooperation between faith groups helps create a fuller community life in which real healing can occur. The speakers offered examples of members of the religious majority expressing solidarity with threatened religious minorities, and described the positive impact of such solidarities.

Ted & Co. TheaterWorks, “I’d Like to Buy an Enemy 2.0: The Fear Version,” Sunday, November 10.

This two-person show, which took place in Lincoln Hall Theater, consisted of a series of skits, most of them comedic, addressing the human tendency to create our identities in contrast to others, who are often made into objects of fear and loathing. The skits addressed different types of fears, but focused especially on fear of people who are different from us, with the goal of enabling us to see the comic absurdity of fear-mongering. The show was followed by a discussion between the actors and the audience.

Concluding Thoughts: Many of the events in “Cultivating Hope in Anxious Times” were inspiring and thought-provoking. The program drew a great deal of community participation, but not as many students as we had hoped. The committee has received reports from independent evaluators who attended the sessions and is in the process of discussing where we should go from here. Whatever plans we may make for the future, the process of working together on this has fostered new relationships across many boundaries, not only between faiths, but also between the university and faith communities.

During the question-and-answer session after Eboo Patel’s talk, one audience member said that she belongs to a denomination that is about to split over disagreements; she suggested that sometimes we do better with interfaith work than within our own group. Dr. Patel replied that this probably has to do with expectations: we expect people of other faiths to be different, but we have standards of conformity for our own congregations. He wondered how different it would be if we expected diversity in our own congregations. He told a story about two women in a congregation who were both passionate about social justice. One was telling the other about a protest she was about to attend. The other woman listened with great enthusiasm until she realized that the protest supported abortion rights. The woman who was listening believed that abortion was immoral; she became so upset that she left the room. This story illustrates that different people can be passionate about social justice, yet disagree about how it is expressed. Accepting different opinions on moral issues can be very challenging. All the speakers at the different events in program emphasized that we do not need to agree, but we need to recognize the divine spark in each human being, even those with whom we have profound disagreements. We may even gain new insights and draw inspiration from people and literature of other religious traditions that may deepen our own spiritual life, even as it expands our intellectual horizons.



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