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Spiritual Exploration: Gender, Human Frailty and Interfaith Realities

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Charles Rice Post-Graduate Fellowship 2019-2020

Spiritual Exploration: Gender, Human Frailty and Interfaith Realities

Elizabeth Iobst

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Introduction:

Chances, Opportunities and Big Decisions

In August 2019, the summer before I started my year as a Charles Rice Post-Graduate Fellow, my parents celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary. My two older sisters and I threw them a surprise party while we were at the Jersey Shore with our extended family during our annual summer vacation at the beach. The night was filled with good food, music, dancing, alcohol, party hats and stories from the past. As I listened to stories from when my parents were younger, I found it difficult to imagine them as anything other than what I've known them as: two loving and selfless parents. There are a million and one things I need to thank my parents for, but on the night of their fortieth wedding anniversary, I was most grateful for my parents teaching me about unconditional love. Unlike tying my shoes and learning to read, I don't think it was something my parents purposely or consciously worked to teach me. Instead, I learned what unconditional love looks and feels like by watching them interact with each other, my sisters and myself. I have never once doubted that my parents loved me, supported me and would do absolutely anything for me with no strings attached.

Before the party ended, my dad gathered our family in the yard and thanked everyone for coming. His thank-you somehow turned into a speech. During which, he said a popular quote from John Lennon: "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." It

wasn't the first time I've heard this quote. But as I listened to my dad talk about his love for my mom, it really resonated with me.

Life is filled with decisions, opportunities and chances. Not even just the chances you take, but also those others do not. No matter how much you plan or how hard you work, sometimes God has other plans. Take for instance me becoming a Charles Rice Post-Graduate Fellow. I spent my whole senior year of college applying for a different fellowship that had absolutely nothing to do with religion. I wanted to study women and extreme sports. After months of working on my application, I couldn't imagine spending the year after my college graduation doing anything else. I was devastated when I was not selected for that fellowship. I regrouped, filled out a different application and applied to the Charles Rice Post-Graduate Fellowship. And then, I was not selected for this fellowship either. So, I started applying for jobs and service years. I planned on finding a cute apartment, exploring Philadelphia and making new friends. I was excited at the thought of being an adult and living on my own.

On the day I interviewed for a job in Philadelphia, I got an email from the Charles Rice Fellowship committee. I learned that one of the students who was offered the fellowship turned it down. As I was busy planning my life in Philadelphia, I was presented with a new opportunity because someone else didn't take it. I would have the chance to travel, research and explore religion. After checking my ego at the door, I accepted the fellowship and began preparing for what would be the biggest and best adventure of my life thus far.

The Charles Rice Post-Graduate fellowship was created in honor of the late Reverend Charles Rice who was lovingly referred to as Rev Rice by students. Reverend Charles Rice was the chaplain at Ursinus College for twenty years before passing away in 2013. During his extensive tenure, he encouraged graduating students to apply to international fellowships and

explore the world. Funded through a grant from the Harold C. Smith Foundation, this fellowship enables Ursinus students to study an intersection of religion and social justice with the aim of writing a publishable manuscript. Originally, I had planned to study equal access to religious education within the five world religions in five different countries. I wanted to know how gender affects quality and level of religious education. I wanted to explore how human frailty influences religious practices, teachings and experiences. Additionally, I wanted to better understand how religious education affects an individual's relationship with God. I wanted to create a rigidly academic manuscript with a clear thesis, numerous case studies and groundbreaking evidence. But as I was busy making these plans, Institutional Review Boards and Coronavirus had other plans.

Due to logistics, timing, funding, a global pandemic and my own naivety, my fellowship did not unfold as I planned. I was only able to spend seven months abroad split between England and Israel. Of these seven months, I was only able to officially interview people for four months and all participants needed to be over the age of eighteen. Because of accessibility, location and my own biases, a majority of my experiences revolved around Christianity and Judaism instead of an equal split between Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. The realization that my research would be different than I planned led to yet another change and another chance.

I did not write a meticulously researched academic paper with a provable thesis and an in-depth literature review as I had planned. Instead, in the following collection of fourteen essays, I have detailed extremely personal experiences, religious beliefs and the occasional interview. As my fellowship year progressed, I fully comprehended what an incredible opportunity I had been given. A chance to explore my faith, have difficult discussions and to appreciate how religious people around the world negotiate their beliefs with their everyday

realities. Religion, though often disguised as formal and exacting, is in fact, intimate, emotional and dynamic. To simply summarize existing research, critically examine the Vatican II documents or to write in an inaccessible format would be a disservice to myself and all of the incredible people I met throughout my travels.

The following essays can be read in order or individually. The first essay is an edited version of my personal statement from my application to become a Charles Rice Post-Graduate Fellow. I believe it provides important context for my inspiration behind my research and also showcases just how much my beliefs have evolved. In each of the other thirteen essays, I open with an introductory paragraph that is anecdotal and sets the stage for the main idea. The body of the essay describes a specific, significant experience or moment. I end each essay with my reflection, final thoughts and opinions. With an exception made for the chapter on the Jerusalem International YMCA, I have changed all names. Unless I explicitly stated the exact location, like in the essay about the Manjushri Kadampa Meditation Centre, I have also purposely remained nondescript in terms of location.

As a twenty-three-year-old woman, this is only the beginning of what I am sure will be an ever-evolving relationship with God. With new perspectives and experiences, I will continue to reconsider and challenge my own preconceived ideas. My time as a Charles Rice Fellow was transformative and powerful. I will be forever grateful that I was given this opportunity to explore different cultures, different peoples and different religions. As my father quoted John Lennon, “Life is what happens when you’re busy making other plans.” And as John Lennon once sang, “The more I see the less I know for sure.”

Personal Statement:

“No Coward Soul is Mine”

“Ladies! The more you cooperate, the faster this will go!” said my eighth-grade homeroom teacher to all my fellow female peers as we line-up single file in the hallway. One by one, my classmates disappear into the observation room with our teacher where our skirts are measured with a ruler, our faces examined for make-up and our bodies and hair our checked for “unnecessary” modifications. As I wait near the end of the line, I watch my friends desperately pull at the hemlines of their skirts, wipe the tinted chap-stick off their lips and hide their non-religious jewelry. As I near the front of the line, my nerves take over and I feel the sweat drip down my freshly ironed dressed shirt. The front of the line offered the perfect view of my male counterparts, working quietly on their science homework unworried about their appearances, uniforms or bodies.

To many, including most of fellow Catholic school alumni, this memory may seem trivial. Others may even look back fondly at this memory as they read BuzzFeed articles entitled “24 Signs You Went to Catholic School” or even “16 Tell-Tale Signs You Were a Catholic School Girl.” However, I am confident I will never look back fondly on this memory or want to check it off on any BuzzFeed quiz. For me, this uniform inspection was the first time I ever questioned my faith, my relationship with God and even the authority of my beloved teacher. Why did it matter what I looked like? Why did God or my teachers care if I liked to wear whale shaped

earrings from the Jersey Shore instead of my cross-shaped necklace? How did my blush colored lip gloss affect my ability to learn the Nicene Creed or the scientific method? Why did my male classmates get a whole extra class period to work on their homework while I frantically tried to pull my skirt down? Although I did not realize it at the time, this uniform check would begin my long, confusing and complicated relationship with God.

After attending Roman Catholic school for twelve years, I transferred to public high school. I still attended mass every Sunday morning with my family. And for the most part, I still considered myself a willing and faithful servant of God. But the more time I spent away from the rigor of uniform checks, weekly mass, religion class and mandatory daily prayers, the more Sunday mass became a responsibility and a way to please my parents. As the end of my senior year of high school approached, I looked forward to the freedom college offered as my mom would be none the wiser that I stopped going to mass. Throughout my college career, I began to develop my own opinions outside the pressures of the church and my traditional Roman Catholic family. I became a liberal in my political views, an intersectional feminist, a proponent of same-sex marriage, sexual exploration and pro-choice. In deep discussions with my friends, I found myself condemning the church for its discrimination, abuses of power and unwillingness to change with the times. Deep down, even though it terrified me, I even began to question if I was an atheist.

By the time my senior year of college approached, with graduation and my undecided future looming ahead, I longed for the old comfort and familiarity of the church and my faith. I wanted to believe that I was created in God's image, that God would forgive me for my past transgressions and that God would welcome me back with open arms, but something kept holding me back. How could an institution that preached love, acceptance, forgiveness,

benevolence and charity be so hypocritical? If I am created in God's image, why could I not become a priest or a high-ranking church official just because of my gender? If God loves all creatures, why does the church not support same sex marriage? If God created all life, why should I be ashamed of my body?

Whether it was a stroke of luck or a miracle, during a period of my darkest thoughts, Reverend Ofori, Ursinus College's Chaplin and Director of Religious and Spiritual life, invited me to speak at an interfaith service. As Student Body President, Reverend Ofori asked me to read a poem to kick off women's history month. Although I was hesitant to accept, something deep within told me to accept her invitation. I spent the week searching for the perfect poem: something that was respectful and appropriate yet representative of my own faith journey. By the time Saturday night rolled around, I was frustrated and annoyed. I regretted the commitment I had made to Reverend Ofori. I had still not found a poem. I began to wonder if I should give up when I found a poem by Emily Bronte entitled "No Coward Soul Is Mine." As I read Emily Bronte's elegant and lyrical prose, I realized her sentiment was true: I need not be concerned with the tenets or structure of religion. I need only to put my faith and trust in God.

Reading a poem at the interfaith Sunday service reinvigorated my belief in God. I am beginning to realize that my Catholic school girl experience is not representative of all religions and faiths, nor does it represent the full potential of my Catholic faith. I do not need to, or want to, be premature in my decision to abandon religion. I hope this fellowship year provides me the opportunity to better define the role religion will play in my life by exploring different denominations and religion in different cultures. I know that life is complex and does not proceed in a straight and narrow line. I should not expect my relationship with God to be any different.

Missionaries and Devil Worshipers:
The Role of Political Views in Religious Salvation

When I first arrived in Northern England, I stayed in a boarding house for three weeks. Though there was nothing special about my room or my uncomfortable cot, the location was supreme. I was within walking distance of the Universities, the city centre, the downtown area, the stadium, the public library and local park. Even better, a small Baptist church was located at the end of the road. In front of its doors was a sign with mass times and a welcome message inviting everyone and anyone inside.

Reflecting on my experiences within this small Baptist community is difficult. The people I met through this Baptist Church helped me find my bearings and jump start my research. I was genuinely welcomed into their religious community. After the very first service I attended, the minister and many parishioners stayed after to introduce themselves to me. After explaining my research and my three week stay in the area, they offered their guidance and advice. I joined their women's bible study, attended about two services a week, and attended one mixed gender bible study. I felt welcomed in every possible way. The people I met were kind, caring and passionate. Their faith was genuine, and their love for God and his creation was apparent. And so were their beliefs in salvation, morality and importance of missionary work. It is the latter beliefs, and the way they were discussed and acted upon, that leave me unsettled.

The first service I attended was an evening weekday service. As soon as I walked in the doors, I was greeted by a lovely woman named Sarah who invited me to sit next to her. The

service was not a typical Christian mass, it was a recommissioning of a missionary. This was a first for me, and hopefully a last. The service started out like any other service. We sang songs, prayed and read from the bible. Then, a man and his wife went to the front of the church and introduced themselves. As a couple, they were in charge of organizing all ministry work for the Baptist community in the area. The man took control and began speaking about the importance of missionary work. First, he suggested that if your friends do not believe in Jesus, and are unwilling to convert to Christianity, you should cease being friends with them. He used the example of unfriending a Muslim if they were unwilling to adopt your own religious beliefs. I was in complete shock. How could I feel so welcomed into this church, but hear a message filled with such intolerance?

The speaker transitioned into the difficulties missionaries face focusing specifically on the one being recommissioned at the service. Missionaries are alone, in a foreign country, where “no one knows or shares the same history.” This missionary had just spent multiple years in Japan, and would be returning for a few more. The speaker explained how hard it is for missionaries in Japan, and also China, because there are so few Christian converts in these countries. He continued to claim that Japanese temples are “Devil worship centers.” He spoke of the dangers tourists face when they unknowingly visit these “Devil worship centers.” Again, I felt uneasy. How can a group who boasts welcoming and kindness judge another religion so harshly? More than just religion, how can a group of people find it appropriate to condemn another way of life, another culture and history? As we prayed for the safety and wellbeing of the missionary, he was blessed and officially recommissioned. Afterwards, everyone was invited to stay for tea, biscuits and special Japanese candy.

Less than a week later, I went with Sarah to her weekly women's only bible study. Instead of meeting at the church, we met at a community center about a mile away. After some brief introductions, and some morning toast and coffee, we took turns reading sections from the book of Mathew. We used a bible study guide with a premade outline and questions. The conversation shifted between religion, praying, everyday chit-chat and gender. As a whole, the group agreed that it would be good for the men of the congregation to be more active in their community, as well as more engaged with the bible. There had previously been an all-male bible study, but they were no longer meeting. The women were hesitant to allow men into their group acknowledging how the group dynamics would change if men were present. The women joked about the men speaking over them, and possibly changing the atmosphere of the group. Though my research is focused on gender and religion, I found myself more interested in the ideas of missionary work and salvation instead. The recommissioning service was over a week ago, but I was constantly thinking about it.

I soon learned that one of the bible study regulars was away on a short mission trip to China. Every bible study I attended, we prayed for her. When we learned she was having troubles with her visa, we prayed even harder. We asked God to give her strength, keep her safe and to help her help others. In their exact words, we prayed for her to "show Chinese communists the light." I was surprised how deeply these women believed that economic and political beliefs were a factor in salvation and morality. I was even more surprised that capitalism was associated with salvation. I am no expert in theology or politics, but I would assume God's political ideals would align more with equality and shared distribution than exploitation and the hoarding of wealth and resources. But at the end of the day, I don't think God cares about politics or the way you worship.

I continued to attend these Baptist services throughout my time in Northern England. I even looked forward to the weekly bible study. It was comforting to have a schedule, to see the same faces and share coffee with new friends while being so far away from home. Is this the sense of normalcy missionaries crave while being so far away from home? Do they deepen their faith and become more extreme in their beliefs because they are alone in a foreign land? When I attended the recommissioning ceremony, I was shocked when I heard the speaker's beliefs about devil worship temples and conversion. For weeks, I was flabbergasted that such a large group of people could still hold such beliefs. But as I took a step back, were they really that different from the questionable things I heard in my own parish? I tried to imagine bringing a friend, unfamiliar with the teachings of the Roman Catholic church, to a Sunday service. What topics and beliefs would make them sweat?

While my studies were focused on gender and religion, and while it was clear from this experience that women could serve equally as missionaries in this faith, I had not expected or appreciated how dedication to one's own religion could result in such profound intolerance.

Go Birds!:

Appreciating Gendered Traditions and Customs

I am a bandwagon Philadelphia Eagles fan. I've never been interested in football. I've never wanted to watch a full game, learn the rules or try to understand the gameplay. I've always believed that professional athletes, especially football players, are excessively overpaid. But when the Philadelphia Eagles won the 2018 Super Bowl, I started to understand the appeal. Now, I understand that football is more than tailgating, chicken wings and half-time shows. Football, like all other sports, serves as a way to unite a community, to celebrate with your neighbors and to show pride for your hometown. Not to mention, everyone loves an underdog. Besides getting to celebrate in stereotypical Philly fashion, I never expected that my new found appreciation for the Eagles would be relevant as I traveled across the pond to England. But as I awkwardly sat across from an Orthodox Jewish community leader and his wife, my newfound appreciation for the Eagles created connection and opened the door for more intimate conversation.

After reaching out to multiple Synagogues in the area, I was invited to tour and meet with the community leader of a reformed Orthodox synagogue. After getting dressed, making sure to adhere to the dress code I was sent with my invitation, I headed to the bus stop. No pants, a skirt below my knees, and covered arms. The bus dropped me off at the corner and I walked around the block four times double checking the address each time. I saw a large parking lot, trees and shrubbery, and a large iron gate but no synagogue. I called my contact Mark expressing my apologies for being late while explaining I might be lost. Mark explained the synagogue is not visible from the street and that I needed to ring the buzzer on the gate. After the first gate, Mark

met me at the second gate. As I shook hands with Mark and introduced myself, I realized that, besides the Vatican, I had never been to a religious center with so much security.

Once inside, Mark introduced me to his wife, Susan, and together they explained Mezuzahs. At most doorways in Jewish homes and synagogues, there is a piece of parchment in a special, decorative case inscribed with Torah verses. Mezuzahs fulfill the biblical commandment of Deuteronomy 6:9, which reads “write the words of God on the gates and doorposts of your house.” It reminded me of blessing myself with holy water whenever I enter or exit a church. Susan led me into Mark’s office as Mark went and made coffee. After a few minutes of small talk, Mark and Susan began a broad, but very detailed, history of Judaism. They began with the story of Joseph and the coat of many colors, a story I recognized from the Old Testament. Mark took control of the narrative. Susan often jumped in specifically when it was related to the traditions and commandments followed by the Jewish people.

We then began the tour of the synagogue and the grounds. In each room, Mark and Susan explained the purpose of the room, the lay-out and its contents. I saw the dairy kitchen, meat kitchen, event hall, and daily prayer room. I learned about Kosher cooking, eating and shopping. Susan happily showed me the apps on her phone which aided in Kosher shopping and finding Kosher restaurants abroad. Susan also showed me the bridal room and explained the veiling tradition.

In the veiling tradition, the groom is escorted by his father and the bride’s father, along with his friends and the rabbi, to his bride. Typically, the bride is sitting on a decorative bridal throne. The groom covers his wife with a veil. Sometimes families chose to use an opaque veil. Susan offered a variety of reasons for this tradition, first and foremost modesty. The veil protects the wife’s modesty, prevents unwanted attention or a lustful glance from a guest and reinforces

the idea that a woman's beauty is meant only for her husband. It can also mean that the groom does not value his bride's physical beauty more than her inner beauty. In some traditions, the veiling of the bride represents the groom's new found responsibility to clothe his wife. The veiling tradition also has biblical origins. In the book of Genesis, Jacob, who is considered the Patriarch of the Israelites, falls in love with a woman named Rachel. Jacob works for Rachel's father for seven years in order to earn her hand in marriage. On the day of the marriage, Rachel's father switches the brides. Instead of marrying Rachel, Jacob marries Leah, Rachel's older sister. Jacob does not notice because his bride is veiled throughout the ceremony. By personally placing the veil on his bride, the groom prevents himself from making Jacob's mistake.

Once we entered the main room, I sat down facing the Arc on the eastern wall where the Torahs are kept. Susan and Mark took turns explaining different elements of Judaism and their congregation to me. Susan spoke about different gender roles explaining that women originally sat separated from men to prevent them from being distracted by female beauty. In this synagogue, women sit upstairs and men sit downstairs. Similarly, married women covered their hair because their hair is their "crowning glory" and therefore, only their husbands should be able to see it. In front of me, I had the rules and dress code for visiting the synagogue. The very first rule stated, "Men and women sit in separate areas." The second rule asks that when the congregation stands, you stand. The third rule stated, "men should wear a kippah (skull cap) and married women wear a hat." I tried to think what the first rule of visiting a Roman Catholic church might be. While I could not specifically identify that rule, I would guess the dress code would likely be in the top three.

As Susan and I discussed the importance of these rules and seating sections, Mark pulled back the curtain on the Eastern Wall to show me the Siferi Torahs. He carefully removed a Torah

scroll from the arc and detailed the specific pieces including the breast plate, pointer and written words. I learned that each Torah can cost upwards to \$30,000 with individual families sponsoring a page, sentence, word or even single letter. The Torah is handwritten and must be without mistakes. If damaged, the congregation will even host a funeral for the sacred book. No one is allowed to directly touch the pages which is why they use a pointer to follow along when reading. When written in Hebrew, it contains no vowels. Mark sang a section of the Torah for me and explained what usually happens on a traditional Shabbat or Saturday service. Traditionally a morning Shabbat service can last up to three hours. Many people do not arrive the moment the service begins. According to the information packet I was given, the beginning of the service includes prayers that should be said at home upon waking up and songs designed to set the mood for prayer before you even enter the Synagogue. After the service the congregation celebrates Kiddish, a blessing of wine or grape juice, in the reception area.

After the tour concluded, Susan and Mark invited me back to their house for more coffee and so that I could see an at-home kosher kitchen. As the three of us sat around their kitchen table, I couldn't help but to feel a little uncomfortable as we struggled to find a conversation point outside of their standard Synagogue tour. That is until Mark inquired, "So you're from around Philadelphia, does that mean you're an Eagles fan?" Though my football knowledge and interest is mediocre at best, the Eagles winning the Superbowl opened the door to a more intimate conversation. Mark told me about his trips to Colorado with his friends to watch the Denver Broncos play in their home stadium. Like me, Susan expressed her overall disinterest in football but excitement that her husband's interests gave her the opportunity to visit American Sephoras stores. Mark and Susan frequently travel to Israel and were able to share some very

helpful travel tips and insights. I realized sports and religion are not all too dissimilar as they both serve as a way to unite people.

Soon the conversation flowed back to religion, but this time it was more relaxed and personal. I explained the confusion and difficulties I felt within my own faith. Mark and Susan opened up about their children. I learned that none of their adult children were “particularly religious.” Though not easy, they both have come to accept this reality. Mark spoke of being happy that all of his children found good people for spouses. As long as their children are happy and healthy, they would be happy. Susan also added the peace of mind she feels knowing all of her grandchildren will be Jewish because of their mother’s lineage. In direct opposition to my Christian missionary experiences, most Jewish communities do not actively work to convert people to Judaism. In fact, conversion to Judaism is often controversial and extremely difficult due to the importance of blood lineage.

Curious about the double fences I went through to enter the Synagogue, I asked Susan and Mark about security. In addition to cameras, fencing and multiple padlocks, there is also a groundskeeper who lives full-time on the property for added protection. In recent years, they have experienced an incident of antisemitic graffiti. Mark was born and raised in England. Within the last five years, he’s felt feelings of hate and prejudice that he’s never felt before. He believes politics have given people the justification to be openly racist. He also spoke of his desire to move to Israel even though it is not an option for him or his wife because they both rely on the United Kingdom National Health Service for health care.

Again, I look back to my own experiences and church in Pennsylvania. I used to wear my soccer uniform to Sunday service because there wasn’t enough time to go home and change beforehand. I remember scheming with my girlfriends in elementary school to sit next to our

crushes. Not only did that mean sitting next to them for an hour, it meant holding their hand during the Our Father and offering them the sign of peace. I do not remember any security checks, nor are there any now. And I have definitely never felt prejudice or hatred because of my religious beliefs.

Before embarking on this fellowship, my knowledge and understanding of the Jewish faith and their traditions was mediocre at best. I was familiar with the Old Testament. I understood that Jesus was a Jew, but is not their messiah. I knew about Hannkuah, Yom Kippur, bat mitzvahs and Hasidism. I'd eaten Challah bread, binge watched *Shtisel* on Netflix and attended a Hillel meeting while in college. I was fascinated and judgmental of married women who wore wigs, separate seating sections and gendered guidelines. As an outsider, I couldn't understand why women were okay with these gendered traditions. I was no better than the Baptist missionaries I was so quick to deem intolerant.

I am confident that gender plays a significant role in Judaism, and that patriarchal hierarchies still prevail but they also exist within my religion. It is not my place to judge something I am only just beginning to understand. Listening to Susan explain the bridal tradition was an important reminder that traditions can have many interpretations. Furthermore, traditions can be repurposed and remade to fit a modern era. Religion, and the traditions that inform it, is not one size fits all. If nothing else, I left this meeting with a growing understanding of the complexities informing the role gender plays in traditional world religions. I now appreciate that customs and traditions that may seem random or outdated are deeply woven into the fabric of organized religion. Judging what you do not know or understand is risky business.

Growing Pains:

An Interview with Female Clergy

Growing up going to church, I can remember listening to homily after homily from the priests of my parish. Every week the homily and its message changed, but usually they boiled down to a few succinct categories: interpretations of the bible, family relations, what being a good Catholic means, church happenings and finances, pro-life ideals and feel good anecdotes. I have learned many valuable and useful lessons from listening to these homilies. I have also grown to resent and question many of the messages and ideas presented in them. Even more than the message, I have always questioned the man speaking at the pulpit. Why did I never see a woman giving the homily especially when the message was about women's bodies, freedoms and responsibilities? I wonder what would be different about the message and lessons if women were given the position at the pulpit.

In the Anglican Church of England, women can be ordained clergy members and I had the privilege of interviewing one. Late in December, I walked to Hellen's house for tea and biscuits. As soon as I knocked on her door, I noticed the differences between her type of ministry and the kind I was accustomed to. She lived in a neighborhood populated with people of various backgrounds, ages, genders and occupations. Most notably, she was married with children and two dogs. In the Roman Catholic tradition, clergy typically live in rectories, on or near church grounds, with other priests. Roman Catholic priests can have pets, but they must remain celibate.

Almost immediately, I felt at ease with Hellen. She was welcoming, kind and authentic. Retrospectively, I understand that Hellen's gender also contributed to my feeling of comfortableness. After recommending restaurants and offering me connections to other possible research leads, I asked Hellen how she became a clergy member. Around the age of twelve, Hellen began having serious thoughts of full-time ministry. Hellen did not meditate on these feelings for long. At the time, women were still not allowed to be priests in the Church of England. It was not until 1994 that the first group of women become ordained clergy members.¹ Nearly ten years later, while teaching drama at a university, these thoughts came back to her. Hellen decided to pursue part-time ministry work. That soon changed. It became "so blindly obvious" that her calling was to pursue full-time ministry work.

Due to financial and personal reasons, her training and degree in theology took over five years. Finally in 2008, Hellen was ordained and given her first placement. She was critical of the training saying she received a "vague administration on how to run a church." During her first placement, she faced unexpected challenges. Not only did the roof of her parish collapse, she also had to learn how to be an authority figure to her parishioners. During her first placement, she learned the importance of taking care of herself so she could in turn help others. Hellen spoke of another important lesson, "a goalkeeper can't score just by stopping bad things from happening." She explained the importance of going beyond the surface and short-term fixes. To really fix a problem, whether it be a parish wide issue or an individual problem, you have to dig deep and find the route of the issue. Long term solutions require hard work, thoughtfulness and dedication.

¹ John Darnton, "After 460 Years, The Anglicans Ordain Women," *The New York Times*, March 13, 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/03/13/world/after-460-years-the-anglicans-ordain-women.html>.

As her tenure in ministry work continued, Hellen was given more responsibility. She worked her way up the chain of command within the church. In her current role, Hellen focuses on advising church leaders and is a social justice director. Hellen detailed the many projects and initiatives she's involved with including local food banks, interfaith networking, and a halfway home for formerly imprisoned women. The halfway house serves as a way "to bridge the gap" between prison and the outside world. Open to anyone, especially those with nowhere else to go, women have the opportunity to explore their faith and reestablish their lives. Buddhism and overall "spiritual wellbeing" are popular among the women in the house. Instead of having a male spiritual or religious guide, these women turn to Helen. Though I was not able to speak with any women in the house, I imagine Hellen's shared gender provides an initial sense of trust and comfort. I also imagine they appreciate the freedom to explore religion with Hellen rather than being forced into Christianity.

Hellen is heavily involved with a campaign to build new churches and remodel existing churches to be sustainable both economically and environmentally. Additionally, this campaign enables churches to have their own mission. Hellen explained the five marks of mission within the Church of England: proclaim God's news, baptize and nurture, respond to human need, care for God's Earth and justice. She asks each church, "What impact do you want to have? Where do they see it [the church] in ten years?" In her own words, "We're asking God for a bigger church to help more people and for more justice."

Of course, I had to ask about the role gender has played in her ministry, faith and experiences. Without missing a beat, Hellen declared, "the church is made for men." She has to wear men's clothing. There's no cassock, gown or cap designed specifically for women and their bodies. Beyond the surface level, gender plays a significant role. Hellen spoke of the

disadvantages women face who are interested in joining the ministry. The training schedule and timetable for clergy training is catered to young men and disadvantages young mothers. Even for part-time positions, the hours are long and inflexible. Again, Hellen shared her struggle to establish authority. As a female priest, Hellen has faced prejudice from conservative and traditional parishioners and even from her fellow priests. She's had to learn when and how to "pick her battles" while "fighting against the system." When I inquired more about "the system" she mentioned the "bad and challenging" church legislation against gender and sexuality. Gender seems to add a whole new, and often exhausting, dimension to Hellen's ministry.

I will be the first to admit, I would feel uncomfortable seeing a Roman Catholic priest kiss his wife. I would feel uncomfortable seeing a woman consecrate the Eucharist. I would probably feel uncomfortable if I went out to get my mail and saw my neighborhood priest waving back. And in all honesty, I would probably feel hesitant the first time I heard a homily from a woman. One of the most beautiful things about the Roman Catholic church is its traditions. The Roman Catholic masses I've attended in England, Israel, New Jersey, Delaware and North Carolina have been more or less the same as those I attend at my home church back in Pennsylvania. I, along with many, find the consistency to be comforting and familiar.

I am more than willing to confront my own trepidation in regards to change within my religious community. Seeing a woman as a priest would challenge my envisionment of God, the authority of priests and the connection between man and God - just to name a few. Ordaining women as priests opens the proverbial can of worms in regards to change versus tradition. Moreover, it would be naive of me to think I would be the most challenged by this type of change. I am a young, liberal woman actively searching for answers and advocating for reform. If I am to acknowledge my own difficulties accepting change, I must think of others. In today's

ever changing and tech savvy world, religion can bring a level of familiarity and comfort to an older generation that I cannot even begin to understand. I am in many ways, just beginning my life. I have not gotten married, raised a family, chosen a career or made irreversible life decisions based on the teachings of the Roman Catholic church. If the church is wrong about not allowing female priests, what else could be wrong?

But growing pains are a natural symptom of change and a symptom I much rather endure than stagnation, obsolescence and irrelevance. Unfortunately, I can only imagine the effect female priests could have in the Roman Catholic Church. I can only imagine how powerful it would be to have a woman, created in God's image and educated in theology, speaking to a congregation filled with young and old men and women. I can only imagine how the leadership, politics and operations of the Roman Catholic church would change with women better represented in leadership roles. I can only imagine the impact on impressionable young men and women especially when being taught about family, relationships, sex and life by a woman. I can only imagine the resurgence and reinvigoration Roman Catholics around the world would feel knowing their faith can endure discomfort and challenges. God's teachings will never change, but those who deliver it must.

Body, Mind and Spirit:

My Weekend at a Buddhist Meditation Retreat

According to Time magazine, “The Dalai Lama has been the face of Buddhism for 60 years.”² Tenzin Gyatso, the current Dalai Lama, is the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Based on Buddhist tradition, the Dalai Lama is a reincarnation of the previous Dalai Lama who has been reborn to continue his work on Earth. Since 1931, there have been fourteen male Dalai Lamas with two receiving the title posthumously.³ Charlie Campbell, a journalist for *Time* magazine, suggests that the Dalai Lama is considered “a living Buddha of compassion, a reincarnation of the bodhisattva Chenrezig, who renounced Nirvana in order to help mankind.”⁴ Renouncing a transcendent state of no suffering and no desires is no small sacrifice especially when considering the hardships the Dalai Lama has endured throughout this lifetime. Beginning in the 17th century, the Dalai Lama had full political power over Tibet until Mao Zedong’s conquest of Tibet in 1950.⁵ Nine years later, the Dalai Lama fled to India and has not been back home since.

² Charlie Campbell, “The Dalai Lama Has Been the Face of Buddhism for 60 Years. China Wants to Change That,” *Time*, March 7, 2019, <https://time.com/longform/dalai-lama-60-year-exile/>.

³ BBC Editors, “Religions: Dalai Lama,” *BBC*, September 21, 2006, https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/people/dalailama_1.shtml.

⁴ Campbell, “The Dalai Lama Has Been the Face of Buddhism for 60 Years. China Wants to Change That.”

⁵ Rajini Vaidyanathan, “The Dalai Lama on Trump, women and going home,” *BBC News*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48772175>.

Holding this leadership position for sixty years has given the Dalai Lama countless opportunities to meet with influential leaders, give interviews, express his opinions and help guide Buddhist adherents in their faith. As I researched more about the Dalai Lama, I found that I agreed with many of his teachings, especially the more recent ones. In a 2019 interview with BBC, the Dalai Lama expressed the importance of global partnership to prevent major conflicts and alluded to the beauty in freedom of expression. He condemned President Trump for a “lack of moral principle.” However, in the same interview he made controversial statements about immigration suggesting that “Europe is for Europeans.”⁶ He also double downed on comments he made in a 2015 interview regarding a female Dalai Lama.

In 2015, during an interview with Clive Myrie, another BBC reporter, asked if the next reincarnation, the fifteenth Dalai Lama, could be a woman. The Dalai Lama answered, yes as long as “the female is very attractive.” He continued by suggesting attractiveness is directly correlated to usefulness stating that, “otherwise, not much use.” When Clive Myrie asked if the Dalai Lama was joking, he replied “Not true!”⁷ In the 2019 BBC interview, Rajini Vaidyanathan asked the Dalai Lama about his remarks on a female successor. While laughing, the Dalai Lama answered, “if a female Dalai Lama comes, she should be more attractive.” Rajini Vaidyanathan wrote, “His message seemed at odds for a man who preaches a message of tolerance and inner confidence, but the Dalai Lama told me that in Buddhist literature both inner and outer beauty

⁶ Vaidyanathan, “The Dalai Lama on Trump, women and going home.”

⁷ Sabrina Barr, “Dalai Lama Doubles Down on Belief Female Successor would have to be ‘Attractive’,” *Independent*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/women/dalai-lama-successor-female-attractive-quotes-age-a8978856.html>.

matter. He also said that equality was important and was keen to stress that he supported women's rights and equal pay in the workplace.”⁸

Similar to Rajini Vaidyanathan’s reaction, I was surprised the Dalai Lama would have stressed the need for a woman Dali Lama to be attractive. Is the current Dalai Lama attractive? I don’t think so, and I think his statements were both sexist and vain. A woman does not need to be attractive to be useful nor should their attractiveness hold any bearing on their success as a leader. Regarding religious leaders and figureheads, I’ve always wondered what enables their power and influence. How legitimate is their authority and how do their decisions influence religion? How far do their opinions and teachings trickle down the religious ladder? In the Catholic church, the pope is elected by the College of Cardinals, a group of senior officials who are usually bishops. Moreover, the pope is considered infallible, or unable to be wrong regarding religious matters. In Judaism, many countries have their own Chief Rabbi appointed by local spiritual authorities. In the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, there are two Chief Rabbis elected for ten-year terms.⁹ One thing I believe to be true is you cannot judge a religion, or even a country, by its leader. My four months in England served as a crash-course in Buddhism and meditation. I was determined to educate myself on Buddhist practices, traditions and teachings. I wanted to understand the role of gender in Buddhism, and if the Dalai Lama’s opinions regarding the need for female attractiveness were incongruent with everyday Buddhists beliefs and practices.

While in England, I joined a student mediation group that used Buddhist meditation practices. The group was organized and run by three women, and the membership was almost an even split of men and women. I paid for two professional meditation classes that were hosted by

⁸ Vaidyanathan, “The Dalai Lama on Trump, women and going home.”

⁹ Nathan Jeffay, “Chief Rabbi selection: how Israel does it,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, August 11, 2011, <https://www.thejc.com/news/world/chief-rabbi-selection-how-israel-does-it-1.26416>.

a male instructor and male monk. In these classes, I learned breathing meditation techniques, Buddhist prayers and mindfulness. I also attended free, outdoor meditation classes that focused on finding calmness and tranquility through Buddhist practices. Through these experiences, I learned about the Manjushri Kadampa Meditation Centre in Ulverston, England. I signed up for a two-day, three-night Buddhist meditation retreat at this International Centre for Modern Buddhism and Temple for World Peace. Though I was unable to definitively verify, it is believed that Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, a monk, scholar and a Tibetan Buddhist teacher, was selected to be the resident teacher at this center on recommendation from the Dalai Lama.¹⁰ What better place to explore the role and influence of the Dalai Lama's opinions than in an international temple where he helped choose the resident teacher?

After a beautiful train through the English countryside, and some awkward introductions, I dropped my bag off in my room and went to explore the grounds. Immediately, I felt like I had entered an advertisement for a five-star resort and spa. There were three trails for walking, one trail was around a lake, one through the woods and one that led to the beach. The grounds contained a wildlife garden, bowling green and multiple quads. If I was ever going to appreciate the art of mediation and tranquility, now was my time. I quickly changed and headed towards the temple for the evening prayer service. As I walked through the temple gates, designed to ward off evil spirits, the sun began to set. The sky shifted from a light blue to a combination of purple, pink and orange. The colorful sky made the gold stupa and gold detailing on the roof of the temple shine. I took a moment to take a picture to send to my parents. For a second, I wondered what they would think about my immersive weekend into Buddhism.

¹⁰ David Kay, *Tibetan and Zen Buddhism in Britain: Transplantation, Development and Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 55-56.

As I entered the temple, I took off my shoes and placed them in the cubbies in the back. I felt nervous and unsure of myself since this was my first Buddhist prayer service in a temple. I decided to sit in the very last row. That way, if I made a mistake, no one would be behind me to notice. As I waited for the service to begin, I took in the beauty of the altar. The front wall of the temple was covered with statues and pictures of Buddha, spirits and teachings. There were flowers, decorative jars, wreaths, colorful fabric and glasses. Some of the glasses were empty, others had water and others were filled with colorful liquids. I later learned that these were offerings. In front of the altar, there was a table sized stage with a red cushion, a microphone and a small table with a bell, a vase with flowers and a glass of water.

At 5:30 sharp, the congregation stood and bowed as a group of monks, with shaved heads in yellow and red robes, walked down the aisle. Through the sound system, an opening prayer was played that alternated between English and what I believe was Pali. Throughout this prayer, the congregation moved their folded hands to their lips, foreheads and hearts. After placing their hands to their hearts, they laid down touching their foreheads to the floor before beginning the series of movements again. I was relieved I was in the back of the temple. I definitely should have done more research before attending. The monk leading the service would periodically ring a bell and the congregation would chant, sing, pray and mediate in extended periods of silence. As the prayer service concluded, the monks left first, with the rest of the congregation following behind them. After the service, I had a communal dinner with other retreat guests. By the end of the night, I was exhausted. As I laid down on my lumpy cot, I no longer felt like I was at a five-star resort.

Not wanting to repeat my mistakes from the previous day, I made sure to do my research before the next prayer service. This prayer service would be “Confession of Downfalls to the

Thirty-five Buddhas.” This sutra-based purification practice is often one of the first practices taught to new Buddhist students, but remains significant for Buddhist adherents throughout their stages of practice as it tames and settles the mind. Through this practice, Buddhists are able to remove stress, afflictions, confusion and emotional burdens from the past.¹¹ My simplified understanding of this purification practice consists of three main components. First, Buddhists physically prostrate or lay face down to oppose pride, arrogance and similar physical afflictions. Typically, they prostrate thirty-five times, one for each Buddha; however, there is no limit or set requirement. Next, they chant specific praises to the Buddhas to help rebuild their enthusiasm for Dharma which has various meanings including the teachings of Buddha, cosmic law and the manifestation of reality. Finally, they visualize the thirty-five Buddhas as divine and beautiful.¹²

Feeling somewhat more prepared, I sat a few rows up from the back, but off to the side. Just like the night before, the congregation rose as the monks walked down the aisle. Tonight, the prayer service was conducted by a female monk. After the first five or so confessions, I got the hang of prostrating though it was much more physically demanding than I expected. Similar to the night before, each prostration began by touching our folded hands to our foreheads, then lips and then our hearts. There were additional steps tonight. After touching our hearts, we touched our knees and then laid on the carpeted floor. While lying, we slid our hands above our heads and did a push-up. After the first ten or twelve prostrations, I fell into a rhythm. I didn’t have to think about what came next, and I stopped looking around to see what everyone else was doing. I felt calm and open, and for once, my mind was not racing. By the end, I broke a sweat.

¹¹ Lee Kane, “Why 35 Confessional Buddhas practice and “The Bodhisattva’s Confession of Moral Downfalls” is a critical purifying practice for Buddhists,” *Buddha Weekly*, <https://buddhaweekly.com/35-confessional-buddhas-practice-bodhisattvas-confession-moral-downfalls-critical-purifying-practice-buddhists/>.

¹² Ibid.

The next prayer service I attended was a hungry ghosts service. Hungry ghosts are “demon-like creatures described in Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu, Sikh, and Jain texts as the remnants of the dead who are afflicted with insatiable desire, hunger or thirst as a result of bad deeds or evil intent carried out in their lifetimes.”¹³ After the ceremony, a monk explained hungry ghosts as “souls and spirits stuck in limbo.” As people trickled into the service, they went to the front leaving a wide variety of food and drinks on the altar. I saw sodas, chocolate bars, chips, bananas, granola, crackers, sour candy, fruit juice and even a whole pineapple. After a long day of mediation class, I was starting to get hungry looking at all the food lined in front of the temple. Just like the other services, we stood as the monks walked down the aisle. An opening prayer was played over the loudspeaker and we moved our hands from our forehead, to our lips and then to our hearts. Two monks began to pass out paper plates to everyone in the congregation. While they passed out plates, others began to pass out the food. I was given a clementine, some crackers and a handful of potato chips. After everyone was given their portion of food, a male monk with a large wooden bowl walked up and down the aisle. Thankfully, I had made friends during my stay and they explained to me what was happening. As he approached, you took a bite of your food, making sure your saliva touched it, and put the remainder in the bowl. The saliva taints the food which enables the hungry ghosts to find it. Some Buddhists bring food and drink for the ghosts of their ancestors while others bring offerings for unknown spirits so that they do not cause trouble. After the service ended, everyone, including the monks, mingled and enjoyed their food.

¹³ Linda Heaphy, “Hungry Ghosts: Their History and Origin,” *Kashgar*, <https://kashgar.com.au/blogs/tribal-culture/hungry-ghosts-their-history-and-origin>.

During my time at the Manjushri Temple, I met international travelers of all ages. I ate meals with monks, devoted Buddhists and people simply searching for a sense of calm. I took meditation classes that focused on happiness, tranquility and love. I walked along the beach in the early morning, and practiced self-meditation by myself in the gardens. I was encouraged to ask about what I didn't understand, and was given the tools and resources to learn. When the weekend was over, I felt refreshed, happy and excited to continue my research. I did not want to leave.

Not once while at the retreat, or throughout any of my experiences with Buddhism, did any teachings, ideas or practices regarding gender surface. I experienced male and female leadership, learned from monks of both genders and mediated with both men and women. We were all taught the same teachings and practices. And not once did the Dalai Lama, or his opinions, come up.

Every religion, country, organization, team and general group of people needs a leader. Leaders help motivate, set a tone and direction, provide guidance and work to create a sense of community amongst countless other things. I am not suggesting that religions have no leaders or that religious leaders are bad. Instead, I question the intersections of divinity, human desire and the institution of religion. As individuals, we all have our own experiences, opinions, skills and beliefs. My experiences at this modern Buddhist temple were profound. Gender did not seem relevant to the everyday practices I experienced. Given my experience, I fail to understand why requirements such as external attractiveness would be required of one sex versus another in the qualifications of a future Dalai Lama. This seems to me to be an unfortunate example of gender norms of society interfering with the essence of a religion.

In Our Thoughts and Prayers:

My experience as an American at an LGBTQ+ Mass in England

“Who are you?

Are you married with kids: worrying for them- committed to their welfare?

Are you divorced or separated?

Are you married for a second or even third time?

Are you a single parent, struggling to make ends meet?

Are you gay or lesbian- bi or trans?

Whoever you are,

you belong to us and you belong here

because you belong to Christ.

Christ is the host here today.”

“Christ sets this table and Christ welcomes all.”

Sitting in a Catholic Church built almost one hundred and fifty years ago, these are the words I heard echoing down the long sanctuary on a chilly October afternoon. Earlier that week, I had seen a bulletin advertising a special service: “Mass for LGBTQ+ Catholics, their Friends and Families.” I’d never seen anything like it! That’s not to suggest that LGBTQ+ Catholics don’t exist or that they are not welcomed into Catholic spaces, but the official stance of the Catholic Church is against same sex marriages. This service advertised as a celebration and acceptance with seemingly no other strings attached.

When I first arrived, about twenty minutes early, I sat alone in the back. I flipped through the bulletin and pulled out the “LGBTQ+ Pastoral Outreach” form. The form asked for your name, preferred pronouns, contact information, religious beliefs and how you heard about this service. It continued to ask for suggestions on how to improve this service, asking if you would be interested in planning future ventures and if their “are any contributions you feel you could make to this outreach to the LGBTQ+, family and friends?” The top of the form explicitly stated that all sections are optional and that they will not be shared with any third parties. To me, this form seemed inclusive, relevant and important. An outreach project directed and catered to the LGBTQ+ community, a community that has long been neglected and controversial within the Catholic Church.

As more people came, an usher asked me to move closer to the front. They wanted to have the front half of the church filled because the bishop of the diocese would be celebrating the mass. Not only was this mass dedicated to and explicitly for the LGBTQ+ community, it was being celebrated by the bishop of the diocese. This wasn’t some small service a student group had somehow gotten approved, this was a large scale, pre-planned and purposeful service. Even before the service began, a statement was made. This diocese, this religious community, this congregation of Catholics care for and accept all people regardless of who they love or who they are loved by. I happily followed the usher and moved closer to the front. I sat behind a group of about ten young adults. If I had to guess, I would say they were from the nearby university. These students had glitter, pride flags, and quite a few rainbows. As we waited for the service to begin, the group of friends in front of me continued to grow. Each time a new friend arrived, they hugged and were welcomed into the group.

Right from the start, I was moved and impressed by this service. This mass was inclusive starting with the opening hymn. We sang “Here in this place” by Marty Haugen, a hymn about God gathering “the lost and forsaken” into the light. We moved through the typical prayers and movements until the litany. The litany was divided into five sections with two readers alternating between sections. In each section, the readers asked the congregation questions, taking long pauses in between. They asked, “Is your faith on a slowdown? Are you homeless or hopeless? Are you living with shame? Are you disabled or disfigured? Are you gay or lesbian- bi or trans? Are you lonely or bereaved?” With each new question, it felt like everyone in the church was examining themselves and their own experiences. I noticed the group of young adults in front of me were all holding hands and comforting one another. A few of them were getting emotional, relying on their friends for comfort and support. It soon became apparent this was more than just a group of friends. This was a support system, a family they have created for themselves. The litany ended with these words, “If you have been away, you can return. If you have lived in darkness, you can come to the light... Here we are invited to meet Christ in each other, in word and sacrament. Sinners are welcome. Saints too! Let us celebrate!”

During the homily, the bishop welcomed everyone in the church exactly as they are. He discussed the idea of perfect stating that “no one has ever been or ever will be perfect.” He continued to remind us that we are all God’s children and God’s love for us is endless. As the bishop spoke, a middle-age white man started yelling from the second-floor balcony. He yelled, “all sins are sins” repeatedly directly over the messages of welcome and acceptance. Just like the messages of affirmation, this man’s hostility echoed throughout the church. Immediately, the mood of the church changed. It no longer felt like a celebration; instead, the mood was heavy and somber. People awkwardly looked at one another, at their feet or were turning to get a better

look at the protester. He continued to yell “all sins are sins” until he was escorted out by two ushers. Even after his removal, his message lingered in the air. I was surprised that the bishop did not address or even acknowledge what had just happened. In front of me, two girls cried as their friends tried to comfort them.

I consider myself, and those around me, lucky that this service had not been held in the United States. Though it was apparent everyone felt uncomfortable and on edge because of the protester, no one appeared to be scared. I, on the other hand, almost automatically worried that he might have a gun. If this would have happened back at home, would the man yelling have had a gun? Would the congregation also think immediately of guns? Would the bishop call for evacuation? On the surface the issue of gun safety seems irrelevant to the issues of religion, gender and religious tolerance but upon deeper investigation, my experience serves as a microcosm for reality.

Three years after I was born, and just as I was beginning pre-school, the Columbine High School massacre occurred. This horrific and senseless school shooting resulted in twenty-one wounded and thirteen deaths. The Columbine shooting marked the beginning of mass shootings, escalated calls for gun reform, continued debate regarding the second amendment and an irreversible shift in American culture. For many American students, school shootings have become a part of everyday life. Mass shooter drills, mandatory bag checks, security guards and police cars in the parking lot are normal. In elementary school, I used to think intruder drills were fun. I liked sitting in the dark, hiding behind things and getting to shorten lesson time. At the time, I did not understand what an intruder was, or the severity of what could happen. But even as I entered middle school and high school, I assumed schools around the world had the same drills, regulations and frequency of school shootings. Mass shootings aren't just limited to

schools with 417 mass shootings occurring all over the United States in 2019 alone.¹⁴ As sickening and disgusting as it sounds, mass shootings have become ingrained in American culture and society.

How is my experience as an American citizen in England with a protester at an LGBTQ+ mass relevant to my research about religion and gender? If I never left the USA, never spoke with international students and never researched global gun safety and violence, I still might believe that mass shootings are normal. I would be living in a world with no perspectives or experiences other than my own. I would be close-minded, inflexible and ignorant. With only a singular perspective of life, it becomes easier to judge what is not the same as your own experiences and opinions. It becomes easier to believe that your way of life, your opinions and your religious beliefs are the only reality or the only correct reality.

Throughout my year as a fellow studying religion internationally, my faith and belief in God has grown exponentially. I no longer have the feelings of doubt and questioning that inspired my research. While I am undoubtedly still questioning, I am confident that God exists and that I want to live my life in a way that will lead to Heaven. My faith did not grow because I remained in my Roman Catholic comfort zone. It did not grow by taking what I learned at face value. It did not grow by continuing to say the same prayers with the same people in the same church I have been in my whole life. It did not grow by condemning what I did not understand and by having discussions in echo chambers with people of similar beliefs. My faith grew because I sought out new experiences, people, difficult discussions and religions. I allowed my opinions to be challenged, and admitted when I was wrong. I have learned to accept that my

¹⁴ Jason Silverstein, "There were more mass shootings than days in 2019," *CBS News*, CBS Interactive Inc., January 2, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mass-shootings-2019-more-than-days-365/>.

religion is not the only one, the correct one or a perfect one. My way of life, ideas and opinions are not the only ones or the correct ones. At the end of the day, God doesn't care about religious affiliation, sexual orientation, nationality or gender. I think God cares about what you do in your everyday life, how you treat others and how you have helped leave the world better than you found it.

“Have you come today with all kinds of questions?

Has your experience of Church been one of rejection and pain?

Are you unsure if you can trust what is taking place today?

Has it been awhile since you felt safe to enter a Church?

Have you worked out your place in the Church?

Whoever you are,

you belong to us and you belong here

because you belong to Christ.

Christ is the host here today.”

“Christ sets this table and Christ welcomes all.”

The Next Generation:

Empowering Young Adults to Enact Change

I cannot imagine a better place to grow up than in rural Pennsylvania outside Philadelphia. I spent my summers outside playing in the nearby stream, catching lightning bugs and hiking on the Appalachian trail. I ate, and continue to indulge in Tastykakes, Middlesworth chips and scrapple with apple butter. I played soccer, joined cross-country, took camping trips and learned how to drive a tractor. Being less than two hours from Philadelphia gave me a taste of the city life, and a better appreciation for life in the country. My parents frequently took my sisters and I on day trips to the city. We visited the Philadelphia Zoo and the art museum, saw *The Nutcracker*, bought books at the University of Pennsylvania's bookstore and ate at my favorite restaurant, The White Dog Cafe. These trips exposed me to diverse lifestyles, peoples, ideas and careers that I would have otherwise not seen in my small hometown. I will be forever grateful that my parents made it a priority to raise me with an open and educated mind.

In both school and at home, I learned about the history of Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. In 1681, William Penn, a pacifist and Quaker, was granted a charter by Charles II of England for the colony that would become Pennsylvania. William Penn established the colony with a democratic system with fair trials, elected representatives, separation of powers and full freedom of religion. It is important to acknowledge this land was already settled by the Lenape Native American tribe. In 1682, William Penn signed a peace treaty with Lenape Chief

Tamanend establishing principles of tolerance, human rights and pacifism. In fact, Pennsylvania would have the first organized protest against slavery in the Americas with the 1688 Germantown Petition Against Slavery.¹⁵ Even today, Philadelphia is associated with this reputation. In 2012, Anthony Bourdain, world renowned chef, celebrity and author visited Philadelphia to film an episode of his travel and food show. When asked the single best thing about Philadelphia, Anthony Bourdain replied, “The attitude.” He would later say, “Philadelphia is a town with a low tolerance for bullshit and a whole lot of heart.”¹⁶

As I walked towards a Quaker meeting house in England, I couldn't help but think about Philadelphia. In many ways, I found it ironic that I'd never been to a Quaker meeting house or had a meaningful conversation about this Religious Society of Friends when growing up just a short drive from Philadelphia. It's funny how things work out that way. When I opened the door to the meeting house, I was greeted by a middle-age man wearing a navy sweater and who had kind eyes. He introduced himself as Tom and asked if I had ever attended a service at the meeting house. I explained that I was just visiting and that this would be my first time ever attending a Quaker service. He smiled wide, welcomed me to their meeting and offered me some literature. He suggested I peruse the pamphlets in the lobby in case I had any questions that he

¹⁵ History.com Editors, “Pennsylvania's largest city is known as the home of the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall and the "Rocky" statue,” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, March 8, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/philadelphia-pennsylvania>.

¹⁶ Allison Stadd, “Quotable: The Best Moments From Last Night's Premiere Of The Philadelphia Episode Of Anthony Bourdain's *The Layover*,” *UWISHUNU Philadelphia*, Visit Philadelphia, December 4, 2014, <https://www.uwishunu.com/2012/12/quotable-the-best-moments-from-last-nights-premiere-of-the-philadelphia-episode-of-anthony-bourdains-the-layover/#:~:text=Chef%20Michael%20Solomonov%3A%20%E2%80%9CWhat%20do,Bourdain%3A%20%E2%80%9CThe%20attitude.%E2%80%9D&text=%E2%80%9CThose%20are%20laudable%20qualities%20in,Solomonov%20about%20Philly's%20%E2%80%9Cchutzpah.%E2%80%9D>.

could help answer. I agreed, and sat in a brown leather chair in the corner. While people filed in, I glanced over *Advices and queries*, a booklet published by The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain. As I read through the introduction, I was particularly struck by this line: “Friends maintain that expressions of faith must be related to personal experience. Some may find traditional Christian language full of meaning; some do not. Our understanding of our own religious tradition may sometimes be enhanced by insights of other faiths.”¹⁷ I was in total agreement with this statement. The more I learn about other faiths, the better I understand my own.

After a few minutes, I felt prepared for the hour-long period of silence I was about to experience. In the Quaker faith, there are no songs, homilies or group prayers. Instead, a majority of the service is a silent period of reflection, prayer and deep thought. I signaled to Tom that I had finished reading and was ready to enter the meeting space. He suggested I take the *Advices & queries* booklet in with me and to use it as a starting point for my prayer. He emphasized I should sit wherever I liked as there was no hierarchy or reserved seating. As I walked into the meeting space, I froze. There were wooden chairs, some had cushions and others did not, arranged in a square around the room. There was a table in the center with a Bible and other religious texts that I did not recognize. Sitting closest to the table was a group of about five elderly people of both genders. I later learned that these were the elders of the group, people nominated to serve as spiritual guides. Since I had sat in the lobby reading, the room had filled. Someone waved and signaled there was a spot open near them. Just my luck, it was a non-cushioned chair.

¹⁷ The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *Advices & queries* (London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 2010), 3.

I was surprised by how long the hour felt, and how hard it was to concentrate. For a while, I just let my mind wander. I thought about what I was going to eat for lunch, how my feet hurt from trying to break in new boots and to wondering what my sisters were doing back at home. I took a deep breath and tried to refocus. I really wanted to embrace this unfamiliar prayer service. I took the *Advices & queries* booklet back out, and flipped to the forty-two questions and pieces of advice. Many of the prompts related back to the introduction and encouraged interfaith ideals and acceptance. As I went through the list, some numbers resonated with me and others did not.

I found myself rereading number nineteen: “Rejoice in the presence of children and young people in your meeting and recognise the gifts they bring...How do you share your deepest beliefs with them, while leaving them free to develop as the spirit of God may lead them? Do you invite them to share their insights with you? Are you ready both to learn and to accept your responsibilities towards them?”¹⁸ As I reflected, I thought back to my own experiences in church. In almost every mass I’ve ever been to, I’ve seen a mom, dad, sibling or grandparent walk out of the service with their crying baby. Almost always, the parental figure is looking at the ground and walking as quickly as they possibly can. Frequently, parishioners cast judgmental or even nasty glances towards them. This is something I’ve never understood. Shouldn’t we, as a congregation, be happy that a new parent is introducing their baby to God and church? Shouldn’t we be happy to hear the sounds of new life and God’s creation? That’s not to suggest that I enjoy the sound of a crying baby, but I certainly don’t judge a parent for their rambunctious child. If anything, I appreciate the parent’s dedication to their faith, and to raising their family with

¹⁸ The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *Advices & queries*, 10.

religion in mind. It also makes me feel guilty for all the Sundays I tortured my mom by refusing to wake up on time or bickering with my sisters in the pews.

After what felt like an eternity, the ministry began. Ministry occurs towards the end of a Quaker worship. During this period, people are invited to stand and share their insights, thoughts and prayers. Sometimes no one is called to speak and the whole service is silent. However, this was not the case today. First, one of the female elders spoke and expressed the importance of listening to the younger generation especially in regards to the environment. In particular, she emphasized the need to make their house of meeting and social gatherings more sustainable and eco-friendlier. Then, a middle-aged woman, who was sitting with her husband and two sons, stood and echoed these thoughts. She stressed the severity of climate change and the consequences of pollution. She started to get emotional as she imagined the world in which her sons would be raising their families. Finally, another elder stood to speak. He continued the theme of eco-friendliness and giving the younger generation the tools necessary to enact change. However, his tone was more intense and serious than the others. He spoke directly to the older people in the congregation. He said it was their generation's fault that the environment is suffering but that they would escape the most serious consequences. Therefore, they owe it to the younger people to sit down and listen. After a few more minutes of silence reflection, the service ended.

Whether you like it or not, the world is rapidly changing and evolving. The Philadelphia my parents lived in as a newlywed couple is different from the Philadelphia I grew up visiting as a child. The Philadelphia I will soon be living in as a young adult will be different than the one I remember as a child. And undoubtedly, the Philadelphia I will hopefully introduce my own children to one day will be even more different. Not even the Catholic Church is immune to

change. After the Second Vatican Council, masses stopped being celebrated in Latin, and women no longer needed to cover their hair. However, Vatican II was not enough. When I go to mass on Sundays with my parents, excluding babies and little kids, I often feel like I'm one of the youngest ones there. Within our parish, young adults seem to be missing. I've often overheard complaints that less and less people are attending mass.

Though I cannot speak for every young adult, I often feel like my ideas and opinions regarding religion don't matter. When I press for answers or question why the church promotes this or that, I am often met with resistance and the answer that "that's just the way things are." When I want to talk about religion and God in relation to the environment, politics or affordable healthcare, I'm told church isn't the place for that kind of discussion. Why would young people continue to attend mass if they feel unheard and unappreciated? What's the point of going to church if it doesn't help you deal or understand the realities of the world today? I wish I felt the same openness to questioning and conversation I experienced in the Quaker meeting house. Hearing that these Christians wanted to empower their young was motivating and significant. While I appreciate the sanctity and tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, I fear the church has become trapped in the traditional status quo. For young adults exploring the meaning of religion and the purpose of life, this seems a fatal flaw.

Faithful Sisters:

The Far-Reaching Effects of Islamophobia

In high school, my weekends in the fall felt like a routine I had down pat. After school on Fridays, I would have cross-country practice, shower, and go watch my high school's football team. Usually, this would include an order of French fries and sitting in the student section. On Saturdays, I would hang out with my friends and my then boyfriend either hiking, eating, seeing a movie or going to a bonfire. On Sunday, my mom would wake me up for 10 o'clock mass and we would argue about what I was going to wear. Eventually, we would agree and leave for church in time to routinely arrive twenty minutes early. After mass, we would always stop for breakfast at one of the local diners. I would order eggs over easy with whole wheat toast, home fries, scrapple and a Coke. I spent the rest of the day doing homework, chores and getting ready for the next week. I never stopped to consider how my life would have been different if my religious responsibilities had been more demanding. What if my mom made me attend daily mass or if I was expected to pray five times a day? What if my religious beliefs dictated my outward appearance, diet and identity? What if being a Christian was abnormal in the area I grew up?

As I got ready to meet Asad and join his Mosque for Friday prayers, I got dressed remembering to adhere to the required dress code. Before starting my fellowship year, I went to Macy's and bought a loose fitting black and white dress that reached my ankles. With all of the

churches, synagogues and mosques I was visiting, I definitely got my money's worth. I added black opaque tights, black boots, a dark green scarf and my raincoat. If only my mom could see me now! Asad was waiting for me when I arrived and I quickly followed him inside to get out of the rain. He led me through the lobby, community center and towards the offices where the Mosque's administration handled the business side of the place. Here, Asad gave me a crash course on Islam and a brief history of Islam in the area.

Since I was there to attend two prayer services, Asad began with the significance of the five daily prayers. For Muslims, the five daily prayers are an important faith obligation which helped reinforce their dedication to God, and to remind them of the opportunities they are given to seek God's forgiveness, love and guidance. He explained that the sun determines the times of the daily prayers and that these times vary depending on the season. The first prayer is before sunrise, the next is at midday after the sun passes its highest point and the third prayer is in the late part of the afternoon. The fourth prayer is said just after sunset and the fifth prayer is between sunset and midnight. Since we were meeting in the winter, I would be able to attend both the second and the third prayer of the day. Asad explained that most prayers are said at home, at work or wherever you are called to pray except for Fridays. On Fridays, after the noon prayer, they are called to the Mosque to listen to the Khutbah or sermon.¹⁹

Asad then led me towards the women's prayer room. The men's prayer room was upstairs, and the women's was on the ground floor. I took off my boots, and used my green scarf to cover my hair before entering. I was quickly welcomed and introduced as a fellow sister. For

¹⁹ PBS, "Five Pillars," *Islam: Empire of Faith*, PBS, [https://www.pbs.org/empires/islam/faithworship.html#:~:text=Worship%20\(Salat\),Mecca%2C%20while%20reciting%20certain%20phrases](https://www.pbs.org/empires/islam/faithworship.html#:~:text=Worship%20(Salat),Mecca%2C%20while%20reciting%20certain%20phrases).

the most part, the room was void of any furniture excluding a bookcase with Qurans. There was also a television in the left front corner. The floor was carpeted and there were pieces of duct tape defining spaces for individuals to pray. Most women were sitting against the wall and chatting. Towards the back of the room, kids of both genders were playing with a nerf soccer ball. I found a spot on the wall between a young mother and an older woman. The young mother pointed out her son John who was snacking on a bag of Doritos. The older woman on my right introduced herself as Rafa. She brings her elderly mom to prayers every day, and seemed to know everyone in the Mosque. Today, Rafa was especially busy as she had just handed our pens and voter registration forms to all the women. In her thick British accent she explained, “We, as Muslims, need to use our voice!” We then heard the call to prayer and the women all found spots on the carpet facing the television, which was also the direction of Mecca.

We turned our eyes to the screen, and we saw a man from the men’s prayer room. We all prayed together before hearing the Khutbah which focused on the theme of “what it means to be a Muslim today.” Although the speaker was very loud, passionate and at some points aggressive in his delivery, he preached about peace, love and combating Islamophobia. He suggested that a Muslim should always be smiling and should only speak about things that concern yourself. A Muslim should talk about Islam and spread the Prophet’s message. As I listened to the sermon, I began to understand how profoundly Islamophobia has affected Muslim life. Outside of Mosques, Muslims face prejudice and ridicule for their prayer schedule, appearance, traditions and diets. Inside Mosques, their places of worship, they still cannot escape Islamophobia. They actively discuss, plan and preach ways to survive and combat the ignorance in the world surrounding their beliefs.

As I waited for the next prayer, I mingled with a woman named Jenna who converted to Islam about twenty-five years ago. “Converting to Islam was the best decision of my life,” she repeated at least five times during our short but meaningful exchange. When she converted, the men and women were all extremely welcoming and helpful as she learned about Muslim prayers and practices. She experienced a new sense of happiness with Islam, but this happiness hasn’t come without a price. She spoke about prejudices she faces at work especially around wearing a hijab. She complained that people make her faith her identity when in reality her identity is composed of much more than just her “love for Allah.” Jenna said sometimes it feels like it's “her versus the world but she has faith and Allah on her side.” I said good-bye to the women after the second prayer and waited for Asad out in the lobby.

Before I left, Asad showed me both the men and women’s washing rooms. In the washing rooms, Muslims perform the Wudu or ritual purification process through cleansing the body. With water, Muslims wash their hands, arms, head, nostrils and feet. Both washrooms were exactly the same, and had brilliant white tiling. Back in the lobby, Asad gave me some literature on Ramadan, the Quran and a booklet on healthy fasting. When he asked if I had any questions, I inquired about the local community and the presence of Islamophobia. He said that each individual Muslim has their own experiences with Islamophobia, but that the local community had been very accepting. He credited this to the strong interfaith community that includes local religious leaders meetings regularly. As a Muslim community, they were always brainstorming and working on ways to engage with the outside community. They try to be proactive and inclusive in their outreach, support and fund Muslim scholars and research on Islam. They even arranged to open the mosque for tours for the local community. He believes

that it's harder to hate or judge something that you've seen and experienced. Finally, he said that they work to stop radicalization and the misinterpretations of the Prophet's message.

A few days later, I met a mother and her teenage daughter for lunch. After attending the Friday prayers, Asad had explained my research to the local Muslim community and they expressed interest in meeting me. After ordering our food, I explained my interest in gender and religion. Amira, the mother, declared that she would never be a part of a religion that did not treat women appropriately. Islam is "comfortable and equal" for women. Speaking about her own experiences, she explained how her husband helps out at home, she empowers her children to make their own choices and their faith guides her in all aspects of her life. As her mother spoke, Sarah shook her head in agreement. Amira continued by talking about all of the misconceptions and ignorance regarding Islam. Religion in the hands of the uneducated is dangerous and can lead to radicalization. You need a scholar to interpret the Koran. Hearing this made me feel a little better after I struggled to understand the sections of the Koran I read the night before. Amira was a proponent for open dialogue about religion and learning about religions that aren't yours. She believes that this is "the only way to rid the world of ignorance."

Sarah explained that women wear hijabs for modesty and respect. Typically, women begin wearing a hijab right after puberty but this can vary as it really comes down to what the woman wants to do. Men are also supposed to dress modestly. Sarah believes Islam gets a bad reputation when a woman is completely covered from head to toe and their partner is wearing "short shorts and a tight tee." Men are also supposed to avert their gaze around women. Dating in the Muslim community largely depends on the family, but "it is designed to protect women." Dating happens in public places or with a chaperone. Both Sarah and her mother emphasized that

women can choose their dates and their husbands. Even though it is not encouraged, divorce is allowed.

Both women spoke about always having to prove to people that they are educated, independent and British. People frequently assume they weren't born in England because of their appearances and faith, but they both spent their entire lives in England. In particular, they said white men never know how to act or what to do around them. Sarah recounted a story from university where she got to class early. When she walked into the classroom, there were two male students there. When she said hello, they looked surprised and looked away. She doesn't understand why her hijab makes people think she's not a "normal teenager." People often stare when they use public transportation or go for walks. When they moved into a new, more affluent neighborhood a few years ago, their neighbors were always filing complaints about them. Amira gave an example of the neighbors complaining that their trees were too tall, even though everyone on the street has the same trees. Amira said she felt unwelcomed, judged and that she had to justify herself to her neighbors. Lunch lasted almost three hours as we dove deeper into gender, religion, stereotypes and sexism. After we said our goodbyes, I walked back home deep in thought and also extremely full.

I have no doubts that gender plays a significant role in the everyday practices of Muslim people. Muslim women sit in separate rooms, have different rules regarding appearance and in general have different life expectations. However, this isn't unique to Islam or religion. Women, and men, around the world face gender stereotypes and expectations in the workplace, in school, at home, amongst their friends and families, and anywhere people congregate. As a Catholic woman in a Muslim space, it is not my place to judge or expect all women to want the same things. As a Catholic woman in a Muslim space, it is my responsibility to support and respect my

fellow faithful sisters. It is my responsibility to educate myself on their beliefs, lifestyle choices and traditions. Furthermore, it is my responsibility to use my privilege and stand against ignorance, prejudice and hate.

I don't think I've ever met a Catholic who hasn't woken up on an occasional Sunday and felt like Sunday service was a punishment. Some Sundays, the last thing in the world I want to do is get dressed, drive to church and sit through an hour-long service. Even with the promise of breakfast or a Dunkin' donuts iced coffee, this seems like a huge burden. Why should I spend my Sunday morning in church when I could spend it sleeping off a hangover or getting a head start on my work? I am starting to appreciate that Sunday service is a privilege and something I should not take for granted. It is not a punishment, a way to appease my parents or a dreaded responsibility I need to check off my to-do list. Sunday service is a way to reaffirm my faith, my trust in God and a way to express my gratitude. It is a way to reconnect to what is important and to prepare spiritually for the week ahead. Sunday mass is a celebration of God, of life, of community and of family. Taking this privilege for granted is disrespectful not only to God and my own religious community, but to all the religious communities and individuals who are forced to fight for their right to practice their beliefs.

The Jerusalem International YMCA:

Interfaith Realities at Work

I was terrified when I got off the plane at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, Israel. I was a stranger in a strange land. Only after I got my luggage, went through passport control and was sitting in a shared taxi destined for Jerusalem did I finally take a deep breath. As I was waiting in the taxi, which was actually a minibus that sat about twelve people, I listened to what the only other English-speaking passenger was saying. He was on the phone letting someone back home know that he made it to Israel safely. He was so excited to be back and couldn't wait to be in Jerusalem. He kept repeating that Jerusalem was the center of the world and that the religious decisions made there reverberate throughout the world. I remember thinking he was crazy. I hadn't even left the airport and I was worried about spending the next few months here. I couldn't read or understand Hebrew. I was already getting unwanted attention from my long blonde hair and American accent. The money system seemed confusing with an unnecessary amount of coins. I was tired from my flight and anxious to meet my new roommate.

To be completely transparent, the feelings I had at the airport did not just suddenly go away. It took me a few weeks to acclimate to living in Jerusalem and to figure out the money system. It was so different than anywhere I had ever visited let alone lived. Even the simplest task, like going to the grocery store or getting a coffee, was daunting and left me emotionally exhausted. I did not speak the local language and did not understand the local culture. I still can't

believe how lucky I was that my roommate and I quickly became fast friends. She showed me how to use public transportation, helped me get an Israeli SIM card for my phone and even went with me on a cross country road trip. In addition to an incredible roommate, the Jerusalem International YMCA played an essential role in helping me adjust to life in Jerusalem. Before even arriving in Jerusalem, I was in contact with Aviva, the director of development at the Jerusalem International YMCA, commonly abbreviated as the JIY. I had contacted Aviva through a connection from the Harold C. Smith foundation. My research was funded through a grant from the Harold C. Smith Foundation, and the late Harold C. Smith was a great benefactor of this international YMCA. I quickly came to understand why.

Located directly across the King David Hotel, the Jerusalem International YMCA is a cultural, sports and educational center affiliated with the Young Christian Association worldwide. The JIY “strives to foster equality and friendship among members of all religions, with an emphasis on Judaism, Christianity and Islam, while serving as an oasis of multiculturalism and a space for coexistence among the residents of Jerusalem and beyond.”²⁰ While living in Jerusalem, I volunteered in the development department with Aviva, Aviya and Abby. In fact, I spent one of my first nights in Jerusalem eating pizza with these incredible women. Just like my roommate, they soon became my friends and helped me become accustomed to life in Jerusalem.

Aviva and I frequently went out to dinner, attended Zumba classes, drank red wine and had in-depth conversations about our lives, families, beliefs and political views. The first time I visited Tel Aviv was with Aviva. We walked along the beach, went shopping and ate at an Asian

²⁰ “About: Jerusalem International YMCA,” *Jerusalem International YMCA*, <http://ymca.org.il/about/>.

fusion restaurant that had just opened that week. Aviya taught me about Judaism, the political happenings of Israel and never seemed annoyed by my endless questioning. She even let me interview her over cappuccinos and dessert. We had a shared love for animals and nerdy television shows. Abby and I were closest in age, and she introduced me to her friends. We celebrated New Year's together at First Station. A little before midnight, we watched a religious Jewish couple get engaged. I was shocked when a friend had to put the ring on the soon to be bride instead of her fiancé. As per their beliefs, the bride and groom were not allowed to touch each other until after marriage. Quite simply, without Aviva, Aviya and Abby, I would have never fallen in love with the city of Jerusalem.

As a volunteer at the Jerusalem International YMCA, I learned how a non-profit organization functions on the day to day. I learned about the application process for grants, donor relations, international partnerships and budgets. I met employees from various departments, made phone calls, observed meetings and took part in a YMCA leadership development program. Through this program, I actually met one of Harold's friends who gave me a journal with a personalized note. The beginning of the note reads: "Dear Elizabeth, Harold C. Smith embraced all new beginnings. He was my mentor and a dear friend. His legacy now lives through you." I was deeply touched.

Most importantly, I learned about the realities of interfaith relations and programming. As previously mentioned, the Jerusalem International YMCA strives to be a center of multiculturalism and coexistence between Christians, Muslims and Jews. The JIY practices what it preaches with employees of diverse backgrounds and religious beliefs. The programming of the JIY also reflects this reality. For the holidays, they host events for each religion including Christmas, Ramadan, and Sukkot. When I first visited the JIY, I saw their beautiful Christmas

tree, lights through the courtyard and garland throughout the building. They host Arabic movie nights on Fridays, an annual back to school event and dance classes with different themes. The Three Arches Hotel and Restaurant attracts international travelers which further emphasizes the idea of multiculturalism.

The Jerusalem International YMCA understands that coexistence and religious tolerance must be incorporated into education and into young people's lives. Established in 1982, the Peace Preschool is the JIY's bilingual and multicultural preschool created "in response to the need for quality education and to promote the values of equality, multiculturalism and tolerance among the children of Jerusalem."²¹ In each classroom, there is a Hebrew, Arabic and English-speaking teacher. From a young age, these children learn about their own faith as well as their peers' beliefs. This theme continues through the Children and Youth Department which "offers programs intended to bring together young people and children from all around the city, for diverse kinds of creative activities in different fields, while offering opportunities for dialogue."²² Not to mention, this programming happens in a beautiful and historical building. With its incredible courtyard, high arches and cool tiling, the JIY never failed to take my breath away.

As I try to articulate my deep appreciation and admiration for the Jerusalem International YMCA and its employees I find that words fail me. Just like Israel, the JIY is unlike any place I ever visited let alone volunteered. Stepping onto JIY property is like stepping into a bubble where religious intolerance and political unrest does not exist. That's not to say the employees are unaware, unaffected or do not consider these harsh realities when creating JIY programming.

²¹ "Peace Preschool," *Jerusalem International YMCA*, <http://ymca.org.il/preschool/>.

²² "Children & Youth" *Jerusalem International YMCA*, <http://ymca.org.il/children-and-youth/>.

Instead, the Jerusalem International YMCA serves as a model for what coexistence looks like and how religious education should be taught. After experiencing the beauty of the JIY, I can only hope the man I met early on in the shared taxi was correct. I hope that the religious tolerance and multiculturalism of the JIY spreads throughout the world. On a personal level, I am also deeply indebted to the JIY for serving as a safe haven and home away from home as I explored religion abroad.

I never met Harold C. Smith but I am honored to continue his legacy especially if it means being an advocate for the Jerusalem International YMCA.

Free Palestine:

Christmas Day at the Church of the Nativity

For my family, Christmas Eve is a bigger celebration than Christmas Day. On Christmas Eve, we drive to my Aunt Audrey's house for Vilija or Christmas Eve dinner. Honoring our Slovakian heritage, we start the meal off with the Oplatky. At every plate, there is an Oplatky, a thin, colorful flour wafer. Before dinner starts, we break our Oplatky and exchange pieces with the rest of the table. By exchanging pieces, we are offering each other peace, prosperity and friendship in the new year. After a prayer, dinner begins and yes, my Aunt Audrey can cook! Our meal consists of seven main components: homemade perogies, fish, mashed potatoes, peas, mushrooms and sauerkraut. For dessert, we have coffee, kiffels, chocolates and peppermint ice cream. After dinner, the traditions continue. To honor the three wise men, we turn off all the lights, light candles and walk around the dinner table three times. Afterwards, the owner of the house, the oldest person there and the youngest take the candles into a dark place and pray to keep the evil spirits away. Up until this year, and one Christmas Eve spent at a McDonald's because our car got stuck in the snow, I've spent every Christmas Eve I can remember at my Aunt Audrey's house with my family. This year I spent my Christmas at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in the West Bank.

About a week before Christmas, I signed up for a group tour of Bethlehem on recommendation of a woman I met waiting for the bus. She said that Bethlehem on Christmas

Day was a beautiful, once in a lifetime experience. I took her advice and signed up as soon as I got home. When I woke up on Christmas day, I felt a tinge of loneliness as I texted my family knowing that it would be another seven hours until they read my text. Instead of my usual Christmas sweater and heavy winter jacket, I put on a black sweater, jeans, and walking shoes. After stopping for a cappuccino and boureka, I boarded the bus and found a window seat. I watched the landscape change from busy streets, tan buildings and stone walls to desert. As we approached the Israel-Palestine border, we were instructed to have our passports ready in case the bus was stopped at the border. At the border, two Israeli soldiers boarded the bus and walked up and down the aisle. Even though I had all the proper paperwork, I was extremely nervous. Relief washed over me as they departed the bus, and waved us through the border.

It is difficult to summarize the violent history between Israel and Palestine, which dates back to the Ottoman rule, especially in only one paragraph. Nor would I claim to have a complete understanding of that history and how it continues to affect life for the approximately 25,000 Palestinians living in Bethlehem. Instead, I will briefly outline the more recent realities of the 20th century in which Israel and Palestine became two names for the same geographical location claimed by both the Zionist and Palestinian national movements. During the Six-Day War of 1967, Bethlehem was captured by Israel, along with the majority of the West Bank. Nineteen years later, on December 21, 1995, Israeli troops withdrew from Bethlehem and the Palestinian National Authority took control of the city. After the Oslo years and the Second Palestinian Intifada, Bethlehem's economy, especially the tourism industry, was significantly damaged and individual freedoms were significantly limited. Because the city of Bethlehem is surrounded by both the Israeli West Bank border and dozens of Israeli settlements, Bethlehem inhabitants have been separated from their land and their livelihood. Furthermore, the entrances

and exits to the city are controlled by Israeli Defense Forces, also known as the IDF, which means Israel controls Bethlehem's travel, imports, exports, industrial development and agricultural development.²³ To be clear, I unequivocally support and stand with the Free Palestine Movement.

After passing through the border control into Palestinian territory, our tour guide Matthew got on the bus. Matthew wished everyone a Merry Christmas, and introduced himself as a Christian born and raised in Bethlehem. As we drove along the wall of separation, I felt the emotion and pain that radiated from the wall. Unlike the Israeli side of the wall which was clean and bare, the Palestinian side was covered with graffiti. I noticed a painting of a dove wrapped in chains, a broken heart and a portrait of Donald Trump with a large, black X painted over his face. As we drove further outside the city towards the Shepherd's Field, the landscape began to change again. I saw stray dogs, unfinished construction projects, trash and broken cars.

Matthew warned us not to stray far from the group as we got off the bus. First, we visited the Chapel of Shepard's Field which is believed to be located where the angels first announced Jesus's birth. Designed by Antonio Barluzzi, the Chapel is in the shape of a dome with no windows, only small holes near the top that filter in light.²⁴ As a group, we stopped in the chapel as Matthew read the story of the annunciation to the shepherds from the bible. I tried to appreciate the moment, and the significance of where I was though I was skeptical that anyone could confirm that this was the exact location of the angel's appearance. I wondered what I would do if I saw an angel. I would probably just close my eyes and pretend I never saw

²³ Green Olive Collective Inc., *A Brief Framing of the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict* (Green Olive Collective Inc., 2017), 6-13.

²⁴ "Antonio Barluzzi, an architect in the Holy Land," *Custodia Terrae Sanctae: Franciscans Serving the Holy Land*, December 15, 2010, <https://www.custodia.org/en/news/antonio-barluzzi-architect-holy-land>.

anything. We then walked towards the fields where the shepherds were working and went into a natural grotto. Mathew explained that this grotto would have been similar to the one where Jesus was born before the Church, or Basilica, of the Nativity was built on it. The grotto was cold, dark and bigger than I expected. I certainly wouldn't want to give birth in it.

Afterwards, we drove towards the Church of the Nativity. We parked in a large shopping complex down the street and walked up the main road. We passed souvenir shops, men selling coffee in big silver vats and stands with rosaries and crosses. The closer we got to the church, the more crowded and louder it became. Once we reached Manger Square, the main city square of Bethlehem, it was shoulder to shoulder with tourists, people on pilgrimage, nuns, priests of various denominations, Bethlehem natives and large groups of people singing Christmas hymns. Similar to the separation wall, I could feel the emotion in the air; however, this time I felt feelings of happiness, celebration and praise. We managed to squeeze through the crowds and through the Door of Humility. And when I say squeeze, I literally mean squeeze. During the time of the Ottoman empire, the Door of Humility, a small rectangular entrance into the church was created to prevent carts from being driven inside and to prevent looters. Traditionally, the door also forced important visitors to dismount their horses before entering.²⁵

As we entered the Basilica of the Nativity, maintained by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, I was completely in awe. The main room had five aisles created by Corinthian columns with gold mosaics covering the walls. Originally, all the walls had this gold mosaic but today only sections remain mainly near the ceiling. In between many of the columns and around the altar were candles, hanging lanterns and red and green Christmas ornaments. I

²⁵ University of Notre Dame, "The Nativity," *FaithND*, January 3, 2011, <http://faith.nd.edu/s/1210/faith/interior.aspx?sid=1210&gid=609&pgid=32744>.

was surprised to hear about the status quo, a firm understanding among religious communities in Bethlehem and Jerusalem in reference to nine shared religious sites including the Church of the Nativity. The status quo is a decree or firman of Ottoman sultan Osman III in 1757 that preserved the division of responsibilities and ownership of Christian holy sites, and that no changes could be made unless agreed on by all six Christian communities. These six Christian denominations are Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Syriac Orthodox, Coptic Christians and Ethiopians. Though at times contested, the status quo remains intact today.²⁶ Matthew explained that the church is divided into three parts: Greek Orthodox, Arminian and Roman Catholic. Given that Jesus is considered the savior of humankind to all Christians, I found it strange that Christians needed to divide the site of his birth. I guess that is the business side of the Christian faith.

Snaking up and down the aisles was a long line of people waiting to enter the Grotto of the Nativity, the underground space where Jesus is believed to be born. The line to enter the Grotto was estimated to be around a five hour wait time, so instead we visited the grotto where Saint Jerome translated the bible from Hebrew to Latin. As I climbed down the stairs and ran my hand against the cool stone, I tried to imagine translating the bible by the light of a candle in a cold, dark cave. I struggle to concentrate even when I'm in a brightly lit library, typing on my laptop and sipping on a coffee. I imagine knowing Jesus was born just on the other side of the wall provided Saint Jerome a special type of inspiration.

After visiting the grotto, I sat in the Church of Saint Catherine, the adjoining Roman Catholic church. I found an empty seat near the back, took a deep breath and looked up at the

²⁶ Eva Maurer Morio, "What does Status Quo stand for?," *Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180613111557/http://en.lpj.org/2014/11/24/what-does-status-quo-stand-for/>.

altar. I couldn't believe that this was my life. I was traveling the world, exploring new religions, meeting interesting people, trying delicious foods and celebrating Christmas in the Church of the Nativity. I felt inspired, grateful and serendipitous. I also felt confused and deeply troubled. Though I justified my visit to Bethlehem in the name of pilgrimage and supporting Bethlehem's tourism industry, I was unsure what my place was as an American tourist in the West Bank. I was beginning to love Jerusalem and Israel but it is the country responsible for Palestine's oppression. How was it fair that I had more freedom as a tourist visiting Bethlehem for one day than the citizens who have lived there their whole lives?

Just like I did multiple times on Christmas day, I try to imagine what Jesus would think if he visited the site of his birth today. I think he would be devastated to see how divided his people are, not only at the holy sites but in their day to day lives. Once again, I was struck by the gap between the essence of religious teachings and the reality of daily life created by mankind. I had visited perhaps one of the most sacred places on earth for my own religion yet I was just a stone's throw away from the ugliness of the separation wall and all of the human intentions driving its necessity. Perhaps even more concerning to me was the sudden realization that had I not made this visit, or embarked on this fellowship, my life experience of Christmas would be defined by a seven-course meal with my traditional Slovak family.

Beautiful and Informative Art:

The Freedom of Extreme Modest Dress

I generally have no taste for the stereotypical finer things in life. I hate sparkling water, expensive cars, salad forks, high-end fashion, raw oysters, alcohol that's older than I am and restaurants with dress codes and waiting lists. I am a connoisseur of fast food, tie-dye clothing, cheap paperback novels, reality television and alcoholic drinks with cherries and cocktail umbrellas. However, I have an affinity for fine art of all mediums. I love performance art, paintings, architecture, classical music, sculpture, poetry and anything from the Renaissance. My love of fine art has led to a passion for museums. Not only did this fellowship give me the opportunity to explore my faith, it enabled me to continue my passion and visit international museums.

The Pitti Palace in Florence will always remain supreme in my eyes. The Israel Museum in Jerusalem is a very close second. The Israel Museum is expansive and overwhelming in the best way possible. I literally spent a whole day there and could easily spend countless more. I saw the Dead Sea Scrolls, a 1,000 square meter model of Jerusalem and explored an outdoor art garden. I toured the Synagogue Route which included four reconstructed synagogues from around the world. Through exhibits dedicated to Jewish life and traditions, I learned about the Jewish year, the cycle of life and traditional costume and dress. I took a break in the outdoor cafe to enjoy a delicious chocolate pie and a much-needed espresso. After refueling, I admired Israeli

art, contemporary art, photography, design art, drawings and a breathtaking exhibit on degenerate art from the Gurlitt collection.

Even more than the ascetics of a lovely piece of art, I believe that art can teach in ways that literature, teachers, lesson plans and schools cannot. Art can convey messages when words fail and can transcend barriers. Sometimes art is beautiful, straightforward and understandable. You can pinpoint the style, the color scheme, the medium and perhaps even the artist's intention. Other times, art is challenging, confusing, emotional and even ugly. Art forces us to think, to see a new perspective, feel something we otherwise would not and to appreciate different forms of beauty. As I explored the Israel Museum, I stumbled upon an exhibit called "Veiled Women of the Holy Land: New Trends in Modest Dress" designed by Rona Chernika and curated by No'am Bar'am Ben-Yossef.²⁷ As a woman who has always struggled with dress codes and the attempted regulation of my body, this exhibit appealed to me.

The exhibit was housed in a spacious tiled room with a security guard sitting in the corner. Throughout the room, there were raised platforms and enclosed glass cases displaying mannequins dressed in extremely modest clothing. Some mannequins had their faces exposed, but as the title suggested, many of their faces were veiled. I noticed a black cape with a hood that covered both the face and the back of the head. Many of the outfits were very simple and monochrome. A majority of the outfits were completely black or a very dark shade of navy. Other mannequins had busy outfits with intricate patterns, fine fabrics and contrasting colors. In particular, I was struck by a mannequin wearing a long black skirt, a large white tunic and a beautiful white lace veil. Unlike a typical wedding veil, this veil was made of thick white lace

²⁷ "Veiled Women of the Holy Land: New Trends in Modern Dress," *The Israel Museum, Jerusalem*, <https://www.imj.org.il/en/exhibitions/veiled-women-holy-land>.

with a crocheted, scalloped detailing at the end. If I were to adopt a life of piety and extreme modesty, that would be the outfit I would wear.

I greatly appreciated that the explanation placards were written in Hebrew, Arabic and English. The introductory placard read, “This exhibition- which displays outfits worn by three different denominations and a video work- seeks to remove the veil of consciousness that we all wear when we observe them and, gently, to raise the women’s layered wraps and let their voices be heard. Do the clothes they wear empower them or protect them? Do they conceal them or make them conspicuous? Are these clothes the outcome of years of oppression and internalization male gaze or are they, on the contrary, an expression of independence and defiance of the permissive secular world?” As I looked around the room, I couldn’t think of any answers. I was thorough in my examination of this part of the exhibit. I made my way to the video room. I was excited to rest my feet and watch the video.

The video was more powerful and eye-opening than I could ever have imagined. The film was projected on a large blank wall. The room was dark and the seating consisted of uncomfortable benches without backs. I found a seat and waited for the video to start from the beginning. As I looked around the room, I realized I was the only one there. The video consisted of three actresses depicting a Muslim woman, a Christian nun and a Jewish woman. The screen was split into three sections with each woman having their own section. Each woman would remove a layer of their modest dress, put it on a hanger and place it on a clothing rack behind them. As they removed each individual layer, they explained their motivations behind their wardrobe, what led to their religious life and what it felt like the first time they went in public while veiled. They discussed the different reactions they’ve experienced from both strangers and close friends. They explained how their own relationship with God has changed since their

wardrobes have changed. After stripping down to their underwear, they began to get dressed again. They continued to speak about their motivations, experiences and explained individual pieces of their outfits. The final scene focused on the women's eyes as they placed the veil down over their faces.

I stayed and watched the video three times. Visually, the video was stunning. I physically could not look away. But the audio and content really stole the show. Their experiences and stories were compelling, relatable and inspiring. The women spoke of being successful in conventional standards. They had jobs, physical possessions and friends. In particular, the Christian woman explained that she knew she should be happy but couldn't understand why she was so unhappy. A friend invited her to church and suddenly she knew what she needed to do. Without looking back, she moved across the world and devoted her life to God. All three women detailed the happiness they felt when they committed to God and veiled their bodies. They felt safer and more confident. The Muslim woman explained that she felt like royalty the first day she wore a veil in public, and that her young daughter called her a princess. Even though strangers may judge or harass them, they would never go back to their old lives.

I must confess that consciously and subconsciously I have judged women who chose to cover their entire bodies including their faces. While living in Jerusalem, I frequently saw Muslim, Jewish and Christian women who took modesty to the extreme. They wore long skirts, long sleeves, covered their heads and wore wigs. Even in less extreme cases, I've judged women who refuse to wear pants, expose their shoulders or refuse to cut their hair. I only ever considered the million reasons why I would never want to wear a veil or start wearing jeans in the summer. I focused on my own experiences with dress codes, skirt length and finding an

appropriate outfit for church on Sundays. I expected for every woman, especially every young woman, to feel exactly as I did.

I don't pretend to understand the appeal of never cutting my hair so I can use it to wash the Messiah's feet during his second coming. I don't pretend to think God cares if I wear a tank top to mass during a summer heatwave. I don't pretend to think that dress codes aren't problematic for teaching girls to cover up rather than for teaching boys to respect women and their bodies. But what I do understand is that every woman has the right to their own body, their own choices and their own relationship with God. I believe that I was created in God's image and God gave me the gift of life. When I dress in an outfit of my own choosing that makes me feel confident, I believe it is a celebration of God and that gift. Expecting all women, even those of different faiths and different life experiences, to feel the same was naive and problematic. Female liberation and empowerment, in the religious context and elsewhere, will only occur when every woman has the ability and the right to choose their own lives which includes how they want to dress.

I have always thought that extreme modern dress was outdated and destined to become a thing of the past. This exhibit disproved both of my theories. The outfits on display were fashionable, modern and unique. The women who inspired the video were women of the twenty-first century who made an informed decision to adopt modest dress. I had never appreciated the free choice some women make when opting to conform to what might seem to be an oppressive religious custom. Through this video, I was able to hear first person accounts from women who were empowered by their choice of dress. I hope that I will learn from my mistaken judgements, and continue to explore religion with an open mind.

More Good will Happen:

Interviewing a Modern Orthodox Feminist

While living in Jerusalem, one of my favorite things to do was walk. I liked to walk through the busy streets, through the Mahane Yehuda Market, the parks and the different religious neighborhoods. On most days, I would stop for a coffee and a Rugelach. I'd walk through the Valley of the Cross, find a bench and watch the diverse citizens of Jerusalem enjoy the sunny weather. Some days, I'd see groups of Orthodox children playing soccer while wearing their prayer shawls and their kippahs. I'd see young adults doing yoga, young couples kissing and other young couples walking with a chaperone. Sometimes I saw people on picnics, individuals reading up against a tree or a mom pushing a stroller. People watching, and eating mouth-watering pastries, soon became an everyday activity. I also always made it a habit to read the signs, bulletin boards and advertisements throughout the city. Though most were in Hebrew, sometimes I would be lucky and find one in English. That's how I found out about Leah, a modern orthodox activist working in a community center to promote gender equality, education and justice in Modern Orthodox communities.

On a day just like the day I saw a flyer promoting Leah's community center, I decided to walk to our scheduled interview. The community center was in an area of Jerusalem I was unfamiliar with, so I gave myself plenty of time in case I got lost. I managed to make without a minute to spare. I introduced myself and Leah invited me back to her office. While doing some

basic introductions and making us coffee, Leah got a phone call from her daughter. As I waited for Leah to end her phone call, I situated myself on the other side of her desk. I opened my notebook, pulled out a consent form and had my list of prepared questions on my lap. I sipped on my coffee and tried not to eavesdrop. I took in my surroundings. Leah was wearing a navy skirt, brown boots and a yellow head scarf. Her office had pictures of her family, her many framed diplomas on the wall and a large tear-away calendar. On her laptop, I noticed a familiar sticker, in light blue bubble letters it read, “Well-behaved women rarely make history.” I had a funny feeling that Leah and I were going to get along. After she hung up the phone, Leah explained that her daughter had just received her position in the Israeli Defense Forces, frequently referred to as the IDF. As I offered my congratulations, Leah explained how her daughter’s placement was a testament to changing times.

In Israel, conscription, commonly referred to as the draft in the United States, is still a requirement for Jewish Israeli citizens of both genders who are over the age of eighteen as well for male Druze and Circassian citizens. Most soldiers serve for two to two and a half years. Of course, exceptions are allowed. Most exceptions are made for psychological, physical or religious reasons. Many young adults who are exempt from military service chose to participate in Sherut Leumi or voluntary national service for Israel. This voluntary service, lasting either one or two years, can occur in a variety of places including schools, hospitals, disadvantaged communities, nursing homes, law, immigrant assistance, health clinics and internal security.²⁸ When Leah turned eighteen, she was exempt for her religious beliefs and enrolled in a national service program. Leah suggested that this was the norm for modern orthodox girls when she was

²⁸ Ruth Levush, “Israel: Military Draft Law and Enforcement,” *Library of Congress: Law*, November 25, 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/military-draft/israel.php>.

a young adult. Though she enjoyed her year of service, she missed out on many opportunities presented to soldiers in the IDF. Through the IDF, young adults are able to make lifelong friends, receive specialized training and make important connections for jobs and adult life. Leah explained that the IDF is a large part of Israeli culture and that it's easy to feel ostracized or not connected to your peers without the IDF experience. Recently, it has become more acceptable for religious women to enroll in the military giving them better opportunities for success in their lives after conscription. Leah's excitement and happiness for her daughter was palpable.

I asked Leah more about her own upbringing and young adult life. She was raised in a religious Modern Orthodox family in an urban environment. When she began dating, she wanted to find a partner who was both educated and religious. She eventually found her now husband and they married in Jerusalem. They moved to a town outside of Jerusalem and in between Tel Aviv to raise their four children: two boys and two girls. As a mother, Leah thinks it's "fascinating" to see what her kids learn from the outside world and how it differs from what she teaches them. She's recently become aware of the gendered ways she teaches her own children. The vocabulary she uses, the way she approaches certain subjects and even what aspects of her personal life she shares depends on if she's speaking with her sons or daughters. She didn't elaborate on specifics. She's sensitive to these differences, but doesn't necessarily believe their wrong. In reality, her sons and daughters will have different experiences and "tensions in life regarding gender." Leah made it abundantly clear how proud she is of her children and that all her children consider themselves feminists.

Even just saying the word feminist seemed to ignite a fire within Leah. She continued to say, "It's important for me to say it, it's important for me to say 'I am a feminist.'" Leah believes the word and "the brand of feminism" has become a curse word in the Ultra Orthodox and

Modern Orthodox community. She expressed her frustration explaining how this condemnation of feminism is “unfair and wrong.” She believes that people find feminism “threatening” to religion as a whole when in reality, it only affects the patriarchy and the idea that “you need to ignore your feelings and thoughts for something bigger.” When a religious woman asks for change, people immediately think “what’s the hidden agenda?” That woman has to defend herself and prove to the men that she’s religious enough to be trusted and that she’s not “trying to change everything.”

To elaborate on this reality, Leah used an example from her experiences advocating for change. After struggling to hear, see and connect to God from the women’s section of her synagogue or shul in Hebrew, Leah asked to have the women’s seating sections adjacent instead of behind the men. When she approached the male leadership with this idea, they were hesitant and scared. First, they told Leah she needed one third of the parish to agree to this change. After collecting a list of signatures with one third of the parish agreeing, they changed their minds. They now wanted half of the parish to agree. When Leah came back with a list far exceeding half, they still wouldn’t allow the change. Eventually, they admitted to Leah that changing the location of the women’s section would lead to even more changes, changes that they would not accept. Leah explained that this idea of a “slippery slope,” or one change setting a precedent for even more change, had become popular in religious communities.

The idea of a slippery slope has always intrigued me, if one change opened the door for the next change, wouldn’t that be a good thing? Wouldn’t that show that the change was needed and accepted, and that people were ready to take even more chances? I wanted to know what Leah thought of this slippery slope conundrum. She doesn’t seem to see what the big deal was saying, “Now women are gonna read the Torah scroll so what? Women will become even more

engaged and involved. More good will happen.” I continued to ask Leah about some of the changes she hopes to see one day. Her list was extensive and included more women spiritual leaders, acknowledgement from the government that female rabbis are legitimate, better education on gender equality in schools and even a female chief rabbi. To me, those goals seem important, inspiring and ambitious. Leah doesn’t seem like the type of woman to back down from a challenge, and has some ideas on how to create these changes. She believes “change happens when you work top down or bottom up” and that women “have to be there to make sure things don’t regress.” She continued to explain that “women need to be in all places where decisions take place.”

I was amazed at Leah’s calm yet passionate temperament. I asked Leah what motivated her, and how she began her life as an activist. Leah had one experience that “changed her life.” As a Modern Orthodox woman, Leah must fully immerse herself in a mikvah, or ritual bath, for purity. A woman must purify themselves after childbirth, menstruation and before marriage in order to have sexual relations with their husbands. Before immersing themselves in the mikvah, women must prepare and take a shower to ensure they are clean.²⁹ After moving, and going to her new mikvah, Leah was disgusted. It was “dirty, rundown and unpleasant.” She decided to gather friends and the support of other women to make a change. They wanted the mikvah to be renovated or for a new one to be built. As she researched and met with important leaders, she realized that the mikvahs were built by men and designed by male architects. These men had no idea what women need when they prepare for their ritual baths, or what they do after their baths. To Leah, this explained why the mikvah was unpleasant and had a confusing, inefficient layout.

²⁹ Rivkah Slonim, “The Mikvah,” *TheJewishWoman.org*, Chabad.org, https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/1541/jewish/The-Mikvah.htm.

There were no women involved in the process even though women were the only ones using it to bathe. Through this process, Leah learned about social change, activism and how much work must be done to enact change. She also learned “that if something is wrong, you must speak up and say it’s wrong to help motivate other people.”

After expressing my admiration and thanks, I left Leah’s office with another cup of coffee and a reinvigorated passion for my research. When I set out on my fellowship year, I wanted to learn how women were changing their own religious communities and how they kept their faith. Never once in our two-hour conversation did Leah ever mention a doubt in her beliefs or a frustration with God. Leah had learned how to separate her relationship with God and the human element of religion which included patriarchal ideas, business practices and day to day rituals. Leah found ways to engage in her local community and make local level changes while still aspiring to make wide scale change. If Leah could remain faithful while challenging the patriarchal ideals in her religion, then so could I.

I find it interesting that the challenges I have with my Roman Catholicism in Pennsylvania are not all that different than the ones Leah faces in her modern orthodox community in Jerusalem. Though we have different beliefs and religious practices and are on opposite sides of the world, we both appreciate the significance of having women in leadership roles. When women are not represented in the decision-making process, their opinions and needs are not represented. It’s not surprising that I am unable to connect with the priests in my parish or relate to their teachings on birth control, marriage or family life. Not only are these messages coming from men, they’ve been created by male leadership and male interpretations of the bible. Again, I come back to the idea of a slippery slope and Leah’s relevant opinion. If women are

better represented in the Roman Catholic church, then so what? Women will become ever more engaged, more involved, more connected and possibly more faithful. More good will happen.

The Western Wall:

Celebrating Rosh Hodesh with Women of the Wall

The first time I visited the Western Wall was the first time it really hit me that I was living in the Holy Land. After getting lost on the colorful streets of Old City, sweating in the Jerusalem sun and making my way through security, I found myself standing in the plaza and staring at the Wall. Upon first glance, I noticed the men's section was bigger than the women's section, and that it was also much more crowded. In front of the men's section, a group of teenage boys were posing for a photo with a flag to celebrate a Bat Mitzvah. People were moving quickly and speaking many different languages. I felt overwhelmed and unsure of how to behave. I decided to move to the back of the plaza and get my bearings. As I found a place to sit on the back ledge, I watched the many diverse worshippers pray at the wall. I saw Ultra Orthodox Jews, of all ages, reading the Torah, touching the Wall and talking amongst themselves. I also saw organized tour groups, Israeli Defense Fighters (IDF soldiers), individual worshipers of various races and ages and many school aged children. Everyone was respectful of each other and showed reverence to the only remains of what was the Second Temple of Jerusalem. Throughout my time in Jerusalem, I became a regular at the Western Wall using multiple entrances, visiting at different times, sitting in different locations and enduring variable weather. I liked watching how different people prayed, their emotional reactions and how they interacted with each other. No matter when or how frequently I visited the Western Wall, I still had that moment of reality hit: I was living in the Holy Land. Eventually, I wrote down my

prayers and deepest intentions, mustered the courage to enter the women's section and placed my letter in the wall. However, my last visit to the Western Wall overpowered all my previous experiences.

Through friends and other international researchers living in Jerusalem, I learned about Women of the Wall. Women of the Wall is an international Jewish organization, with women from all denominations of Judaism, that “strive to achieve the right to wear prayer shawls, pray and read from the Torah collectively and out loud at the Western Wall (Kotel) in Jerusalem, Israel.”³⁰ Existing rules, established by an Orthodox government rabbi, prohibit women from these actions but allow men to do all of the above. According to their website, “The Western Wall is Judaism's most sacred holy site and the principal symbol of Jewish peoplehood and sovereignty, and Women of the Wall works to make it a holy site where women can pray freely.”³¹ To celebrate Rosh Hodesh, or the new month in the Hebrew calendar, Women of the Wall gather in the women's section of the Western Wall and read a special portion of the Torah scroll. I joined the Women of the Wall at the end of February for a Rosh Hodesh ceremony and I will never forget that experience.

The day of my visit, I woke at 5:30AM to pour myself a bowl of cereal, drink a cup of coffee and pack my bag for the rest of the day. I was excited, nervous and still half asleep as I locked my apartment door. I had no idea what to expect. Because Women of the Wall provides buses for women in the organization and for those interested in participating, I didn't have to walk the whole way there. I had made plans to meet two friends, and fellow researchers, on my walk to the designated pick-up location. My friends had attended last month's service and

³⁰ Women of the Wall, “Who we are,” 2016, <https://www.womenofthewall.org.il/who-we-are/>.

³¹ Ibid.

warned me to stay with the group. I started to feel a little more nervous and a lot more alert. As we boarded the bus, I found a seat next to an employee of their organization. She welcomed me to the group, echoed the same warning of staying close and expressed genuine interest in my research. She was raised as an Ultra-Orthodox Jew, but left the community. She is still finding new ways to reclaim her faith and relationship with God.

Before I knew it, the bus was parking outside Dung Gate. I tried to heed the warnings and stay close to my friends as we filed off the bus. I immediately noticed the difference between this visit and my usual visits to the Western Wall. First, the security lines, plaza and prayer sections were the most crowded I had ever seen them. As a group, we waited in the security line. As we approached the security checkpoint, I noticed the next big difference. I would usually just walk through a metal detector, open my purse and be waved through. The security guards were always friendly and often asking me questions about the United States and what brought me to Jerusalem. Today, I was patted down, my purse was thoroughly searched and there was no friendly chit-chat. I soon learned that security was expecting us. When I finally made it through security and stood in the plaza, I did not feel reverence and respect. I felt unwelcome. I felt hatred, animosity and disgust.

The women's section was crowded with Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women and young girls. Conservative groups typically provide transportation to fill the prayer sections in an attempt to crowd Women of the Wall out. We found a spot in the back of the women's section and began to form a circle. As an outsider and an observer, I stayed towards the outside of the circle. Security quickly formed a circle around us to create a barrier between Women of the Wall and everyone else. The women began to pray and sing in both Hebrew and English. Some women put on kippahs, prayer shawls and tefillin or Jewish phylacteries. They even managed to bring in a

Torah scroll. To get it through security, the women had to completely deconstruct it and disperse the pieces. As soon as Women of the Wall began praying, their opposition began hissing, sushing and jeering. Even with security, there was a lot of pushing and close contact. Three young Ultra-Orthodox girls had made their way into the middle of our circle. They did whatever they could to disrupt and harass the Women of the Wall. They took pictures, yelled insults, hissed and mocked us.

The prayer service lasted a little over two hours and I struggled to stay engaged. Sometimes, I was able to tune everything out and focus on the women praying. They were emotional, beautiful and powerful in their words and actions. I was able to appreciate the significance of the moment. Other times, I was too nervous to engage in the prayers or with the group. I couldn't focus on anything other than the tension and possibility of violence. Throughout the two hours, the shushing, jeering and harassment only got worse. I was especially shocked by the intensity of young girls protesting against Women of the Wall. Most of the girls couldn't have been older than fourteen. I tried to remember what it was like to be fourteen. I recalled fighting with my friends over the *Twilight Saga*, buying a dress with my mom for the eighth-grade formal, crying when my sisters said I picked an ugly color for my braces and asking my dad to drive me to my friend's houses every weekend. At fourteen, I didn't have a single belief strong enough to get me up at 5:30AM without my parents forcing me awake. At fourteen, I changed my opinions every other day and was influenced by teen pop stars, my friends and most significantly my older sisters. Watching the tension and harassment unfold just a few feet away from the Western Wall was depressing and discouraging. If people with the same overarching beliefs couldn't get along, how could there be any hope for global religious tolerance and interfaith realities?

As the Women of the Wall wrapped up their prayer service, we were instructed to follow them out in a line. I thought this meant we were in the clear. I was wrong. Exiting from the Western Wall would be the most intimidating part of the day. As we started to exit, security formed barriers on both sides of the group to keep us away from the Ultra-Orthodox men. As soon as we left the women's section, Ultra-Orthodox men began to yell, mock and push against security. Even after we exited the Western Wall plaza, the men did not stop. Outside the plaza, people were holding banners which read "Reform is not religious," "Reform denies the Torah and all Jewish traditions" and "Religion is consistent." I was once again surprised because there were many young boys holding these signs. The Western Wall no longer felt scared and beautiful. Again, the essence of religion, including unconditional love and acceptance, seemed to be at odds with the human element.

As I reflect on this experience and my experiences in Catholic school, I now realized I may not have been all that different than the three Ultra-Orthodox girls in the middle of the circle. No, I never harassed another group, visited sacred land or found myself in the middle of a controversial and illegal prayer service. But, as a fourteen-year-old, I did accept the beliefs of my parents and church without researching or examining them on my own. I missed out exploring broader academic issues in the name of dress code, pro-life assemblies and memorizing prayers. Even though I went to public high school, I know that the local Catholic high school provides buses for students to attend pro-life marches in nearby cities. I am left to wonder if I had attended Catholic school at a different location, for a longer duration or with different teachers; would I have become more extreme in my beliefs or more radical in my questioning of them?

I feel conflicted when I reflect on my twelve years in Catholic school. I recognize the right of private institutions to have their own regulations, teachings and instructional methods. I

understand that my parents sent me, and my sisters, to Catholic school so that we could learn the teachings and beliefs of our church. I also understand the great privilege I had by going to a private school with small class sizes, incredible teachers, individualized attention, established extracurricular activities and heavy parental involvement. I received a great education where I developed critical thinking, reading and writing skills that helped me succeed in high school and college. Through my religion classes, I learned about my own beliefs as well as the other five world religions. Most importantly, I credit my Catholic school upbringing with showing me the importance of seeing the bigger picture, helping others and living life according to my own moral compass and conscience. Through Catholic school, I became compassionate, polite, self-sufficient, hardworking and an inquisitive person.

A few days after my experience with Women of the Wall, I reached out to some female organizations who oppose Women of the Wall and who believe tradition should be preserved. I was able to speak with a representative, but due to logistics and consent forms, I was unable to officially interview them for my research. However, we had a meaningful and personal conversation. I was forced to reevaluate my experiences with the Western Wall. With the Western Wall being the most sacred site in Judaism, many Ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox women feel that their spiritual home is under attack. In fact, Women of the Wall is outnumbered by thousands of women who oppose changes to the protocol of praying at the Wall. They find the attack on their traditions to be disrespectful, degrading and even patronizing. They acknowledge that Jewish men and women have different ways of praying and obligations, but they don't want to adopt the masculine model.

Just like I feel conflicted about my experiences in Catholic school, I feel conflicted about my experiences at the Western Wall and about my opinions on the gendered prayer protocol. It's

all too easy to get bogged down in religious politics, feminist theory and an individual bad experience. At my core, I believe every woman, and every individual, should have the right to practice their beliefs and pray in whatever way they see fit. Prayer is our most intimate connection to God; therefore, we all have our own ideas and experiences with prayer. One-size-fits-all prayer protocols and rigid religious traditions will never work if religious practices wish to evolve. I experienced this reality first hand at the Western Wall. Regardless of one's beliefs, sharing sacred spaces should require mutual respect, tolerance, willingness to participate in difficult conversation and openness to reform in religious education. Maybe, just maybe, if we spent less time nit-picking details and teaching the differences between us and more time focusing on the similarities we could limit the ugliness of misguided hate and emotion in the practice of religion.

My Last Day Abroad:

A Dedication to my Uncle Bob

In March of 2020 I was told I had to leave Ireland and end my research four months early. The coronavirus pandemic was spreading rapidly and I was required to return to the United States. I called my parents and my sisters. I was crushed. I cried and cried and cried some more. When I finally stopped crying, I went to the bar and ordered a drink. At that moment, I was unable to appreciate the severity of coronavirus or how lucky I was to have spent seven months abroad. I ordered another drink, called my sister and cried again. I was so frustrated. I was disappointed and defeated. I felt like all of my plans and hard work had crumbled during a single phone call. As I sipped on my drink, the bartender came over to inform me that the bar was closing in twenty minutes. I wasn't out late or on a bender. Seeing my confusion, the bartender informed me that all the bars were closing because of coronavirus concerns. Though my disappointment did not suddenly go away, the bartender's warning was the reality check I so desperately needed. The fellowship committee was not being overly cautious and neither was my Dad. I needed to go back home. I finished my drink, went back to my hotel and booked the next flight back to Philadelphia. In hindsight, I feel so grateful and lucky that I got a flight home. I didn't get sick and I had a place to quarantine in the United States before interacting with my family. I also realize how lucky I was to be in a country similar to the United States and in a country where I had no language barrier. If only you could have somehow accessed hindsight in the moment.

I was told to return home on a Saturday night and booked a flight for early that Monday morning. I had one full day in Dublin. I decided to go for a walk to ease some of my anxiety and fill my day. I walked through Saint Stephen's Green, along the River Liffey and through Temple Bar. The sun was warm on my skin and there were no clouds in the sky. I had to wear my jacket and scarf because of a strong breeze. Being alone and far away from home when coronavirus became a scary but real reality was a surreal experience. All the storefronts and restaurants had signs stating their temporary closures. When I overheard people talking, COVID-19 was the only subject. My phone was constantly buzzing with new airport protocols, updates from my parents and texts from concerned friends. As I walked along the river, I walked by a Roman Catholic church. I read their sign and realized it was a Sunday. I checked my phone for the time and mass would be starting in about fifteen minutes. I decided I didn't want to spend my last day abroad in church. I kept walking. And then, I turned around. What better way to end my research studying religion and gender than in a Roman Catholic church- the place where it all began.

I didn't realize how big the church was from the outside. When I walked in, I was shocked by the rows of long pews and the high ceiling. It was a very old church and very cold inside. I zipped my jacket all the way up before sitting down. Instead of sitting in the back, I sat closer towards the middle. Even the middle rows felt far removed from the pulpit. Including the priest, there were probably ten people in attendance. Every single person was sitting alone with many empty pews between them. Before the priest began, a parishioner went to the pulpit. This would be the last mass until further notice. There would also be no sign of peace. They asked everyone to only take communion if they thought it necessary and that the priest would only administer it to folded hands. I always thought it was weird to get the Eucharist placed directly

in your mouth anyway. I decided that I didn't need communion. I thought the fact that I was attending mass was good enough.

When the priest walked out, I thought I was dreaming. Maybe coronavirus and this new reality were only a figment of my imagination. The priest had white wispy hair, big glasses, a funny smile, old freckled skin and a big round stomach. He was not tall but he wasn't necessarily short. His walk down the aisle was more of a shuffle and he looked exactly like my late Great Uncle Father Robert Brown. My Uncle Bob lived a life too big to be condensed down to a paragraph or miniature essay. He was the youngest of eight children and brother to my paternal grandmother. He graduated Niagara University with ROTC commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. infantry. He joined the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales and became an ordained Roman Catholic priest. He continued his education and received graduate degrees in politics and social work. He used these degrees to be a teacher, counselor and to open and direct three group homes for troubled teens in Philadelphia.

I cannot remember a single hymn or reading from mass that day. I don't remember the homily or if anyone received communion. I spent that hour in church thinking about my Uncle Bob. My parents had a close relationship with my Uncle Bob. When my parents were newlyweds, they even took a backpacking trip around Europe with him. Growing up, Uncle Bob was always around. He visited for Thanksgiving, long summer holidays and in the fall for a yearly hunting trip. He stayed with us for our annual beach vacation and even came with us once to Disney World. We used to visit him and would stay in his parish rectory along with all the other priests. I always used to love going to mass when Uncle Bob was celebrating it. Not only was it cool to see my Uncle at the pulpit, but his homilies were always quick and usually included the same religious joke about a golden telephone. Outside of church, he never wore his

clerical collar around us. Usually, he wore Birkenstocks, L.L. Bean sweaters and anything with the Big Dog logo on it. Uncle Bob brought the good time with him wherever he went. He liked Italian food, cooking elaborate meals and never doing the dishes afterwards. He liked smoking cigars, drinking Scotch, eating cashews and playing golf. Uncle Bob loved his family, especially his boxer dogs. During one summer visit, he even brought us a boxer puppy named Andy. When Uncle Bob died of pneumonia in 2013, his dog, Molly, came to live with us. My mom believes Molly died of a broken heart, and I do too.

As a kid, I didn't always appreciate Uncle Bob's visits, fancy seafood dinners or the way he hogged the television remote. I did appreciate the \$20 he would leave under our pillows before leaving and definitely credit my boxer dog obsession to him. Even more than silly anecdotes, as I've grown older, I realize how profoundly Uncle Bob has shaped my religious views and expectations of myself. First and foremost, Uncle Bob showed me what it meant to unapologetically be yourself and to live life to the fullest. Uncle Bob was well educated, well traveled, well read and well fed. He took chances and never let an opportunity go to waste. I was amazed when he told stories about his summer as a security guard or the time his dogs saved his life. His life had so many different chapters with different characters and different settings. I wanted to be like my Uncle Bob. I wanted to have stories from around the world that seemed almost too good to be true. Even after he died, his reputation and legacy was full of life, laughs and crazy encounters. Among cousins, he is still brought up at almost every family get together. He was so much more than a devout Roman Catholic Priest. He was a complex human being trying to enjoy his life while also living as he thought God wanted. Understanding that my Uncle Bob was more than just a Roman Catholic priest was significant in my own journey of religious exploration and understanding. In many ways, it was similar to realizing that my second-grade

teacher didn't live in school. All religious leaders, just like my Uncle, are human. They are people with families, friends, opinions, desires and their own beliefs. They are not perfect or incapable of making a mistake. They have bad days and good days. At the end of the day, they are humans just like the parishioners they serve.

I believe that religious leaders deserve the utmost respect and appreciation. They devote their lives to God and to others. They often renounce worldly desires and are constantly forced to make sacrifices. Much to my mom's disappointment, I know I could never make the sacrifices or commitments necessary to live a pious life. But appreciating that religious leaders are just human fuels my passion for seeking reform and change within my religious community. Not only was my Uncle Bob a human being, so was every single priest before him. Though they may have had extra guidance from the Holy Spirit and a deeper understanding of theology, they were all capable of making mistakes. They all had previous life experiences that informed their ministry, opinions and beliefs.

After I left the church and continued my walk, I kept thinking about my Uncle Bob. I don't think it was a happy accident that I found myself in mass my last day in Dublin. I think Uncle Bob watched out for me throughout my time in England, Israel and my brief visit to Ireland. Though cliché, I like to think he helped guide me in my journey both physically and spiritually. At the very least, my trip down memory lane was an important reminder. This was only the end of a chapter, not the end of my story exploring religion, travelling abroad and finding myself. And in an ominous way, my experience with mass that day made me hopeful. The church was willingly to change the way mass was performed in order to keep people safe and healthy amidst the coronavirus pandemic. They changed the structure of the mass and even suspended services for the foreseeable future. Maybe the church isn't as stagnant as I assumed.

Conclusion:

“The more I see the less I know for sure”

Ironically, I am writing this final reflection as my parents’ forty-first wedding anniversary quickly approaches. A lot has changed since their surprise party last summer. My sisters and I are living in our childhood home again because of the pandemic. I’m getting ready to begin law school and to move into my own apartment in Philadelphia. I haven’t been to church since March. I am in desperate need of a haircut and now understand just how easy it is to spend 15,000 dollars. If I thought John Lennon’s quote about making plans and living life was relevant a year ago, I now know it’s not just a clever saying. It is simply a fact of life. My fellowship did not unfold as I had planned and for that I am forever grateful. Although I would have preferred finishing the year abroad, I don’t believe I would have learned or experienced as much if I limited myself to a purely academic agenda.

When I applied to this fellowship, I was questioning if God even existed and why I should go to church. I now no longer have any doubts about God’s existence. Though I developed a new appreciation for tradition, I am now able to distinguish my belief in God from the human element of Roman Catholicism. I understand the importance of appreciating different perspectives while advocating for what I believe is right. I believe that women need to be better represented in the Roman Catholic church. They need to be represented in the administration, at the pulpit, in the pews, in teachings and everywhere else. The church needs to adapt and evolve with society while remaining true to God’s word. I believe this means taking a public and active

stance on current social issues. The church should be using its platform and financial abilities to stand against racial inequality, the destruction of our environment, corrupt politicians, religious intolerance and injustice everywhere, Palestine included.

In terms of religious education, I am just beginning to realize how paramount interfaith relations and coexistence really are for personal spiritual growth and peace. Even more than just coexisting together, we should uplift and celebrate our faithful sisters, brothers and those who don't identify as either, regardless of how they worship. Hate and intolerance is fueled by ignorance and judgement. I believe if religious institutions, especially educational institutions, focused more on interfaith ideals and teachings, the world would be a different place. I am hopeful but not naive. To change the world into a place with real religious tolerance and interfaith relations will require a lot more than one girl spending seven months researching and living abroad. This type of change can only occur through difficult and honest discussions, meaningful reform and years and years and even more years of hard work. For now, I'm taking a page out of Leah's book: "change happens from the top down or bottom up." Instead of becoming discouraged, I will continue to focus on what I can do among my friends, family and local community.

In terms of a final thesis or overarching idea, I again turn to John Lennon: "The more I see, the less I know for sure." I thought that this fellowship year would answer all my questions about religion, gender and education. It did the opposite. Sure, I was able to answer a few of my questions, most notably, do I believe in God? But now I have more questions than ever. My world view was shattered every other day while I was in England and Israel. I was constantly presented with new perspectives, experiences and ideas that challenged my understanding of religion and the world. At times, I felt scared that my opinions were simply opinions and not

fact. I felt overwhelmed that change and uncertainty were my new normal. Now, I am excited to understand that the world is vast, ever changing and filled with information. I will never know all there is to know about anything, especially religion. Appreciating that there will always be something to learn has become the ultimate motivation to experience as much as I can and to continuously challenge myself to do better.

The fourteen essays I included in this collection are just snapshots and moments from my seven months abroad. They are not comprehensive when I consider all of the other significant experiences I had abroad, interviews I conducted or the many other beautiful people I met. I didn't write about my trip to Egypt with one of my college best friends or meeting my sister in London for a weekend. I frequently met with a Seven Day Adventist student group, visited a Skih Temple, attended countless academic lectures and spent a meaningful morning at the Temple Mount. I ate more falafel than I ever thought possible, floated in the Dead Sea at sunset and listened to a Beatles cover band at the Cavern Club. I could write one hundred more pages about everything I did and learned as a Charles Rice Fellow.

At the very least, I hope you enjoyed reading these essays and didn't find my sentence structure all too repetitive. A little more than that, I hope my passion for spiritual exploration, gender equality and international travel was evident in my writing. I hope my gratitude for the Charles Rice Fellowship team, the Harold C. Smith Foundation and the unconditional love of my family was equally as evident. Most importantly, I hope something from my experiences resonated with you. I hope you are able to find your own motivation, inspiration or a moment of faith, no matter how small. I will never stop exploring, questioning, learning and taking chances. I hope you don't either.

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