

ACTING ON FAITH STUDY GUIDE

Acting on Faith: Women's New Religious Activism in America is a documentary film that offers a glimpse into the lives and work of three American women for whom faith, activism, and identity are deeply intertwined:

- Laila Al-Marayati, spokesperson for Muslim Women's League, an organization dedicated to strengthening the role of Muslim women in society
- Shamita Das Dasgupta, co-founder of Manavi, Inc., the first organization in the US to focus on violence against South Asian immigrant women
- Mushim Ikeda-Nash, former chairperson of the San Francisco Zen Center Board Committee on Diversity and Multiculturalism and diversity facilitator

In the film we see these women at work, with their families, and at play. We hear them reflect on their experiences, and tell us in their own voices what kinds of identities they seek to build – for themselves and for their communities. Their stories help us to consider the compatibility of feminism and religion, and the tension of offering a voice of critique without alienating one's community or inviting outside prejudice.

Acting on Faith provides insight into, and encourages dialogue on, the powerful streams of thought and action that are being generated by women activists of the varied religious and cultural traditions of the United States. It is a face-to-face encounter with the women who are pioneering a new religious activism.

The film is directed and produced by Rachel Antell, a research affiliate of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. She received her MTS from Harvard Divinity School in 1992 and an MA in Documentary Film and Video from Stanford University in 2001. The film is narrated by Dr. Diana L. Eck, director of the Pluralism Project, and professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University. The film was made possible through generous funding from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation.



The Pluralism Project is a research organization dedicated to helping Americans engage with the shifting realities of religious diversity through research, outreach, and the active dissemination of resources.

www.pluralism.org

USE OF THIS STUDY GUIDE

How should we use this video and guide?

This guide is designed to assist the viewer in understanding her or his own experiences in light of the experiences of the three women featured in the film. It includes questions that prompt the viewer to consider how one formulates an identity as a person of faith *and* as an activist on three levels: personal, community, and as a participant in new movements. The guide is meant to be read through prior to viewing the film, and used as a tool for focused discussion in small groups afterwards.

Who might find this guide useful?

The ideas and experiences discussed in this video and guide are meant to speak to young adults and adults in general; however, the following groups might find this film particularly inspiring and thought-provoking:

- Women's organizations
- Religious/congregational groups
- Interfaith groups
- High school, college, and graduate classes
- Youth groups
- Activist organizations
- Civic leaders and organizations

Where can I find more information on the issues discussed here?

A bibliography and list of related links follow the study guide.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

In her opening narration, Dr. Diana L. Eck invites viewers to consider the relationship between faith, feminism, and activism. She says, "The women profiled in this film...believe that no one should have to choose between multiple and vital identities. For these women, and many others, their faith fuels their activism. As they engage with their religions in the American context, they are each becoming pioneers of new identities, new communities, and new movements."

The study guide questions below are framed in terms of these new spaces that women of faith are carving out through their activism. The intention is to encourage you to consider the film in light of your own identity, your own community, and your own participation as an activist in various movements.

IDENTITIES

When did you first realize that you were (Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, etc.)? How does it affect your everyday life?

What is the gendered lens you bring to your religion?

Laila talks about her volunteer work at the UMMA Free Clinic as part of her religious obligations. What are the religious precepts/obligations that help you to determine choices in your life (service, sanctity of life, justice, etc.)?

Mushim says “What’s most important for us as Buddhist activists, and for myself, is to continually examine my own practice, my own heart to say, ‘Am I acting out of fear? Am I acting out of hatred? Am I acting out of clinging to some idea of what is right and what is better?’” What was your first activist experience? What role did your faith play?

How do you define “religious activism”? Are these women religious activists? What advantages do women have as religious activists? Disadvantages?

Does religious activism take place on a personal, community, or political level? What forms might it take on each of these levels?

Are there ways in which you belong to a minority group? How does it affect your activism?

COMMUNITIES

Are there texts, rituals, symbols, and stories in your tradition that empower women? What are they? Which ones are meaningful to you?

What is the position of women in your religion? Where does sexism exist? In what form(s)?

How would you explain your religious beliefs to someone who knows nothing about them? What are the most important things for them to know about your religion?

These women all work within faith communities. How might their work look different in other faith communities? In secular communities?

Manavi, the organization founded by Shamita, is “nonreligious and nonsectarian.” Do you think that it belongs in this video? Why or why not?

Laila, Shamita, and Mushim have all made an effort to pass down lessons to their children from their experiences as members of their faith communities, as women, and as activists. What community identities do you belong to that you would want your children/the next generation to claim as well?

Dr. Diana L. Eck suggests that these women are particularly predisposed towards interfaith work because they are at the margins of their communities. Do you agree? If so, do you think that being on the margins of a community predisposes you towards activism?

MOVEMENTS

Shamita found the women's movement to be unresponsive to the needs of women of color, and found her faith community to be unresponsive to the needs of women. Does her work fall into an entirely new category of movement? Why or why not?

Christine Grumm, the president of the Women's Funding Network, says: "I've lived in both worlds of the secular women's movement and faith-based movement and found myself quite frustrated at having to hop back and forth when they refused to talk to each other and work together." (<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm?aid=2399>)

Have you experienced a tension between the two movements? How do you think that tension might be balanced?

Where might faith and feminism find common ground? On what issues?

Shamita describes herself as a "runaway" from the mainstream feminist movement. Are you a runaway from a mainstream movement? Which one? How is your activism different?

RESOURCES ON WOMEN, FAITH, AND ACTIVISM

ORGANIZATIONS FEATURED IN *ACTING ON FAITH*

Buddhist Peace Fellowship

<http://www.bpf.org>

Muslim Women's League

<http://www.mwlusa.org/welcome.html>

Manavi, Inc.

<http://www.manavi.org/>

San Francisco Zen Center

<http://www.sfzc.com/>

Pluralism Project Women's Networks – Past Events (including photos and transcripts), Resources, & Profiles of Participating Organizations

<http://www.pluralism.org/events/women/index.php>

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