

Women, Religion, and Social Change II

PANEL: STUDENT INTERFAITH NETWORKS

HARVARD FACULTY CLUB

THURSDAY, MAY 1, 2003

6:00 - 8:00 PM

CLAUDIA HIGHBAUGH: Good evening everyone. I just wanted to give you another quick welcome and as we're changing plates here, just give you a little orientation of what our reflection is for this evening.

First of all, we have a group of young women who do interfaith work on several of our campuses, and I wonder if they would just raise their hands so you all know who they are, and hope that you will engage them in conversation through the main part of the meal. And what we want to talk about this evening is the work of interfaith community and discussion on campuses. And I just wanted to give just a minute and a half reflection here about what are we hoping that that will come to as we're in this new era. I guess that's what I want to talk about, is a new era.

I'm a child of the '60s, where campus ministry and university life around religion was all about dissent and civil rights and peacemaking and some issues around feminism and some issues around creating justice, housing, food, things like that. It was basically Christian. It was basically confrontational. It was basically the power voice of young adults but the power presence of middle-aged white males who didn't actually share the podium very much.

Now, we have moved into a new era where our communities are just full of people from lots of different cultures, lots of different religions, lots of different races and backgrounds, multiracial, multi-tradition. And what we're asking ourselves here is how do we live in places with divergent cultures, myriad ritual spaces, in a cacophony of prayers, with a variety of faces? How do we make peace? How do we hear faith? And how do we live in community?

So I hope that we can talk a little bit about this over dinner, and then at the end of our meal I will introduce our young women and they will each bring a little perspective. Thank you.

DIANA ECK: I wonder if I could take your mic for a moment here as our meal is being served and-- is this mic working pretty well? Good. All right. I would like to call attention to someone who doesn't often like attention drawn to herself, and that is one of our graduating divinity students this year, Kathryn Lohre. [sound fades out for several minutes]

CLAUDIA HIGHBAUGH: I'd like to just give a short introduction of the young women who are with us here from a variety of campus interfaith networks, and thank them. They will

each come in the order that I read their names and give a little bit, a 3-5 minute reflection on what's going on in their own communities.

First we have Heather Gregg, who is a PhD candidate here in Cambridge at MIT. She's a recent graduate of the Harvard Divinity School and she is studying political science at MIT where she is finishing up her PhD. Heather has lived in several regions of conflict, including Jerusalem and Bethlehem, working with Palestinian Christians on issues surrounding Israeli occupation and Croatia and Bosnia from 1994 to 1996. She is currently writing her dissertation on the causes of religious wars, considering both historic and contemporary cases of religious violence, terrorism and war.

Next, we will have Bahiyyih Khelghati. She is originally from the Togo, though she was raised in Massachusetts. She is currently in her second year at Wellesley College where she is a neuroscience major with a minor in art history. She plans to go to medical school after graduation. For the past two years Bahiyyih has been involved in the multi-faith council at Wellesley College as a member of the Baha'i faith. She also volunteers at the Tahirih Peace Institute, a program to help recent immigrants who have come to the United States to learn English and build a sense of community.

Next we will have Deshmeet Malik. Deshmeet was born and brought up in the Sikh faith in Chappaqua, New York. She is currently completing her first year at Wellesley with intentions to eventually graduate premed and with a BA in economics. Woah, math and science. Deshmeet spent the year before college in the Himalayas teaching at a Sikh boarding school for underprivileged youth and volunteering at a charitable hospital. Additionally, she spends part of every summer as a counselor at a Sikh youth camp in upstate New York, where she previously was a camper. While at Wellesley, she has been active in the Sikh-- as a Sikh in the multi-faith council there at Wellesley.

Next we have Marilyn Notah Verney. Marilyn is currently in the religious studies program at UC Santa Barbara. Her research focuses on the religious and spiritual traditions of the Diné Nation Navajo of which she is a member, paying particular attention to new insider interpretations.

We're proud to introduce Gavri Rosen, who is a senior here at Harvard where she just finished her last classes today, where she studies the history of science, focusing on mind sciences: psychology, philosophy and neuroscience. She deferred college for one year in order to study Talmud in a yeshiva in Jerusalem, and has spent summers working in Switzerland for the World Health Organization and in Berlin working for [Wissenschaftszentrum] ... At Harvard, Gavri has been active in Harvard Hillel as the head of its leadership council and with Project Health, where she has served as head and founder of one of its hospital advocacy groups. She has also participated in the Harvard Inter-Religious Women's Council and has worked with Women in Color on inter-religious multicultural women's issues.

Next we have Neelima Shukla-Bhatt. Neelima is originally from Gujarat, India. She is currently a PhD almost finished in the study of religion at Harvard, soon to be at LeMoyn

College in Syracuse as an assistant professor. She has been a member of the interfaith team and advisor for Hindu students at Wellesley since 1999. Neelima has organized prayer meetings and spoken at several public meetings to promote understanding between Hindu and Muslim communities following the religious riots in Gujarat in 2002.

And finally, we have Jessica Zaman. Jessica is currently a sophomore in chemical engineering at MIT. Originally from Oklahoma, her parents are immigrants from Bangladesh. She is currently the president of the Muslim Students Association at MIT, so she has been involved in several interfaith efforts. Last year Jessica participated in the Interfaith Volunteer Day once a month with Hillel, the Jewish students' organization. She is currently involved in interfaith activities with MIT and the Lutheran Episcopal Ministry and Hindu student groups.

I want to welcome all of these women and ask you as you come forward to share with us, to just remind us of your name, and thank you. [applause]

HEATHER GREGG: My name is Heather Gregg. And first I'd just like to thank you so much for this opportunity to speak this evening about something that is so important to me. As mentioned, I'm a PhD candidate in political science at MIT, where I'm focusing on international relations and security studies, which basically studies the causes and prevention of war. I also have a Master's degree from Harvard Divinity School where I studied Islam.

I'm writing my dissertation on the causes of religious wars, looking at religious wars across time, culture and religious tradition, with the hope of finding similar patterns of what religious groups fight over. And I'm writing on this topic because I am deeply concerned with what I believe to be stereotypes that people have about Islam as a uniquely violent religion. And I'd like to say that I disagree with this stereotype and I want to demonstrate that all of the world's religions have gone through periods of violence and periods of peace, including religions that are commonly portrayed as peaceful, such as Buddhism and Hinduism.

So one of my goals as an academic is to provide information and to try to break down stereotypes about different religious groups. And as part of this goal, I've had the privilege of coordinating an interfaith dialogue, which is a dialogue with three groups instead of two, along with Kathryn Lohre, who is from Harvard Divinity School, and I've also been working with Jessica Zaman of the Muslim Student Association at MIT as well.

So the dialogue consists of students who are in three on-campus ministry groups: the Muslim Student Association, Hillel, and the Lutheran Episcopal Ministry, which is a joint ministry between those two denominations. And I myself am a member of the Lutheran Ministry.

So this project has been made possible by a grant from the Aid Association for Lutherans in New England, and we've engaged in two semesters of projects, one in last fall and then we're just finishing up one right now this spring. And in the fall we focused just very

basically on trying to provide basic information about the different religious groups provided by the students in their own words, and each group had four or five people that spoke briefly on topics relating to their religious traditions, such as forms of worship, prayer, law, the role of women, food, history, you name it. And then that was followed by questions and answers.

And in the second semester we focused on what we've decided to call faith and action projects, which just very broadly defined is how these groups see their faith operating in the here and now in the real world. And each group did a different project and they were all wonderful. Hillel did a presentation on the role of food in Jewish life and religious practices, including a chance for participants to make hamantaschen, which are little cookies which we then gave to a Jewish retirement community in Brookline. LEM did a-- which is the Lutheran Episcopal Ministry-- did a guide ministry, or a guided church service, that explained each of the different components that make up a typical Lutheran and Episcopal service. And the MSA focused on the role of prayer in the Muslim faith and invited students to come to a Friday prayer service on campus.

So as this year is finishing up for us, I'd like to say that I think the project has been successful. But I can say personally it's been tremendously rewarding. I have learned so much from my fellow students at MIT and I feel honestly truly blessed for the experience to do this.

I believe that the dialogue has done two things. I do believe that it has really helped participants to understand different faiths and their religious neighbors at MIT, but also as importantly, I think it has provided an opportunity for people to get to know each other and to learn new things about each other and to build friendships, which is really great. So why do I think as an academic that engaging in dialogue is really important at the university level? I actually think that the university level is one of the best places to have discussions like these, and I think it's because first of all that students, when they come to university they are often very curious and open-minded. It's the first time maybe they're away from home, they're exposed to new ideas, new ways of thinking, new people, and I think this really shakes things up and it provides an opportunity for people to learn new things that they otherwise didn't know about. And so I think that dialogue or having interfaith religious dialogue is a really useful thing to do at this stage.

Furthermore, I'd like to say that MIT I think has been a fascinating place to have an interfaith dialogue. I imagine that the stereotype that many of you have about MIT is that it's a place of science and that there's no room for God there. And I have to say that before I started my program that's how it thought of MIT. But I'm very happy to report that this has not been my experience at all, that religious groups on campus are lively and they're thriving. And not only has MIT shown me that God and science can be compatible, but that they're actually-- the two are quite complementary, and it has produced a lot of very rich and lively discussions. So therefore I think that having these discussions at the university level and at MIT in particular has been very interesting and useful.

So to finish up, I'd like to say a little bit about challenges and opportunities that I think my generation faces in interfaith dialogue. I do think that we're living in challenging times, particularly in regards to religion and ethnic stereotypings that have proliferated in the wake of 9/11. However, I also think that along with these challenging times come tremendous opportunities. I think 9/11 has made people-- has really shook people up and made them ask why is this happening, why now, why us, why religion, if it is religion at all? And I think this is a really exciting opportunity to engage people in conversation and to try to break down stereotypes.

So therefore I think that in the face of these challenging times I think it's important to seize on the opportunities that lie underneath the challenges and to provide an opportunity for people to learn. Thanks a bunch. [applause]

BAHIYYIH KHELGHATI: Hello. My name is Bahiyyih Khelghati. I'm a student at Wellesley College, undergrad actually. You did the introduction already. But I just wanted to say how exciting this is to be here. It's really refreshing to see just different religious groups interacting with each other in this manner, and around food, which is the way to do it I think. [laughter]

But I just wanted to talk a little bit about my experience at Wellesley College these past two years. I'm a Baha'i, and my first year at Wellesley College there was no other Baha'is on campus. And so coming from an area where there were a lot of Baha'is and a lot of Baha'i youth, it was an interesting experience and very challenging. And the Multifaith Council, which is at Wellesley, was kind of a group that really welcomed me on campus. The Multifaith Council at Wellesley is formed of two representatives from each religious group on campus, and the purpose is just to foster dialogue and to kind of promote inter-religious dialogue throughout the whole campus.

And so I found that it was really refreshing also to have people that were talking about spiritual things and knowing that they were really comfortable with-- well not necessarily comfortable but also comfortable with questioning things and being part of a community that was questioning religion in general. And so I think at Wellesley sometimes, or just in general, youth aren't really that comfortable about talking about religion and spiritual things. It doesn't come up that often. So I think the Multifaith Council at Wellesley was really, you know, it was just a welcoming thing for me.

I wanted to also talk about two different events, well one event that's been happening at Wellesley. About a month ago, just spontaneously the Christian group on campus called Awaken the Dawn organized a dialogue around Jesus Christ, and it was like-- sorry. I'm a little nervous. It was-- they invited different religious groups on campus. They invited the Muslim group, the Jewish group, Mormons, Baha'is, Catholics, all to talk about their different religious views on Jesus Christ. And you know, expecting-- like even the MC was a little nervous when she introduced the event. She was like, "Don't start any fires. Please do not-- just as long as you don't raise your voice, etc."

But it ended up being the most like calm and very uplifting event I've ever been to really at Wellesley. And I found it so exciting, because the students really researched and read what their religion had to say and were very frank about it. And I think that was really important. And oftentimes if you want to talk about what your religion has to say between the Jewish student, the Muslim student, the Christian student, there was no avoiding what the truth was, but still there was very much respect, and I thought that was really cool. And it just reflects kind of like the exciting time that we're in right now. I think the youth in general should be questioning things and seeking the truth and reading up on what different religions have to say and not feeling like you have to fit a mold, but at the same time asking questions a lot. I think I'm saying asking questions a lot because I have a lot of questions. I also want to talk about where I've been going every Saturday for the last like two years. I go to the Tahirih Peace Institute, which is at the Boston Baha'i Center. And it's actually a social and economic development project that started at the Boston Baha'i Center. And it's mainly to teach ESL classes but its goal was for the advancement of women and the minority communities in Boston. So originally they just focused on women but eventually they found that inviting the men as well to kind of be involved in the life of the women was also important.

And what's really cool about this project is that it's not only ESL classes but halfway through the day we have just the time to consult and really talk about what's happening in the community and to say prayers. And it's at the Boston Baha'i Center, so we do have Baha'i prayers, but it's really also everyone is welcome to bring their own prayers and writings from their own religion. Most of the people that come are Catholic but we've had Muslims. We've had people from Central African Republic, Columbia, Guatemala, Egypt. And so it's been a really interesting dynamic. But because everyone is kind of out of their comfort zone and because most of them are immigrants, they're kind of ready to-- they're kind of just ready to start any sort of community, especially like some sort of spiritual community. And also they bring their children there. And there's a place for their children to be baby-sat and things like that.

So it's kind of-- I just wanted to bring that up, because I thought that was really kind of an example of how women and religion are kind of involving social change. And I think that's it. Thank you. [applause]

DESHMEET KAUR MALIK: Hi. My name is Deshmeet Malik and I was introduced before. I am a first-year at Wellesley College, soon to be a sophomore. But I just wanted to speak a little bit about my experience at Wellesley as a Sikh and in the Multifaith Council and even outside of Wellesley College. As Bahiyyih mentioned before about the Multifaith Council, unfortunately I am only one of two Sikh students at Wellesley, and last year there were none. The year before that it was my sister, who was the only Sikh at Wellesley College for four years.

So I'm pretty much on my own there. But it definitely gives me an interesting opportunity to not only explore my faith and to become more comfortable with my faith at Wellesley College and learn more about myself and about my religion as it's supposed to be, because being part of Multifaith Council we come together in a group together twice a week almost

and we question each other and we question each other's faiths and what it's about to further understand other people and their religions and where they're coming from. And I would say that I grew up in a relatively religious family. I used to attend temple and I would go through all the-- everything that you go through. I would do prayers. I went to summer camps, I would talk to older siblings, I would learn how to play religious hymns. But I never really understood the meaning of it. And it was once I got to Wellesley College that I really started to question everything that I was doing, and it made me want to learn more about my faith.

One of the great things also about the Multifaith Council is that they hold Flower Sunday in the beginning of the year, right maybe a week into classes. And it is a chance for people of different faiths, of the women at Wellesley College of different faiths to give a little bit about their religion at this service. And I spoke-- well everybody-- sorry, I'm trying to think of how to put this. Everybody gives a few lines from some of their religious text on a certain theme that was brought up for that particular Flower Sunday, and I was lucky enough to have spoken in that as a first-year there and represent the Sikh faith.

Another thing that I would really like to address is after 9/11 many, many issues came up within the Sikh community. Because the males in the Sikh community wear turbans, they were often mistaken for being militant Islamic-- being mistaken for militant Islamic men. And as a personal anecdote-- not person but to my family, my brother was hit in a car when he was driving across the bridge taking my great-grandmother to temple. And the man came and hit him from behind, and then he came around the side and he hit him from the side, and then he went around the front and then he slammed on his brakes so that my brother would hit him from the back, and he drove away. And my 98-year-old great-grandmother was sitting in the car with him.

And there have been so many other stories such as that, not just in cars, in the subway, with family, friends, Sikh store owners that have been attacked. I know that in the news there were stories of people being shot and killed that were Sikhs and that were not Muslim men. I don't think that anybody should be treated that way, but because of 9/11 the Sikh community has really had to come together and form one cohesive unit and tell people about our religion, which forced us to learn more about our religion as well.

So I mean, there are many issues that have been brought up, and as a Sikh in this community, I as a woman have had to face many things. And there is actually a line in a song that I used to sing at summer camps when I went to religious camps that makes so much sense to me right at this moment. It was Daughters of the Khalsa. Khalsa is another-- you can say Khalsa or Sikh; it depends if you're baptized. "In your strength our future lies. Give our children fearless minds to see the world through the guru's eyes." We are mothers, we raise our children, and obviously many of us have jobs and professional lives as well, but it really is in our strength that our children will grow up to be strong.

I could go on but I think I'll stop. Thank you so much for this opportunity. [applause]
MARILYN NOTAH VERNEY: Good evening. My name is Marilyn Notah Verney, graduate student in the MA program at University of California. I would also like to take this

opportunity to thank Diana and her staff, Ellie Pierce, Kathryn and Clare. You've all been just wonderful. I appreciate all that you've done for us while we're here. And also Professor Talamantez, who is working with me. I thank her for asking me to come and help her here. So I'm really happy to be here.

Right now on the UCSB campus I'm not too involved in what's going on with the other students as far as interfaith. I haven't even checked it out. We've been just kind of-- I don't even know if there's anything going on because I don't hear anything about it anyway. So right now I am involved with the American Indian Student Association, the American Graduate Student Association. And just recently the graduate students got together and they called themselves the Graduate Students of Color on campus, which I think is going to be a wonderful organization because they're focusing on mentorship, support for each other, and a sense of community for people of color on campus. And we had our first meeting last month and we're having another one next week.

And I feel like in that organization we're going to be able to do a lot more things for other students on campus. And one of our main projects is to be mentors for the Undergraduate Students of Color. And I'm excited about that project. Being a person of color myself, it has been very difficult for me to leave my reservation and come into the city and be a student there, and there's maybe like three other Native American Indian students there who were undergraduates.

And at my age-- first I want to say thank you for saying young students-- but at my age, I find working with the young and even people who are back home and teaching them about the culture and our traditions and our language, and that is my dream and my vision for the future, and that is one of the reasons I went back to school. I did my undergraduate work at the University of Texas in El Paso, and then my son had a little-- we had a new little baby in the family and he had just been born and I wanted to go home and bond with my grandson. So I did that, I went back to Gallup and I spent five years with him.

And in that five years, I was able to see what was going on on my reservation and I saw the loss of language, the loss of culture, the values were changing, traditions were going, and it saddened me very much. And I decided at that point that I want to help save our traditions and our culture and our language. And my two sons do not speak the language, do not know very much about the traditions either. So I took it upon myself to take my grandson with me. And Professor Talamantez was asking me, how can we say this, how can we do this? And my people do not like to be involved in political social issues. We're talking about grassroots traditional Dine' people. They live in peace; they don't like to get in controversies. And I said we cannot go in there and tell them what's happening. We can say these things but they will just listen and go, yeah, mm-hm.

So I said, where we have to start is with our young people. And that's what I've done with my grandson. He goes with me to the ceremonies and he's learning the language and he's learning the ways of our culture, just by being with his grandmother and doing things. So I've laid the foundation for him now.

But on our reservation we have diverse religious beliefs. We have Baptists, we have Mormons, we have a lot of Christianity, different denominations. And of our traditions we have of course the Navajo religion and the Native American church and things are being integrated into one. Like Professor Talamantez and I went to a sweat lodge that I usually go to the sweat ceremony and she went with me, and in that sweat ceremony we heard Jesus Christ praying, God's name, Native American church ways of praying, songs and chants, and then the traditional Navajo chants and prayers. So you know, religion binds people.

And I want to say something about this conference. Today, thanks to all your sharing, my mind was expanded more. It was like tunnel vision before. I was so focused on my own religion and traditions, and then having-- growing up and being told that I couldn't speak my language and my religion was trying-- they were trying to strip all that off of me. So I was very anti-Christian. When I heard the word Jesus Christ I would cringe.

But you know, today you women, what you have done for me today, you've opened up my eyes. And among us women here, I embrace Christianity. I can comfortably say we are all women of color, we are all women of different ethnic backgrounds, but we come together. And the basis of that is religion. You know, what a way to go. I think it's exciting now. And now I really want to go back and learn more about all these different religions, and when I do write my papers now, which I have always done, even in philosophy, I do comparative religion. You know, this is western man's approach, how do we see it as Diné people?

But thank you all for sharing today, and I value being here in these last few days, and it's exciting to see all your work. I had forgotten all about politics, economics and social issues. You know, I thought religion was just religion, something to be separate, but it's not. You've given me a whole new field to look at now, from a different perspective. Even though we're learning this in our studies, but I feel like now I have other women who give me the support, and I can go on and continue my work in all these different areas and look at it with different lenses now. Thank you very much. [applause]

GABRIELLA ROSEN: Hi. My name is Gavri Rosen, I'm a senior at Harvard. It's a great honor for me to be here speaking with you tonight. I'd actually rather than talk about kind of the particulars of my involvement, rattle off the organizations that I've been involved with at Harvard, with your permission I'd like to share some reflections on a particular experience that I had.

This story actually involves two of the participants in this conference-- I'm not sure if they're here yet-- though this will be unbeknownst to them. And I think that the anecdote illustrates two of the components of inter-religious work that I through my experiences with multicultural and inter-religious work both at Harvard and beyond have come to understand as central to the success of inter-communal mobilization.

The story takes place in Jerusalem at a girls' yeshiva or school for Talmud study where I spent a year before coming to Harvard. Having been raised an Orthodox Jew in Berkeley, California, that bastion of feminism, atheism, secularism, progressivism and any other -ism you could imagine would challenge non-egalitarian religious observance. I was on

unfamiliar territory at this yeshiva. In Berkeley I was the religious one and had grown comfortable conversing about my observance with less traditional Jews, with non-Jews, agnostics, with nudists, with hunger artists, you name it.

In yeshiva, I found that the tables had turned. My modern brand of orthodoxy made me the secularized radical, the one for whom terms had to be translated and pronunciations slowed. And this particular school prided itself on its own left-wing position within orthodoxy, which put me basically to the left of Stalin. All of which meant that when I started organizing a yeshiva-wide journal of articles on Jewish texts, the school administration was extremely wary. They were most wary about an introduction I wrote that sought to contextualize the journal in the history of Jewish women's writings. Carol Gilligan junkie that I was, I sought to celebrate the journal as part of a growing female corpus adding its unique voice to a largely male tradition of scholarship.

The administration had two major problems with my introduction. First off, the idea that women were adding a unique voice might imply, I was told, that our tradition of male scholarship had all along been lacking something [laughter], an inadmissible idea within orthodox theology. Second, I was told that by including the writings of modern thinking Jewish women in my history of Jewish women's writing I had implicitly endorsed their opinions. Judith Plaskow and Blu Greenberg were among the authoresses whose names I was asked to remove from this work. [laughter] There was no ill will in any of this, I assure you, just deep-seated fear of an orthodox establishment wary of interlopers.

In response, I insisted that on the one hand celebrating a new contribution is not the same as lamenting its historical absence, and on the other that mentioning a range of authors, I sought to mark a larger trend of Jewish women's scholarship that cut across denominational lines.

Over time, though, I grew increasingly impatient with the discussions into which I was drawn about how and what to change in my writing. I began to feel more and more strongly about the need for the communication of these two ideas in their pure form-- their pure form-- to my fellow students, who had been kept from appreciating the potential latent in their own scholarship. Somehow over the course of those tense weeks I had actually become the rebellious liberal that all along they believed me to be. [laughter]

The conflict very nearly escalated into irreconcilability at that point, save for the intervention of that year, renowned Talmud scholar Dr. Tamar Ross. Just as I was beginning to rather melodramatically embrace my identity as a radical speaker of egalitarian truth and interdenominational tolerance and consequently to abandon all hope of publishing the article, she made me appreciate the dogmatism of my own position. My rabbis were, she insisted, willing to hear and yes even publish my ideas but they, like the less traditional irreligious communities I was used to accommodating, had a language and value system that I had to respect within the context of that communication. She and I worked together to re-word certain points as well as to pick my battles as far as the mention of particular female scholars was concerned.

In retrospect, those changes seem trivial compared to the triumph that the article and the journal as a whole represent, for the school eventually came to take much pride in that publication and to disseminate it within the orthodox community.

The two lessons about interdenominational collaboration that I took from that nearly botched opportunity have, I think, become increasingly relevant these last turbulent years of world history. The first and hardest to recognize was about the potential for dogmatism even in tolerance, for it was I rather than the rabbis with whom I was negotiating who bordered on dogmatic resistance in our interaction. While they remained rational and respectful throughout, I substituted abstractions, like authorial integrity and open-mindedness for genuine engagement with the issues on the table, guilty of exactly the intolerance of which I was accusing them. I had somehow reduced my own ideals of tolerance and dialogue to ends in and of themselves, rather than understanding them as means to larger social ends.

Tolerance does not mean dialogue for dialogue's sake. That's just daytime television. The real work of tolerance comes instead in translation, and that would be the second lesson of that anecdote or almost any I might share from my work with inter-ethnic, inter-religious, interdisciplinary groups at Harvard and beyond. Intercommunal collaboration hinges on the successful translation of beliefs and goals into different systems of meaning. In insisting on maintaining my own agenda-laden language in my article at the yeshiva I was undermining my own larger aim: the communication of the ideas it contained. Radical or not, those ideas had to be phrased in terms that that particular audience would understand. Translation requires knowledge of and respect for the language of the various communities we seek to connect. As someone who inhabits many worlds, intellectually and spiritually, I have found that however idealistic an interdisciplinary, inter-religious or multicultural project, if it lacks the practical and difficult work of translation, the dialogue itself becomes the vapid end rather than a means for achieving larger change.

The deep engagement with opposed traditions required of the translator represents to my mind the antidote for the potential for dogmatism in intercommunal work. I identify deeply with the role of the translator as a Jew, as a woman and as a young adult. Jews and migrant people have long been the translators of their cultures, meeting different commercial and intellectual universes for others. As a woman, I, we, all of us stand at a remove even in this day and age from the major power structures of many communities. But that distance uniquely positions women leaders as intercommunal translators. Finally, as a young adult, still fluent in teenager-speak but also old enough to engage with adults of all ages, I and all of the students here tonight have the potential to translate across generations, both between and within our communities.

In a world fearful of religious extremism and in which so many nations stand in need of political and spiritual healing, inter-religious workers trained in and committed to translation between different value systems offer an invaluable resource for social and political change. Now more than ever, intercommunal work that employs dialogue and tolerance as a means to a larger end rather than as ends in and of themselves is the order of the day. Thank you. [applause]

NEELIMA SHUKLA-BHATT: Good evening. My name is Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, and I am a PhD candidate at Harvard in study of religion. I'm trying to finish my dissertation desperately, so I apologize to Professor Eck for being here. [laughter] As you can see, I am more on the senior side of the young people who are attending this conference, and I'm here to speak about my work at Wellesley. It's so good to see so many Wellesley faces here. I am the advisor for the Hindu student body, called Darshana, at Wellesley, and I'm also part of the interfaith body. It is called Religious and Spiritual Life Team, headed by Victor Kazanjian, who also leads the Multifaith Council.

I will say that I was raised what one might call religious Hindu. And I was also raised a secularist. So I grew up in a family where prayers and puja were a part of my daily life, but at the same time I was taught to challenge whatever I thought was socially wrong in my religious community. And also to reinterpret constantly, to make it more meaningful for my own life and for people around me. I was taught that religions should enhance the experience of life for one's self and for others. And, if it doesn't do that, it doesn't have any meaning.

I didn't have a really bad experience or negative connotations about religion but since the past few years, the political climate of India has been changing, and the Hindu religious right has been quite active and actually very successful in certain sectors of the society. So when this opportunity at Wellesley came up, I took it up as an avenue to engage with young adults so that I could talk with them about what opportunities and resources were there within the Hindu tradition to converse with other people, to be able to say that-- to be able to stand as confident women, not in spite of being Hindu women but because of being Hindu women.

And so these four years have been fascinating, and I have worked with some of the students here, especially with Deshi. What we have been doing at Wellesley in Darshana is-- it has been two-level work. At the basic level, we meet weekly in the Hindu student body and engage in conversation about what it means to be a Hindu woman in the 21st century. And the questions mostly come from the young women. We do not have any kind of preaching or anything. It's always socially oriented issues that the students think up and we-- I mean, I explore the situations along with them. And it has also been very fascinating to engage in Multifaith Council and their work, to engage in interfaith services, to have one team about social engagement and to make it a part of interfaith service in Flower Sundays, in baccalaureate.

So that has been very interesting and very rewarding, but my work especially got challenging and therefore more meaningful after the religious riots in the beginning of 2002 in my own part of India, Gujarat. The communal violence that broke out took many lives, especially of Muslims. And it was very difficult for me to stand as a Hindu for Hindu students to identify themselves with the tradition that on the one hand was beautiful and great symbols and has so many resources for a rich human life, and on the other the same religious symbolism was being used to scare minorities, to actually silence them completely and to engage in so much violence, so much bloodshed that it became a really, really difficult time.

And the way we dealt with it was to engage in things-- there are quite a few Muslim students of South Asian descent at Wellesley also. So the way we dealt with it was to do things together, to speak about it together and also to engage in counseling for people who needed counseling at that time.

Another thing that in this capacity as the advisor for Hindu student body I have done, I have been engaged in, is speaking at public meetings after the riots in Gujarat. And this has been one of the most difficult tasks I have had to do in this capacity because it is very-- I mean, these days you can either-- it is easier to be a completely secular person doing away with-- especially within the Hindu community-- doing away completely with the Hindu tradition or there are people who associate themselves with the more right-wing type of groups. And to stand in between and to hold that position, to say publicly that I identify myself as a Hindu but at the same time I publicly and clearly condemn what is being done to minorities in India, especially my part of India, it was quite difficult to do because I thought that at times I was all alone. I did not-- there were questions raised which were kind of hostile, and I think we heard about making political statements from religious positions.

And I am still struggling, so I stand here as a total novice in that field. But I think that was one political position I have had to take. And I'm struggling to find a way where I can say that I am Hindu, I identify myself as a Hindu, but I want to find a place within the discourse where we can join hands as people who want to liberate Hinduism from its own negative forces and to on the other hand from complete rejection of the tradition.

And so that has been my journey, and I'm so happy to be here and honored to be here, to be among women who have worked with various organizations in different capacities and have thought deeply about religious women and social change. And I take this opportunity also to very, very deeply thank Professor Eck, for it was in her class, in Diversity and Dialogue, that I first started on this journey. And I also want to thank you Ellie and Kathryn and Clare for all the support and friendship I have had from them for years. Thank you very much. [applause]

JESSICA ZAMAN: Good evening, everyone. I just wanted to say I'm the last speaker, so hang in there for a little while longer. Five more minutes, I promise. My name is Jessica Zaman. I'm a sophomore in chemical engineering at MIT. I am also president of the Muslim Students Association. I'm the first woman president. [applause] So I ask you all to bear with me, I really didn't have very much time before to prepare for this, but I'm the last speaker so hopefully there's not much longer left.

So in the half an hour before dinner today I was trying to figure out what I was going to talk about, and so I asked my friends what can I say, do you guys have any ideas, I need any input. But the first thing everyone would ask me is, wait, what does pluralism mean? I guess at MIT we're not known for our high verbal scores of the SAT. [laughter] But we do balance it out with the math.

So I took a minute to look it up online, and I think that it's important to reflect on something at the end of a day of a lot of reflections and a lot of controversy. So pluralism is

a state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain an autonomous participation in and development of their traditional culture or special interests.

And before I came to college, it was just two years ago, I thought I lived in a pluralistic society. I thought I lived in an ideal world where I could be comfortable with being different. But I think in the past two years I've seen that I don't live in the ideal utopia. I grew up in a suburb in Norman, Oklahoma. It's in the heartland. But I think that people automatically assume it was—'did you face a lot of racism in a community where there weren't as many people of diverse background?' But in my youth I haven't encountered very much racism or racial tension or ethnic tension, because I feel like in the South there's a lot of open-mindedness and a lot of openheartedness. Even after the Oklahoma City bombings, I did not face any tensions.

But unfortunately-- I automatically assumed that that ideal would be present everywhere, but unfortunately, we live in a time where our relationship with neighbors are being tested, where things that were not apparent within people, like a certain misunderstanding, certain things we've grown up with weren't as apparent, because they weren't tested. So that is a challenge that I face as a young woman who is coming to realize the world that she lives in, that the world is not a perfect place and there is a lot of misunderstanding between people of different communities. So it may not be obvious on the surface.

So among the things that I faced so far, when I first came to MIT, September 11th was like my second week of school, and so it was something that I, as a Muslim woman who was very adamant about being involved in my community, it was something that I was forced to deal with almost immediately. So I think in the wake of-- in the past two years, the Muslim community has been challenged to spread more awareness about, spread more understanding about its culture and to face misunderstandings about fundamentalism and various other things. And I think that it's changed the direction that, like from an organizational perspective, that our MSA has taken.

So I've noticed in the past two years we have organized a lot of inter-religious, ethnic and various different cultural melting pot events and initiatives. But something that I've noticed that's come into most of the efforts that I'm involved in is they've been initiated by women, and I think that it might be a trend that especially I think we've noticed in the anti-war movement, that efforts such as these are oftentimes organized by women. So I can't particularly explain why, but maybe it's our nature or maybe it's just fate. Regardless. So some of the initiatives that I've been involved with have really-- I'm fortunate to have participated in them, and I think that it's really shaped my understanding of what causes misunderstandings between people. So I think-- have you all heard the event that Heather and Kathryn organized? It was interfaith event between the Lutheran Episcopal Ministry, Hillel and MSA, and it was very interesting to be able to interact from different people and learn about different cultures.

Some other events I've been involved with are organizing-- after the communal riots in Gujarat, our organization was involved in organizing an awareness week. And also, most

recently, since it's been a year since the communal riots, we've been involved in seeing like what can we do to move to the next step. These riots occurred almost a year ago and there's no need to spread more awareness, like there's no need for awareness. So it opens up a whole new scope: where do we go after we realize that interracial and inter-religious tensions need to be addressed? How can we bring about understanding between these different groups?

So I've been very fortunate to participate in a group of five different organizations, with the Muslims Student Association, the Hindu Student Council, Secular Alliance of South Asian Democrats at MIT, and a few other organizations. And we've tried to brainstorm on things that we can do to initiate real understanding, true understanding.

There is one thing that-- we had an event I think two or three weeks ago where speakers from each of these organizations talked for five minutes and we tried to make it a very interactive event with members of the audience. Something that someone brought up was that in Gujarat, before the communal riots, there were friendly relationships between Hindu and Muslim families. People would eat at each other's houses for dinner and people would-- they had close relationships with each other's families. But then when the time for the test came, when these two communities were pitted against each other for economic or governmental reasons, the evilness in people's hearts came to push and shove. So why did that happen? How can we explain that?

But there is, in the midst of this tragedy and this misunderstanding and being lost in what we can do, there is an example of-- there are a few examples of hope. There are some villages where members of the communities, Muslim or Hindu, despite their religious background, they united together against rioters from other villages who wanted to come and ransack their villages. So I think that it's important that we use these organizations and these peoples, like the human understanding in these people's hearts, to not only try to understand each other's religions and learn more about them but to see each other as human beings and to care for each other as much as we would for people of our own religion.

So as a young woman and as someone who is coming to terms with the different problems in societies and being lost in the midst of tragedy, I see a hope for us. It's important for us not to only react to the certain things that we've been faced with, but it's also important for us to try to think about these things at a deeper level and try to really understand what religious harmony and racial harmony and pluralism really means.

I'm really grateful to be in this group of really exciting and really-- of activists and really interesting group of women, and I hope that we're able to make a difference. Thank you. [applause]

DIANA L. ECK: I'd like to thank Kathryn again and Claudia Highbaugh for putting together this panel. This was really great. [applause] And simply to say that I think probably we should disband in a formal way, because people have had very long day. And yet I know there could be many informal conversations. You may want to go up to some of these young women and talk with them, the ones who are not at your table.

But one of the things I think would be important to say in that in the United States, in the years when people in my generation went to college, this was not the kind of college we went to. The colleges, and especially those with some religious roots, which much of the higher education system that's non-public here did come out of religious roots, they were founded by one group or another-- Jewish or Protestant or Catholic-- but they were very much at the core, either a Protestant chapel, Newman Center for the Catholics, and a Hillel organization. It was Protestant, Catholic and Jewish. And that really was what the United States was seen, as quote, "a three-religion country," as they put it in the 1950s.

That is no longer the case, and one of the places where the struggles with religious pluralism in our culture is taking place is precisely on college campuses, because one college after another, one university after another is faced with trying to grapple with the architecture that it has, the ways in which it needs new kinds of spaces for new kinds of student bodies, and new kinds of organizations, like the Multifaith Chaplaincy at Wellesley that basically replaced what was for a long time a Protestant-Christian chaplain and the white church on the green kind of thing.

So these are days of tremendous structural reorganization. And Dorothy has certainly been part of that in the university church here at Harvard, where all these times when something happens that university in some way needs to respond, as in the case of September 11th, many, many religious organizations that sort of converge to represent the university community. And so it is at Harvard today when baccalaureate takes place, as the Flower Day at Wellesley, there will be readings from the Qur'an, there will be readings from the and from the whole range of traditions, precisely because that's who our students are now. Dorothy?

DOROTHY AUSTIN: I just want to say one thing, if I may. We heard a lot today during the day about hope. I felt tonight, as I suspect most of us did, that this panel tonight gave hope a human face... and I just want to thank all of you. [applause]

ECK: Ladies and gentleman, gentle Sheriff, we do need to disband tonight because we have people who have had a long, exhausting day. And all of you who are part of the conference tomorrow will be picked up at the hotel at some rather early hour, 8:15-- same time as today. And we'll--

__: ...(inaudible)

ECK: How far is the Divinity School? It's walking distance, if you're walking. You can find it on your map. Absolutely. It's a ten minutes walk.

__: ...(inaudible)

ECK: If you can walk and if you enjoy walking, by all means walk. And we'll see you there at 8:15 tomorrow. Tomorrow should be a really interesting, wonderful day. Any of you who are students, please come. You're most warmly invited. We'd love to have you tomorrow. And we'll see all of you tomorrow as well. Thanks for a great day. [applause]

END OF PANEL