



KHATIB PROGRAM IN RELIGION & DIALOGUE

at the University of Mary Washington

Academic Year 2020-2021

A LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR DR. MEHDI AMINRAZAVI

To my distinguished colleagues and students,

I have the distinct pleasure of reporting the activities of Khatib Program in Religion and Dialogue in the second year of its existence. Despite the continuation of COVID-19 and the University going virtual, we have had a busy year planning and implementing various programs.

In the past year, we have achieved the following:

We offered a comparative class entitled **“The Bible and the Qur’an”** taught by Professor Halla Attallah. In this class, which was offered for the second year as part of KPRD, such topics as women in scripture, gender, and some of the most common themes between the two religions and historical narratives were emphasized.

In the Fall of 2020, we organized a one-day symposium entitled **“Beyond Ballot: The Role of Religion within the American Political**

Landscape.” A number of scholars of religious studies discussed the election and post-election events within a comparative religious context. This successful event was watched by students and faculty. The event was recorded and remains on the Khatib Program’s website.

During the Spring 2021 semester, we organized another one-day symposium entitled **“Religion, Democracy and Violence.”** Representatives of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism attended the event, and we had a robust and engaging discussion on the place of violence in our religions. The recording of this event can also be accessed through the Khatib Program’s website.

This year, for the first time, we offered a **Research Internship to Mackenzie Poust**, a former student, whose work not only made having these events possible but has provided us with a wealth of information about other interreligious centers in

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the area. We are hoping to be able to build on this information and hopefully offer joint programs with other institutions in the future.

Humanities in Action is a second internship that KPRD supports. Accordingly, a student is chosen every year to work for the enhancement of humanitarian activism and to help the underprivileged benefit from the work of our program. We are hoping by providing small grants to students interested in interreligious dialogue and

activism, we can push the boundaries of this endeavor from theory to practice.

In anticipation for the normalization of activities in a post-Covid period, we are already planning for the next academic year. We are hoping to continue with the mission of this program and to be able to organize and implement even larger events.

The Khatib Program in Religion and Dialogue has become a permanent part of our University and seeks to bring about unity and dialogue among various religious traditions.

Best wishes,
Mehdi Aminrazavi
Professor of Philosophy & Religious Studies

❖ ANNOUNCING THE KPRD WEBSITE ❖

The Khatib Program in Religion & Dialogue is pleased to announce the design of our new website!

<https://cas.umw.edu/cprd/khatib-program-in-religion-dialogue/>

This website is a wonderful way to stay informed on events, locate resources on interreligious dialogue and other programs, and find all Khatib Program-related information in one place. Be sure to check back throughout the semester for even more additions and for the most up-to-date information on our programming and initiatives!

OUR FEATURED INITIATIVE

THE BIBLE & THE QUR'ĀN

by Halla Attallah, *Instructor*

This last semester, I had the pleasure of teaching Religion 231, The Bible and the Qur'ān, at the University of Mary Washington. The class brought together two subjects at the center of contemporary American discourse: religion and social justice. My students and I explored a number of well-known stories from the Hebrew Bible and

the Qur'ān, including those related to Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Mary the mother of Jesus. Instead of focusing on a comparative reading—a method that can at times create the semblance of a competition between the various religions—we interrogated these foundational stories through the lens of social justice questions. One central concept was Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of Intersectionality. We, for example, explored such questions as: how do these narratives from the

scriptures represent different categories of identities? What are the power structures that come into play within these stories, thereby shaping the text's treatment of different figures? We also considered how these multifaceted representations and modes of storytelling influence the reading process. The scriptural narratives shape ongoing assumptions about gender, sexuality, race and disability—whether or not these identities are actually valorized by the texts. What resulted was a vibrant conversation about the Bible and the Qur'ān in contexts: the context of the texts themselves, and our own.

The stories of Abraham and his family, recounted in Genesis and referenced in various parts of the Qur'ān, is one such example. These accounts, central to the idea of the Abrahamic traditions, are both appealing and appalling. Students related to some aspects of the narratives such as Abraham's devotion to God, but were also uncomfortable by others, namely his willingness to sacrifice his son without question. To help guide us through this difficult terrain, we drew on a number of interpretive approaches. This includes Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Tikva Frymer-Kensky's essay, "Akeda: A View from the Bible," which offer a philosophical and historical-critical reflection of the sacrifice story respectively. We also drew on the womanist scholarship of Renita Weems, whose examination of Sarah and Hagar

reveals the unsettling parallels between the Abrahamic narratives and the unsettling inequality between contemporary women, separated by race, class and reproductive ability.

To my mind, the most exciting part of the class was the student contributions. Through class discussions, weekly blogs, presentations and assigned papers, everyone demonstrated a keen thoughtfulness to our interreligious/intertextual investigations. The students were not only willing to learn and be challenged, but they were also eager to share perspectives from their own unique positionalities. This enriched everyone's learning experiences, including my own. Some of the standout topics raised by students include the conceptual overlaps between some of the narratives and the contemporary realities of police brutality, economic inequality, the death penalty, slavery, sexual abuse and slander—just to mention a few. Students reflected on how certain elements of our texts potentially contribute to some of the systemic injustices inherent within our society. They also uncovered aspects of these foundational stories that challenge and even put to question these injustices. This complex engagement shown by the students filled me with a rare sense of optimism—which given the difficulties of the pandemic this past year, is something that I will always be grateful for.

FALL 2020 PROGRAMMING

BEYOND THE BALLOT: THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE AMERICAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

by Mackenzie R. Poust, *Interreligious Dialogue Research Coordinator*

As the unusual year of 2020 came to a close, there was a consensus that it was an eventful--and challenging--year in many respects, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the U.S. Presidential

Election in early November and all the large and small events and movements captured in between. While much of the programming the Khatib Program hoped for this year was canceled or postponed, it was important that we still created a space that encouraged and fostered those important questions of “What?”, “How?”, and “Why?” with respect to religion and this unprecedented year.

As social distancing protocols were still in place, the Khatib Program in Religion & Dialogue decided to move our fall event online to a virtual webinar format. “Beyond the Ballot: The Role of Religion within the American Political Landscape” was an event centered on how religion and religiously motivated beliefs and values have historically and now, in 2020, affected American politics and politicians. We were fortunate to have esteemed scholars in the field join us, including Dr. Nichole M. Flores (Assistant Professor, University of Virginia) and Dr. John Fea (Professor, Messiah University) as panelists, and Dr. Emile Lester (Professor, University of Mary Washington) as our respondent. This event was graciously hosted by Dr. Jennifer Barry (Associate Professor, University of Mary Washington).

The event opened with the connected questions of “How has religion played a role in American politics, and in presidential politics [specifically], at various points in American history?” and “What voices have had more of a presence in the past, and what voices are we hearing from more recently?” These questions took those in attendance into the areas of study of our panelists and respondent, as we heard about the history of not only religions in the United States at-large, but the histories of religious ideas in various regional locations, of unexpected religious populations and the significance their ballots have on politics, and of the levels of religiosity of past presidents and how that impacted their perception of the country and the country’s of them.

Most of the evening oriented around American Catholicism and white, American Evangelicals, as these were the main fields of our scholars. The answers to questions of the modern-day interaction between religion and American politics also looked at the discussion surrounding the U.S. Supreme Court and potential cases with its now conservative majority. (The swearing in of the newest Supreme Court Justice was only two nights prior to Beyond the Ballot.) Other topics included the relationship between religion and institutionalism, particularly regarding Catholics both on the Supreme Court and in the presidential office (President John F. Kennedy, and then-candidate during the event and now President-Elect Joseph R. Biden, as well as other past, unsuccessful presidential hopefuls). The 1965 Immigration Act was discussed as one of the largest catalysts for the changes in the American religious landscape, and subsequently the political landscape, during the second half of the 20th century. White Evangelical support for President Donald Trump and the conservative right was analyzed extensively, and the Christian Right was examined as a political movement, not only one with religious roots.

Towards the end of the event, the discourse deepened and difficult questions were tackled. The topic of religion in connection to political platform stances, especially the debate over abortion, was discussed at length. A question was posed, asking whether the act of being religious makes us, as humans credible, and does religiosity make us view politicians as more authentic or less so? And our moderator additionally offered the question: “Who gets to claim or be in religious life in public?” to guide our panelists into an analysis of race and whiteness and the role religion has in the United States’ emerging social justice movements (particularly the ongoing work for racial justice, women’s rights, and LGBTQ+ rights) and in

politician's responses to them--either in their support or in their vehement opposition.

The event closed with a few audience questions and had us attendees think and consider how the year of 2020, with COVID-19, the changing economy, and the growing prevalence and recognition of racial and social justice movements, could have a tremendous impact on the presidential election and for the United States, well beyond any single ballot or one election.

The United States is far from having a uniform religious identity or even a uniform political ideology. It is made up of so many people, beliefs, values, and ideas. The purpose of the Khatib Program in Religion & Dialogue is to promote mutual understanding of each other and each other's faith traditions and to bring people together in respectful conversations. For us, this event was important to look at where the U.S. has been religiously and politically, where we currently are, and the countless opportunities that exist for a future that can be for all Americans, for all faiths, and for all people.

We wanted to again extend our gratitude to Drs. Flores, Fea, Lester, and Barry for their willingness to participate and their contributions to such a timely and informative conversation. The entirety of the



event can be viewed on the Khatib Program's website and the Initiatives and Programming page:

<https://cas.umw.edu/cprd/khatib-program-in-religion-dialogue/initiatives-and-programming/>

Above: The evening's panelists, respondent, and moderator. Top, from left to right: Dr. Nichole M. Flores and Dr. John Fea. Bottom, from left to right: Dr. Emile Lester and Dr. Jennifer Barry.

SPRING 2021 PROGRAMMING

RELIGION, DEMOCRACY, & VIOLENCE: A VIRTUAL SYMPOSIUM

by Mackenzie R. Poust, *Interreligious Dialogue Research Coordinator*

With a new year came new possibilities, not only for the Khatib Program in Religion & Dialogue and the university but for the country. I, personally, remain hopeful for what the rest of this year and the rest of this decade will offer.

Several recent events in the United States and around the world encouraged us to develop a

program focused on religion, democracy, and violence. While brainstorming, we asked, "How do various religious traditions engage with violence? Is religion compatible with democracy? What if we put all three into conversation together?", and our online spring symposium, *Religion, Democracy, & Violence: A Virtual Symposium*, was born. The event examined how people could perpetuate acts of violence against others in the name of their faith tradition and how religious violence could be justified. To do this, the Khatib Program was joined by Rabbi Lizz Goldstein, Father Mark Delcuze, Oshin Liam

Jennings, and Professor Halla Attallah, as well as by our director, Dr. Mehdi Aminrazavi and our colleague, Dr. Steve Rabson.

The program opened with introductory remarks from Dr. Aminrazavi and Dr. Rabson. Dr. Aminrazavi referenced his previous engagement with interreligious spaces and his eagerness to hear the panelists' perspectives on such a timely topic. Dr. Rabson posed a question to each of our panelists and to the audience: to think about who exactly are the individuals around the world committing acts of violence in the name of religion and how are we supposed to view them and engage with them?

Our panelists then began the core portion of our event, presenting on their respective faiths. They introduced our virtual audience to the basics of each tradition before beginning an exploration into their tradition's complex histories with both democracy and violence.

Ōshin spoke of Buddhism's culture and tradition of nonviolence, which has been translated into its "reputation" around the world. His sect of Buddhism is Zen Buddhism and more specifically, Soto Zen. He touched on the concept of *ahimsa* (non-harming) and sitting with emotion, recognizing feelings like anger or hate and really being present with them. Bringing his presentation into current events, Ōshin referenced increased violence in Burma-Myanmar and the dangers of dehumanizing the "other" in situations in violence by using scripture as justification. In his mind, violence ultimately leads to great suffering, and in Buddhism, practitioners aim for the cessation of suffering.

Rabbi Lizz spoke about Judaism's history with working with the text as she started her exploration into her tradition's engagement with democracy and violence. To her, the act of arguing and the realities found through self-interpretation is how Jews throughout history have engaged with the text and

their larger communities and have created a societal hierarchy. She also spoke about God and finding balance between compassion and mercy, and how we all really wrestle with offering justifications and tackling difficult questions. In her mind, true religion promotes representation and justice, and accountability serves as the cornerstone of faith.

Father Mark began by stating that to move forward, people must recount who they were. Christians have a difficult history to reconcile when it comes to working with other faith traditions and other Christians, and he specifically pointed to the Crusades and sectarian violence in Europe and abroad. He introduced the audience to the Christian thinkers he feels most inspired by, including Francis of Assisi, Clare of Assisi, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Howard Thurman, who promoted peace. In ending his presentation, he told a story about the creation of the Community of the Cross of Nails, a group he feels stands for dignity. And it is their purpose and message that encourages him.

Professor Halla Attallah gave a unique perspective as an academic, offering a theoretical reflection on violence in scripture and the how violence is perpetuated through interpretation. She explained as readers look at text, layers of hidden violence can be detrimentally utilized. Violence and language are interconnected, Attallah said, when discourse is used to exclude or marginalize. She brought into the conversation current events like Black Lives Matter, Say Her Name, and Me Too, as well as Islam's modern-day attempts at reconciliation with verses surrounding domestic violence and gender-based violence. She introduced the audience to prominent figures in the field, and the significant contributions they have made. Attallah encouraged the audience to read for inclusion, seek out alternative readings and approaches, and constantly question where problems and violence are while reading religious texts and what can be learned from the text.

The event closed with various questions, addressing working with children versus adults, using and mis-using texts, and how to reconcile religion in an age of social media and use religion for “good.”

On behalf of the Khatib Program, I wanted to again extend my gratitude to Rabbi Lizz Goldstein, Father

Mark Delcuze, Oshin Liam Jennings, and Prof. Halla Attallah for their contributions to this event and the perspectives they offered. The entirety of the event can be viewed through the Khatib Program's website and the Initiatives and Programming page.



Above: The event's panelists. Top, from left to right: Oshin Liam Jennings and Father Mark Delcuze. Bottom, from left to right: Rabbi Lizz Goldstein and Professor Halla Attallah.

❖ INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE RESEARCH COORDINATOR ❖

The Khatib Program in Religion & Dialogue is pleased to announce the position of Interreligious Dialogue Research Coordinator. This individual is responsible for supporting the program in a variety of ways, including developing and coordinating all programming, compiling the annual newsletter, and seeking out and researching new resources, organizations, and individuals in the field of interreligious/interfaith dialogue. A successful candidate will be someone interested in religion and who has a willingness and commitment to supporting interreligious/interfaith work. Interested individuals should forward their resume and a brief statement of purpose to Dr. Mehdi Aminrazavi, Director of the Khatib Program, at maminraz@umw.edu.

This year, the position was held by **Mackenzie R. Poust** (B.A. Religious Studies, 2019). Until recently, she lived in Amman, Jordan, continuing her study of Arabic and the Middle East. After her time with the Khatib Program ends, she will begin her Master's at Georgetown University. Ms. Poust was excited to be a part of the Khatib Program at its beginning and enjoyed organizing this year's programming and discovering new resources.



❖ HUMANITIES IN ACTION INTERN ❖

The University of Mary Washington is pleased to announce that Ms. Josephine Ohene-Okae (B.A. Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, December 2021 graduation) has agreed to become our second Humanities in Action intern. This internship presents an opportunity for a UMW student majoring in one of the humanities to shadow the chief executive and her leadership team at an area non-profit. The line between the questions students in the humanities ask and the problems non-profit leaders are asked to solve is, to our mind, direct. Ms. Ohene-Okae will be mentored by Ms. Cassie Kimberlin, the executive director of the Greater Fredericksburg affiliate of Habitat for Humanity, in Fall 2021. She will receive a stipend, which has been generously provided by the Khatib Program in Religion and Dialogue, and she will pursue academic credit for this experience.

KHATIB AWARD IN RELIGION AND DIALOGUE

Another promising opportunity made possible by the Khatibs' generous donation comes in the form of an award available for upperclassmen who are Religious Studies majors. This award would be used for an educational experience outside of the UMW Fredericksburg campus community to introduce students to different religions and cultures.

To qualify for the award, students need to discuss the potential course or program with Dr. Aminrazavi; complete an application; submit a final reflection on the program (5-7 pages) upon completion; and have a minimum GPA of 3.0. The application can be found below, on our website, or by request. Formal inquiries and applications may be sent to Dr. Mehdi Aminrazavi at maminraz@umw.edu

KHATIB AWARD IN RELIGION AND DIALOGUE APPLICATION

The Religion Program has received a generous gift from Dr. and Mrs. Khatib to promote interreligious dialogue at UMW. From this fund, several awards will be distributed to declared religion majors entering their junior or senior year, who want to take courses for credit--or university acknowledgement--in the U.S. or overseas that provide a deeper insight into religious traditions outside of their own. Upon completion of the program or courses, the student will write a brief 5-7 page reflection on the experience which may potentially be published in the *Khatib Program in Religion & Dialogue Newsletter* and/or on the KPRD website.

In addition to the information listed below, please attach:

- Proof of financial need in the form of a copy of your Student Aid Report (found on the FAFSA website)
- Information on the program/course in which you intend to enroll.

All applications and inquiries should be sent to Dr. Mehdi Aminrazavi at: maminraz@umw.edu

APPLICATION INFORMATION

Full Name: _____ Date: _____
Last First M.I.

Phone: _____ Email _____

Anticipated
Graduation Year and
Major(s): _____

GPA: _____

ESSAY

In 1-2 pages, describe the program you intend to attend and the benefits of this course or program to you and UMW, in the context of interreligious studies. Explain your qualifications for the Khatib Award and ways in which you will benefit from it.