HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

Religion and Public Life

ANNUAL REPORT 2023–24

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MISSION

Religion and Public Life promotes the public understanding of religion in service of a just world at peace.

APPROACH

We collaborate across disciplines and vocations to examine religion in context in ways that deepen understanding of the causes of injustice while opening imaginative possibilities for addressing the urgent challenges of our time.

TEN-YEAR VISION

By 2032, RPL alumnx, fellows, and professional and lifelong learning participants are integrating religious literacy and just peace principles into a wide range of vocations, professions, and arenas. They are creating webs of influence that shape approach and practice, opening new possibilities for addressing critical issues of social importance.

HDS faculty increasingly emphasize the public dimensions of religion in their teaching, research, and professional and lifelong learning offerings. Across Harvard University, including its professional schools, a robust understanding of religion is recognized as essential. HDS's cross-disciplinary convening power will have expanded in response to this growing expectation.

In the public square, religious literacy and just peace principles are increasingly mainstreamed into justice initiatives, as evidenced in public discourse and approach.

Religion and Public Life | Harvard Divinity School | 14 Divinity Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138

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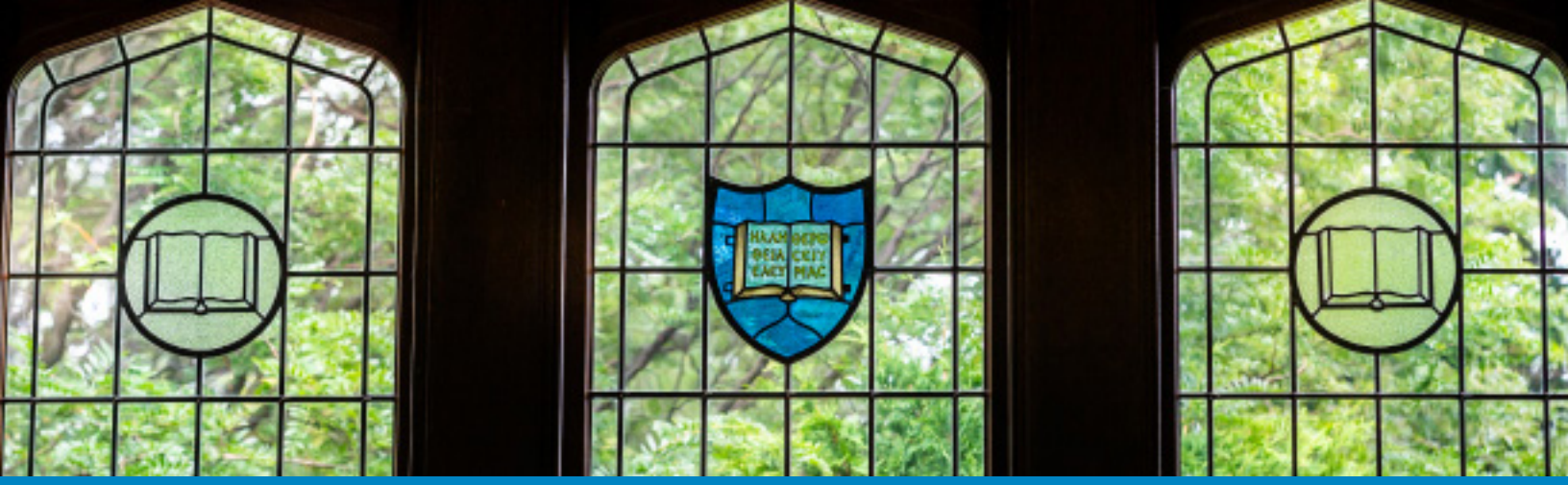


RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE, YEAR IN REVIEW

Dear Friends of Religion and Public Life:

At Religion and Public Life, we know that religion is a powerful force that can both thwart and inspire open-hearted love; that is why our work is focused on understanding that power in its implicit and explicit manifestations. Our methods are grounded in theory and intended for practice in diverse contexts and professional fields, including education, journalism, government, community organizing, humanitarian action, and arts and popular culture. Through both our academic offerings (the Master of Religion and Public Life and the Certificate in Religion and Public Life) and our public programming, we provide skills for translating the relevance and power of religion that can be applied in multiple fields and sectors.

Representing the vision and central commitments articulated in our strategic plan, this report reflects several guiding themes:

1. Seeking Justice: Our goal is to identify how we can contribute to a just world at peace.
2. Inspiring Moral Imagination: Our work is grounded in hope. We strive to explore what is possible beyond the probable.
3. Cultivating Just Peace: Our process is rooted in collaboration, with a long view of transformation and a wide view of accountability.

As we conclude the year, we are humbled and inspired by our students, colleagues, and collaborators who strive to act with open-hearted love in response to the ongoing and multivalent challenges and opportunities before us. We remain deeply grateful for your partnership and look forward to our continued collaboration as we strive together to build a just world at peace in these dangerous and fragmented times.

Diane L. Moore
Associate Dean for Religion and Public Life
July 2024

INTERNAL REPORT SUMMARY

This year in Religion and Public Life (RPL), we grew and developed our programs across disciplines, practices, and applications. We provided new workshops and teaching tools for educators, hosted book events featuring scholars renowned for their ideas about conflict and peace, and created a broad array of opportunities for connection within Harvard and globally. Throughout this year's annual report, we highlight the voices and stories that demonstrate the impact of RPL's approach on students, faculty, and alumnx.

Master of Religion and Public Life

Our third cohort of the Master of Religion and Public Life (MRPL) students hail from a variety of diverse personal and professional backgrounds, including a prominent novelist, a media and entertainment executive, an award-winning poet, a chef, an artist, a lawyer, and several community organizers. Each of these individuals engaged in deep explorations of the power and complexity of religion, developing projects that probed the generative possibilities of applying principles of religious literacy to advance their communities toward a just peace.

Reflecting on the program's progress, Diane L. Moore noted, "MRPL continues to attract an astonishing array of talented professionals from diverse sectors of society, all of whom are driven by a vocational call to make the world a better place. We are enriched by their presence and look forward to following them upon graduation to learn how their time with us will impact their ongoing work."

Religious Literacy in the Professions Initiative

Certificate in Religion and Public Life (CRPL)

We welcomed Hussein Rashid as assistant dean of Religion and Public Life to lead the Certificate in Religion and Public Life (CRPL) program, previously led by Susie Hayward as associate director for Religious Literacy and the Professions Initiative. In a co-taught introductory course, Rashid and Hayward welcomed students to the RPL method of engaging religious literacy through journalism, advocacy, entertainment, community organizing, and more.

As students progressed in their studies, many found internship opportunities to bring their professional goals to fruition. Auds Hope Jenkins, MDiv '24, decided to explore her interest in journalism with the *Minneapolis Star Tribune,* where she authored front-page stories about reparations and indigenous land rights. Ariella Gayotto Hohl, MDiv '24, brought her passion for film to Unity Productions Foundation, and she is now the host for a documentary series, "Islam's Greatest Love Stories," on PBS. Claire Neid, MTS '24, worked with the Aspen Institute's Religion and Society Network, where she was deeply involved in their Powering Pluralism Summit, bringing together key stakeholders to map religious diversity and power across the United States.

This summer, current CRPL students will be exploring a broad array of interests. Mustafa Diwan, MTS '25, will intern with Tanenbaum, supporting their explorations into how government policy and practice can combat religious prejudice and recognize diversity. Becca Leviss, MTS '25, will work with Mormon Women for Ethical Government, helping the group create a formal organizational framework and understanding of advocacy through faith-based peacebuilding. Rachel Florman, MTS '25, will intern with Twanna Hines, founder of Funky Brown Chick, where she will develop original content for online courses on global sexual and reproductive rights.

Religious Literacy and Education Initiative (RLEI)

As RPL supports educators in engaging themes of religious literacy in their classrooms and beyond, we continue to build collaborative and iterative relationships through our networks. This year, we used a variety of modalities in our work with educators: we piloted an educator advisory committee; hosted an in-person summer learning institute; and

offered online workshops targeted to educators throughout the academic year. The RPL education team developed a model for authoring new cases that involved collaboration between a secondary school educator, RPL staff, HDS students, and content experts. Topics developed this year included oil and Christianity in the U.S., legislation outlawing witchcraft accusation in Ghana, and the complex role of religion in South Korean support for North Korean defectors.

Throughout the year, RPL offers free, online live workshops, and asynchronous, self-paced modules designed for teachers and educators in the public and private sectors. For more information about our workshops for educators, please visit our website.

Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative

The Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative (RCPI) continues the important work of advancing knowledge and promoting a just world at peace, even during tumultuous times. For students, faculty, and the public, we provide an analysis of structural injustice, violence, and power within the case study of Israel/Palestine.

This year at RCPI, our events included public film screenings, community conversations, webinars, teach-ins, and a special course from scholars and experts across perspectives. We created a faculty reading group focused on understanding Christian Zionism, attracting scholars from 10 different countries. One highlight of the year was the U.S. film premiere of *Lyd*, a science fiction documentary directed by former RCPI fellow Rami Younis. The screening attracted over 200 attendees, including RCPI students and alumnx who had the opportunity to visit the city featured in the film on past RCPI-organized trips to Israel/Palestine.

By the Numbers

PEOPLE	EVENTS	GLOBAL REACH
Religion and Public Life Fellows: **12**	Public events hosted: **28**	HarvardX course participants, 2023–24: **31,574**
MTS and MDiv Students completing the CRPL requirements: **14**	Attendees at public events: **2,406**	Total HarvardX participants since 2016 launch: **1,083,293**
MRPL students: **11**	Public events co-sponsored: **18**	Unique website visits: **872,897**
CRPL summer internships: **19**	Professional and Lifelong Learning workshops for educators: **3**	Religion in Times of Earth Crisis series participants: **990**

Highlights 2023–24

Religious Nationalism Workshop for Educators conference with Global Studies Outreach at Harvard

JULY 2023

AUGUST 2023

Hussein Rashid, MTS '98, GSAS '10, joined Harvard Divinity School as the assistant dean for Religion and Public Life. Before this, he worked at The New School where he earned a distinguished teaching award in 2023. Read his full bio on our website

***Israelism* film screening and Q&A** with director Erin Axelman and panelists Shaul Magid, Atalia Omer, and Diana Buttu

SEPTEMBER 2023

OCTOBER 2023

Faith in Action: Christian, Jewish, & Muslim Solidarity for Just Peace in Times of Conflict panel dialogue featuring Mae Elise Cannon (Churches for Middle East Peace), Hussein Rashid, Diane Moore, and Atalia Omer

Community Forum: The Work of Religious and Legal Literacies in LGBTQ+ Advocacy with Ben Marcus (GLBTQ Legal Advocates) and Naomi Washington-Leapheart (Political Research Associates)

Reflections from a Navajo Elder: Jonah Yellowman on Reimagining Stewardship in Museum Collections a conversation between Jonah Yellowman (Diné Navajo elder and Bears Ears protector) and Stephanie Mach (Diné Navajo, North American Collections at the Peabody Museum)

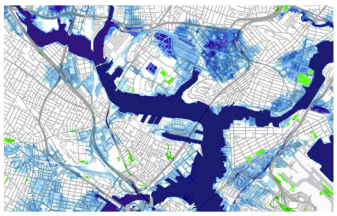
NOVEMBER 2023

A Conversation with Dr. Ghassan Abu-Sittah first-hand accounts from British-Palestinian surgeon working with patients in Gazan hospitals (Doctors Without Borders)

DECEMBER 2023

RCPI Book Series begins with "Decolonizing Religion and the Practice of Peace"

JANUARY 2024



Religion in Times of Earth Crisis webinar series begins with "A Procession of Catastrophes."

FEBRUARY 2024

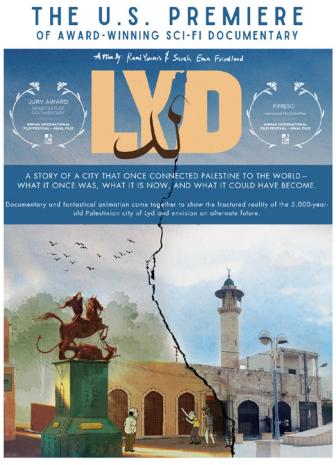
"Relax with RPL" community-building event and **"Game On!"** game nights, in partnership with Office of Ministry Studies and Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging

Antisemitism and Islamophobia in the White Nationalist Agenda discussion featuring Rabbi Jill Jacobs (T'ruah), Eric K. Ward (Southern Poverty Law Center), and Hussein Rashid

MARCH 2024

The second annual **Climate Justice Week** featured a student showcase; a workshop, "Confronting Climate Grief for Climate Professionals Workshop"; and a garden party, "Planting Seeds of Love and Justice"

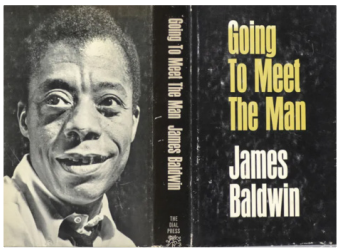
APRIL 2024



U.S. premiere of *Lyd*, a sci-fi documentary featuring directors Rami Younis and Sarah Ema Friedland

RPL hosts its inaugural summit, **Lead with Love: Just Peacebuilding and Moral Imagination**, bringing together students, alumni, fellows, and affiliates for a weekend of connection, learning, and collaboration

MAY 2024



Religious Literacy and American Literature virtual workshop with a focus on James Baldwin's "The Outing," inspired by the work of CRPL student Betül Maden-Yilmaz

RPL Student Photography Competition

Our second annual student photography competition, Harvard graduate students participating in Religion and Public Life programs were invited to submit photographs highlighting key moments from their summer internships or experiences. Focused on the themes of "Religion and Public Life" and "A Just World at Peace," photos were captured across the globe—from Mexico City to Bethlehem to Chicago.

"Eyes of Silwan" (1st Place)

Rachel Nelson, AM in Middle Eastern Studies '24

"Murals of famous figures' eyes painted by 'I Witness Silwan' in collaboration with the community to both 'watch' over the community of Silwan and send a message to the settlers that they too are being 'watched.'"

"Mary Can't Move" (2nd Place)

Destiny Magnett, MTS '24

"At the Apartheid Wall in Bethlehem, the hashtag #MaryCantMove emerges out of the clouds of graffiti, referencing the city's significance as the birthplace of Jesus Christ, and how the occupation impedes its Palestinian residents' freedom to movement."

"Prayer for Oxum on a Hot Afternoon in Rio de Janeiro" (3rd Place)

Eve Woldemikael, MDiv '24

"After placing an offering of flowers and fruits for Oxum in a cave near a waterfall, Letícia, a practitioner of the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé and a dear friend of mine, takes a ritual bath in the waterfall. Oxum is the Orixá of rivers as well as love, pleasure, and beauty."

EVENT HIGHLIGHT

Religion in Times of Earth Crisis Series

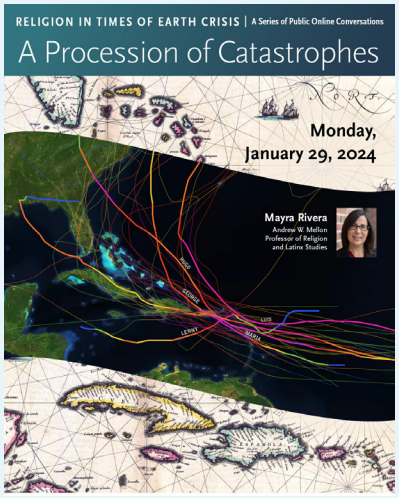
> *"One of the things I'm coming away from this series with is this incredible renewal of belief in the power of individual agency. Our actions matter. They matter tremendously. Everything, from the small gestures of our lives to the large commitments we make because we are parts of communities acknowledged and unacknowledged, and our actions impact those communities of humans and the greater than human world for good and ill." Diane L. Moore, associate dean for Religion and Public Life*

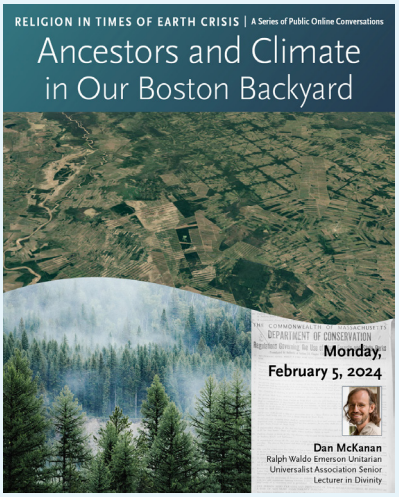
What can an expansive understanding of religion provide in these times of earth crisis? Members of the Harvard Divinity School faculty set out to tackle this pressing question in the second series of public conversations developed by RPL.

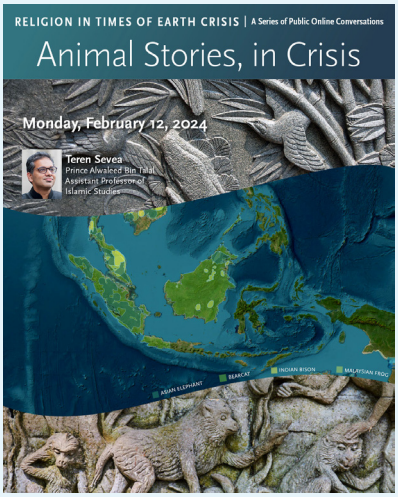
Mayra Rivera, HDS Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Religion and Latinx Studies, in collaboration with Diane L. Moore, associate dean of Religion and Public Life, structured these conversations around Rivera's American Academy of Religion 2022 Presidential Address, "What is the Role of the Study of Religion in Times of Catastrophe?"

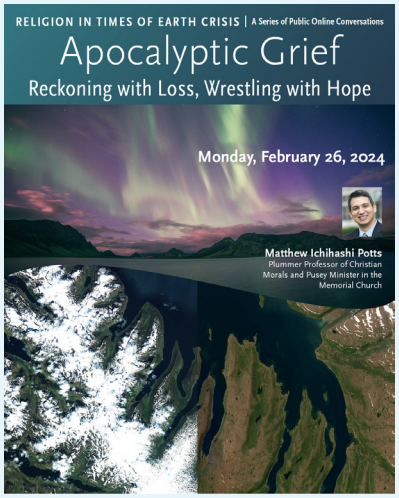
Each featured faculty member spoke from their individual areas of expertise, weaving together many worlds—local, historical, theological, spiritual, and cultural. Throughout the series, presenters asked the audience to turn both inward and toward their communities, asking: what would it mean for each of us to open ourselves to the challenging, paradigm-shifting calls to action offered by these presenters?

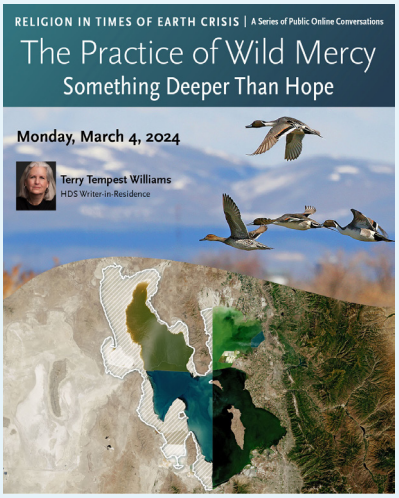
Find a detailed list of session descriptions and quotes on our website.

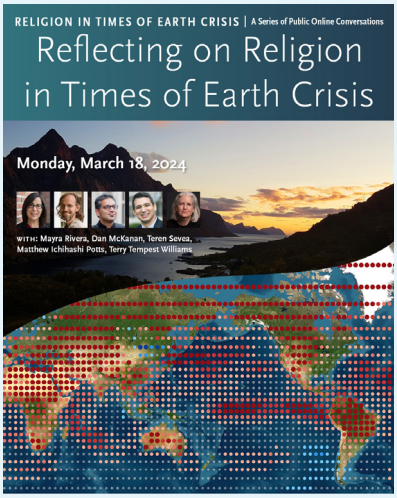












SEEKING JUSTICE

Seeking Justice Beyond Retribution

BY DIANE L. MOORE, ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE

These are challenging times to talk about just peacebuilding when the overwhelming public representation of justice is as retribution. Anything labeled "war," for example, is fueled by multivalent representations of retribution and their counter justifications of "defense" with a zero-sum, winner-take-all formulation. In these scenarios, "winning" is defined as vanquishing the foe to a sufficient degree that killing and other forms of direct violence are no longer required to maintain the conditions of "order" that victors determine. This is often presented as "peace."

Though common and accepted, these forms of justice and peace are delusive. Gandhi was right. "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind."

So, we ask ourselves: what other forms of justice and peace are possible? Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" invites us to consider alternative possibilities.

The story begins with a vivid description of a community festival in a picturesque town called Omelas. There, residents are depicted as happy and content, fulfilled by a balance of love, meaningful work, and multiple opportunities for play and creative pursuits. The narrator anticipates the reader's skepticism regarding the credibility of this story with the following lines: "Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing."

The "one more thing" is an equally vivid description of a child locked in a small, windowless room with dirt floors. Referred to as "it," the child is equipped only with a bucket and two foul-smelling mops that the child fears. No one visits or speaks to the child. Their only interaction with others is when they are periodically fed small portions of food and water to stay alive. Sometimes during these feedings, others will come to stare and sometimes mock the child, but none stay. The child wasn't always locked in the room and remembers their mother's love and happy times before.

The narrator goes on:

> They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

Le Guin ends the story describing how every now and then, after seeing the child and contemplating the conditions of their existence in Omelas, a person decides to leave the city of happiness for a place "even more unimaginable." They always leave alone, and their

destination is unknown to others. Le Guin ends the story with the following: "But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas."

There are many ways to interpret this story. If taken literally, for example, it is quite despairing.

But I find Le Guin's story profound as a metaphor for moral imagination. I interpret the ones who walk away as those who refuse to accept as inevitable the structured existence of Omelas, where the well-being of some is dependent on the abject misery of others. For me, Omelas is a metaphor for binary, zero-sum interpretations of existence where "othering" is presumed as inevitable. To walk away is to step into the "unknown," where we create a world where collective flourishing is possible.

This story invites engagement. People read the story as one of despair, or an abdication of responsibility. Yet, the possibility of creation is in recreation.

Another interpretation takes us further. N.K. Jemisin wrote "The Ones Who Stay and Fight." In this story, she writes of a city called Um-Helat where people have a shared responsibility for keeping the society functioning. That means there is a shared responsibility for facing suffering and alleviating it. There is a shared responsibility for restorative justice. There is a shared responsibility for healing. She ends the story with this reflection:

> Now you might finally be able to envision a world where people have learned to love, as they learned in our world to hate. Perhaps you will speak of Um-Helat to others, and spread the notion farther still, like joyous birds migrating on trade winds. It's possible. Everyone—even the poor, even the lazy, even the undesirable—can matter. Do you see how just the idea of this provokes utter rage in some? That is the infection defending itself … because if enough of us believe a thing is possible, then it becomes so.

Le Guin gives us critique and questions our role in the world. She makes us question how we are responsible for suffering, and we must each provide our own answers. Jemisin offers a new way of seeing the world. She invites us to think about our role in creating a more just world. We have agency. We can imagine our own world anew. We can work to create a new reality. My dear friend and HDS Writer-in-Residence Terry Tempest Williams invites these same kinds of opportunities. She insists that we refuse to settle for the given, the predictable, and the probable. "There are so many ways to change the sentences we have been given."

Justice fueled and motivated by love is our "antidote to extinction," in the words of MRPL graduate Sara Jin Li. An expansive, open-hearted, radical love that defies the death-dealing power of "othering" requires a recognition of our profound interdependence with one another and all of creation, where the ecology of life is assumed and celebrated.

Religious and spiritual traditions function to both inspire and thwart this radical vision of love. Understanding the power of religion for good and ill can help us identify why good intention alone is insufficient to transform the zero-sum binaries that lock us into paradigms of fear and retribution. We at RPL believe in the existence, promise, and power of radical love as the foundation for engaging in the process of just peacebuilding. We are honored to collaborate with others as we strive to "walk away" from paradigms based on "othering" to create an alternative present and future fueled by radical love. ◆

Critical Caretaking in the Context of Peacebuilding

Q&A with Atalia Omer

BY SCARLETT ROSE FORD, MTS '25

Atalia Omer, MTS '02, RPL Senior Fellow in Conflict and Peace, T. J. Dermot Dunphy Visiting Professor of Religion, Violence, and Peacebuilding, and Professor of Religion, Conflict, and Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, has long grappled with issues of political and religious identity. Growing up in Palestine/Israel, Omer was told she was part of the "Jewish state," and she began to wonder: "What does that mean?" This question fueled her academic journey through the MTS program at Harvard Divinity School (and eventually a PhD from the Committee on the Study of Religion at Harvard), ultimately leading to her position as a senior fellow and visiting professor in RPL's Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative. In these roles, Omer works to transform herself and others through RPL's methodology and the interdisciplinary work she termed "critical caretaking."

Scarlett Rose Ford: **What has it been like to go from being an HDS student to both an RPL senior fellow in conflict and peace and visiting professor of Religion, Violence, and Peacebuilding?**

Atalia Omer: Earning my MTS at Harvard Divinity School and then my PhD in the Study of Religion, Ethics, and Politics was an incredible time of learning for me. The most valuable skill that I learned at HDS is how to read, interrogate, and think critically about texts and issues, whatever shape and form they come in. I've had the opportunity here to examine comparative questions of religion, violence, and issues around peacebuilding, such as human rights. This became very foundational in my long journey to de-exceptionalize the case study that has been the main driver of my scholarship: Palestine/Israel.

I came to be a senior fellow and visiting professor at HDS after years of teaching at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. At Notre Dame, I learned so much from my colleagues and students that I feel like I gained another PhD in Peace Studies. These human rights defenders have challenged me, especially regarding the tensions between theory and practice. Ideas and theory are not the binary of practice; they are a form of transformative practice that is central to my research, my writing, and my teaching. Disrupting the theory/practice binary is what eventually led me back to HDS's Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative's dedicated focus on Palestine/Israel.

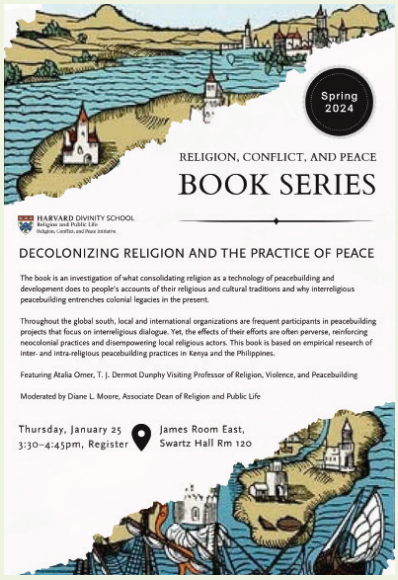
SRF: **For someone unfamiliar with the topic, how would you explain "just peacebuilding"?**

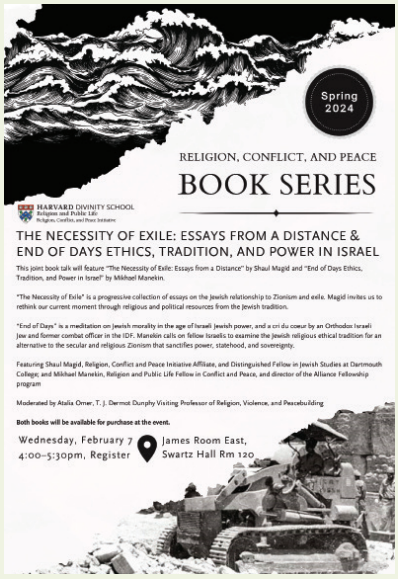
AO: Peace studies include the study of violence, the causes of violence, and violence in all its forms—epistemic, structural, cultural, symbolic, and direct or acute forms of violence. Central to peace studies is understanding the interrelation between those forms of violence, peacebuilding practice, and research that is oriented to alleviate human suffering and transform the structures of violence. In the academy, we especially need to be concerned with epistemic violence.

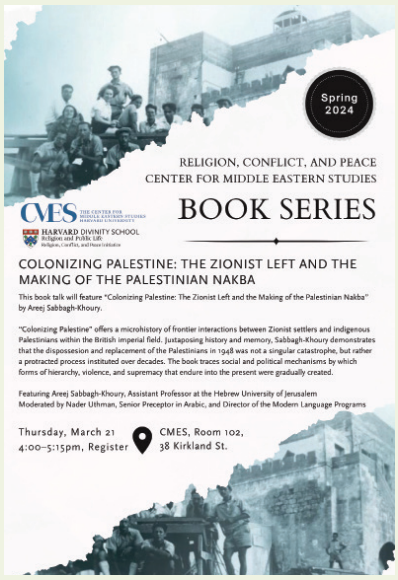
I tell my undergraduate students, "It's silly to think that complex problems can only be responded to using one tool." Transformative processes are interdisciplinary, multi-sectoral, and involve human rights spaces, international institutions, practitioners on the ground, humanitarian actors, human rights defenders, activists, social movements, the study of social movements, transitional justice mechanisms, and negotiators under fire.

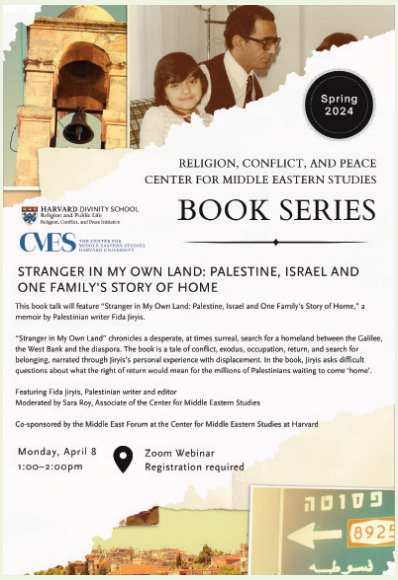
The work is multi-directional, oriented by questions of how to transform the realities of violence. The concept of transformation is essential because it recognizes that conflict in and of itself is not bad. Conflict can be very generative and constructive. The question is how to transform harmful realities without reproducing injustice and harm. Restorative justice is a part of the study of peacebuilding.

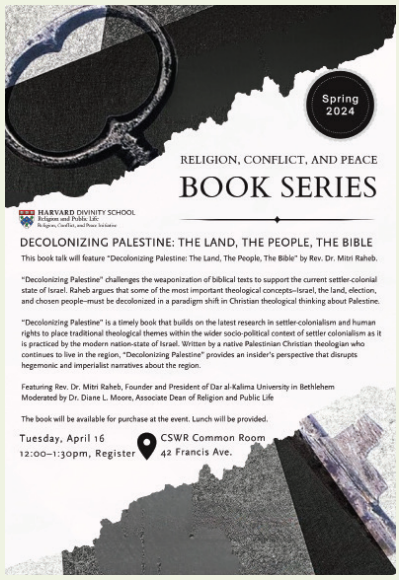
Read the full Q&A on our website.











EVENT HIGHLIGHT

Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative Book Series

> *"I turned around, and I asked my father, 'What does this mean? Can we go home?' It's interesting that I referred to it at the time as home. Can we go home? Though I'd never been to this place. That's how deeply we felt Palestinian, how deeply we felt that we belonged to a place that we had been forcibly removed from. My father, I remember, shook his head, and then there was a slow smile. Then he said, 'Yes. Probably yes.'" Fida Jiryis, author of* Stranger in My Own Land: Palestine, Israel and One Family's Story of Home.

The 2024 book series, which ran from January-April, featured local and international scholars discussing issues of peace, justice, home, exile and diaspora across Israel/Palestine, Kenya, and the Philippines. The series drew upon core Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative (RCPI) frameworks: investigating the role of religion in geopolitical conflict; focusing on the importance of lived history; and valuing diverse narratives in the search for homeland. Taking place both online and in-person, the series attracted over 225 attendees, and three of the six events featured RCPI fellows and affiliates. Each event closed with the opportunity for participants to engage in a thought-provoking Q&A with the featured authors, and nearly each discussion brought forward questions of identity, home, and cross-disciplinary approaches to the subject.

Find a detailed list of session descriptions and quotes on our website.

INSPIRING MORAL IMAGINATION

Imagining a World Beyond Violence

BY NATALIE CHERIE CAMPBELL, MTS '18 AND SHIR LOVETT-GRAFF, MTS '24

"Moral imagination is grounded in the hope of imagining and thinking of a world beyond violence," says Hilary Rantisi, associate director for the Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative (RCPI). "Mahmoud Darwish, a Palestinian poet, writes that 'Poetry is perhaps what teaches us to nurture the charming illusion: how to be reborn out of ourselves over and over again, and use words to construct a better world, a fictitious world, that enables us to sign a pact for a permanent and comprehensive peace…with life.' His words speak to moral imagination. Moral imagination is what inspires us. It is fueled by building relationships and finding and honoring people's stories."

In his book *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, John Paul Lederach writes that transcending violence is advanced by moral imagination. But what is moral imagination? According to Lederach, the capacity to imagine and generate constructive processes is rooted in the day-to-day challenges of violence. Yet, transcending those destructive patterns necessitates making use of the art and soul of social change.

Lederach outlines four capacities we must develop to cultivate our own moral imagination: imagining ourselves in a web of relationships, embracing complexity without getting caught up in binaries, committing ourselves to creative acts, and accepting the risks that come with attempting to transcend violence.

Hilary Rantisi, in conversation with Natalie Cherie Campbell, MTS '18, reflects on how moral imagination, hope, and creativity intersect with the mission and work of RCPI.

On Creative Expression

From our genesis, cultural activism and moral imagination have been central to the work we do at RCPI. We uplift, give space and voice, and celebrate work and art of those on the margins. We imagine a world that transcends violence and actualizes it through creativity. Creativity is important because we see belonging expressed poignantly and expansively through the arts.

Systems of oppression leave no avenue for the voices of people who think differently from prevailing powers and prejudices. Creative expression is a way of breaking down and breaking away from these structures. It is different than talking about peace negotiations, which may not address power imbalances that perpetuate a particular structure for a community or people. Art counters and disrupts, and that is usually not included in the traditional policy toolkit.

Many RCPI fellows have been political activists at one level or another but felt that they were able to reach more people through artistic expression. Being creative allowed them to be themselves and respond to the structures that put people in a box to say they don't belong.

We can't be separated from what makes us who we are. We try to celebrate all the complexities of our identities.

We seek to be fully human even if structures tell us that we are less. We strive for that fullness of identity and expression. That should be celebrated and not confined.

On Moral Imagination

The work of imagining a better world can be vulnerable. For some, it is riskier than others. When we travel to Israel/Palestine, our students witness and hear stories of collective solidarity and creative resistance. They see people thriving in difficult circumstances because they're serving their community and have a vision. One such example is when we visit an ancient agricultural village in the West Bank, which came together as a community and lobbied for status as a World Heritage Site to save their land from confiscation by settlers. The day we visit this village is a highlight for the students every trip.

Among the inspiring people we meet is Norma Musih, a postdoctoral fellow at Hebrew University. Norma's work is informed by political theorist Hannah Arendt, who writes about imagination as relationships that emerge between people who can see each other and envision each other's perspectives. The force of imagination, Arendt writes, "makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public, open to all sides . . . . To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one's imagination to go visiting." Norma introduces her work on imagination, as "deliberative imagination," and she stresses that it is not just in fantasy, but is something that emerges through action. She argues that we need imagination to understand the past, present, and future of Israel/Palestine through a lens freed from the confines of exclusive structures.

We need moral imagination to disrupt exclusive structures and construct liberatory ones. Here at Religion and Public Life, we envision this as peacebuilding, disrupting injustice without replicating it. This seems most relevant these days when I hear a certain discourse about Gaza. One of the things that disturbs me in conversations around Gaza is the limited imagination regarding the future of Gaza. I wonder, "Why can't we think of these people as free people? Why shouldn't that be our goal rather than restore them to a restricted, controlled existence?" Such questions are not part of the discussion, not part of the imagination—an imagination that puts freedom front and center.

On Hope and Love

Core to RPL's approach is seeing structural violence, imagining another way, and feeling empowered to act. Once you see injustice, you can't unsee it. How our students translate their understanding into every aspect of their lives is powerful. The world as it is is not inevitable. If you dive into why injustice is happening, how it's happening, then you come to realize it is composed of a series of choices, and we can choose differently.

People often come up to me and ask, "Do you have hope?" And I say, "You can't not have hope. If you don't have hope, then you give up. We must have hope; we must give hope to other people." For a lot of people who are struggling, hope is a vital necessity for their existence.

There is an old quote from a Catholic priest in Gaza. He would tell visitors to Gaza, "In the scriptures, we learn of the importance of faith, hope, and love. We are told in the Bible that the greatest of these is love. In Gaza, the greatest of these is hope."

Hope is what you hold on to so you can keep going. It is at the core of survival. Hope and love are imagining a better, different future so we can sign a pact for a permanent and comprehensive peace with life. ◆

STUDENT PROFILE

Elizabeth Bliss-Burger, MTS ’25

BY SHIR LOVETT-GRAFF, MTS ’24

After spending several years working as a teacher and public health advocate, Elizabeth Bliss-Burger, MTS ’25 and CRPL candidate, began looking for new avenues that engage education and justice. She describes her work as bringing “the power that is reaching out and finding some connection to something greater than ourselves.” Through her work as an educator in carceral spaces, Bliss-Burger helps to foster that connection despite the challenges presented by working within the prison system.

Bliss-Burger grew up in the small mountain town of Cañon City, CO. She recalls being surrounded by nearly “11 correctional facilities.” She says, “It was just second nature that you would drive by and not think anything of it. A lot of my friends’ family members were corrections officers. They were librarians, nurses, teachers, and [incarcerated people] were just members of a visible but invisible population we never thought about.”

After several years working in education and community health, Bliss-Burger found herself back in her hometown once the pandemic hit. “We were all floundering, trying to find forms of human connection and meaning,” she recalls. She began looking for new connections through her work as an educator, and soon joined Abolition Apostles and From Prison Cells to PhD, two prison justice organizations focused on providing professional and spiritual resources to incarcerated people nationwide.

“Around that same time,” Bliss-Burger says, “I was going through the experience of losing my mom who was, at her core, a teacher. Part of her teaching philosophy and her parenting philosophy was this concept of ‘never stop writing; your story is never going to be done until you say it is, and no one else has the power to tell your story except you.’ And so, I wove this interconnection with my mom—which feels very divine and spiritual—into my work in decarceration. I started to consider what it would be like to do work at the intersection of spirituality, education, and decarceration full-time.” Bliss-Burger decided to explore adult education as a counselor at Rikers Island in New York, one of the world’s largest prisons.

Between her work coordinating penpal connections at Prison Cells to PhD and serving as a counselor at Rikers, Bliss-Burger realized that the work she was doing was not only educational. She says, “The majority of the curriculum I taught was life skills like financial literacy, relapse prevention, [and] healthy relationships. Yet almost every conversation converged with all types of spirituality. People would bring poems to group that grounded them. People would reference the Qu’ran, or a biblical passage.” She continues, “This is what sparked my curiosity in having a religious literate lens when working with incarcerated people, and what it might look like to become a professor in prisons that could bring in the spiritual aspect of learning, and people’s conduits to the divine.”

In the summer of 2023, Bliss-Burger began exploring higher education as a next step in her professional and spiritual journey. She came to HDS to deepen her understanding of the intersection between spirituality, justice, and education. She describes taking a “holistic approach” to designing curriculum, taking the opportunity to pursue cross-disciplinary study by enrolling in classes at Harvard Divinity School, MIT, Harvard Law School, and Harvard Business School.

“It was the conversations in my first semester class, ‘Religious Literacy and the Professions,’ that really started to ignite what it would look like to design curriculum focused on religious literacy, expanding the notions of religious education and spiritual devotion,” she says.

Bliss-Burger felt inspired by the teachings of Professor Reverend Naomi Washington-Leapheart, RPL Government Fellow about “infusing the spiritual into the worldly.” She says, “I want to infuse my own spirituality and divinity into my work, and have other people access theirs in a place that often is void of connection and void of recognizing possibility.” ◆

STUDENT PROFILE

Luca Del Deo, MTS ’24

BY SCARLETT ROSE FORD, MTS ’25

At age 18, Luca Del Deo, MTS & CRPL ’24, struggling with mental health challenges, almost dropped out of high school. Having graduated with his master’s degree from HDS, he credits much of the healing that led to this shift in his life to one practice: meditation.

Through meditation, Del Deo found redemption. “I began to think of the mind as part of the body,” he says. This was so profound to Del Deo that he has devoted his academic career to exploring how to make meditation more accessible for others, especially those facing mental health issues and economic inequality. He explains, “For the past seven years, I’ve been on a journey to understand meditation better and to make it more widely accessible, to make the benefits of meditative practices as psychological healthcare more available.”

This accessibility, what Del Deo refers to as cognitive equity, may be a lifeline to those who need mental care but do not have the resources to afford it. “Meditation is poorly understood as a technology of mental health improvement, and it is quite inaccessible in the United States,” Del Deo says. “I found that the only way I could meditate around Boston was within explicitly religious contexts which I did not feel connected to.”

Del Deo believes that there is a false binary in the meditative realm where the practice either needs to be fully steeped in a religious tradition or fully stripped of its religious ties. Through the CRPL program, Del Deo has been able to embrace a both/and stance where meditation can be pluralistic and non-sectarian. This intersection of the religious and the nonreligious is where he sees the largest gap in research. This is the gap he hopes to fill. “RPL offers me a way to expand my understanding of how meditation can be directly practiced in the world where change matters.”

In utilizing the RPL methodology to address this issue, Del Deo approached the practical application of cognitive equity through the CRPL capstone project, which he is now turning into a business endeavor—the Meditation Artifacts Initiative. As the founder of this initiative, Del Deo works alongside peers and students from Harvard Divinity School and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health to create a coaching model for meditation. “Our goal is to make meditation a more effective tool for mental health and other purposes that unite people beyond the ideological and religious borders,” he shares. “At the same time, we are committed to creating equitable cultural practices as part of our mission to create a better future for meditation and its use by people of all religious backgrounds, for all altruistic purposes.”

Del Deo credits the CRPL program, especially his CRPL internship, for providing him with the leadership tools to make this business startup, his dream, into a reality. As a CRPL intern at the Adriano Olivetti Leadership Institute in Italy, Del Deo grew in meeting people where they are at as a leader rather than seeing himself as the expert. “Everyone has skills,” he explains. “Leadership through moral imagination is about collaboration to prevent perpetuating cultural violence.” This has been essential not just in Del Deo’s academic endeavors, but also in his professional and personal life. With this morally imaginative toolkit, he intends to cultivate the skills to be not just a leader, but a changemaker.

“I’m grateful to RPL for making me slow down and challenge my assumptions about what meditation is and how I should go about researching it,” Del Deo concludes. “Not all my ideas have changed, but the way I see them in the world has changed; I want to see these ideas brought into the world together with others rather than see myself pushing them forward on my own. It is in the co-doing, co-learning, and co-teaching that we are truly able to build the future together as a community.” ◆

Faith, Love, and Justice

Q&A with the Very Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas

BY DEBORAH JIAN LEE

This May, Harvard Divinity School hosted the inaugural Religion and Public Life summit, "Lead with Love: Just Peacebuilding and Moral Imagination," with a keynote address by the Very Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas. Douglas is the interim president of Episcopal Divinity School and the author of many books, including *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*; *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*; and *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter*.

Douglas spoke with Deborah Jian Lee, RPL's journalism fellow and the senior editor at the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, the only nonprofit dedicated to supporting journalism about economic inequality in America.

Deborah Jian Lee: The theme of the summit is "Lead with Love: Just Peacebuilding and Moral Imagination." We're entering the summit against the backdrop of student encampments taking place on campuses, including this one. Can you tell me a little bit about how you're feeling and how you're showing up in this moment?

Kelly Brown Douglas: First, I can't believe it. Yet I can. I'm old enough to remember Kent State. The militarization that is happening on our campuses is undeniable, and it reveals the militarization of our society. The other thing is, students aren't perfect protesters, if you will. The purpose of our universities and colleges is supposed to be to help educate our students, to help them become even more nuanced and critical thinkers. What is appalling to me—and appalling is an understatement—is that instead of helping students elevate the conversation to deepen their thinking . . . we're penalizing them. This does not mean that we should ever tolerate antisemitism and Islamophobia, as well as any other violence—we should not. Our campuses must be places that respect the humanity of all students and where no student should have to tolerate any form of bigotry. And, our campuses must also be a place where students can learn and grow, make mistakes and become better human beings. Colleges and universities have to be places that help us to change an unjust status quo.

It's no different from the Black Lives Matter movement when saying, "Black lives matter," was met with people saying, "Oh, that means you hate white people." That's not what that means. We have to affirm the life that doesn't matter to society so that we can affirm that all lives matter.

The other thing is the politicization of these protests and the way in which the support of one people is seen as being against another. To support the humanity of, in this instance, Palestinian people is not the same as being antisemitic. The point is to affirm the humanity of all peoples. Moreover, to be against the actions of a government is not to be against the people of that government. I would hate to be held accountable for the things that Biden or Trump do, but I can critique them, and they need to be critiqued. And Netanyahu, and what's going on, needs to be critiqued. That should not be equated with being against a people.

And as much as our democracy is failing, our humanity is at stake. I can't believe we're here though I know why we're here. I'm overwhelmed by it. I'm at a loss of how to at least stem the tide. And the only thing that I know to do is to continue to speak loudly the truth as I know it—and it may not be the whole truth—to follow a moral compass that says that every single human being is cherished and is to be respected. Every single human life is to be honored and cherished. And that means Palestinians and Israelis alike. And to speak out against what I know is wrong—that which is going on over there in Gaza. It is as wrong as what happened on October 7.

DJL: In the opening of your book "Resurrection Hope" you write about struggling to understand your faith in relation to your blackness and the sense that "the God to which black people had pledged allegiance had not really pledged allegiance back." This question intensified during the pandemic as the visibility of violence against black people increased. I imagine that throughout your life, this question has come up at different pivotal moments. Can you walk me through this, starting with your earliest memory of this? And what role has moral imagination played?

KBD: During the 60s, I remember seeing on the TV the dogs attacking children. I was seven years old. I remember my parents whispering about the bombing of the Birmingham church. I grew up in Dayton, Ohio, a very segregated city. You knew your place as a Black person in Dayton.

I can remember this like it was yesterday. We're standing in our living room. And I said, "Daddy, why do white people hate us? What did we do?" I don't remember what my dad said. What I do remember is . . . going to bed, trying to figure out what we did, because if I could figure out what we did, then I thought, I can make it right. And they will stop treating us so badly.

I don't know how much time passed. My dad and I were going out somewhere. I stopped on our front porch, and I said, "Dad, Dad I figured it out," as if we were having this long running conversation. And Dad said, "What?" And I said, "What we did to make white people treat us so badly." My Dad asked "What?" And I said, "We didn't do anything. They treat us that way just because they can. It could be anybody, but it just happens to be us."

It was freeing because I figured out that there's nothing wrong with us. This was an important stage in my journey of really being proud of my Blackness. In those days you had three channels on the TV, and you had to get up and turn them on. I was home from school; I must have been sick or something. I was flipping the three channels and there was this Black man. It was James Baldwin. I'm sure it was Phil Donahue who asked Baldwin why Black people were calling themselves Black. Now, I hadn't quite decided yet that I was going to call myself Black. And I don't remember what Baldwin said, but I remember the eloquence of the way he said it and the power. And I thought, This Black man is not only gorgeous, but proud. Seeing and hearing him made me proud. And from that day on, I started calling myself Black.

DJL: There is this relentless influx of information and of tragedy and of people's rights being taken away and of bodies piling up. It puts a huge strain on our humanity to witness this kind of inhumanity on such a mass scale. And it can lead to despair. I would love to hear more about your thoughts for those of us who are experiencing this weight.

KBD: The way out of despair is working for justice. And I really mean that. There's always this witness of God somewhere, moving us toward justice. And that's the way it was for me. At the end of "Resurrection Hope" this germaphobe that I am went down to Black Lives Matter Plaza in DC. That pulled me out of my deep despair—to see that there are people that recognize that this isn't the way it's supposed to be, fighting for a better way. Our task is not to wait for the justice of God, but to be accountable to that future that we know—a more just future—which means that we have to not wait for justice, but to do it.

When I'm in deep despair . . . I think of my great grandmother, whom I knew. We call her Mama Mary. When she died, she was 100 or so; I was maybe six. She was born into slavery. And obviously, she didn't die in slavery. When I think of her, I think of those folks who were born in slavery, who died in slavery, who never ever breathed a free breath and never ever dreamt that they would breathe a free breath. Yet these people fought for freedom anyhow. They fought for freedom that they knew they would never see, but that they believed would become a reality because they believed in the promise that was the freedom of God. They fought for the children like me that they could not see.

Read the full Q&A with Kelly Brown Douglas on our website.

CULTIVATING JUST PEACE

Tending to the Work of Just Peace

BY HUSSEIN RASHID, ASSISTANT DEAN FOR RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE

"There are Black people in the future."

The first time I read this quote by artist Alisha B. Wormsley, my reaction was "of course." My next thought was what I think Wormsley wanted: "But why don't we see them?" I am a fan of speculative fiction, which includes science fiction and other futurist genres. There is a hope for "what could be" in those works: the potential for moral imaginations to become moral realities. Yet, Wormsley's art was a reminder that what we consider a just future could not be just if it perpetuated our deep systems of inequity to their absurdist conclusions.

The Star Wars franchise has Black characters that are criminals, caricatures, and bit players. When a Black character seems poised for something profound, they are sidelined in the story. Star Trek is often lauded for representations of racial equity in the original run in the 1960s. It has also been criticized for shifting racial stereotypes onto alien species. These shows can never quite break away from the biases that we have today, even as they imagine their futures.

Yet, a just peace demands that we think beyond where we are now to where we could be and then create that society where our successes are intertwined.

As we work toward this state, we unveil those overlapping systems that have kept marginalized communities marginalized. To attack one system is to invite backlash from them all. These are systems of power that want to preserve themselves, so they are structured in ways that create the illusion of proximity to power, inspiring marginalized communities to battle each other to preserve the systems. I am reminded of a remark by Italian anti-fascist Antonio Gramsci: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." I do not know where we are in the transition from the old to the new, only that we need a "new" that does not need to be remade as quickly as we make it.

Cultivating a just peace means learning core principles from bad acts, not just saying the bad acts should not be repeated. The case of Star Trek is instructive. It recognized that racism is bad but not the principle that discrimination is bad. In the decades since it first aired, new iterations of the show have grappled with the principle of discrimination rather than just the acts of racism. As a society, we look at large-scale loss of human life, caused by other humans, and continuously say these events are bad and we should not do them. I wonder what our society would look like if we took the principle that all humans deserve a life of dignity seriously. I would hope that we would not wait for the next mass loss of human life to be finished to say it was bad, and instead ask what enables us to take life.

Cultivation is a process that takes time. The systems that affect us and the cultural exclusion we take as

normal are not the way things have to be. They are simply the way things are. They grew over time so that they obscure our vision. We must clear our sight, cut through what hinders us, and lay out a new way of being. That work is generational and is one that must constantly be tended to protect from encroachment of what was there before, from aberrations that organically emerge. Identifying what is wrong now is only one step in the work that needs to be done. The harder work takes time and must be collaborative. We must understand that what works in one context will not work in another; environments are different.

Particularities are important. The examples illuminate the principle. Antisemitism is different from sexism is different from racism is different from ableism is different from classism is different from . . . . And in those differences, we see the commonality of dehumanization, oppression, and marginalization. Because I recognize my personal stake in combatting Islamophobia and racism, I know that antisemitism and sexism must also be opposed. They are specific manifestations of broader tendencies. The languages of hate, of separation, and of "othering" are the languages that lead to laws that make discriminatory fantasies a reality and make it so much easier to hurt each other. A just peace is recognizing that my success is tied to yours and structuring society so that we are reminded of our connection in real and tangible ways. Perhaps then, when we read the quote, "There are Black people in the future," it will not be an indictment, but a matter of fact. ◆

> *"I wonder what our society would look like if we took the principle that all humans deserve a life of dignity seriously."*

ALUMNI Q&A

Rev. Kevin Kitrell Ross, MRPL '23

BY SCARLETT ROSE FORD, MTS '25

From the Southside of Chicago, the Rev. Kevin Kitrell Ross, affectionately known as "Rev. Kev," came to Cambridge to receive his Master of Religion and Public Life degree in 2022. He is the Senior Minister of Unity of Sacramento and an interfaith social justice leader. Rev. Kev describes himself:

"I am the passion of Black Lives Matter and the poise of Gandhi's Namaste. I am my grandmama's hot water cornbread and my Jewish mother's unleavened bread. I'm Morehouse and Harvard book smart and Chicago Southside street-smart. I'm a globe-trotting, universal human, and one of the boys from the hood. I am a Black optimist who has seen the worst of humanity, but somehow still believes the best is yet to be. I'm Rev. Kev."

Rev. Kev shares more about himself and how his experience in the Master of Religion and Public Life graduate program has impacted his work in the service of a just world at peace.

Scarlett Rose Ford: What led you to pursue the MRPL, and what was that experience like?

Kevin Kitrell Ross: When I was a part of the American Leadership Forum, a national network dedicated to building stronger communities by strengthening leaders, a dear friend of mine encouraged me to go to Harvard, saying, "You could quadruple not only your local but national and global impact. You've got to do it; not only do you need Harvard, but Harvard needs you."

This came after having served as the Senior Minister and CEO of Unity of Sacramento Church for 12 years; during that time, the world had changed so much that I felt ill-equipped both to fully address the challenges of the day and to lead others in the face of those challenges. We were on the tail end of the George Floyd reckoning and amid the pandemic. Because I lead a congregation that is as diverse as the United Nations, I felt like I was running out of tools to hold the tension that was brewing.

I took my friend's encouragement as a sign. The MRPL program is a beautiful, diverse cohort of people from different professional backgrounds. Iron sharpens iron, so a lot of good came out of this cohort. I was able to see how others perceive, interpret, and cultivate just peace. Some of these points of view were ones I would not have considered at all. The ways we debated and engaged as a cohort—and continue to engage—enliven the process of working with our different approaches and interpretations of the frameworks.

SRF: What does work in service of a just world at peace mean to you?

KKR: It is about merging worlds that would never coexist. The Cornel West phrase comes to mind, "Justice is what love looks like in public." In pursuing a just world at peace, a bridge must be built between our often-divergent worlds. For me, that comes with intentionality around forming relationships outside of my known existence. In these shared spaces we are coming to understand what justice looks like to the other.

I'm now pursuing just peace at Harvard through the creation of a campus ministry, called Just Us, which supports this generation of game changers and peacemakers. It is designed to create safe spaces where leaders who are interested in building peace and pursuing justice can be oriented toward game-changing, whether that be through their disruptions as activists or through the innovative ideas they share through their writing and publishing. I'm also leading a public lecture series at Harvard called Public Courage in the Academy. This comes directly out of my MRPL project, which created a curriculum to train and teach religious actors to move beyond political neutrality by finding meaningful pursuits of just peace.

The Rev. Kevin Kitrell Ross, MRPL '23 is the founder of Just Us: A Unity Justice Campus Ministry for Peacemakers and Gamechangers at Harvard, and the creator and cosponsor of Public Courage and the Academy, a public lecture series at Harvard Divinity School.

Read the full Q&A on our website.

ALUMNI Q&A

Jenn Louie, MRPL ’23

BY SHIR LOVETT-GRAFF, MTS ’24

When Jenn Louie, MRPL ’23, applied to Harvard Divinity School, she was facing a “crisis of conscience.” She had spent her professional career in the technology sector, overseeing large teams at Facebook that were responsible for content moderation and risk mitigation. She felt that she was in the middle of an epidemic of immorality. “What happens to us on the social webs is a reflection of our human suffering,” she concluded. Watching people spread violent content and misinformation led her to wonder about where and how morality is formed. Louie decided to investigate these questions at Harvard Divinity School through the MRPL program.

Shir Lovett-Graff: How did you first connect with the MRPL program, and how did it shape your time at HDS?

Jenn Louie: I heard about MRPL on its very first inaugural day through orientation. It felt like the most applicable space for the types of questions I held and the problems I was trying to solve in my profession. I am so grateful for the program, because I loved being in a cohort. We were such a diverse group of people. We came with many different professional experiences and because we knew we would have such a short time together, our discussions were very much grounded in the immediacy of the moment and what we believed was coming next. It was both challenging and enriching to see how we could each apply the theories that we were learning to our professional lives.

SLG: How do you see religious literacy emerging through the work you are doing now?

JL: Everything we see in technology reflects human relationships. I don’t know if I always saw it that way, but I certainly see it that way now. We struggle with our moral literacy. For me, religious literacy is integrated into the ways I talk about ethics and morality, the implications of those things, and the considerations we need to have as we approach building new technologies. We need to broaden the scope of what religious literacy means. There’s very little in our moral histories that has not emerged—language-wise and principle-wise—from a religious context. It’s valuable to see how technology and tech culture is religious, and replicates many of the same kinds of symbols. None of this is neutral. Religious literacy helps ground me in knowing that the problems we face [in the tech world] are deeply human and have pre-existed all of us. We need to contextualize these problems in the larger framework of how humanity and its relationship to values has evolved over time.

SLG: Thinking about the future of AI and big tech, where do you see opportunities for just peace and how do you see, if any, connections between the RPL frameworks and what that just peace could look like?

JL: Opportunities for just peace exist in every single problem that we see with AI. The fundamental problem is inequity, and then injustice happens because we create these hierarchies that believe there are some people whose privileges are worthy of preserving over the life and dignity of other people. Artificial Intelligence—especially in the ways it will be used for business—will exacerbate the divisions and polarizations and hierarchies that we already see. It will accelerate some people’s careers and make them phenomenally wealthy. It will increase power in some countries. We already see these divisions and gaps widening.

It’s super important to know that there’s an opportunity here. As scary as that is, every problem is an opportunity for us to consider how just peace could inform the ways that we would alter or change that technology or govern it differently. We are not truly innovative if we are merely replicating systems of oppression into the technologies we build.

Jenn Louie, MRPL ’23, works as a product manager at the Applied Social Media Lab. She is an affiliate at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, and is a former resident fellow at the Integrity Institute.

Navigating Crisis in Community

Q&A with Rachel Florman

BY SHIR LOVETT-GRAFF, MTS '24

Rachel Florman, MTS '25, came into Harvard Divinity School with the intention of studying faith-based organizing in the context of reproductive justice, investigating how people use the same scriptures in pro- and anti-abortion contexts and "end up on opposite sides of the political spectrum." Florman was particularly interested in how identity formation, in relation to religious peoplehood, affected reproductive control. She saw the RPL program presenting an opportunity to integrate religious studies with "advocacy-based and interactive aspects of work." Believing that RPL could bridge the divide between the Divinity School and the non-academic world, was key to her ambitions as an activist, scholar, and community-builder.

As the events of October 7th erupted, however, Florman felt her first semester at HDS take a sharp turn. Thrust into intense conversations about Israel/Palestine, and the role of the American Jewish community in this crisis, Florman reflected on how RPL helped her maneuver in this moment.

Shir Lovett-Graff: What role has RPL held for you in navigating this moment of tension and crisis?

Rachel Florman: I think that RPL has done a wonderful job of creating a space for students like me who did not arrive at this moment of crisis—neither at Harvard nor in the broader world—with clear opinions and expectations. A lot of my Jewish friends and I, specifically, are arriving at this moment in the middle of our journey of understanding how we fit into our communities, both in the wider world and at Harvard, especially as first-year students. RPL has provided me with a place to pause and not know all the answers; to think about, talk about, and explore the ways in which we fit into our communities.

For me, that means: how do I fit into the American Jewish community? How do I fit into American Jewish activism? How do I fit into religious services? RPL, as a physical space, through the events they've held, and the dialogues they have fostered, has genuinely allowed me to work through some of those questions.

SLG: RPL offers a space to break binaries, especially in the context of religious literacy. How do you understand RPL's role at this moment of religious and political crisis?

RF: RPL provides space to interrogate why something may be seen as good or bad, what the word "good" even means in the context of religious literacy, and where these biased perspectives may be coming from.

SLG: How do you understand "just peace"? What does that mean to you?

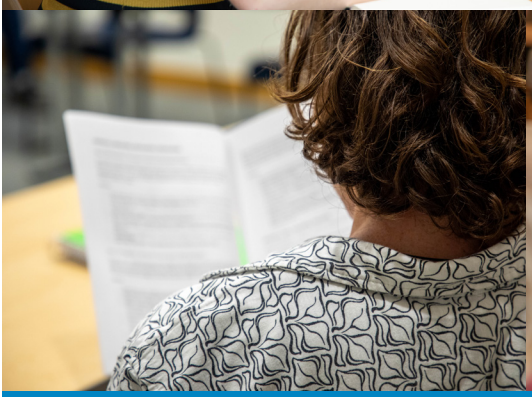
RF: To say we want peace is the most important thing. I feel that strongly, especially as someone who studies something that often turns to violence—whether it's violence that's religiously motivated, politically motivated, or intimate, especially when thinking about reproductive justice and violence.

I often think about care. A lot of people at Divinity School think about love, especially from a Christian perspective. But being forced to reframe that—call it love or care—just peace gives me the opportunity to think about care in a structural format. I now understand how peace, and care, and love—whatever you want to call it—can be built into the systems of society.

Rachel Florman is a first-year MTS student interested in Jewish community organizing and reproductive justice.

Read the full Q&A on our website.






RESOURCES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Religion and Public Life provides educational opportunities and resources for how to recognize, understand, and analyze religious influences in historic contexts and contemporary life. Enhance your learning journey with this Religion and Public Life booklist, which includes texts that teach religious literacy and RPL's method.

Our Recommendations—for Teachers

- *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* by Diane L. Moore
- *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire
- *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* by bell hooks
- "Cultural Violence" by Johan Galtung, (*Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp 291-305, Aug. 1990), Sage Publications, Ltd.

Our Recommendations—for Learners

- "Secularism, Sovereignty, and Religious Difference: A Global Genealogy?" by Saba Mahmood (Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 35(2), pp 197-209, 2017).
- *Secularisms* by Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini
- *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* by Talal Asad, part of the Cultural Memory in the Present series
- *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Readers*, edited by S. Brent Plate
- *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* by Amitav Ghosh
- *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* by John Paul Lederach

Learn More:

- Enrich your learning by watching RPL event recordings at rpl.hds.harvard.edu/news-events/events/rpl-event-recordings
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