The Sultanate of Oman as a Venue for Inter-faith Dialogue and Intercultural Immersion – A Case-Study on Christian Semester Abroad Students living in a Muslim Context

Matias Uusisilta
ABSTRACT

This paper is a case-study on a group of American students, who spent a four-month period in Oman on a semester abroad program hosted by Al Amana Centre. This paper examines the changes that have occurred in the students conceptual thinking, their attitudes towards Muslims, Arabs and Islam and their personal theology, and identifies causes of those changes.

In the first section, I will introduce the interfaith work that Al Amana Centre does, and lay a summary of the history and theory of Christian-Muslim dialogue. I will also explain the concept of Theology of Religion, which is central in examining the students’ own theological views. I will also introduce transformative learning theory that I use as a theoretical framework in this study.

In the last section of this paper, I analyze the research material which includes program curriculum, student interviews, student essays and students’ answers to questionnaires and surveys. From this material, I have identified repeating ideas and patterns and compared them to the framework offered by transformational learning theory.

This paper seeks to answer to the question: what kind of effects does the Al Amana semester abroad program, infused with cultural immersion, have on the students in this particular case study. In the conclusion part of this paper, I conclude that the semester abroad program facilitates opportunities for deep reflection and extrarational experiences that work as a catalyst for transformation.

It is hoped that this study can offer guidelines for other programs that aim at transforming attitudes and believes, and that work with cultural immersion and interfaith dialogue. It should be noted though, that the conclusions and outcomes of this study are tied to the specific context and people who attended the semester abroad program, and should not be taken as universal or context-free.
INTRODUCTION

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

Say: Oh you who turn away

I do not worship what you worship,

nor do you worship what I worship.

And I will not worship what you worship,

Nor will you worship what I worship. Your way is yours, and my way is mine.

Surah 109/ Surah of the Unbelievers

As we live in societies that are becoming more and more pluralistic by the day, the need for religious literacy and interfaith dialogue has become more and more dire. Surah of the Unbeliever in the Qur’an (in English above) is a strong statement for religious tolerance and advises Muslims to set an example by their life but not to force their beliefs on others (Maqsood 2000, p.103). It is a statement for religious pluralism and tolerance and can be used as a basis for interfaith dialogue with Muslims.

In order to live in peace with people of other faiths, and to understand each other, some kind of engagement is a necessity. Al Amana Centre in Oman is one of the those organizations that facilitates this kind of engagement. One of these programs that Al Amana Centre facilitates, is the semester abroad program, that this study is focused on. In the program, the semester abroad students have the chance to learn about Islam and inter-faith dialogue in a Muslim context in the Sultanate of Oman (Al Amana Centre, 2019).

In this thesis, I am studying the changes that have happened to six American students, from three different Christian universities, who have come to Oman to learn about Islam, Omani culture and society, and Christian-Muslim relations. In order to do this, I have analyzed the interviews I had with the students, and the
questionnaires they have filled in the beginning and at the end of the program, and final essays that they wrote at the end of one of the courses. The medium of this research is a case-study, that has been conducted in a certain time and context with a unique group of individuals, and cannot, hence, be generalized to all groups in a similar context. I believe, however, that this case-study can provide some general guidelines regarding transformation and interfaith dialogue.

In addition to just mapping out the changes that have occurred, this study aims to identify the causes of said changes. The aim is to find what specific parts of the program the students found most effective and what they themselves identified as the causes of the changes that happened in retrospect. What kind of unique opportunities for transformation does this semester abroad program provide, in comparison to merely studying the same contents at home?

As a framework for this study, I am using Jack Mezirov’s transformative learning theory with the focus on collaborative learning and extrarational processes. This theory allows the study to go beyond mere cognitive learning and rationality, to the dimension of feelings, experiences and spirituality. This is, of course, not to say that the rational side of learning is totally ignored. What this study aims to find out is the effects of both the rational and extrarational processes on the students.

To sum it up, this study is about transformation; transformation of attitudes, of personal theology, and learning. The idea for this paper was produced in collaboration with the Al Amana staff, especially the Associate Director Rev. Justin Meyers, for whom I am deeply grateful for helping me formulate the questions I wanted to ask and map out the changes I wanted to study. I also want to thank the rest of the Al Amana staff and the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission, which made it possible for me to volunteer in Oman for the Al Amana Centre, and to collect the data that I needed for my thesis. And of course, I am also deeply grateful for lecturer Håkan Bengtson from Uppsala University for guiding me in this academic path.
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1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The focus of this study, is the Al Amana Centre semester Abroad Program that is one of the centre’s long-term programs. During this program, students from three different universities in the United States, engage into several learning activities with the focus on Muslim-Christian relations and dialogue (Al Amana Centre, 2019b). I am studying transformations and learnings that has occurred in the thinking of the six students who participate in this study. Hence, my research questions can be summed up to:

1) What changes and learnings have occurred during the course? and
2) What has caused these changes and learnings?

In order to answer these broad research questions, they must be divided into less broad ones that can be answered with scientific methods. Regarding the first research question ‘what changes have occurred during the course?’, these are:

- How do the students view Islam?
- How do the students view interfaith dialogue and it's possibilities?
- How do the students position themselves on their views on other faiths. In other words, what is their so-called theology of religion?
- How do these results that measure the students' attitude towards inter-faith dialogue and Islam change over their time in Oman?

And regarding the second question ‘What has caused these changes'  

- How does the Al Amana Centre semester abroad program curriculum facilitate possibilities for transformation?
- What experiences do the students themselves identify as significant in the changes that have occurred?

In this study I will analyze the curriculum of the semester abroad programa and the students' experiences of the program from the point of view of transformative learning, collaborative learning and the extrarational process.
2 AL AMANA CENTRE AND THE SEMESTER ABROAD PROGRAM

Al Amana Centre, is a centre for Christian-Muslim dialogue, in the sultanate of Oman. Originally established by the Reformed Church in America, the centre’s work is based on more than 125 years of collaboration between Christians and Muslims in the sultanate of Oman. The Centre’s mission is to “Foster peace and reconciliation by providing a safe space for Christians, Muslims, and other faith communities. (Al Amana Centre, 2019 p. 2-4.) According to the Al Amana Centre’s Annual Report 2018, the centre fostered approximately 3000 Christian-Muslim encounters in the year 2018 (Al Amana Centre, 2019 p. 9).

Al Amana Centre is heavily focused on providing opportunities for interreligious encounters and cultural immersion. On their website Al Amana Centre explains that “[w]hile time consuming and requiring financial resources, face to face interactions and immersions in to other cultures are some of the best ways to help people correct misunderstandings about each other, learn about religious beliefs and practices, and correct false cultural stereotypes” (Al Amana Centre, 2019b).

This work is made possible due to Al Amana Centre’s history of collaboration that has built relationships and partnerships with the Omani people and the government (Al Amana Centre, 2019b). With these resources Al Amana Centre hosts two kinds of programs; short-term and long-term. The Semester Abroad program, that is the focus of this study, is a long-term program and is just a few days short of four months long.

During the time that the students spent in Oman, I volunteered at Al Amana Centre through the FELM Volunteer program by The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission, a partner of Al Amana Centre. As a program coordinator my job was to support the Semester abroad program, provide pastoral care for the students and work on my master’s thesis.

The College Semester in Oman is provided in partnership with Northwestern College in Iowa but students from other universities can also apply to the program
This year, the semester abroad program participants came from three different universities and colleges; Northwestern College, Calvin College and Hope College.

2.1 Program Curriculum

The College Semester in Oman is a 16-credit undergraduate-level study abroad program in Oman with a focus on Muslim-Christian relations and dialogue (Al Amana Centre, 2019b). The program consists of four courses with include:

- Arabic Language (6 credits)
- Oman Culture and Society (4 credits)
- Christian-Muslim Relations and Dialogue (4 credits)
- Integrated Experiential Learning (2 credits)

The program aims to teach the participants Arabic and develop cross-cultural skills through interactions with Omani Muslims and to teach the participants about Islam, with the goal of furthering understanding and trust between Christians and Muslims. The program is based on cultural immersion that is combined with academic rigor. (Northwestern College, 2019.) In addition to the courses mentioned above, the program includes a week-long spring break in April, during which this year’s course travelled to Thailand. During the trip, the students had the chance to visit Buddhist holy sites and meet Christian missionaries working in Bangkok.

2.1.1 Course syllabus

The Omani Culture and Society course aims to “provide the students with an introduction to the history, social structure, politics, religion economy and culture of Oman” and “to develop an appreciation for the customs and culture of Omani society and in turn of greater pan-Arab culture”. These objectives are to be reached to lectures scheduled to happen twice a week, through relevant readings, analytical essays and a six-week intensive Arabic language course in Ibri, which also facilitates cultural engagement with locals in interior Oman. (Appendix 1.)
The ‘Muslim – Christian relations’ course focuses on the cross-cultural, immersion experience that encompass many areas of exposure and learning. In order to focus the experience, the course examines four interrelated areas of Muslim-Christian relations. Firstly, introduction to Islam and Christianity through literature and a guest lecture from the ministry of religious affairs. Secondly, introduction to theology of religions. Thirdly, History of Muslim-Christian relations and lastly, review of the foundations of Muslim-Christian relations in Oman. The course methods “consist of assigned readings, lectures, discussions, student-led colloquies, guided intercultural encounters, inter-religious dialogues with Muslim friends, and opportunities to engage people of Oman at a variety of levels”. (Appendix 1.)

The course syllabus also allows opportunities for increasing religious literacy. The books for the Muslim – Christian Relations course include will Reza Aslan’s introduction to Islam No God But God, that is discussed alongside A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue by Badru Kateregga and David Shenk. This is accompanied with s “a cross-cultural, immersion experience [that] encompasses many areas of exposure and learning” (Appendix 1). In my personal view, this mixture of learning and experiencing first-hand, is ideal for increasing religious literacy.

The experiential learning course leads the students to engage in a range of rare and intensive intercultural and interreligious encounters. The methods include guided outings, facilitated dialogues, and both structured and informal interactions with Omani society. The aim of the course is to guide students in processing the intercultural and interreligious experiences in a way that enables them to integrate their discoveries into their own identity, faith, value system and culture. (Appendix 1.)

The experiential learning course also includes short periodic reflection papers, that help the students frame their time in Oman and help them make the most of it. These papers serve as a platform for further processing of the students’ experiences and learnings in Oman. Each week include new prompt or series of questions based on particular experiences or material of the week that is meant to
incite reflection. At the end of the semester the students write a longer 4-page reflection paper on their overall experience in Oman. (Appendix 1.)
“In our age, when humanity is being drawn closer together day by day, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the adherents of the world’s religions are examining what they have in common and what draws them to fellowship. Through the praxis of interfaith dialogue some headway has already been made on this path to peace, understanding, and collaboration.” (Chia, 2016 p. xi.)

Interfaith dialogue means the dialogue between adherents of different religions, and is found in many formal and informal forms. The roots of dialogue can be traced to Plato whose work Dialogue proposed a ratiocination that consists of exchanging ideas and thoughts in favor of the better argument. Through this exchange of ideas people can come closer to the truth. (Nweke, 2017 p. 131.)

In the groundbreaking book on interfaith dialogue Unity in Diversity: Interfaith Dialogue in the Middle East, peace scholars Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Amal I. Khoury and Emily Welty define dialogue as “a safe process of interaction to verbally or nonverbally exchange ideas, thoughts questions and information and impressions between people of different backgrounds”. (Brown, 2013 p. 54-55.)

Interfaith dialogue happens in the world of symbols and is essentially communication (Brown, 2013 p. 1). Though it might often appear to the public as theological heavyweights bantering together in an academic way, interfaith dialogue is at its best lay-people and non-experts engaging with one another. (Brown, 2013 p. 5.)

In terms of communication theory, dialogue can be seen as in Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s phenomenological tradition as “an encounter of two consciousness”. Bakhtin claims that all humans seek to live consciously and that consciousness consists precisely in the encounter with the other, the highest level of sociality.” For Bakhtin, dialogue is travelling back and forth between each other, performing co-existence. This understanding of dialogue allows us to see things
that might be considered as “interfaith exchange” or “interfaith encounter” as also forms of dialogue: everything a person of faith says to a person of another faith, every interaction with them is “performing co-existence” and in essence dialogue. (Brown, 2013 p. 5-6.)

Like Brown writes, this “performance of co-existence as dialogue” takes place “at the breakfast table, among congregants of diverse worship centers, in the classrooms and throughout the community” (Brown, 2013 p. 5). Hence the classes that the students take, the books that they read, and things they learn from the teachers at Al Amana, are just an addition to the value of cultural immersion, that is happening throughout the four-month period that the students spend in Oman. Everything else they might as well learn back home in the United States. Thus, in this research I am interested to find out what value the students give to these everyday interactions with Muslims and to compare it to the value they give to the classes they attend and books they read.

In his Book Interfaith Dialogue in Practice Daniel S. Brown Jr. outlines three outcomes of interfaith dialogue: cooperation, friendship and hospitality. One criticism faced by persons of faith, is that they don’t get along with each other. Cooperation through religious dialogue will help us people of all faiths to defend their religious voices in public life. When coming together for a common meal or a joint service project, a friendship is not an uncommon result of such dialogue. And lastly, hospitality is a common command from God in all Abrahamic faiths. (Brown, 2013 p. 8-9.)

For the outsider, interfaith dialogue might seem contradictory, since all religions are exclusive in their own way and offer a particular structure of religious sustenance, a compliance to a way of life or ritual through which one attains a particular goal. In other words, every religion teaches to follow its own path, not other religion’s. Yet despite these allegiances to their own religious beliefs, different religions can find things they appreciate in other religions. It is important to understand the distinction between exclusivism and absolutism; exclusivism has room for compromise and readiness to respect that the other could be right too without undermining one’s own values. Absolutism does not. (Nweke, 2018 p. 133.)
In his article *The Necessities and Limitations of Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Kizito Chinedu Nweke takes a route that emphasizes compromise by quoting American philosopher Walter Sinnott-Armstrong.

“When religion undermines compromise, we should be careful. We need look again at whether the compromise really is good. In the end, if we want to reduce conflict, we need to reject at least those absolutist parts of religion that undermine compromise.” (Nweke, 2017 p. 134.)

One can believe his particular perception of truth but one must not, as a result of this, believe that it is the only correct one or that this ultimate truth exists only within one’s values. Dialogue must not be an anti-thesis to the truth (Nweke, 2017 p. 140.)

It is a clear among majority, if not all, experts and scholars of interfaith dialogue that interfaith dialogue does not exist to create some sort of amalgam, a new religious system that is a combination of many. This kind of syncretism is not what interfaith dialogue is aiming for, even counter to its idea. Interfaith dialogue accepts both, the common and mutually exclusive, in different faiths. Interfaith dialogue does not seek to resolve theological differences, convert or proselytize participants of other faiths, nor to “win the debate”. It seeks to understand, explore and investigate. (Brown, 2013 p. 6–7.)

Nweke argues that religious truths can be discussed and theologically analyzed and compared, but if a dialogical forum suggests unity or unification it begs the question whether inter-religious dialogue is the right forum to undertake religious truths (Nweke, 2017 p.140). Others argue that interfaith dialogue should instead focus on the common values that religions have and their effort to change the world to a better place with less human suffering. According to John Hicks, all religions share the same soteriological goal of changing the practitioners’ life from self-centered to reality-centered. Knitter takes this idea further and says that the common concern and the end goal of all religions is *soteria,* a common concern for the promotion of human welfare and the removal of human suffering. He sees all religion as form of resistance to the broken state of affairs caused by self-
centered humans and the concept of salvation found within religions as a thisworldly matter. (Singh, 2005 p. 47–49.)

Interfaith dialogue could be then understood as a dialogue of different worldviews that hold on to their own truths, but rejects absolutism. In this ambiguous space of engagement, the adherents of different truths can come together, listen to, understand and learn from each other in a peaceful manner, while staying true to their own truths.

3.1 History of interfaith dialogue in Christianity

Christians haven’t always been open to the idea of interfaith dialogue, in fact there has been a time when Christians considered other religions to be purely ‘untrue’ and that they should be replaced by Christianity, instead of engaged in a respectful dialogue, ‘conquered’ not negotiated with (Ariarajah, 2017 p. 22).

The modern medium of Interfaith dialogue took off in the protestant churches as an officially endorsed stance towards people of other religions in the 1970s, a little later than in the Roman Catholic Church. The reforms of the Second Vatican Council had encouraged Catholics to view people of other faiths with respect since at least the publication of Nostra Aetate in 1965, but the major Ecumenical instrument of Protestants and Orthodox churches, World Council of Churches kept dragging the progress due to the enforcement of the cautious and negative theology of Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer towards the faith of other people. (Forward, 2001 p. 11.) The history of inter-religious dialogue goes much further though.

In the fifteenth century the Council of Florence affirmed that “no one outside the Catholic church, not only pagans but also Jews and heretics and schismatics, can share in eternal life, but will perish in the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”. Some hundred years later Martin Luther wrote in a very similar way that “those who are outside of Christianity, be they heathens, Turks, Jews or even false Christians and hypocrites --- Cannot expect either love or any blessing
from God, and accordingly remain in eternal wrath and perdition”. (Wiles 1992 p. 9.)

These kinds of views don’t obviously offer a lot of room for a respectful dialogue. Other religions were not seen as worthy of any positive attributes. Though certainly in a minority, there of course also existed strands of Christian teachings that were not so absolute in this, especially that of Justin the Martyr, born 100 AD, died 165 AD, and Nicholas of Cusa. born 1401 AD, died 1464 AD (Wiles 1992, p. 10.) Justin Martyr was famous for claiming that God had prepared a way to Salvation, not only through Christ but also through Greek philosophy (Forward, 2001, p. 43).

It can be argued that the Orthodox and Catholic traditions have been more open to the ideas of religious dialogue due to their theological doctrines. As opposed to the views of such exclusivist reformed thinkers as Barth, Kraemer and Brunner the Orthodox churches have communicated the Christian message in ways that take the religious and wider cultural contexts of their converts as worthy of respect (Forward 2001, p. 44).

Scholar of interfaith dialogue Martin Forward agrees that the age-old process of dialogue may be a minority strand in the history of inter-religious relations, but nonetheless in need of stressing in contemporary world (Forward 2001, p. 75). According to him “the ancient churches of the East may have much to teach Christians about living faithfully in a world of religious diversity” (Forward, 2001 p. 43).

3.2 History of Christian–Muslim Relations

Christian-Muslim relations have existed all the way since the establishment of the first Islamic caliphate in the 8th century. This dialogue was of a very different type though, compared to the concept that we understand respectful interfaith dialogue to be these days.
When the Islamic community was established in the seventh century AD, Christians of that time had to respond to this new phenomenon, and did so in ways that where already established in the tradition’s relation to other religions. This response included the tension between so called exclusivism/antagonism and inclusivism/universalism. This response was based on the scriptures inherited from the Jewish community but also on the New Testament. On one hand, Christians wanted to keep the same exclusivist covenant that they have inherited from the Jews, but on the other hand the same Hebrew Bible that claims the uniqueness of the covenant also speaks of a God that works through other religions (Isaiah 45:1) and is worshipped in other religions (Malachi 1:11) as well. (Goddard, 2000 p. 5-6.)

Besides the Jewish influence, Christianity’s own tradition from the New Testament, laid a foundation for the dichotomic response to other faiths. Such church fathers as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria spoke in favor of the inclusivist approach, whereas Tertullian defended hard exclusivism. (Goddard, 2000 p. 9) These are of course not only two ends of a spectrum on tradition that the Christian community could draw on to develop a response to and interpretation of Islam. In reality there was, from the very beginning, a considerable variety on the Christian response to Islam. (Goddard, 2000 p. 11.)

One of the earliest written responses that have survived to this day by a Christian to the new Islamic religion, was composed probably already in the year 634 during the Bedouin invasions of the 630s, and claimed the Prophet Muhammad to be a “false prophet” and that he may in fact be the Antichrist. According to this text written by a recently converted Palestinian Jew: “there was no truth to be found in the so-called prophet”. (Griffith, 2007 p. 24.)

At the end of the seventh century the Christians of the Middle-East realized the Arab invasion as a permanent state of things, and started a theological debate by writing texts referring to the “false ideas of the Arabs”. As such, the dialogue between Christian and Muslim scholars in the early years of the Caliphate was more of a defense of the Christian faith against a new faith. These texts include such theological dogmas as the Trinity, and Jesus as the son of God, that needed
to be defended against the Islamic claims of them to be a heresy. (Griffith, 2007 p. 28-29.)

Though not a completely new development, on the twentieth century there has been a significant move towards dialogue between the two traditions. A radical development was The Second Vatican Council in 1965 which moved Christianity from its traditional exclusivism towards Islam and other traditions into a more sincere pursuit of understanding. This was happening around the time of a larger paradigm shift around Christian organizations: in the Roman Catholic Church, The Secretariat for non-Christians was renamed Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and the World Council of Churches also set up a Sub-Unit for Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies in 1971. These bodies produced a significant set of guidelines for dialogue. (Goddard, 2000 p. 177.) There are of course older aspects of Christian tradition which make inter-religious dialogue possible, though the main Christian tradition has been clearly opposed to any positive evaluation of other religions (Wiles, 1992 p. 20).

Until the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church’s official teaching was that of ‘extra ecclesiam nulla salus’, ‘no salvation outside the church’, which was originally in its formation in the Council of Florence in the medieval ages, directed not only towards other world religions, but at the fissured Christendom itself (Forward, 2001 p. 41).

Though both the Protestant and Catholic traditions have come closer to Islam in terms of respect and dialogue, it could be said that the Catholics are a few steps ahead of the Protestants. In his book A History of Christian-Muslim Relations (2000) Hugh Goddard writes:

“A Western traveler, admittedly from a Catholic background, while passing through Pakistan, recorded a remark of her Muslim host about the significant difference he had noticed between the attitudes of the Catholic and Protestant missionaries in the country: ‘The Protestants seem to come here because they hate Islam and the Catholics because they love God’” (Goddard, 2000 p. 189).
And it is true that there is a significant contrast between some Protestant, particularly Evangelical, approach to Islam compared to the more open sects within Protestantism and to the Catholics. Some evangelicals seem to be, if not hating Islam, at least scared of Islam (Goddard, 2000 p. 189). The theological background for this can be found on the high view of the Bible, sometimes seen as the total infallibility of the Bible, and the high view of Christ (Goddard, 2000 p. 189).

A recent big leap towards more holistic understanding for the need of dialogue happened in Chiang Mai in 1977 where a group of Christians from many parts of the world met to address the problems of dialogue. Their purpose was to clarify the meaning of dialogue and discuss its meaning. This meeting produced an important WCC document, “Guidelines for Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies”. This understanding of dialogue means that it’s an attempt to understand people of other faiths not as people of opposed or competing ideologies but as partners on a pilgrimage. Through this pilgrimage and partnership, the message of Christ is shared with them. (Ariarajah, 2017 p. 23.)
4 TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

Scholar Nadira K. Charantya has studied Jack Mezirov’s *transformative learning theory* in interfaith dialogue. I use her article *Cultural-Spiritual Perspective of Transformative Learning* (Cranton & Taylor, 2012) to build a theoretical framework from where to analyze the changes and their catalysts that the students identify in their interviews and the survey and questionnaire answers. Charantya has studied interfaith dialogue and transformative learning in the doctoral research project *Interpreting the experiences of Christians, Muslims and Jews engaged in interreligious dialogue: a collaborative research* (Charaniya & West Walsh, 2001) undertaken within the doctoral program in adult and continuing education at National-Louis University in Chicago.

Transformative learning was first comprehensively presented by Jack Mezirow (1991) in his book *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. According to Transformative learning theory, we interpret our experiences in our own way, and our way of seeing the world is a result of these perceptions. In the process of transformative learning, one examines, questions and revises those perceptions. (Cranton, Taylor 2012b p. 5) As Jack Mezirow stated himself in 1978, the outcome of transformative learning is “a deep shift in perspective, leading to more open, more permeable and better-justified meaning perspectives”. This outcome is the same or similar, despite the context, but the ways of getting there may differ greatly. (Cranton, Taylor 2012b p. 3).

Transformative learning theory is commonly used in adult learning. Scholars of transformative learning theory often understand the journey of transformation, when considered in the context of spirituality or culture, to follow a repeating three-part sequence that begins with *a strong sense of identity* that is then confronted by anomalies and challenges and through that expanded through engagement with experiences that are intellectual, relational and reflective. The goal of this process is a clearer and more profound understanding of self and of one’s role in the world. (Charaniya, 2012 p. 231.)
The beginning point of this journey is an identity that is deeply rooted in the socialization processes of one’s religion and culture yet still incomplete. It is important to note though, that the learning processes of through which this identity evolves is not a single, static occurrence but rather an ongoing series of events and experiences through which one’s understanding of the self and the world are formed and reformed through contact with the unexpected, the unfamiliar, and the challenging. (Charaniya, 2012 p. 232.)

The journey usually begins with a questioning of one’s deeply held beliefs and attitudes and challenging of certain culturally based assumptions and results in a construction of a new perspective. It is an experience leading towards wholeness and often a culmination of an earlier stage of exploration and searching. Transformation is an extrarational process that involves integration of various aspects of the Self. (Charaniya, 2012 p. 232.)

One focus of this study is to map out changes in the students’ spirituality. Spirituality can be defined as individual’s personal experience of making meaning of the sacred. This ought not to be mixed with the concept of religion, which can be defined as an organized community of faith, though individuals are often socialized in a particular faith tradition, so their spiritual identity is often linked with their community of faith. (Charaniya, 2012 p. 232.)

The search one engages in as a spiritual being is influenced by one’s culture. This transformative learning aims for meaning perspectives that are more inclusive and less discriminating. Much of the ignorance is based on socialization that is inherently influenced by our cultural and spiritual perspectives of life. There are several ways to confront this ignorance. These perspectives can be called diving in, being pushed in, and testing the waters. (Charaniya, 2012 p. 233–234.)

Divers actively seek out the experience and find ways to integrate themselves in circumstances that form an opportunity to learn and move on in their lives. Those who are pushed in are those who encounter disorienting dilemmas that cause them to question their frame of reference. Their reaction to the dilemma pushes them to dialogue rather than running away from it. (Charaniya, 2012 p. 234.)
Those who test the waters are not confronted with a dilemma, nor does an opportunity for exploration and development present itself. They are rather just curious and interested. These people have a strong foundation but are open for exploration and possibilities of transformation. (Charaniya, 2012 p. 235.)

Intellectual and social humility is an important attitude in transformational learning. The first allows the learner to be open to different points of view, and the second enables allows the learner to listen to those views without resistance. “These attitudes, when combined with opportunities in the learning environment, enable the learner to be touched and transformed intellectually, affectively, and socially.” (Charantya, 2012 p. 237.)

Scholar of transformative learning L.A. Daloz (2000) identifies four conditions for transformation: the presence of the other, reflective discourse, a mentoring community, and opportunities for committed action. To this list, Charaniya adds a fifth condition opportunity for holistic engagement. This fifth condition allows learners to explore, build on, and re-vision their cultural and spiritual understanding and attitude so that transformation is possible. (Charaniya, 2012 p. 241.)

In the case of the semester abroad program, transformative learning helps to develop a deeper understanding of Islam. Through cultural immersion, and engagement with the Muslims, the students of the program can develop empathy and understanding towards Muslims. This kind of learning changes the students understanding of Islam from something that is purely learned concepts and theology, to an actual real-world phenomenon and also helps bridge the gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

4.1 Collaborative Learning and the extrarational process

Among the practical implementations of transformative learning are collaborative learning and extrarational processes. What Dirkx (1997) refers to as “learning through soul,” is collaborative knowledge construction, which occurs when “the socioemotional and the intellectual world meet”. (p. 85) Core values of
collaborative learning include “critical openness, engaging the whole person, stimulating critical thinking through dialogue, appreciating diverse perspectives, dwelling with questions, touching the affective, strengthening the cognitive, and enhancing the social”. (Charaniya, 2012 p. 237.)

According to Peters and Armstrong (1998) “collaboration means that people labor together in order to construct something that did not exist before the collaboration, something that does not and cannot fully exist in the lives of individual collaborators” (p. 75). This collaboration is what happens when the people involved are open to the extrarational process. It is something that goes beyond just sharing ideas and is not limited to exploring only the intellectual discourse. (Charantya, 2012 p. 237-238.)

Contrary to the idea of perspective transformation as a rational process of interrogating our assumptions and then correcting the distortions in them, transformative learning focuses on the idea of an extrarational process, that does not reject rationality, but is more inclusive. This extrarational process of meaning-making is expressed through symbol, image, and emotional expression. (Lawrence 2012, p. 472.)

The extrarational process is not separate from the reason or rationality, that leads to change. Such means as critical reflection, logic, rational discourse, and problem solving, are often seen as more “rational”, yet extrarational processes are means that promote reflection and engage the unconscious. Recognizing the interrelationship of cognition and emotion, gives us more tools to facilitate the transformative experience (Cranton; Taylor, 2012, p. 567.)

In the setting of their Al Amana Centre semester abroad program, the students’ have an opportunity to engage in collaborative learning and extrarational processes that go beyond to just what they learn in class. In this thesis, I aim to focus on the extrarational aspects, of the semester abroad program, and how that facilitates transformative learning. This is not to say that the rational side of learning is totally ignored. What I aim to study is how the rational and extrarational affect the students, and how they themselves give value to those processes.
5 EFFECTS OF SEMESTER ABROAD STUDIES

In *Transformations at the Edge of the World* (2010) Ronald J. Morgan and Cynthia Toms Smedley have collected essays on the effects that Semester abroad studies have had on students of Christian colleges and universities.

The medium of study abroad invokes shifts in faith interpretation, knowledge paradigm and cultural familiarity (Smedley, 2010 p. 21). This case-study aims to find out the measure of those changes.

According to Morgan and Smedley, “Study abroad expands cognitive boundaries and provides natural impetus for growth by removing students from their home environments and exposing them to diverse thinking” (Smedley, 2010 p. 24). Semester abroad builds self-esteem, self-confidence, holistic learning and respect for others but qualitative and quantitative research has also confirmed the improvement of cultural sensitivity, self-awareness, language proficiency and career advantage. These immersion cultural experiences also offer an ideal venue for the kind of cognitive dissonance that leads to spiritual reflection. UCLA’s study on higher education and spirituality confirms that study abroad helps students develop spiritually. CCCU BestSemester Programs alumni attribute spiritual and emotional growth to their study abroad experiences and Greenville College’s Semester in Africa students demonstrated significant gain in spiritual development measured by Faith Change Questionnaire. (Smedley, 2010 p. 25.)

5.1 Spiritual change

In *Transformations at the End of the World* Janine Paden Morgan claims that from a theological point of view, real engagement with the social and cultural other with different religion, ideology sexuality etc. is necessary “for us to be formed in the very Image of God”. This means the willingness to see others as God does, understanding that God is working in alien people and acknowledging that the truths one holds about God for themselves and their group applies to other groups as well. This means also expanding one’s view of God: “the God I
worship is infinitely greater than my personal and tribal concepts of who God is”. (Morgan, 2010 p. 41) According to Morgan “In today’s tribalism, the sacredness of one’s neighbor in God’s eyes, of God’s solidarity with all the ethnic groups of the earth, is an essential aspect of transformation.” (Morgan, 2010 p. 43.)

The studies conducted on semester abroad students affirm, that studying abroad is a transformative experience both spiritually and cognitively. To measure the spiritual changes that occur in the students’ beliefs, I have asked them to explain their own faith, but also their attitudes towards other faiths. (Appendix 2 and 3.) I have then compared the answers to these questions on the models on Christian theology of religion, to find out on which three models each student fall. This is measured both on the beginning and at the end of the program.

5.2 Cognitive change

The move to a deeper maturity often necessitates leaving behind safe place of orientation and known structure. This distance from normative life called “anti-structure” according to Victor Turner, creates “a space of liminality, moments out of the ordinary time and place, wherein rules about old structures and identities are broken in order to create new ways of looking at reality” (Morgan, 2010 p. 35). Leaving home allows students to reflect upon and critically examine the values and ideologies of their home communities (Morgan, 2010 p. 36).

To measure the cognitive changes on the students, I have asked questions about the students understanding of Islam, and their attitudes towards Muslims and other religions.
6 CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES OF RELIGION

In his book ‘Sharing the Truth in Love – How to Relate to People of Other Faiths’ author and religious scholar Ajith Fernando tells the story of a western missionary who had spent 28 eight years working in Sri Lanka. The missionary speaks of the changed that happened after coming to a multi-religious country. “I was rather intolerant of other religions at the time and thought that mine was the only true one, but all that changed during a visit to Anuradhapura” Visiting a Buddhist holy place made the missionary experience such a sense of peace that he felt that he was truly in the presence of God and the difference in faith did not matter. He said he had learned that all religions have the common thread of love and compassion in them. In the same chapter Fernando tells of a Sri Lankan church leader who has said that when he sees Buddhist devotees worshipping at the Bodhi tree, he sees the Holy spirit at work there. (Fernando, 2006, p.13.)

This change in the missionary’s attitude is not uncommon among people who have experienced cultural immersion in a multi-religious context. In this study I aim to measure the changes that happen in semester abroad students own personal theologies of religion, as they spent four months in a multi-religious context in Oman, while studying Arabic, Muslim-Christian relations and Islam in the Al Amana center semester abroad program. In this chapter, I will introduce different theologies of religion and how the concept relates to interfaith dialogue.

6.1 Theologies of religion

Kizito Chinedu Nweke ponders the questions of truth claims in Christianity in his article The Necessities and Limitations of Inter-Religious Dialogue.

“If Christians have the God, why bother becoming adherents of other religions whose founders have described themselves as ‘servants of God’ at best? On what religious imperative would they even accept the other religions or their values as right or better, especially if these religions have contrary teachings?” (Nweke, 2017 p. 140).
An obstacle with Christianity when it comes religious dialogue in general is the idea of owning The Truth. Does Christianity being true, mean that other religions are untrue? What then is there to discuss or learn from others, other than try to convince them to turn to Christianity?

For Christians, theology of religion means the theological position on the relation of Christianity to other religions (Knitter, 2011 p. 2). One level of change that I explore in my research is the level of change in the students’ personal believes and theology. To evaluate these changes, I use Christian theology of religion according to Paul F. Knitter and Narendha Signh, who have divided the Christian approach to other religions into three different viewpoints: 1) Exclusivism/Replacement model, 2) Inclusivist/Fulfillment model and 3) Pluralist/Acceptance Model. (Knitter 2011, Singh 2005.)

To put it simply “the exclusivist maintains that salvation is given only to those who make an explicit commitment to Jesus Christ: the inclusivist affirms that salvation is bestowed on others besides Christians, because of all that God has done through Jesus Christ; and the pluralist affirms that humans are saved within their own faith traditions, not because of the works of Jesus” (Forward, 2001 p. 39).

From analyzing the data, I have gathered from the students, I am able to position the students’ views on these three models before and after the program and analyze the changes that occur on the course of the program.

6.1.1. The Replacement Model/ Exclusivism

What Paul Knitter calls the Replacement Model is based on the idea that Christianity is meant to replace all religions and that in the end God wants there to be only one Religion: Christianity. This kind of view on other religions is found especially in the so-called Fundamentalist or Evangelical Christian communities. (Knitter, 2011 p. 19) In this view the only kind of dialogue Christians can have with persons of other faiths, is one that aims to convince them to convert to Christianity. (Knitter, 2011 p. 33.)
The theology of total replacement considers other faith communities and traditions as so lacking, or so aberrant that they have basically no value at all (Knitter, 2011 p. 23). Indian Theologian Naredtha Singh calls this kind of theology of religion, which does not acknowledge the possibility of any truth claims in other religions, as exclusivism. This paradigm in Christianity maintains commitment to Jesus Christ as being the full and final revelation of God and therefore sees Christ as the one and only path to salvation. (Singh, 2005 p. 53) An extreme position of this exclusivist view is that of Karl Barth who sees no relation whatsoever between religion and God's revelation in Christ. Therefore, the relationship between the Christian revelation and human religions is “either/or”. (Singh, 2005 p. 55.)

This kind of view on other religions does not open many doors for inter-religious dialogue but it has been maintained in both Catholic and Protestant churches as a paradigm until the 1960s. The axiom ‘there is no salvation outside the Church’ was not changed until Vatican II in the early 1960s and the exclusivist attitude was also dominant in the Protestant church as seen in the three great Protestant International Missionary Conferences in 1910, 1928 and 1938. (Singh, 2005 p. 53.)

Within the Exclusivist view there exists also other views that are a bit more open to find God’s presence in the world. This “partial replacement” recognizes and affirms a genuine revelation of God in and through other religions. This revelation is called “general revelation”, an authentic presence of God’s Spirit within the persons and structures of other faith communities. (Knitter, 2011 p. 33.) This means that this general revelation can reveal to persons of other faiths, a divine presence that is loving, caring and calling, but when it comes to salvation, that is not found in these traditions, but only in through Christ in Christianity (Knitter, 2011 p. 35-36).

6.1.2. The Fulfilment Model/ Inclusivism

The fulfillment model doesn’t consider Christianity as a replacement of other religions but rather as the fulfillment of them. (Knitter, 2011 p. 63) Singh calls this
model inclusivism. This kind of view seeks to address the issue of religious pluralism with an attempt to recognize the importance of other religions but simultaneously keep a hold on the uniqueness and importance of Jesus Christ. It attempts to both accept and reject other faiths. This can be seen as a middle ground between exclusivism and pluralism. (Singh, 2005 p. 71.) In essence, this view claims that people of other religions can be saved, yet not through their own religion, but through Jesus Christ whose sacrifice has opened a way to salvation for them too.

6.1.3. The Acceptance Model/Pluralism

Pluralism can be seen as an opposition to exclusivism. Such famous theologians as John Hick and Paul Knitter speak for the pluralistic view of religion by questioning whether there is only one way to the Divine Ultimate. They suggest that there is a commonality of revelation in all the religious traditions and that Christians cannot claim that Christ is the sole revelation of God. (Singh, 2005 p. 33.) Hick argues that in the majority of cases the religion which a person adheres to is given to them in birth. Therefore, religious identity is not so much a matter of finding the truth as being born in to particular tradition. Despite difference in the name they use for God and how they worship him/her, they all worship the same Deity. (Singh, 2005 p. 34-35.)

Paul Knitter argues in favor of this position by claiming that the God of Jesus Christ is a God that is in essence unbounded love and one that wants to embrace all of God’s children and all of God’s creation. From this basis, Knitter argues that there is compelling reason for Christian communities to recognize that there is, not just truth, but salvific truth in other religious found outside “our own cultural-linguistic” system. Knitter invokes his teacher Karl Rahner’s claim that “If God wants to save all people, then God will act in such a way as to make this a real possibility for all people”. For Rahner it was different religions that make God’s offer of grace most available and readily-at-hand for most people and Knitter affirms this view. (Knitter; Netland, 2013 p. 31.)
6.2 Theology and interfaith dialogue

In this chapter I will look into the concept of theology in interfaith dialogue from the perspective of three scholars who have focused on it in their works. Scholars of inter-religious dialogue, Maurice Wiles (1992), Martin Forward (2001) and Wesley S. Ariarajah (2017) provide with insights on what the role of theology is in interfaith dialogue.

6.2.1 Interfaith dialogue as a theological process

Forward claims that an attempt to formulate an ‘interfaith theology of religions’ is an urgent task for Christians to enable them to understand the extraordinary resources that religions open up to their adherents. This would result to a serious effort to learn from and even to appropriate insights from other perspectives that seem valuable in understanding the transcendent. This would allow Christians also to ponder on responses of other faiths that, for one reason or another, don’t feel acceptable to them. (Forward, 2001 p. 69.)

For Forward, this kind of interfaith theology of religions is not only needed for inter-faith dialogue, but formed through the process of it. He argues that members of different religions need to begins to answer the question of interfaith theology of religion together not separately. (Forward, 2001 p. 74.)

6.2.2 Interfaith dialogue as a way for forming theology

Former Regius Professor of Divinity Emeritus in the University of Oxford, Maurice Wiles, argued in his book *Christian Theology and Inter-religious Dialogue* already in 1992 that comprehensive discussion and reflection on one’s theology of religion is needed when engaging in inter-faith dialogue.

There is a deep-seated Christian hesitation about the compatibility of Christian commitment and open dialogue with people of other religions. The suggested dialogue can be seen as a desertion of the way in which the church has
understood its faith throughout history, and conflicting to the absolute truth claims of Christianity and the role of Jesus Christ (Wiles, 1992 p. 5-6). According to Wiles, developing a theology of religion that is suitable for interfaith dialogue, means a substantial change in what has been the dominant self-understanding of Christian theology (Wiles, 1992 p. 6-7).

Wiles argues that theology is provisional, since there is always new information and knowledge to be found that is bound to change it. It needs to be acknowledged that truths formulated by theology are not eternal truths. This perspectival character of theology allows room for genuine understanding and appreciation of different perspectives. This is not to say that the differences of the two approaches are inexisten t, or can be simply allowed to co-exist without further examination. The conflict between different truth claims can and should be addressed, but the perspectival character of all theology “enables us to see the existence of even radical difference as having possibility of positive, and not simply negative, implications in relation to God’s self-revelation to the world”. (Wiles, 1992, p. 65-66) Wiles is calling for a perspectival, parabolic and provisional theology of dialogue that cuts out the possibility of claims to finality and exclusiveness of revealed truth. (Wiles, 1992 p. 77.)

Wiles argues that all religious language is in essence words we use to interpret the divine and in that always linked to a certain context and understanding of the words. Concepts like ‘water’ can be a metaphor for a fulfilling oasis or a destructive flood. The symbolic essence of religious language means that the words we use can’t have universality or finality in them. (Wiles, 1992 p. 33-34.)

The strongest emphasis on the limitations and indirectness of human language about God within Christianity is found in the apophatic tradition that uses a language that doesn’t tell what God is but who what he is not: “he is infinite, ingenerate, immortal, incorporeal, invisible”. For Wiles, the continuation of this emphasis and understanding the limitations of religious language is vital for interreligious dialogue. To stress this, he continues to quote Nicholas of Cusa and his work ‘De Docta Ignorantia’, ‘On learned ignorance’ (Wiles, 1992 p. 35.).
“It is necessary for him who wants to attain understanding to raise the intellect above the meaning of words, rather than to insist on the properties of words, which cannot be properly adapted to such great intellectual mysteries”

Thus, there is no language about God that can claim the kind of completeness that would place it above any need of correction or supplementation from others. Every religious community develops a language suitable for itself, that will not be understood by those who approach in its whole from the outside. Wiles stresses the importance of recognizing these characteristics of religious language as important to of the practical possibility of interreligious dialogue. (Wiles, 1992 p. 36.)

Wiles stresses that Christians ought not to deny what they believe to be true in their own religion for the sake of easier relations with others. A greater danger lies in failing to strongly revision the understanding of religious belief as something in which the truth is a goal rather than a present possession of every religion. This is a theology of dialogue that allows for mutual learning and self-correction. (Wiles, 1992 p. 42-43.)

Wiles goes on arguing that “it is impossible for Christians to rule out in advance the truth of other religions, and to claim to know --- that truth belongs exclusively to them”. According to him, the pluralist world that we live in, forces us to face the issue afresh, and to make a strong case that the logic of Christian faith itself requires an embarkment on a genuinely open dialogue. (Wiles, 1992 p. 43.)

Hence, it can be argued that forming a coherent Theology of Religion is a necessary process for a person who wants to engage in interfaith dialogue. But it is not a process that is only done prior to the engagement but a process that goes on once a person engages in inter-religious dialogue. These are the reasons I have decided to focus on the students’ personal theologies of religion and map out the changes that happen during the course of the four months they spend in Oman, being actively engaged in interfaith dialogue.
6.2.3 Interfaith dialogue as approaching the other

Within the dialogue discussions there exists two schools of thought on the concept of ‘the other’. There are those who argue that the aim of dialogue is to remove the alienation between communities and break the concepts of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and form a ‘we’ in which we see ourselves as part of the one human community. In this view the other is embraced and seen as part of ourselves. (Ariarajah, 2017 p. 34.)

Others see that dialogue aims to merely develop a spirituality that respects the otherness and of the other. In this view, the differences among communities don’t need to be undermined, but dialogue is seen as a way for communities to learn to respect the differences and distinctiveness of each other, while still searching for foundations that help them live together. Though providing different approaches, both of these views aim to find ways to enable peaceful co-existence between communities. (Ariarajah, 2017 p. 34-35.)

When identifying the other, there are several ways to approach the otherness. One is to see it as a threat. This perception of the other as a threat can be real or imagined, and is often aggravated by economic and political realities. This perception can only be dealt with new experiences of the other. (Ariarajah, 2017 p. 35) Another way to see the other is as different. This is often the case with Christian-Muslim relations which are of then corrupted from the beginning by the over-emphasis of the differences, although perceiving differences is not a bad thing per se, and is in fact important. (Ariarajah, 2017 p. 36.)

Seeing the other as the alternative means seeing them as someone with an alternative truth. This means strictly holding on to the exclusive truth claims within religions, such as Christianity being the only truth and Islam being an alternative, that can’t be true. (Ariarajah, 2017 p. 37-38.)

Yet another option is seeing the other as part of my own reality. In the Christian tradition there has been over the past twenty years an intense drive to deal with religious plurality more seriously and much of this discussion has happened
under the search of a new Theology of Religions that moves away from Christianity as the only alternative to other religious beliefs. As opposed to the old categories of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism new highly nuanced positions have been developed. One way is to include other religious traditions into one’s own perception of reality in one’s own terms. There is some legitimacy to this, but in interfaith context, respecting the otherness of the other and allowing the other to define itself is important (Ariarajah, 2017 p. 38.)

The last way is to treat the other as a partner and a co-pilgrim. Though some religions maybe based on revelations, even they agree that they don’t know the whole truth about the Ultimate Reality. Religious persons may claim to have sufficient knowledge about reality to be able to make ultimate commitments but no tradition can claim to have exhausted the mystery of existence as a whole. (Ariarajah, 2017 p. 39) Accepting the spiritual reality means accepting our neighbors as partners and co-pilgrims on a spiritual journey. “One of the amazing realities of our day is the way people of religious traditions are discovering each other as praying and believing people with spiritual histories of their own” (Ariarajah, 2017 p. 40.)
7 RESEARCH METHOD AND SUMMARY OF DATA COLLECTION

I this chapter I present the form of the study along with the research and data collection methods I have used in it. The form of the research is a case study (LeCompte, Schensul 2010, p.100). For methods, I will be using 1) a survey and a complementing questionnaire that the students will fill in the beginning of the program and at the end of the program, to measure the students’ understanding and view on Islam and personal theology of religion 2) reflective essays, that the students write on the course of the program and 3) a semi-structured interview in the beginning and at the end of the program, that allows the students to speak of their experience in their own language.

The reason for choosing these three different methods, instead of just focusing on one is triangulation, confirming the outcomes through several data inputs, in this case, surveys, questionnaires, reflective essays and interviews (LeCompte, Schensul 2010, p. 147). Studies that use only one form of data could be criticized for lacking scientific value (LeCompte, Schensul 2010, p.156).

7.1 The interview guide

For this thesis, I have chosen to use the method of semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. The reason for choosing this method is that it will generate what we call “rich talk,” talk that is informal, free-flowing, and couched in words (Magnusson, Marecek, 2015 p. 100). This allows the participants more freedom to describe their experiences in Oman in their own words. Since this research is focused on the experiences of the participants and the changes they have noticed in their conceptual thinking, this method will allow them to reflect on their time in Oman and the changes that occurred during that time and the catalysts that caused those changes.

In a semi-structured interview, the interview items do not have the form of the answer built into them (Magnusson, Marecek, 2015 p. 101). This will allow the participants to point out notable topics that had an effect in their conceptual
thinking, that were not mentioned in the survey. The interview format is a conversational one that will put special stress on putting the participants at ease. (Magnusson, Marecek, 2015, p. 47.)

The interview questions were developed in cooperation with the Al Amana centre’s Executive director. As a result, an interview guide with ten questions was developed. The questions are as follows:

- What made you come to Oman?
- What is your view on Islam?
- What is your view on other faiths in general?
- Could you be friends with a Muslim?
- Do you know a Muslim/Muslims?
- Do you recognize some stereotypes in your ideas about Muslims and Arabs?
- Explain to me your personal faith.
- Do you think that there is salvation outside Christianity?
- Do you think that God works through different religions?
- What is your view on interfaith dialogue and its possibilities?

7.2 The survey and questionnaire

The survey is meant to produce quantitative data that will complement the qualitative data, gathered through the interview. The survey will be a five level Likert scale. Since all the students have agreed to take part in the research, the survey will be a census survey, meaning that it includes the whole population at issue, and not just a sample group (Stausberg: Engler, 2011, p. 395).

The survey is loosely based on Pew Research Forum’s survey research on the American public’s attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, (Pew Research Center 2016) and on the interests of Al Amana Centre staff.

In the questionnaire, that is on the other side of the survey sheet, there are three sentences, that the students are asked to complete. These are:
- I understand Islam to be...
- I understand Christianity to be...
- I understand my own faith/religion to be...

With these questions, I collect data that complements the interviews.

7.3 Finding repeating ideas and composing integrative summaries and labels

In order to analyze changes that happen in the students thinking and to find commonalities of interest, I have identified repeating ideas and made groups of those that are similar (Magnusson, Marecek, 2015, p. 363). Through these repeating ideas I can find the common effects that the semester abroad has had on the particular set of students. These commonalities will be presented in the next chapter in tables.

In addition to finding commonalities, I have analyzed the data I have gathered from the students, in the light of transformational learning theory, especially focusing on the models and theories presented by Nadira K. Charantya in her article *Cultural-Spiritual Perspective of Transformative Learning* (Cranton; Taylor, 2012).
8 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

In this chapter I will first present my analysis on the course syllabus, and how it enables chances for transformative learning. After that I will present my analysis on the baseline study that I conducted by an interview, a survey and a questionnaire at the beginning of the program. Lastly, I will analyze the ending interview, surveys and questionnaire I conducted at the end of the program and compare the results to the ones done in the beginning of the program.

In the analysis, I am using transformative learning theory as a theoretical framework, from which I analyze the causes, and results of change, with an emphasis on extrarational experiences. For this I am using the *three-part learning sequence* and *five conditions for transformation* introduced by Nadira K. Charaniya in her article *Cultural-Spiritual Perspective of Transformative Learning*.

The transformative learning sequence begins with 1) a *strong sense of identity* that is then 2) *confronted by anomalies and challenges* and through that 3) *expanded through engagement with experiences that are intellectual, relational and reflective* (Charaniya, 2012 p. 231).

*Illustration 8.1 Three-part transformative learning sequence*
Daloz (2000) and Charaniya (2012) list of five conditions for transformation are 1) the presence of the other, 2) reflective discourse, 3) a mentoring community, 4) opportunities for committed action and 5) opportunity for holistic engagement. Daloz has identified these pedagogical and environmental conditions as important for transformation and Charaniya claims that they apply to the spiritual-cultural dimension as well. (Charaniya, 2012 p. 241.)

8.1 Conditions for transformative learning in the course syllabus

From the five conditions for transformation the presence of the other is probably the most central in the semester abroad program. The whole program is set in a society of the other. As explained in the syllabus of the Christian-Muslim Relations course “[Sultanate of Oman [is] a country noted for its openness, tolerance, and hospitality. This makes it an ideal place to introduce students to Arab culture and religion, and the dynamics of relations between Christianity and Islam” (Appendix 1).

Cultural immersion in the Omani culture allows the students to be holistically in the presence of the other during the whole of the semester, and to be taught by, and have a chance to ask questions from, local Muslims, who work as their lecturers, and who they get a chance to meet in excursions. Especially the six-week intensive Arabic course in Ibri, a smaller city in inner Oman, facilitates an opportunity to be in the presence of the other, since the students have to leave the familiar Al Amana Centre compounds, and live in a city with less foreigners, and Western influence. During these weeks the students learn Arabic in Noor Majan Arabic Learning institute, which is a local language school, with local teachers and staff.

Reflective discourse is facilitated especially through the Experiential learning course which allows the students to reflect on their experience in class, and by themselves in the assignments and essays of the course. Besides this, the other courses in the program also aim to facilitate chances for reflective discourse in
several ways. The significance of this reflective discourse was stressed by many students in their ending interviews and essays.

In the Omani Culture and society course, the students are assigned “to submit a portfolio, scrap-book or journal documenting his/her cultural experience in Oman or any emerging questions or observations” (Appendix 1b). In the Christian-Muslim relations course, the students are to write a final paper addressing “how a student’s experience and increased knowledge in this area in-forms his/her theological understanding of, and engagement in, Christian-Muslim relations” (Appendix 1).

In the case of the Christian-Muslim relations course, this reflective discourse stresses the importance of reflecting the students’ own approach towards other religions, the so-called Theology of Religions. As it is written in the course syllabus regarding theology of religion:

“How one approaches Christian-Muslim relations is largely determined by one’s underlying theology of religious pluralism. Therefore, it is important to have a sense of one’s perspective in entering into interfaith relations, as well as assessing how the experience of engaging the ‘other’ informs one’s theology” – Christian-Muslim Relations Syllabus (Appendix 1.)

A mentoring community is provided by the other students, the two program coordinators and the rest of the Al Amana staff. In the ending interviews, several students pointed out discussions with the staff and program coordinators, as being influential in their learning process.

Opportunities for committed action and opportunities for holistic engagement are facilitated through Scriptural reasoning sessions with local Muslims and visits to the houses and families of Al Amana Centre partners. These opportunities are especially available in Oman due to the country’s special religious and political leadership, which allows a space for this kind of engagement. It is articulated in the course description in the following way:
Because Oman’s religious and political leadership is currently articulating the importance of interfaith and intercultural cooperation, it provides an engaging environment in which one can explore approaches and possibilities of working together for the common good” (Appendix 1.)

Al Amana Centre’s long-time partnerships with local Muslims, religious leaders and government officials, give the centre a chance to provide opportunities for holistic engagement and committed action.

8.2 Baseline study

The initial beginning interview, survey and questionnaire, were conducted just a few days after the students arrived to Oman, and the data gathered from them is used as a baseline study for the analysis on the changes that have happened in the students’ thinking during the Al Amana Centre semester abroad program. In this chapter, I will introduce the findings of the baseline study in order to lay a comprehensive understanding of the starting point of the students. After that, I will introduce the findings of the ending interview, conducted at the end of the program and the analysis of the changes that occurred. The baseline study was conducted in order to map out the respondents’ attitudes towards Muslims and Arabs, their personal theology of religion and attitudes towards interfaith dialogue. I will go through my findings in these three categories.

In order to preserve anonymity, I will refer to the students as Student 1 to Student 6, or as S1 to S6 in the tables and paragraphs. I will also use the gender-neutral singular pronoun ‘they’.

8.2.1 Students attitudes towards Islam, Muslims and Arabs

As Charantya writes, it is not purely up for the learning environment to invite transformative learning, but the learner must also be able to bring certain prerequisite tools to the process. An example is the characteristics of intellectual
curiosity and being comfortable with ambiguity, that are crucial in any encounter in which one’s cultural and spiritual assumptions are to be challenged. “Intellectual curiosity allows the learner to be open to asking questions; tolerance of ambiguity gives the learner a certain comfort level with the unknown and with having his or her own beliefs challenge without being devastated.” (Charantya, 2012 p. 237.)

This intellectual curiosity, is something that all the students had in common when coming to the semester abroad program. In the beginning interviews, all of them expressed curiosity to learn more about Islam, and many were eager to learn what “Islam is actually like” compared to the stereotypes they heard at home. (Appendix 2) In Charantya’s terms, they were not divers, or being pushed in but wanting to test the waters (Charantya, 2012 p. 235).

Out of the six students only one highlighted ‘strongly disagree’ on the question ‘I have a good understanding of Islam’, three were ‘neutral’ and two agreed that they have a good understanding of Islam. So, while most of the group had some kind of previous understanding of Islam, all were curious to know more.

**Table 8.1 – Students answers to the survey question 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have a good understanding of Islam</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>S1, S2, S5</td>
<td>S3, S6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In their interviews, four out of the six students described Islam as a peaceful religion or a religion that teaches peace, while acknowledging the violent aspects of it shown in the media. These violent aspects didn’t, according to them, show the essence of Islam but were actually the actions of a small minority. Three students
mentioned hearing very controversial things about Islam when they were young
and one acknowledged that growing up hearing about the violence of Islam had
made him think that it’s a violent religion. Three of the six students regarded Islam
as in essence a very similar religion to Christianity. (Appendix 2.)

In the survey, only one student agreed that ‘Islam is a violent’ religion, one was
neutral on the topic and rest disagreed or strongly disagreed. (Appendix 3.)

Table 8.2 – Students’ answers to the survey question 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Islam is a violent religion</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1, S2, S3</td>
<td>S5</td>
<td>S6</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When it comes to questions about relationship with Muslims, only one student
said that they have a Muslim as a friend, but all others were unanimous that they
could imagine having a Muslim as a friend, and that it wouldn’t be a problem. In
the surveys all students agreed that they could imagine having a Muslim friend.
Two of them agreed that they have a Muslim that they can call a friend or an
acquittance, though only one of them also mentioned this in the interview. (Ap-
pendix 2 and 3.)

When asked about stereotypes of Muslims or Arabs, one student admitted that
they have a stereotype about Arabs not treating animals very well, but most of
the students rather answered by giving examples of common stereotypes without
saying that they themselves had those (Appendix 2).

In the question sheet where the students were asked to explain their understand-
ing of what they understand Islam as a religion to be, all students managed to
explain the core beliefs of Islam, such as the oneness of God, the belief in Muhammad as a prophet and a role model. Even those students who had in the survey expressed to have a poor understanding of Islam, knew the basic principles of the faith. (Appendix 3.)

Out of the six students only one chose ‘neutral’ in the question ‘I think there is a lot that is good and admirable in Islam’, one chose ‘agree’ and four strongly agreed (appendix 3).

In conclusion, it is safe to say that most of the students seem to share interest and curiosity or even admiration towards Islam and have some sort of basic understanding of the religion. In the questions related to attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, most students seemed to view Islam and Muslims in a somewhat positive or a neutral way with only one exception of a student who was either neutral on those questions or leaning towards a more preserved view on Islam. (Appendix 2 and 3)

8.2.2 Students’ theology of religion

In their interviews, all of the six students self-identify as Christians yet they’re views on other religions, so-called theology of religion differ. Out of the six students only one expressed certainty that there is no salvation outside of Christianity both in their interview and survey answers, one expressed certainty that there is, and the four others were uncertain on the question. Out of these four who were uncertain two thought it was up to God to decide who is saved and two acknowledged the conflict with the idea of an all loving God sending people to hell but simultaneously wanted to maintain a neutral position without making a statement on one way or the other.

Table 8.3 – Students’ answers in interview 1
There is salvation outside of Christianity | I don’t know if there is salvation outside of Christianity | There is no salvation outside of Christianity

| S1 | S2, S3, S5, S6 | S4 |

When asked if God is working through other religions than Christianity, the students were more unanimous on the question: five out of the six students were certain that God is working through other religions. Only one student who was also certain that there is no salvation outside of Christianity, was uncertain on the possibility of God working through other religions.

*Table 8.4 – Students’ answers in interview 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God is working through other religions than Christianity</th>
<th>I don’t know if God is working through other religions than Christianity</th>
<th>God is not working through other religions than Christianity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1, S2, S3, S5, S6</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through analyzing the students’ answers on these questions, it is possible to position the students according to their theology of religion. Out of the six students, two would fall into the category of *universalist* since they demonstrated views that all religions are worshipping essentially the same deity. One student can be categorized as an exclusivist for demonstrating a view that there is no salvation outside of Christianity and that God is not working through other religions. The other three were reluctant to take a firm stand on the possibility that all religions are essentially true, while simultaneously not wanting to accept Christianity as being the only fundamental truth or means of salvation. (Appendix 2.)
Table 8.5 – Students’ theology of religion according to starting interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universalist</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Exclusivist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1, S3</td>
<td>S2, S5, S6</td>
<td>S5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the surveys the students’ answers differed a little bit. Two out of those three who in the interviews described themselves as uncertain on whether there is salvation outside of Christianity, had chosen ‘agree’ on the question. This could be interpreted in a way that in their uncertainty, they are still leaning towards universalism. On the other hand, those who had in the interviews expressed strongly universalist or strongly exclusivist views had chosen the two extremes ‘strongly agree’ and ‘strongly disagree’. This shows a kind of certainty on their conviction.

The questions on whether God is working through other religions and on if there is truth on other religions, had somewhat parallel answers and there is a clear correlation between believing in universal salvation and truth and acts of God in other religions. The more willing the students were to accept salvation outside of Christianity, the more open they were to the idea of God working through other religions and other religions having some truth in them.

Through comparing the students’ answers in the interviews and to the surveys, it is possible to evaluate the students position on a scale from universalism to exclusivism. Two students are clearly universalists though one is a bit more certain on their conviction, two students are uncertain with strong leanings towards universalism, and one is uncertain with some leanings towards universalism, and one student is strongly exclusivist.

Table 8.6 – Students’ theology of religion in the beginning of the program
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly universalist</th>
<th>Universalist</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Exclusivist</th>
<th>Strongly Exclusivist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1, S3</td>
<td>S2, S5</td>
<td>S6</td>
<td></td>
<td>S4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two students’ who lean the most towards universalism are the ones who mentioned having a Muslim friend or an acquaintance in their interviews. It is not hard to imagine there being a correlation with having friends from other faiths and leaning towards universalism.

Only one of the students answered to the question “I understand my faith/religion to be…” with an answer that expressed clear questioning of their formerly deeply held beliefs. According to Charaniya, this kind of questioning is usually the beginning point of the journey towards construction of a new perspective (Charaniya, 2012 p. 232).

“[I understand my faith/religion to be…] in progress. I am walking with my philosophically skeptical side, trying to understand what faith looks like for me and reconciling that with my childhood church and belief system and understanding of the world. Though I am going through this period of questioning and existential reflection I still consider myself Christian.” – Student 3, Beginning interview (Appendix 3)

The rest of the students answered to the same question by also identifying themselves as Christian, but were more firmly rooted in their beliefs. Students 1, 3 and 5 identified themselves as “liberal” or “open” Christians or in other words distanced themselves from conservative Christianity. Student 3 specified that their faith is not the same as their religion, but strongly influenced by it. (Appendix 3.)
8.2.3 Students’ attitudes towards interfaith dialogue

All six students expressed positive attitude towards interfaith dialogue and its possibilities. According to the students, engaging in dialogue with other faiths reduces misunderstandings. Two students expressed interfaith dialogue as a faith motivated practice, something that “Christ is calling us to do”. (Appendix 2)

All students agreed that Christian – Muslim dialogue is important with four of them stating ‘strongly agree’ in the survey. They also agreed that Christians and Muslims can live together peacefully with five of them stating ‘strongly agree’ and one ‘agree’. All students agreed that Islam can be a part of modern western society with four stating ‘strongly agree’ and two ‘agree’.

“I think it’s good because on both ends Christians and Muslims there’s a lot of misunderstanding and that can be because you don’t really see how similar we are.” – Student 3, Beginning interview (Appendix 2)

8.3 Analysis on cognitive and theological change

The focus of this case-study is change and transformation. Through analyzing the students answers on the baseline study interview and survey and comparing them to the answers at the ending interview, I have been able to find what changes occurred on the course of the semester abroad program. This chapter will present those changed that I have identified and the conclusions that I have been able to draw from those changes and their causes. The ending interview was conducted during the last week of the semester abroad program.

In earlier studies of adults engaged in interfaith dialogue (Charaniya & West Walsh, 2001), participants have painted a picture of experiences in which knowledge was socially and collaboratively constructed (Charantya, 2012 p. 236). In the ending interviews, all the students expressed views that the social engagement with Muslims helped them understand Islam better, which is very much in line with this previous research.
"I think in the past my only knowledge has come from textbooks and people who aren’t Muslim and they tried their best but it’s very different to see or to hear like, what a faith is about and like, how worshiping in that faith works from someone who does it than someone who’s reading about it second hand." – Student 3, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

As Charaniya concludes based on her earlier studies on interfaith dialogue “when the cultural and spiritual aspects of the learner’s identity are included in the learning process, the result is a sharing, re-visioning, and enlargement of learner narratives about their identities, life, and the world, and a profound sense of interdependence. It is grounds for a transformation that goes beyond the individual’s place in the world to a more active engagement with the world” (Charaniya, 2012 p. 236.)

The transformative learning process in the context of interfaith dialogue, involves interacting with co-learners from a holistic perspective (Charaniya, 2012 p. 236). The semester abroad program involves several dimensions of connecting and engaging in a co-learning process. First of all, a connection with the group of students currently taking part in the program. The experiential learning course allows the students to reflect their experiences as a group. Secondly, the connection with local Omani Muslims, whether it is the teachers, language partners or acquaintances, allows engagement in a learning process with people of another faith and culture. Ideally this is helpful for all participants as it’s opens a possibility for two-way communication and learning, for those participating in the co-learning process.

8.3.1 Students’ attitudes towards Islam after the semester abroad program

In the ending survey, the change on the students’ self-perceived understanding of Islam is evident. All students agreed that they have a good understanding of Islam, with four of the six choosing ‘strongly agree’. When compared to the previous survey, all strengthened their position. In the beginning of the program one
student chose ‘strongly disagree’, three were ‘neutral’ and two agreed that they have a good understanding of Islam. Also, in the ending interviews, most of the students expressed confidence in their knowledge about Islam and claimed that they now have the kind of understanding of Islam, to also counter stereotypes and unjust claims about Muslims by their peers in their home communities.

*Table 8.7 – students’ understanding of Islam at the end of the program.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have a good understanding of Islam</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1, S4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>S2, S3, S5, S6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2, S3, S5, S6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fact that all six students chose ‘strongly agree’ on the statement “I believe that Christians and Muslims can live together peacefully”, can be interpreted as a result of living in a Muslim country as a Christian, without feeling discriminated for one’s own faith. Most students also expressed that they now have a Muslim that they can call a friend or an acquaintance. Confronting one’s own attitudes and prejudices towards Muslims and Arabs is clearly one of the most fruitful opportunities that the program enables.

At the end of the program, five out of the six students chose ‘strongly disagree’ and one ‘disagree’ on the statement ‘Islam is a violent religion’. The biggest changes happened to Student 4 who had previously chosen ‘agree’ on this statement, and now chose ‘strongly disagree’ and to Student 6 who had chosen ‘neutral’ before.

Through looking into the ending interviews, one can get a more holistic and nuanced view of the students’ attitudes towards Islam. This attitude varies a lot from
student to student but seems to be mostly positive in all cases. For Student 1, one of the conclusions that, they have come to during the course of the program, is that Muslims and Christians worship the same God.

“I think I was leaning towards the idea that Muslims and Christians worship the same god um now I uh believe that we do um but I think that Christians have, that Christians and Muslims have a different understanding of God and I think that Christianity emphasizes the love of god through Jesus Christ um but I think that there is different emphasis, emphases on God in Islam that I can’t understand so yea those are my views now.” – Student 1, Ending interview (Appendix 2.)

Student 2 expressed that their view on Islam hasn’t changed but their understanding of it has expanded. They also claimed that now they have more resources to speak about Islam and explain their views better than before.

“Yea, I think it’s changed because I understand it more which if only everyone could understand it more, right? And it’s not like it has changed in a sense that they were these awful heretics before it was just this sense of… Now I can explain to people why I don’t think they’re bad humans or I don’t know I think it gave me, it put words to something that I had been thinking about and feeling but I didn’t understand why. Umm and that might contradict something I said earlier or like the beginning of this semester but that’s hard to remember now. And so I think my view has changed because I’ve met people so now I can say something like “in my experience Muslims are X or are not Y...” or whatever and then I think that adds a lot of more validity to that when people wanna go back to the States, somebody says like… I don’t even know what they would ask but if they ask something about Islam and it’s like well no, not really and instead of just saying well I read this it’s more of in my experience, I know people or whatever so I think it’s changed my opinion not my opinion my views have changed… not… what can I say.. my views have not
changed it’s just provided words and reason to kind of help me understand why I thought that way or something.” – Student 2, Ending interview (Appendix 2.)

For Student 3, Islam offered a faith that they themselves can relate to. Some Student 3’s theological aspects were, in their opinion, better articulated in Islam than in Christianity.

“I definitely have a better understanding of it now. And I would say that some of the things I’ve formed in my theology and in my faith over the years was really expressed in certain aspects of Islam that I really relate to. So, I think my opinion stating is that probably would share more with like the fundamental ideas of Islam than like some people at my church.” Student 3, Ending interview (Appendix 2.)

Student 4 stressed that seeing Muslims practice their faith, and hearing a Muslim speak about their faith, helped them understand Islam better, and change a stereotype that Islam is focused on acts, in order to please God.

“Um I don’t remember exactly what I said before um yea I think it has changed because I see the way that people practice it and the fact that I think a really big thing that I heard form Ahmed was like we worship god because he’s worthy of our worship and I’ve always heard the ideas that like Islam is very work spaced and all these different things but I think now I have an understanding like doing all those things is important in their religion because it’s a way to worship god and to honor him and it’s not necessarily like to earn favor or anything more like going to heaven because, I mean in ways because of what they have done but it’s like the focus is on god, the focus isn’t like on them as much and if you like I have a better understanding of like how much the fact that on sin is so much different than Christianity that has a big impact in a way that they like worship.” – Student 4, Ending interview (Appendix 2.)
Student 5 expressed that the semester abroad program has solidified their preconceived notions about Islam, that were already positive and viewed Islam as a peaceful religion. For them, seeing that persons of different faiths can live together peacefully, was a powerful experience.

“Yea it’s I definitely, like it’s solidified my view of what like that it is a peaceful religion that the… the ability to live as neighbours is not something that seems distant but it’s something that is present and can be achieved. Yea that can be achieved and, cause I growing up in a fairly conservative area where it just seems like it is not possible. Um going to Oman and seeing Muslims, Christians, Hindis all living next to each other is really powerful. And a thing to experience and witness. So yea it’s a positive, more positive view and more peaceful I think to some levels.” – Student 5, Ending interview (Appendix 2.)

Student 6 expressed that their views about Islam have stayed mostly the same. Their views were already positive in the beginning interview, and they regarded Islam as a peaceful religion. What has changed is that they are now more open to the idea that Christians and Muslims might be worshipping the same God. For them, seeing practitioners of Islam worship God, has made them understand that Muslims and Christians might actually worship the same God.

“Umm I think now um that Islam can that our god maybe like um I think they are worshipping our god as well. Umm I don’t know about salvation and those kinds of issues but I think now from what I have seen they are worshipping god and if they are not worshipping god I don’t know who they are worshipping. Because it seems like they have umm sometimes they seem a little more faithful and close to worship than I do sometimes when it comes to worshipping god so I guess. That’s how it’s changed, my opinions, but everything else I think is the same.” – Student 6, Ending interview (Appendix 2.)

All in all, the students’ attitudes didn’t change drastically, since they had mostly positive preconceptions about Islam and Muslims already in the beginning of the
program. Rather their preconceived notions were strengthened and they attained more grounds for formulating their views and talking about Islam. What is notable, is that the significant experiences that the students themselves identified as having an effect in their thinking, were mostly extrarational experiences such as seeing Muslims practice their faith, having personal discussions with Muslims and getting to know Muslims. It could be said that Islam became a normality, where it once was an abnormality.

8.3.2 Students’ theology of religion at the end of the semester abroad program

In the ending interviews, out of the six students, Student 2 was open to the idea, of salvation outside of Christianity, but didn’t want to say anything for sure. Students 1 and 3 expressed a clearly inclusivist view, that salvation is possible outside of Christianity, yet only through the work of Christ. Student 5 expressed a clearly universalist view, that God has revealed themselves in other religions and through there revelations people can be saved. Only Student 6 remained totally uncertain, and expressed that though they don’t think that God would send people to hell, but that they don’t have enough evidence to say one way or the other yet. Student 4 remained firmly in their stance that there is no salvation outside of Christianity. (Appendix 2.)

Table 8.8 – Students theology of religion according to the ending interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universalist</th>
<th>Inclusivist</th>
<th>Exclusivist</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>Student 1, Student 3</td>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>Student 2, Student 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These views are paralleled in the students’ answers to the ending questionnaire (Appendix 3). All those, who expressed universalist or inclusivist views, in their interviews, chose ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ on the question “I believe there is
salvation outside of Christianity”, and the one who expressed exclusivist views, chose ‘disagree’. The only notable difference to the interview answers was Student 2, who expressed believing in salvation outside of Christianity in the questionnaire, despite being reluctant to express anything certain in their ending interview.

Table 8.9 – Students view on salvation outside of Christianity according to ending survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>There is salvation outside of Christianity</th>
<th>I don’t know if there is salvation outside of Christianity</th>
<th>There is no salvation outside of Christianity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1 (strongly Agree), S2 (Agree), S3 (Agree), S5 (Strongly Agree)</td>
<td>S6 (Neutral)</td>
<td>S4 (disagree)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When compared to the students’ answers on the beginning survey, the results of the ending survey, don’t show large scale changes in the students’ theology of religion. Those who we’re already thinking that there is salvation outside of Christianity, kept their positions and those who didn’t did the same. What is worth noticing though, is that those who were uncertain about their stance on this matter, but were leaning on one side or the other, got more certain with the exception of one student, who remained on the ‘uncertain’ category. Hence, it could be said that the program helped the students find more grounds for their already established beliefs in this matter, and find more certainty in those questions they were uncertain about.

Another interesting outcome of the study was, that in the ending interviews, Students 1 and Student 3 expressed inclusivist views, which are views that were not expressed in the beginning interview by any students. This can be seen as result
of learning and reading about theologies of religion, which has added more nuance to the students’ understanding of questions of salvation within Christianity. In the Christian–Muslim Relations course, the students had to read Paul Knitter’s (2002) *Introducing Theologies of Religion* and write an essay about their own personal theology of religion. It is possible, that some of the students’ have not even been aware of the inclusivist view on salvation, before this course, and found it suiting to their own beliefs. Reading about theologies of religion, while being immersed in a Muslim context, allows the student many opportunities for collaborative learning and personal reflection on theological matters.

Like mentioned in the previous chapter, two students expressed coming to the conclusion that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, during the course of the semester. On the other hand, Student 6 also expressed this kind of belief yet remained uncertain about the question of salvation for Muslims. In the interview, they expressed that seeing Muslims practice their faith, confirmed for them that they might worship the same God, yet remained uncertain on the question of salvation, because they didn’t think they had enough grounds to say for sure. This can be interpreted as a conflict between the students’ experiences and their own theology. From the point of view of the *three-part transformation cycle* (Illustration 8.1), the student seems to be still in the *confrontation* phase of the cycle, and hasn’t yet resolved the conflict, brought by this confrontation. It is clear that different students go through the transformation cycle in different phases, and for some, if not all, the process continues long after the semester abroad program.

8.3.3 Students’ attitudes towards interfaith dialogue at the end of the semester abroad program

In the ending interviews, the students described interfaith dialogue as an important tool for greater understanding and peace and especially relevant in today’s world. Through their experiences in Oman, Student 1 had come to understand the possibilities and need for interfaith dialogue in their home community:
“I think [interfaith dialogue] is especially important, I think, right now for American Christians especially due to the way that media skews other religions and because of how 9/11 has shaped our outlook of Muslims I think it’s important that we have actual conversations with Muslims too.” – Student 1, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

For student 2, interfaith dialogue is an important tool for understanding others and their culture and through that provides greater opportunities for peace building (Appendix 2).

Student 3 expressed that interfaith dialogue should not be “overdone”, but used only when needed:

“It [interfaith dialogue] should only really be used when necessary. I think sometimes when people are having an understanding and respect for one another it’s not always necessary. But I think in places where there’s like strife and miscommunication and misunderstanding it would be best to like for whichever religious groups that are having these issues, I guess, to come together and talk about them because it’s easier to, I guess, see things when, like, someone in front of you is telling them this is how their life’s going. I think interfaith dialogue is like any other dialogue is as long as it’s, I guess, like, intentions are there, like, if it’s out of curiosity or just out of getting a deeper understanding of like a person of another religions perspective instead of just reading about it, I think it can be good. But sometimes I think it’s just overdone.” – Student 3, Ending interview (Appendix 2.)

Student 6, expressed quite the opposite view, by describing interfaith dialogue as a “natural” way of getting to know a person without forcing it too much. For them, dialogue offers an alternative to a culture of debate, where mutual respects for each other allows a chance for deeper understanding than just trying to ‘debate’ someone in hopes to win them over.
I think it’s a very good way to get to know the other person without like rally forcing it too much. It is a lot more natural than just trying to debate somebody on a topic and each one is trying to argue for like that they’re right instead of like you know just talking about each thing and having that mutual respect for each other. – Student 6, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

For Student 5, besides increasing understanding, interfaith dialogue helps humanizing the other and relate to them on a personal level.

I think that interfaith dialogue is key in building relationships and peacebuilding I think that through interfaith dialogue we can gain understanding about those who are different from us. And if we gain understanding we can humanize them and relate to them on a very personal level and if we do that, we can really solve the interfaith conflict that is happening. – Student 5, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

Student 4 also agreed that interfaith dialogue increases understanding towards people who think differently.

In the survey answers all students agreed that Muslim-Christian dialogue is important, with four choosing ‘strongly agree’ and two choosing ‘agree’. In this, there is no change compared to the answers given in the beginning of the program.

8.3.4 Final essays

During the semester, the students have taken part in an Experiential Learning - course, which according to the course syllabus “is designed to guide students in processing these intercultural and interreligious experiences in a way that enables them to integrate these discoveries into their own identity, faith, value system, and culture.” (Appendix 1) This course takes place during the whole course of the semester abroad program, and has produced essays, that I will analyze in this case-study. Among the vast number of essays, I have chosen to focus on the
students’ final essays, in which they have written about their feelings at the end of the program, and reflected on what they have learned and how they have changed.

In their final essays, the students have been asked to reflect on the changes that have occurred in them during this semester. Out of the six students, all mentioned an increased respect and empathy towards Muslims as one of the biggest changes they noticed in themselves.

Out of these self-identified changes in themselves, I have been able to identify 5 common themes, that more than one student has found somehow significant. These are 1) change in their personal theology of religion, 2) enhanced respect for different worldviews, 3) increased empathy for others and 4) increased self-acceptance and self-love and

Table 8.10 – Changes identified by the students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change in personal theology</th>
<th>Student 1, Student 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased respect for different worldviews</td>
<td>Student 1, Student 4, Student 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased empathy for others</td>
<td>Student 1, Student 4, Student 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased self-acceptance and self-love</td>
<td>Student 1, Student 2, Student 5, Student 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two of the students mentioned the biggest change being in their personal theology.
“This semester, I have utilized this practice when concluding my theology of religions. I considered what my reality would look like if I believe that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, or if all humans went to heaven, or if my concept of God was completely incorrect. I think this practice will allow me to better empathize with different ideologies.” – Student 1, Final Essay (Appendix 4)

“I think the largest change I saw in myself was with my personal theology. I remember talking with one of my advisors throughout fall semester about religion, faith, spirituality, etc. We just talked, not coming to any conclusion– not that a conclusion is really possible in this area.” – Student 2, Final Essay (Appendix 4)

Three of the students mentioned that the semester abroad program has helped them understand and respect other worldviews and other ways of understanding Christianity.

“I have the tools needed to “try on” another perspective; that is, I can better understand others’ worldview if I imagine it as my own.” – Student 1, Final Essay (Appendix 4)

“As I reflect on my experience in Oman, I recognize transformation in the following two areas: my respect for other cultures and my respect for other theological views within Christianity.” – Student 4, Final Essay (Appendix 4)

“The biggest change has been in how I view and interact with those of other religions. I was also challenged in looking at the world through a different lens. Living in a new culture will force you to be open to new ideas.” – Student 5, Final Essay (Appendix 4)

The semester abroad program has also helped some of the students to be more conscious of others and more empathetic.
“I feel that I am now a stronger, scrappier, more empathetic person”
– Student 1, Final Essay (Appendix 4)

My love for my neighbor has grown deeper as I have gained a greater understanding of my Muslim neighbors. – Student 4, Final Essay (Appendix 4)

“When thinking about how I have formed here in Oman the first thing that comes to mind is being conscious of others. --- These experiences have helped me to understand how to interact with our Muslim neighbors, in a way that is practical and respectful. It has also helped me to understand the people I interact with in America at home as well. --- Now, I am not sure about what I have learned yet here, but what I am realizing is that I am not the same person I used to be when I came here. I am something more complex, I am something that God has created and that is beautiful.” – Student 6, Final Essay (Appendix 4)

The theme of self-acceptance and self-love can also be found in many of the student’s essays. This has been linked to the theme of loving the other as well. As one of the students put it “I have learned to love myself more because I put so much emphasis on making sure others are treated well and that the love for them”. – Student 5, Final Essay (Appendix 4)

“I have been thinking so little of myself for so long, and I find self-respect to be an elusive, lofty goal that may or may not be attainable. While this semester was not a cure for this, I have been reminded of my worth here.” Student 1, Final Essay (Appendix 4)

"While I appreciated most of the conversations in class, I think one of the most important for me was the “self-love as self-awareness” topic. We discuss theology in most of the other classes, so this one provided an interesting contrast to all we were learning. I think so often we don’t think about ourselves, which on the surface sounds
fine, but when you really think about it, it’s not the best. How can you love someone to the fullest if you don’t love yourself? I think taking the time to focus on the inside helped me engage people better, which helped me see my experience with different eyes.” – Student 2, Final Essay (Appendix 4)

I have learned to love myself more because I put so much emphasis on making sure others are treated well and that the love for them. I also hold God at a very high level. Because of this I may leave little room for myself. I hope that I can continue this journey of learning how to balance my life in a more fulfilling way. – Student 5, Final Essay (Appendix 4)

“The topic I appreciated the most in class was the one talking about self-love as self-awareness. When I came to Oman, I really struggled with how others perceived me and really let my past define who I was. I was already good at being self-aware, but the topic of self-love helped me to understand that before I can love others in the right ways I first need to love myself for who God has created me to be.” – Student 6, Final Essay (Appendix 4)

In addition to these four changes, another thing, that was mentioned in the essays as well as the interviews, was the ability to better challenge the stereotypes about Muslims, Islam and Arabs, in the students’ home communities.

“I have learned about Islam during an important period of America’s history, where we are deeply divided and hateful of the “others.” However, this education will allow me to better serve my community as well. I am actually looking forward to it; instead of dreading the ignorance, I can challenge it.” – Student 1, Final Essay (Appendix 4)
8.4 Identified causes and catalysts for transformation

All students expressed views that extrarational experiences were central to their learning process. They agreed that learning about Islam was central to their semester abroad experience, but stressed that getting to know Muslims and Omanis was even more important. This transformational learning that is based on extrarational experiences is more emotional and experiential than intellectual kind of learning.

“…it’s more just like I’ve learned like information but, -- the thing that has impacted me the most is the emotional learning I’ve had…” – Student 1, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

By analyzing the students’ interviews, I have been able to identify 4 types of extrarational engagement that the students identified, when asked what experiences were most significant in their learning processes; 1) engaging in dialogue with Muslims, 2) visiting holy places, 3) seeing faithfulness in practitioners of other faiths and 4) having reflective discourse with peers.

Table 8.11 – Types of extrarational engagement, that students found significant in their ending interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extrarational Engagement</th>
<th>Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holistic engagement with Muslims</td>
<td>Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, Student 4, Student 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting holy places</td>
<td>Student 5, Student 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing faithfulness in practitioners of other faiths</td>
<td>Student 3, Student 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having reflective discourse with peers</td>
<td>Student 3, Student 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Holistic engagement with Muslims includes having dialogue with Muslims (Students 1-5), having a chance to ask questions from Muslims (Student 2 and 5) and hearing a Muslim’s perspective to matters that one has been pondering about (Student 4).

"---spending time with Ahmed and having Sultaan as a professor actually both of them, I think, were really, really influential in that process. Sultaan because he’s just so fun loving and then I got to like interview him and it was really interesting to hear his thoughts on like progress and things of that sort but Ahmed because, I just fearlessly asked him stuff just like why are you a Muslim I’m just curious or whatever and I think that was kind of the beginning of actually engaging in that dialogue and realizing um how powerful it can be.” – Student 3, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

Students who mentioned visiting holy sites as an impactful experience either felt some kind of a spiritual presence in the places they visited (Student 5) or were just impressed at seeing other people’s places of worship. (Student 6)

"So, like some like smaller examples are like going into a mosque and feeling like a godly presence, if that makes sense, or spiritual like thing about it, like feeling that—" – Student 5, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

"Now I have seen like so many different people just like worshipping in their own environment like the Buddhist in Thailand or the Taoist temple and how all that looked or the Sikh temple as well. I can see a lot more from where they’re coming from. It’s not just words in a book now. It’s more real to me that how like important this thing how important other religions are to other people. And that um it’s not okay to just push them aside and say that they are not correct without at least trying to understand them, I think.” – Student 6, Ending interview (Appendix 2)
Some students, who mentioned seeing faithfulness in practitioners of other faiths as an impactful experience, were impressed at how honest the faith of the people they met seemed. For them seeing Muslims who are devoted in a similar way that they themselves are to their own faiths, helped them empathize with their faith experience. Some even compared their own faith to those of Muslims.

"I have seen they are worshipping God and if they are not worshipping God, I don’t know who they are worshipping. Because it seems like they have umm sometimes they seem a little more faithful and closer to worship than I do sometimes when it comes to worshipping God so I guess. That’s how it’s changed, my opinions, but everything else I think is the same.” – Student 6, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

Having reflective discourse with peers was identified by two students as a significant experience in their learning process. This means being able to have discussions with fellow semester abroad students about the ‘big questions’ this semester abroad experience has given them.

"I think just like continually talking about those questions with people and like having so many people tell me for like asking big questions and it’s okay to recognize the bigness of this world and to try to understand it a little bit better. So, I think encouragement from other people was a huge, huge one.” – Student 4, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

"--- and it has been a really good space with people who are also thinking the same things or questioning and that sort of thing. Then also with enough differences to really challenge what you think and even I came already with a tons of questions so it provided me with this space every single day for three and a half months to think about and have those conversations and like looking back thinking it’s just crazy to me that I have those conversations every single day for three and a half months like that’s a lot of deep thinking.” – Student 3, Ending interview (Appendix 2)
In addition to these four types of engagement, one student also mentioned the concept of cultural immersion which means being immersed in a culture foreign to one’s own.

"I would say going to Thailand actually was really interesting um I have never like been in Asian culture and especially I never had like exposure to like Buddhism or any of those philosophies and yea so I think it was interesting to see how like it affected their daily life and also just understanding that like people just wanna live in a good way I guess, you know they don’t… I’ve always grown up with the idea that like people are heathens if they like believe in multiple gods and things like that and so it was really helpful to see the way that that looks in real life." – Student 4, ending interview (Appendix 2)

These findings parallel the four conditions for transformation identified by L.A. Daloz (2000): 1) the presence of the other, 2) reflective discourse, 3) a mentoring community, and 4) opportunities for committed action. And the fifth condition added by Charaniya: 5) opportunity for holistic engagement. This fifth condition allows learners to explore, build on, and re-vision their cultural and spiritual understanding and attitude so that transformation is possible. (Charaniya, 2012 p. 241.)

The Three-part Transformative learning sequence is also useful, when looking into the students’ identities as Christians, and developments in that area through the course of the program. All six students that participated in the program identified as Christian in the beginning interview and in the questionnaire, with some nuanced differences. One student identified as “a liberal Christian” (Student 1), and one as a Christian who has been questioning their own faith (student 2). All had somewhat a strong sense of Christian identity nonetheless.

The confrontation by anomalies and challenges happened to different students in several ways. What stood out was confronting one’s prejudices by having conversations with Muslims, and learning about Islam in class.
“…pretty much every conversation I’ve had with Shah has been significant and all of the classes with Ahmed um joining a women’s only gym surprisingly so formative” – Student 1, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

In their ending interview Student 2 describes a meeting with a Muslim woman wearing a full niqab, that covers her face, and having a conversation that resulted into a shared laughter and a shared feeling of humanity:

“…then I realized what I had done so I was like ‘oh aasifa aasifa’, and she just laughed and you could just see it in her eyes and she like just like patted my shoulder and walked away. (laughter) And so I think that was really important for me because it was such a weirdly positive interaction with someone that I’m never gonna see again but it’s also someone who is different from me but also a… similar if that makes sense. And we both thought it was funny we both, I don’t know anything about her life but I think just recognizing this like connection with humanity is really, really important having these experiences so you can say “this matters, interfaith dialogue matters” it matters to…”
– Student 2, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

Student 5 explained that talking with Muslims about their faith, and feeling ‘a godly presence’ in a mosque has affected their thinking.

“So like some like smaller examples are like going into a mosque and feeling like a godly presence if that makes sense or spiritual like thing about it like feeling that and interacting like talking to Shaa in his shop about why he believes what he believes and him asking me and like just having this dialogue like it just makes you have these feelings towards Muslims and other things like that. Learning more about Arab culture gives you different feelings about their treatment of women cause going I thought like it is a pretty sexist but then like learning that women use the hijabs and abaiyas as a form of freedom like it’s an expression of freedom in themselves and other things like
that like it’s just like changing that feeling so yea.” – Student 5, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

All the students expressed in their ending interviews that, the semester abroad program resulted into stronger sense of identity as Christian.

“When coming into this semester one of my biggest questions was “Why Christianity?”. Cause I’ve grown up Christian so I kinda like but why? Why am I picking this, I’m not picking this because I wanna pick it. For reasons that are important to me or whatever. --- I’ve had this space to really think about other religions and why Christianity makes sense in my context. --- I think for me Christianity provides a hope um but then what that means for other religions I don’t know other than that it gives me hope that there is a bigger plan and that it’s not my job to know that but my job is to be an agent of renewal…”
– Student 2, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

These confrontations both challenge the students’ preconceived prejudices and stereotypes, and help them humanize the other, in this case the Arab or the Muslim. According to the three-part transformative learning sequence, this engagement with experiences that are intellectual, relational and reflective results into an expanded identity, that is clearer, more open and more pronounced understanding of self and of one’s role in the world (Charaniya, 2012 p. 231). Student 2 expressed finding their role in the world in the following way:

“--it gives me hope that there is a bigger plan and that it’s not my job to know that but my job is to be an agent of renewal and whatever way I can and whether renewal looks like peacebuilding or education or something of that sort I don’t know but I think you can renew with the gifts that you’ve been given--” – Student 2, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

In their answer to the question “I understand my own faith to be…” Student 2 expressed a motivation to come to the program with some uncertainty of their
own beliefs and wanting to find some clarity to their own theological and philosophical ponderings. At the end of the program, same student answered the same question with a clear devotion to identify themselves as a Christian. (Appendix 2) In their case, confrontation resulted into a clearer and more pronounced understanding of one’s own Christian identity.

This kind of shift can be clearly seen in the ending interviews and survey answers. As one can see when looking into the students’ theology of religion the program didn’t really change anyone’s position on the matter drastically, but rather helped the students articulate more clearly, the thoughts and ideas they already had when coming into the program. The result was an increased certainty in what they believe to be true. The same effect can be seen in other areas in the students’ thinking as well. In the questionnaires, all students agreed at the beginning of the program that “Christians and Muslims can live together peacefully”. (Appendix 3) At the end of the program, four students chose ‘strongly agree’ on the same question.

8.4.4 Critique of the program

In the ending interviews, some critique was also addressed at the program. There were no commonalities in the critique but rather individual students who wanted to address issues that had affected their experience negatively.

When asked about their attitudes towards interfaith dialogue, Student 3 expressed that, while thinking that it is an important tool, it should not be “overdone”.

“I think sometimes when people are having an understanding and respect for one another it’s not always necessary. But I think in places where there’s like strife and miscommunication and misunderstanding it would be best to like for whichever religious groups that are having these issues I guess, to come together and talk about them because it’s easier to, I guess, see things when like someone in front of you is telling them this is how their life’s going. I think
interfaith dialogue is like any other dialogue is as long as it’s I guess like intentions are there like if it’s out of curiosity or just out of getting a deeper understanding of like a person of another religions perspective instead of just reading about it, I think it can be good. But sometimes I think it’s just overdone.” – Student 1, Ending interview (Appendix 2)

Some critique from the students focused on the weariness of the whole course. During the semester, the students were given opportunities to practice their faith in several ways, most notably by offering a chance to attend the Friday Services at a local church in Muscat, and by weekly services organized by the two program coordinators, in the six-week excursion to Ibri. Despite this, Student 6 expressed feeling spiritual weakness, during the program due to the weariness of it all

“I have felt [spiritually] very, very weak I guess if that makes sense. Like coming in, coming from a community that’s like all about worship and Christ and there’s chapel and you know you read your bible at least once a week there. Here it’s like I’m so busy with stuff or I’m so tired that I just don’t haven’t taken the time that I need to spend in like the word or with the Lord and do my devotions so that I can umm I can grow. I mean that’s not the only way you grow but I think that devotion helps. Helps you to understand and contemplate things and talk with god as well as a kind of trigger almost but umm yea I think I feel very weak like I don’t yea I don’t feel like I really been strong in my faith this semester. I feel like it’s been really hard to, I’m not sure if that’s because I’m in an all-Muslim society or you just get so busy here that it’s hard to like, it’s hard to have that time. And it’s especially hard it seems like, to have privacy and space here to like just be with your thoughts and think about things without having to worry about somebody coming in or something like that. So, I guess overall I felt yea, I haven’t felt really strong in ym faith. At the moment. That doesn’t mean that Christ is not present in my life or that I’m a bad Christian it just yea it’s just not, I’m not um it’s just caused maybe me to be like a little bit less confident sometimes in myself because I try
to lean on my own works to like help me through things instead of God because I haven’t made that time for him. I guess.” – Student 6, Ending interview (Appendix 2.)

I see this weariness as a result of having to write many academic papers on the course of the program. Having worked closely with the students during the semester, I noticed weariness and increased stress levels due to having so many written works to submit during the course. Though I understand the value of writing these academic papers, I personally believe that the program directors could rethink the balance between traditional ways of learning, in this case writing papers, and researching topics, and untraditional, more experiential ways of learning. After all, it is the extrarational experiences that the students highlighted as significant in their learning process.

Another significant challenge, that most students mentioned in their essays and interviews was the difficulty to adapt to the gender norms in Oman.

“I have also been challenged by living in the gender culture here. I am generally a friendly person to people on the street, but here I feel like I can’t say hello to everyone. I feel like I can’t look into the eye of women here. This was a very big challenge to begin with. Over time it became second nature to me. When I started to notice this, I became nervous. I wonder how I will react to the different culture of the States. The gender norms have been very different and very difficult for me to deal with. I find it difficult to hear what the girls are saying because I know it is true, but also it is so different from my experiences in this culture.” – Student 5, Ending interview (Appendix 4)

This was a challenge for both the males and the females of the group, but for the males, this was also a significant learning experience. Both of the male students expressed in their interviews and essays, that hearing the female perspective in a culture that is significantly more patriarchal than the one in their home communities, helped them understand how gender affects the day to day life of females and assumed females.
One student also expressed feelings of being unable to express their views due to having more conservative views compared to their peers. The student also expressed feeling a contradiction with the overall message of respecting other worldviews. In their ending interview Student 4 said that:

“...I feel like something I have struggled with this semester like after hearing so many different views and understandings especially within Christianity um I think I have just struggled with being one who has had like more of a conservative view because yea sometimes I feel like it’s not okay to like believe those things um when really I’m just trying to understand the world around me and that’s how I grew up and so yea I think sometimes I have been afraid to share my views because I feel like they are not right compared to everybody else’s um so I would say like that’s one thing that it’s been like challenging this semester and it might have like kind of hindered me from being able to like really dig into questions in a different way because I was afraid of like saying the wrong thing which like that’s kind of my own thing too like I recognize I’ve always had that fear and not just here but yea I don’t know if that would be helpful at all.” – Student 4, Ending interview (Appendix 2.)

Personally, I see it as particularly noteworthy that one of the students felt ashamed of their opinions and afraid to speak out due to a fear of judgement. The program’s aim was to teach the students to understand and learn about the dynamics and importance of interfaith dialogue, but in a sense, failed to actualize intrafaith dialogue within the student group. The particular group, that was the subject of this research, was somewhat homogenous, since most of the student held quite liberal theological views. This can be seen as a helpful premise for the students to engage in discussion with each other, since it lessens conflicts, but it can make the minority who disagrees feel unable to voice their opinion. How the program facilitates internal dialogue within the student group, is a matter that might need to be addressed in the future.
9 CONCLUSIONS

According to my analysis of the students’ interviews, essays and answers to the questionnaire, the semester abroad program helps the students develop love for their neighbor and for themselves, respect for other cultures and worldviews, and a deep and personal understanding of Islam. These outcomes parallel the program's aims to develop cross-cultural skills, teach about Islam, and to further the understanding between Christians and Muslims through cultural immersion and academic rigor (Northwestern College, 2019).

Nadira K. Charantya, who has studied the cultural-spiritual perspective of transformative learning, notes that the transformation is usually multidimensional. “When one’s spirituality and one’s culture are invited guests at the table, they become an inherent part of the transformation. Participants at the table are transformed in terms of how they see the world, how they see their own identities, and how they see their role in the world.” (Charantya, 2012 p. 238.)

The semester abroad program allows the students to be guests at the table, in a society that is often described with the word ‘hospitable’. Living in Omani culture and benefitting from the partnerships that Al Amana Centre has with their local partners, fosters holistic cultural engagement and extrarational experiences.

Most prominent change found in the research is the students’ increased understanding of Islam. This was a very expected outcome and confirms that the program reached its academic goal of teaching the students about Islam. The students agreed that taking classes on Islam, and Muslim-Christian relations has increased they’re knowledge and understanding of Islam and that they are more certain about their knowledge of the faith tradition. Some students expressed that they can now better combat the stereotypes that people have about Muslims in their home communities. This kind of religious understanding and religious literacy is also an increasingly useful tool in an ever more pluralistic world, where contact with people of other faiths and cultures, has already become a norm. The
increase of understanding can be traced the result of two different catalysts: rational and extrarational engagement.

The rational engagement with the ideas of Islam through courses, books and academic papers about the tradition has increased the students’ knowledge of the tradition. In the interviews, the students also stressed and valued the interactions with Muslims, local Omanis and their Muslim teachers. Getting to know Muslims and having the chance to ask questions from their Muslim teachers has given the students a chance to understand Islam not just on a rational level, but on a more experiential and emotional level.

The experiences of the students can be seen as being true to the idea of transformative dialogue. The goal of transformative dialogue is that the participants experience some sort of conversion to a renewed version of their own faith, while being informed and compassionate towards the other, seeing the similarities and honoring the differences in the religions and purging the stereotypes about the other faith (McLaughlin, 2013 p. 55).

This kind of extrarational engagement is what I would describe as the core of the semester abroad program. Intercultural immersion and the chance to engage with Muslims in a Muslim context allows the students a chance to see the world from a new point of view. Visiting the holy places of other faiths gives the students a chance to see and experience what people of other faiths find holy, and opens their minds to respect that.

The second dimension of the extrarational engagement is the chance to experience and reflect on the experiences as a group. Getting to ask the “big questions” in a group of peers going through the same struggles and experiences, allows a special space for transformation and learning. This was enhanced due to the majority of students coming from a similar place in life; having sincere curiosity to learn about Islam and to engage in dialogue with other people, and being open-minded.
It is although worth noting that the group having a positive attitude towards interfaith dialogue before coming into the program, obviously twists the research outcomes in favor of the program. It raises the question of how well the program would work on a group of students with negative, or more neutral attitudes towards interfaith dialogue. It would be an interesting possibility for future research, to study how similar methods affect persons with negative attitudes towards Islam and interfaith dialogue.

The program helps the students become *ambassadors for dialogue*. All the students already had highly positive attitudes towards interfaith dialogue before coming to the program, and majority of them mentioned that the program has given them tools that they can use in their home communities when confronting stereotypes about Muslims. The students also learned about the practicalities of interfaith dialogue, and can hopefully take these tools to their home communities too.

This research has been a research of transformation. The transformations that happened during the course of the program have not been drastic changes, but developments on the way that the students have already started upon before the program. What is clear, is that no student changed their opinion or believes completely, but all students learned to articulate their believes more clearly and gained some certainty in their own identities as believers.
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Integrative Experiential Learning

Instructor: Laurel Pals
Meeting Time: Various Times as per calendar

Course Credit: 2

Course Description

Through this course, students will engage in a range of rare and intensive intercultural and interreligious encounters through guided outings, facilitated dialogues, and both structured and informal interactions within Omani society. This course is designed to guide students in processing these intercultural and interreligious experiences in a way that enables them to integrate these discoveries into their own identity, faith, value system, and culture.

Objectives

- Integrate academic learning with hands-on experience in order to maximize understanding and growth.
- Engage the culture and people of Oman from a variety of vantage points in order to objectively and deeply understand the host culture.
- Gain new perspectives on the home culture through interacting with Omani culture.
• Explore issues emerging out of student experiences and questions through dialogue, interaction with Omani culture, and academic endeavors.
• Consider how perspectives gained in Oman will influence faith formation, character, and pursuing personal goals.

Learning Goals

1. Build confidence and skills for navigating life and relationships in a new culture.
2. Demonstrate an informed understanding of Omani culture and contrast it with their home culture.
4. Develop ability to articulate and discuss experiences, including personal thoughts, questions, and feelings both verbally and in writing.
5. Begin planning for how this cross-cultural experience will impact life upon returning home.

Course Format

Weekly course requirements will vary according to travel schedule and other factors. Respectful participation in educational travel, organized outings, scheduled lectures and discussions, and informal interactions is required and these make up the bulk of the course time. Group discussion and debrief sessions, as well as occasional readings, will supplement experiential components.

Course Requirements and Evaluation

Attendance, Participation, and Meaningful Contributions 20%

This includes experiential learning opportunities and class discussions/debriefs. Students should demonstrate engaged listening and thoughtful participation in all activities and discussions. Feedback on participation will be formally given by the instructor with the return of the first two reflection papers.

Attendance/Participation Grading Criteria:

• How engaged is the student in the exposure to Omani history and society?
• How much curiosity does s/he display? (Is s/he forming and asking insightful questions?)
• How much understanding does the student demonstrate regarding cultural complexity?
• How much intellectual and emotional empathy does s/he exhibit for more than one world view?
• How clearly does s/he articulate understanding of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication in the host culture?

Interview Project 40%
This project should be five to seven pages (double-spaced) in length and will require you to interview five people who you have met during your time in Oman. These five people should represent different views of Oman and should come from different spheres of society (i.e. they should not all be Omani men). Though the exact interview topic and questions will be chosen by you, your interview topic should focus in on some social issue that you have encountered in Oman. Some ideas for particular topics include: “the rights and treatment of women”, “the rights and treatment of immigrant workers”, “youth-culture in Oman”, etc. A project proposal will be due to the instructor on April 2nd that will include: 1) your specific topic, 2) a paragraph statement on why you chose this topic, and 3) the names of your five interviewees. The final project will be due on May 3rd.

Reflection Papers 40%

Short weekly reflection papers will help frame your time in Oman and help you make the most of it. Each should be one and a half to two pages, double spaced, and should demonstrate critical thinking, self-reflection, growing self-awareness, and engagement with the world around you in Oman. These are meant to serve as a platform for further processing, and therefore should be well thought out but not a source of stress. These may be revised and resubmitted if desired. Let the instructor know you intend to revise and resubmit within two business days of receiving graded paper back, and a new due date will be agreed upon. Each week may include a new prompt or bunch of questions based on particular experiences or material of the week that is meant to incite reflection. Short lectures of material may be introduced in class pertaining to our weekly experience, such as a sacred text, relevant concept, or cultural object that will be expected to be synthesized in at least one paragraph of the weekly papers.
General questions may look like the following:

What was the most challenging thing for you this week, and in what ways? What has been unexpected? What kind of goals could you set for yourself this semester? What attitudes, beliefs, cultural or religious leanings of yours were illuminated with deeper understanding? How did the material for the week sit with you? Did it open up or inspire any new thoughts? What do you want to know more about? Where do you see growth in your life (personally, spiritually, relationally, academically, etc.) over the course of your time in Oman?

At the end of the semester we will do a four page reflection paper addressing your overall experience of the semester.

Review your first reflection paper. How have you achieved what you set out to gain? What is left undone or incomplete? Did your goals and purposes change or develop while you were here? How? Why? What was one of the most valuable things you have learned, and how can you explain it to someone at home in a few sentences or short conversation? Look forward to what life has in store for you next. How will you take this semester home with you and continue with what has begun here in Oman? How has your time in Oman prepared or equipped you for life after college?

1. Omani culture and society syllabus

Oman Culture and Society
Spring Semester 2019

Instructor: Ahmed Al Mukhaini, Justin Meyers
Student support: Laurel Pals

Course Description

Oman is a microcosm of the culture of the Arabian Peninsula and in some ways is representative of the larger “Arab-World” a region encompassing the 22 countries of the Arab League from Morocco in Northwest Africa to the Oman itself, the country on the far eastern edge of the Arab World. While diverse in culture, the larger region comprised
of Arab countries is united by a common language - Arabic, a shared faith - Islam, and an approximate political affiliation based on a shared experience in relation to mutual membership in the Arab League and respective dealings with Western colonial powers. To understand the culture, society and people of Oman is to understand in more depth the complexities, intricacies and importance of the Arab World.

Course Objectives

To provide students with an introduction to the history, social structure, politics, religion, economy and culture of Oman. Upon completion of this course students will:

- Gain an understanding of the Arab World through the detailed case study of Oman. Students will be better able to articulate how Oman is exemplary of the Arab World and how it is unique.
- Develop an appreciation for the customs and culture of Omani society and in turn of a greater pan-Arab culture.
- Discover an Omani perspective of the political history of the Gulf region in relation to regional and global foreign policy.

Lecture and Session Schedule

Week 1:

**Jan 28: Introduction** to the course. General questions and observations.

**Jan 30: Topic:** Oman: A voyage through Time: Exploring the history of Oman from its pre-history to modern day Oman.

Week 2:

**Feb 3: Topic:** Oman History debrief and a closer look at modern history

**Feb 7: Topic:** Evolution of National Identities in Oman: the utility of history, information and the tribe.

Week 3:

**Feb 10: Topic:** Tribes and Omani Society. Examination of the tribe as a social organization in past and present.

**Feb 12: Topic:** OMANis in East Africa. Focus on this cultural group in Oman, highlighting some historical and political baggage.

Week 4:
Feb 17: **Topic:** Slavery. History and practice of slavery in the Omani Empire and its overbearing into the present.

Feb 19: **Topic:** Social groups and stigmas in Omani society. Overview of the various social groups and stigmas, and associated stereotypes.

Feb 21: **Analytical Essay Questions Due**

Week 5:

While in Ibri: **Topic:** Women’s role in Oman and its historic evolution. Outlook and evaluation.

Week 6-10: **Ibri Abarbic Language and Interior Oman Cultural Engagement**

Week 11: **Spring Break**

Week 12

April 14: Religious Underpinnings of the political landscape in Oman. Presentation of various religious aspects and themes impacting politics and polity in the Muslim world and Oman and an insight into Ibadi Islam.

April 16: Ethics and Morality in Islam

Week 13

April 21: Islamic Perspective on other religions and faiths: do non-heavenly religions exist?

**Analytical essay due date. April 22nd**

Research time at al Amana Centre

Week 14:

Research time at al Amana Centre

Week 15:

Research time at al Amana Centre

Week 16:

Students’ Presentations. Format, duration and schedule to be determined later. Portfolio/ scrapbook/ journal due date. May 2.

Research paper due date. May 2.

**Field trips**

- Visit to Bait Al Zubair museum of Omani history and cultural heritage
- Visit to the Omani Military Museum (National Armed Forces Museum)
• Tour of archaeological sites of interior
• Tour of Nizwa Fort and lecture on political tension between Imamate and Sultanate.

**Required Texts:**


Other recommended readings as determined by Instructor, such as:

- Jepeterson.net
- Some excursions in Oman by Percy Cox. (Geographical Journal Vol.66, No.3, Sept. 1925, pp. 193-221)
- Narrative of a journey into the interior of Oman, in 1835, by Lieutenant Wellsted. (Journal of the Royal Geographical Society Vol.7, 1837, pp.102-113)
- Marc Valeri, Uzi Rabi, Peter Johnson, Unni Wickan, Christine Eickelman, Khaled Al Azri, Mandana Limbert

**Evaluation Criteria:**

1. 10% Discussion  
2. 10% Presentations  
3. 20% Portfolio / scrapbook/ journal  
4. 25% Analytical Essay (1500 words)  
5. 35% Research Paper (3000 words)

**Course Requirements:**
Discussion: Students are expected to engage in class with questions and comments. The instructor might assign roles during discussions sessions.

Presentations: Each student will be required to select a topic related to Omani culture and society, to research the topic and give a 15-minute in-class presentation. Presentations will take place after the spring break. Presentations can be on the selected topic for the research paper.

Portfolio/ Scrapbook/ Journal: Each student will be required to submit a portfolio, scrapbook or journal documenting his/ her cultural experience in Oman or any emerging questions or observations. The portfolio, scrapbook or journal should not be less than 10 pages and not more than 20 pages.

Analytical Essay : Each student will be required to submit an analytical essay. The students will be presented with a host of questions or statements by the instructor. The students are expected to present critical arguments and analysis of the issues at hand.

Research paper: Each student will be required to develop his/ her own question and attempt to answer it, or synthesize his/ her own thesis on topics related to Omani culture and society. The paper should be researched using library and on-line sources. 3,000 words, double spaced typed pages.

Grading Scale:

Grades will be determined as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Above Average</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Below Average</th>
<th>Failing</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>C+ 78%</td>
<td>D+ 68%</td>
<td>F 59%</td>
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1. Christian-Muslim relations syllabus

Syllabus for Christian-Muslim Relations-Spring 2019
**Course Title:** An Introduction to Christian-Muslim Relations

**Instructors:**
Rev. Justin Meyers – Associate Director – Al Amana Centre

Rev. Aaro Rytkonen – Executive Director – Al Amana Centre

Rev. Jeff Bos – Associate Program Director – Al Amana Centre

**Course Credit:** 4

**Meetings Times:** Generally, Sunday and Tuesday 1-4pm when in Muscat. Other guest lectures time TBD

**Room Location:** Al Amana Centre.

**Course Description:**

This course is part of a semester program in the Sultanate of Oman, a country noted for its openness, tolerance, and hospitality. This makes it an ideal place to introduce students to Arab culture and religion, and the dynamics of relations between Christianity and Islam. Because Oman’s religious and political leadership is currently articulating the importance of interfaith and intercultural cooperation, it provides an engaging environment in which one can explore approaches and possibilities of working together for the common good.

**Course Objectives:**

A cross-cultural, immersion experience encompasses many areas of exposure and learning. To help focus the experience, the course will examine four interrelated areas of Christian-Muslim relations. Understanding the differences and convergences of these areas helps one to develop a scholarly approach that integrates faith perspectives.
**Area One:** Introduction to Islam and Christianity. We will read and discuss Reza Aslan’s introduction to Islam *No God But God*, combined with *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* by Badru Kateregga and David Shenk. Being in Oman allows one to learn about Islam from a Muslim perspective (Sunni, Shia, and Ibadi). Guest lecturers include professors of Islam from Ministry of Religious Affairs. It also allows one to learn about different Christian traditions from local pastors and Al Amana instructors.

**Area Two:** A theology of other religions. How one approaches Christian-Muslim relations is largely determined by one’s underlying theology of religious pluralism. Therefore it is important to have a sense of one’s perspective in entering into interfaith relations, as well as assessing how the experience of engaging the ‘other’ informs one’s theology.

**Area Three:** The history of Christian-Muslim relations. It is here one can see the various modes and means through which people of these faiths have engaged one another over the past 1,400 years. This aids one in understanding the importance of contextual issues when building relationships with Muslims.

**Area Four:** A review of the foundations of Christian-Muslim relations in Oman. Through an examination of Ibadi law, the history of Oman’s relations with western nations such as the UK and the United States, and speeches written by Oman’s religious leaders, we will develop an understanding of Oman’s current approach to religious coexistence.

**Course Method:**

The course will consist of assigned readings, lectures, discussions, student-led colloquies, guided inter-cultural encounters, inter-religious dialogues with Muslim friends, and opportunities to engage the people of Oman at a variety of levels.
Course Requirements:

- Attendance and active participation in all lectures, colloquies and meetings, and familiarity with assigned readings.
- Student Presentations: as part of the course, each student will be assigned one section for which he/she will give a 20 minute lecture reviewing the material for that class period, summarizing the major themes and issues, identifying questions for discussion, and leading a group discussion. A 2-3 page brief on the topic will be turned in and distributed to the group in advance of the session.
- A one-page synopsis of readings and prepared material will be due one day prior to the scheduled discussion.
- Two short analytical essays, 3-5 pages (1000-1500 words) each, will be due periodically throughout the semester. Students will receive a prompt with information regarding the paper at least one-week prior to its due date.
- A final paper, 10 pages (3,000 words), will be due at the end of the semester. It will address how a student’s experience and increased knowledge in this area informs his/her theological understanding of, and engagement in, Christian-Muslim relations.

Course Grading:

Attendance and participation (should demonstrate reading comprehension): 15%

Presentations: 15%

Two analytical essays: 30%

Final reflection paper: 40%

Course Schedule:
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday, January 27</td>
<td>Syllabus review, Opening discussion, Issues in Christian-Muslim Relations</td>
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<td>1:00 – 4:00 pm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday Jan 29</td>
<td>Introduction to Islam</td>
<td>Aslan, Preface through chapter 3 (p. 75)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:00-4:00 pm</td>
<td>The early history of Islam</td>
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<td>Sunday, Feb 3</td>
<td>Introduction to Islam</td>
<td>Goddard, 1-104</td>
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<td>1:00-3:00 pm</td>
<td>Establishing authority and political structure of Islam</td>
<td>Aslan, Chapters 4 – 6 (p. 173)</td>
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<td>Paper Prompt #1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, Feb 6</td>
<td>Introduction to Islam</td>
<td>Aslan, Chapters 7 – 8 (p. 224)</td>
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<td>1:00-4:00pm</td>
<td>Distinctions between the major branches and expressions of Islam (Sunni, Shia, Sufi, Ibadi)</td>
<td>Hoffman, The Essentials of Ibadi Islam, pp. 3-27</td>
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<td>Student Presentation #1</td>
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<td>Monday, Feb 11</td>
<td>1:00-4:00pm</td>
<td>Introduction to Islam</td>
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<td>Contemporary Trends</td>
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<td>Human Rights and Gender Issues</td>
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<td>Student Presentation #2</td>
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<td>Leah</td>
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<td>Wednesday, Feb 13</td>
<td>3:30pm-6:30pm</td>
<td>Intro to Islam – An Omani Muslim perspective</td>
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<td>Monday, Feb 18</td>
<td>1:00-4:00pm</td>
<td>Intro to Scriptural Reasoning</td>
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<td>Tuesday, Feb 19</td>
<td>9:00am-12:00pm</td>
<td>Scriptural Reasoning</td>
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<td>Monday, April 15</td>
<td>1:00-4:00pm</td>
<td>Major Points of Muslim Theology</td>
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<td>Student Presentation #3</td>
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<td>Daniel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, April 17</td>
<td>1:00-4:00 pm</td>
<td>Major Points of Christian Theology</td>
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<td>Student Presentation #4</td>
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<td>Gatwiri</td>
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<td>Monday, April 22</td>
<td>1:00 – 4:00 pm</td>
<td>Theology of Religions: Replacement Theory</td>
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<td>Student Presentation #5</td>
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<td>Anna</td>
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<td>Wednesday, April 24</td>
<td>1:00 -4:00 pm</td>
<td>Theology of Religions: Fulfillment Model</td>
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<td>Student Presentation #6</td>
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<td>Garrison</td>
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<td>Monday, April 29</td>
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<td>Theology of Religions: Mutuality Model</td>
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<td>Wednesday, May 1</td>
<td>1:00-4:00 pm</td>
<td>Theology of Religions: The Acceptance Model</td>
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<td>Thursday, May 2</td>
<td>Oman’s approach to Religious Co-existence and Christian-Muslim Relations</td>
<td>Final Class reflections and learnings from Oman</td>
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<td>1:00-4:00 pm</td>
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<td>Second 3-5 page paper due</td>
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<td>May 5-6</td>
<td>Final Presentations in Class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday May 7</td>
<td>Final research paper due – If chosen as option</td>
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**Required Reading:**


Reading Packet, provided

**Recommended Reading:**


Crucified One is Lord: Confessing the Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralist Society, by the Commission on Theology, Reformed Church in America. 1996, http://www.rca.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?&pid=1611&srcid=2058


Appendix 2 – Transcribed interviews

**Student 1, Beginning interview**

**Interviewer:** So umm, what made you come to Oman

**Student 1:** I wanted to learn how to umm communicate with other people so specifically the Muslim Christian relation class was appealing to me. Umm because I want to be a physician eventually so it's very important to have that background and know how to relate well to your patients. I also wanted to umm learn Arabic for a couple of reasons. Practically it fulfils the language requirement of
my school and otherwise as the Muslim um Arabic population in the US is growing I'll likely have patients that at some point will speak Arabic and I think that it is important for physicians to at the very least be able to greet their patients in their native tongue. Um additionally originally I was going to go to Chicago for the semester and do an internship and all things that would really great on the resume for a medical school but that didn't really excite me. I didn't feel like I didn't feel jazzed about it. Like I did when I thought about going to Oman. And so that was a sign that to me that um that it would be better for me to go to Oman than Chicago.

Interviewer: And have you liked it here?

Student 1: Yes, it’s been a harder adjustment than I thought. Typically, you hear that when you go to a new country and exist in a new culture you have this honey moon phase for the first couple of weeks and then culture shock sets in I think that I have travelled enough that I don’t really feel the honey moon phase anymore umm so it’s just an immediate culture shock right away. And it wasn’t necessarily anything about the culture even it wasn’t like you know oh the walking across the street is scary you know it was just um an inability to want to engage if that makes sense so if that makes sense and so I’m still working through that. Statistically speaking most people get over that so I should be fine.

Interviewer: So can you explain to me your view on Islam or your opinion about Islam?

Student 1: yes so I don’t say this to a lot of people because I have a lot of conservative friends who would probably like think I’m a witch but I think that Christianity and Islam likely worship the same god umm I think that might be the case for all Abrahamic faiths umm and I’m not entirely convinced that we’re not all in all theistic religion worshiping the same god. I’m not convinced that that’s not the case. Does it make sense?

Interviewer: I understand what you mean.
Student 1: I think there are parts of Islam that are very clear and beautiful umm in Christianity it’s really messy because we try to at least in the States we try to keep the church and the state separate and we end up voting for political parties that we think is the Christian answer umm because of their views on this or this but Islam is very upfront about you know, there’s no separation of the church and state. There is Sharia law and that has to do with both the state and the church so I think that part is much better executed than in Christianity.

Interviewer: Umm what is your view on other faiths in general, other religions?

Student 1: Yea umm, there’s some practices in some religions that I have a hard time reconciling, um just because of the way that I was brought up so like for example… I definitely had an example for this now I don’t remember

Interviewer: It’s totally fine

Student 1: Yea.

Interviewer: You can say it later if it comes to your mind.

Student 1: Okay yea. Um certain practices that are that clash a lot with my culture I guess are a bit hard for me to reconcile. Umm so I have a hard time with Satanists because that’s so opposite of what I believe but I think that there’s beauty in… I think there’s some beauty in every religion I think there’s something wonderful about adhering to umm a set of beliefs and how then you self change in the process. Um I don’t remember who it was that said that religion is the opiate of the masses but umm I don’t see that as the case and even if it were I think opiate is a strong word but that might not be such a bad thing you know. Maybe I sound like a heretic or a witch or but.

Interviewer: I’m not here to judge you. Umm so do you think that you could be friends with a muslim?

Student 1: Hmm yea I do. Umm I don’t umm. It’s a very small town where I live and I don’t live near anyone who is a muslim but I think if I met someone and our
personalities coensided I wouldn’t have a problem with being friends with them. I’m friends with an agnostic person and that’s not Christianity you know and so.

**Interviewer:** Do you usually befriend only with other Christians?

**Student 1:** Not necessarily. That just happens to be who I am surrounded by for the most part.

**Interviewer:** Do you recognize any stereotypes in your ideas about Muslims or arabs?

**Student 1:** Like do I have any stereotypes?

**Interviewer:** Do you recognize that you have some stereotypes?

**Student 1:** Yea. I do. Umm. I’m really working on my feelings about gender separation in public I think public displays of affection are gross for the most part but umm I’m having a hard time suspending any judgement from umm separating like single men are gonna sit over here and families can sit over here that sort of thing. Umm also there’s a stereotype that umm Arab people don’t treat animals very well and I’m trying to suspend that. At least until I’m given enough evidence to prove me right. Not prove. To suggest that I’m right or wrong. But right now I’m trying to suspend that.

**Interviewer:** Any others?

**Student 1:** No I don’t think so. There’s a western stereotype that I don’t necessarily hold that umm the hijab and the niqab are umm suppressing women but I don’t think that’s the case. Yea.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Then if you would need to explain to me your own faith. What it is that you believe in?

**Student 1:** Yea so. I am a Christian in a sense that um I believe in one God. I could recite the Nicene creed but that’s not helpful. One god and I believe that
Christ was a historical figure who was crucified and the purpose of that death was umm sanctification and what I mean by that is umm taking the burdens and sins and faults of humanity and umm I guess challenging them um so that we can have a relationship with god because otherwise um he’s perfect and pure and we would not be able to communicate with god if we were bound to that sin. Um I think that we are able to as humans to have a personal relationship with god but I think we were born sinful and we need forgiveness everyday and um I believe that god created the world through theistic evolution so I believe the earth is billions of years old but I do believe that god designed a mechanism that I can’t fully understand and we cannot understand to create the world as we can see it. You know. I’m running through the Nicene creed and making sure I have everything.

**Interviewer:** Do you think, do you believe that there is salvation outside of Christianity?

**Student 1:** I think that (pause) I think that Abrahamic faiths worship the same god. Umm and I think that if they worship the same God it would be unlikely that they would not also receive salvation because they worship and dedicate themselves to that god. So yes.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that God is working through other religions too

**Student 1:** Yes

**Interviewer:** Okay. Thank you. Was there anything you would like to add? Related to the topics we had discussed.

**Student 1:** No, I don’t think so. Thanks in advance for not judging me or sending me to the stake or whatever. Yea

**Interviewer:** Okay. Thank you. I’m gonna turn this off now.

*(the last question was asked later on the same day since, it was forgotten in the first interview)*
Interviewer: So could you explain to me your opinion on interfaith dialogue and its possibilities?

Student 1: Yea, I think that umm the less educated you are on um the less educated you are about the person with whom you are engaging in dialogue umm the less possible it is but I think with education so for example between Christians and Muslims I think for Muslims to understand Christianity and for Christians to understand Islam umm interfaith dialogue is completely possible. I think what makes it not possible is lack of education and understanding or lack of willingness to learn and understand.

Interviewer: Thank you

Student 2, Beginning interview

Interviewer: So what made you came to Oman?

Student 2: um, kind of like I was telling Aaro, there’s so many pieces to add to the answer to that question. Umm. Just general interest with this area. I think it’s so incredibly misundersteed and portrayed in such a negative way. And I think it’s really important to go go over there so you can go back to your home and everything and say this has been my experience and its likely completely encoun-ter to what you grew up hearing or what was in the news. Umm so that and then just sheer interest. I think it’s a fascinating area its history, its tradition, um the people themselves. You can learn so much just by intentionally placing yourself in these types of situations and just like transplanting yourself like completely ripping yourself off from the roots and just being somewhere. Umm and then I really loved what the program was looking at. I always thought world religions were fascinating. Umm cause I just think religion is something that just so deeply unites humanity. And so I think understanding them is really really important in understanding people and who they are. Even if you’re not religious, you’re not religious typically for a reason and so not necessarily in a vent (?) so I think even
if you don’t believe in religion understanding, and learning to communicate across them is important.

**Interviewer:** what is your view or opinion on Islam?

**Student 2:** Umm, kind of the same as the general area that I think is deeply misunderstood. Umm I’ve done a little bit of study in Islam and I don’t claim to know very much at all. But from what I do know, I think it gets a really bad rep in Western society. And kind of similar... I mean every.. the squeaky wheel gets the grease you could say. You know the small minority of the group might cause problems, that doesn’t speak for the majority of um Islam and Muslim people. Um I totally lost my train of thought, what was the question, what I think of it?

**Interviewer:** Yes

**Student 2:** Okay I was just following a rabbit trail. Yea, I think it’s misunderstood, I think it’s interesting and I think it’s much more interwoven than we think it is. Like um all the Abrahamic traditions the more I learn about it the more similar it is to Christianity, to Judaism to whatever. I think it’s important to understand.

**Interviewer:** And do you think that you could be friends with a Muslim?

**Student 2:** Oh yeah totally. I haven’t had that experience, just being in small towns, you know

**Interviewer:** So you don’t have any Muslim friends?

**Student 2:** I don’t. No. Well not to my knowledge. Anyway. But yea I wouldn’t have any problem with having a Muslim friend. I think that would be cool.

**Interviewer:** And do you recognize any stereotypes about your ideas about Muslims or Arabs that you have?

**Student 2:** Yea, definitely. Um I think a lot of in my experience, people tend to think they’re violent. Maybe not inherently, maybe learned. Umm or for some
reason it feels like untrustworthy thinking? Umm and people just expect the worst of them. Umm so that’s kind of an awful cards to be dealt.

Interviewer: Do you recognize some of those stereotypes in your own ideas or…

Student 2: I think I used to have them, and I’m not saying I’m completely washed of them, I think it’s really hard to do that. Umm I think it depends on the context where I don’t think I would judge a person based on how they look or like their um religious affiliation or anything of that sort. But I do recognize like if I’m in an alley as a female and a there’s a female following me that’s gonna be different than a male and then even if it is a man that’s gonna be different so it kind of depends on the context, but I’m can’t say that I’m completely … those are completely absent from my mind. Which isn’t easy to admit but…

Interviewer: And umm what is your opinion on other religions in general?

Student 2: Umm other religions in genereal, or how they relate to each other? Or…

Interviewer: I mean if that’s your… you explained to me your opinion on Islam, what you think about Islam. What do you think about other religions than Christianity.

Student 2: Christianity… Interestingly that’s a lot harder to answer cause I grew up Christianized so I’m Christian and so I see the complexities within religion cause that’s familiar to me, whereas I see the complexities in Islam but not in the way that I would if I had grown up Muslim. So I think.. I don’t know, I think they are way more related than we recognize and I kind of think that’s true for most religions that they are very, very interconnected. Umm yea I don’t know if that answers your question. I can expand on that if it’s helpful.

Interviewer: No, we can go on to your own faith. Can you explain what do you believe in, what do you categorize yourself as?
Student 2: Oh it’s so hard because as a philosophy major I’m like little bit inherently skeptical so I’m very eager to question rationales and tell me story, explain to me, give me empirical data and what ever. And so there’s for like about the past year, that’s been like self-reflection like okay so if I want to have this cohesive worldview, what does that look like from my religion because that um impacts like everything you do like impacts the way you act, impacts values and things of that sort, so I would say despite all of those questions that I have um its, I would still categorize myself as Christian. But yea I don’t know about that denominational-wise probably something closer to reformed church but then even still I’m a little bit, I don’t know, working through. It’s the institution that gets me. So but…

Interviewer: So, as you identify as a Christian, do you think that uh God is working through other religions?

Student 2: 100% yea, I think so. Yea. I think there’s no possible way for any of us to really know what’s really going on with the divine. Umm so I think as humanity, we do the best that we can and I don’t think it’s my job to say that somebody else doesn’t have it right. Cause I don’t know that. You know, so all I can do is just hope that I have enough of what’s right. Enough of an understanding to make a difference in my life and other peoples lives. So, and just live well

Interviewer: So, do you think that there is also salvation in other religions?

Student 2: Once again, that’s the… I have definitely thought about that a lot and I think ultimately, I kind of came to the conclusion that that’s not my decision to make. That I believe what makes sense to me and that in no way should that, should what makes sense to me be forced upon someone else. Especially on the basis of salvation. I do see the complexity in that with evangelism and everything of that sort but I think if there is general revelation or divine revelation, I need to let the person come to that on their own terms maybe. And live life in such a way that maybe something is revealed through my life, that feels very arrogant to say, I don’t know. But yea I guess ultimately, it’s just not my decision to make so we live in a way that, live in a way that is umm yea. That could be revealing I guess…

(Prayer call starts sounding from the minaret) Do you want to move inside?
Interviewer: Uh, I’m pretty sure this will catch (the audio recorder) your voice.

Student 2: Oh that’s impressive. I’ll speak up a little bit if that helps

Interviewer: No worries. Uh yea. Anything you would like to add on that?

Student 2: I don’t think so. I think I would just start

Interviewer: Umm, so what do you think about interfaith, interfaith dialogue and its possibilities

Student 2: I think… Its possibilities.. I think it’s crucial to talk with other people of different religions. Part of that I guess cause where I come from with believing that there is multiple ways to god um or at least yea… so I think it’s really important to talk… This is like super distracting. Give me a second to think. Umm interfaith… Yea so religion is… I kind of go back to something I said in the beginning where I think religion is something that really unites humanity in a very deep way, I guess you could say. I mean it’s something that we’ve been doing since like the beginning of our race and so like our species. Umm and so I think it’s really important to understand the different ways people view the world and that gives you deeper understanding not only of the person but of maybe the culture of whatever which gives you a vast network of understanding and so I think it has.. I think once people are open to talking um the possibilities are really endless to… I yea, I think there is a lot of potential there when you’re open um and you don’t, and you don’t, open being you are curious, you don’t take offence quite as easily I think that can be a major inhibitor. Umm and curious.. so yea I guess I just think it’s crucial. Amongst faith communities of any kind.

Interviewer: Anything you would like to add on the topics we have discussed. OR correct yourself.

Student 2: Um I don’t think so. Anything you would like me to expand on?

Interviewer: No I think you expanded quite well
Student 2: Okay thanks

Student 3, Beginning interview

Interviewer: So could you explain to me, what made you came to Oman?

Student 3: Um, Justin came to talk to one of my classes and I thought it was interesting and I started thinking about it more and I realized it’s an experience that might be more difficult the older I get as well as it’s something that I’ve never had the chance to do. I’ve never been to a dominantly Muslim country or a country in the Middle East. And I’ve also always wanted to learn Arabic so there’s that. But just the idea of learning about a new culture, a new language, getting to experience um the food it’s just like an all-around newness that I was really excited to participate in.

Interviewer: So what is your general view or opinion on Islam?

Student 3: Um, I’d always known that it’s an Abrahamic religion and I guess it’s not that much different from Christianity, there are things here and there that are different fundamentally but I think the for the most part Islam is what the religions title is, it’s a very peaceful loving religion much like most religions I guess.

Interviewer: Could you imagine having a Muslim as a friend

Student 3: Yea definitely. One of my father’s closest friends, him and his family are Muslim. And I think we used to spent a lot of time in their house and Hatma would make us chai, the best chai that I’d ever had and um like she would always have her prayer mats out in like in this specific place so she didn’t have to move them. So when it came time to pray and we were there, she would pray and come back to doing whatever we were doing when her prayer was over. And I also have a cousin who’s a Muslim um one of my favourite people. Yea.
**Interviewer:** So do you have a or do you recognize some stereotypes about Muslims or Arabs that you have?

**Student 3:** Um I guess I know of them but I don’t really believe them. Like I know people think of Islam as being a violent or oppressive religion. Um and I don’t really think that’s true. I think that’s dependent on specific people just like all religions. I know a lot of see it as this violent religion and I don’t think that’s true either. I think it’s down to the specific people and people’s choices that are influenced more on their personality than the religion itself. Um yea I don’t really know any other stereotypes that I think I have good or bad. Like I guess a good stereotype is, I think Muslims are very disciplined and dedicated which is a stereotype that I do have. But yea that’s about it.

**Interviewer:** And what do you think about other religions in general outside of Christianity?

**Student 3:** Um in general I thin for the most parts all religions are looking for the same entity for the same being. And I think it’s just how we all got to the conclusions that lead to our religions and there’s I think far too many similarities between let’s say like Christianity Judaism Hinduism and Islam and other like smaller tribal religions that I think it’s not a coincidence that they’re so similar. I think religion is just an interpretation of what we ultimately know to be true. And just our knowledge is different and our beliefs are different but kind of different answers to the same question, I guess. Just like of God or whatever entity people believe in, the universe or whatever, yea.

**Interviewer:** So how would you explain your own faith if you had to explain or categorize yourself.

**Student 3:** Umm I would say that I am a Christian, I believe in the trinity and salvation but um I guess beyond that there like are not many things in the Christian religion that I guess dictate my faith. I try to go to church and partake in like baptisms and communion but I think my main goal is to live a life that I thin would reflect what I believe god to be and Jesus to be and ultimately to live a life that
isn’t harmful to anyone else myself included and I believe that’s the way it should be and yea.

**Interviewer:** So do you think that God is working through other religions than Christianity?

**Student 3:** I definitely think so yea. Um god made all of us as he put some part of himself into all of us and I think some people’s revelations whether they are Christian Muslim Buddhist um are all influenced by God and you can kind of see that depending who you like meet or run across that there is a specific like a light or some other kind of good feeling that I can’t really explain outside of like a supernatural goodness or deity.

**Interviewer:** And do you think that there is also salvation in other religions

**Student 3:** Umm I don’t know. I think you’d first have to believe that you are in need of salvation before you can get it and I don’t know if all religions believe that but I think ultimately who is saved and who isn’t is up to god. And you might think that salvation is dependent on what you do how you act but I think no matter what religion you subscribe to or partake in god can see in your heart how you’ve lived how you haven’t lived whether you’re allowed to be saved.

**Interviewer:** And what do you think is the… or what is your opinion on this inter-faith dialogue and what possibilities does it have?

**Student 3:** I think it’s good because on both ends Christians and Muslims there’s a lot of misunderstanding and that can be because you don’t really see how similar we are. And I think a lot of times conflicts like these arise cause there’s so many things that are close and similar but it is the smallest differences can I guess make us upset if I can use that word. And I think learning how to talk amongst each other with each other about like difficult conversations of Christianity or Islam or just religion in general and having that dialogue and learning how to I guess interact with people who are different without necessarily judging them or putting down their believes is important not just in religion but all around but I
think people having intentions of doing that but I don’t know if people always have the means to do that and I hope that I'll get like those tools to interact and be able to um I guess make coherent conversations and know how to do that.

Interviewer: Thank you is there anything you would like to add about these topics we discussed.

Student 3: I don’t think so.

Student 4, Beginning interview

Interviewer: So can you explain to me what made you come to Oman?

Student: 4: Um yea I just really wanted to learn about a different culture and umm yea hear other people’s points of view and yea about Islam, I don’t really know anything about Islam umm but I just thought it would be interesting to listen and hear like what people have to say and yea why they believe what they believe and um yea I just think it’s really important like learning about other people and trying to share that with the people that I know. And I think it’s really important when it comes to like developing an understanding like towards other people and especially yea kids eventually like as a teacher um being able to yea tell them like there’s multiple different people who believe different things and we need to respect people for who they are so yea I wanted to kind of gain a better understanding and like yea better respect for people that are different from me.

Interviewer: Can you explain to me your view or opinion on Islam?

Student: 4: Yea so I don’t know much about Islam really in general so do you want like what I understand Islam to be or?

Interviewer: Maybe more like your attitudes and… do you have any opinions about the religion, stereotypes anything?
**Student: 4:** Yea I mean I think definitely growing up I always saw on the news negative things about Islam and how like a lot of people are radical in Islam but since probably more coming to college I heard more about it being more of a peaceful religion. And I can definitely see the peacefulness in the people I have seen around here um I don’t think I’ve really met many Muslims before coming here but I can see the peacefulness but I also know that there are like sects that are more radical. Um but I think for me it’s kind of hard to figure out like the balance of all of it because I don’t, I’ve heard that’s not necessarily like true Islam. So yea.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that you would be friends with a Muslim?

**Student: 4:** Yea I think so. I think… yea I think it would be better if I actually knew more of like what a Muslim believes. Um but I believe I could be.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any Muslim friends?

**Student: 4:** No. No. I just we don’t really have very many Muslims from where I’m from. But also. Yea I just haven’t talked to many before so.

**Interviewer:** You already started on this topic but do you recognize some stereotypes that you have learned about Muslims or Arabs?

**Student: 4:** Umm yea I think especially since 9/11 and all of those things uh yea I’ve heard a lot about Muslims being more um radical but I’ve also yea lately heard a lot of them like being peaceful um. So yea I guess those are the two stereotypes that I’ve like been exposed to and I guess yea for me personally I don’t really know where like it all falls like all the people that I’ve met I’ve seen as peaceful but I know that there is a part that like isn’t but I don’t know if that’s… yea specifically reading from the Qur’an or if those are kind of more interpretations that are more radical… does that kind of answer the question?

**Interviewer:** Yea yea that’s perfect. Umm how about your own faith. If you had to explain what you believe in or how you categorize yourself what would that be?
**Student: 4:** Um I would say I’m a Christian. I believe in god the father, god the son and god the holy spirit. Um yea I believe that Jesus died on the cross and that because of that I’m saved not because of what I’ve done but what he did on the cross.

**Interviewer:** And as a Christian, what do you think of other religions? Not just Islam but in general.

**Student: 4:** I yea I guess I don’t know a whole ton about other religions. I believe that there is only one way to heaven. Um yea. Through the grace of Christ. Um yea I guess I don’t know a whole ton about different religions, I yea… I definitely don’t want to judge other people just because they’re a different religion I don’t think that that really has any say of like being friends with someone um and just respecting them as a person I don’t… It’s kind of hard for me I don’t want to just like try to preach to someone the minute that I meet them if I found out that they’re not Christian like I don’t think that’s like yea what I would want to do but umm yea I guess I believe that there’s only one way to heaven that’s kind of hard to yea hard to figure out always like how to interact umm but I definitely want to respect other persons and their believes

**Interviewer:** So you don’t believe that there is salvation outside of Christianity?

**Student: 4:** Yea I don’t believe that there is.

**Interviewer:** Do you believe that god is working through other religions?

**Student: 4:** Umm I don’t know exactly… Yea I don’t know.

**Interviewer:** Yea, okay. Um so I think you kind of started on this already in the beginning but what is your opinion on interfaith dialogue and its possibilities.

**Student: 4:** Um yea I think that it’s a really interesting concept. I haven’t really been exposed to a lot of it before um I definitely grew up just the idea that oh if you hear that somebody’s not a Christian you just should just talk to them about your faith but since coming to college and different things I feel like it’s really
important to listen to other people and what they believe and um really get to know them and get to know the validity of what they believe in. Um yea I think there is definitely like a good possibility for interfaith dialogue. I guess I just haven’t experienced it personally. Um yea I think there is always kind of those spheres of things that you are not used to that yea maybe keep me inside my comfort zone but I definitely like I’m open to those kind of conversations I think sometimes it’s just kind of hard to know where to direct to like you can go to okay this is what I believe and this is what I believe but how do you kind of go after that I just don’t know like where it goes. Yea.

**Interviewer:** Okay well thank you. Do you think there is anything you would like to add concerning the topics we discussed?

**Student: 4:** No I don’t think so.

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Student 5, Beginning interview

**Interviewer:** So umm, could you explain to me why you came to Oman?

**Student 5:** Yes so, umm I heard about the semester abroad here from my sister who studied here um and then as my um career journey landed religion and was very passionate about how we can understand Islam and those relationships with Muslims and Christians can be strengthened um and I think from where I am from, North-West Iowa, there is I think one Muslim family in the whole town. Um and so there is not much exposure and um to try and help bring knowledge and experience in living in a Muslim majority country umm can help people know what Islam is really like um and not just what Fox news says um or what the media says. And yea and then from my personal growth and personal growth in faith is one thing that really brought me here. To challenge me in a different way.

**Interviewer:** So So umm what is your view or opinion on Islam?
**Student 5:** Umm, I think a big thing is um that Islam is a submission to god is kind of one thing in the class that I took which umm was very surface level study of Islam. It really focuses on that kind of submission umm and is reflected on the way they pray. And how it really does, is a religion that teaches peace and a lack of violence and um yea but I think like all religions, it can lead to violence if interpreted in a certain way. But umm I think growing up I definitely thought it was a very violent religion. Umm through class um through my sister’s experience here it shifted to more of a peaceful less violent religion

**Interviewer:** So do you think that you could be friends with a Muslim?

**Student 5:** I do, I do.

**Interviewer:** So Do you have Muslim friends?

**Student 5:** I don’t. I do know Muslims which, that is not a friend I just there is some at Western. That’s a small college, you know everybody so.

**Interviewer:** So What is your view on other faiths and traditions in general? Other than Christianity, what do you think about other religions

**Student 5:** Yea umm I think other faiths are important I think that truths can be found in other faiths and I think that I do believe that Christianity is like the truth but I don’t think that other faiths have nothing to offer. Umm and umm yea I think that they are important because religion is part of culture. And it’s intertwined so much and I think that you know to understand culture you need to understand religion.

**Interviewer:** So do you think that God is working through other religions than Christianity?

**Student 5:** Yea, I was. I forget where I heard it or who I heard it from but he said umm that he was working in kind of a very impoverished area and he said some people came and were like “we’re bringing god” and he was like. “no leave”, like “ God is already here” God is working everywhere, even where the Bible or
Christianity is yet to be brought. Um so I think that God in Christ is doing redemptive work everywhere even if the Bible or Scripture isn’t there so.

Interviewer: So do you think that there is also salvation in other religions?

Student 5: This is. That’s a tough question that I am still working through. And one I hope to find a solid answer to but umm I do know it makes me uncomfortable to think that God would put people put them there…

inaudible

…where they can’t read the bible if that’s the only way to salvation. It’s um unjust in a way and if God is al good then that there’s conflict there. But I also don’t know if I’m a universalist in that everybody gets to heaven I just. It’s something I need, I’m working through um and I hope that through this semester working with Justin and you that hopefully I can find… be closer to an answer or to have found and answer to that question. Yea there’s a lot of conflict right now in that idea.

Interviewer: So We’re all learning here. And do you recognize some stereotypes in your ideas about Muslims or arabs?

Student 5: Yea um I think stereotypes um are an easy way for our mind to categorize things and yea I definitely ecen in these few days have noticed some um stereotypes so um I expected to more like everybody to wear more of a traditional outfits and like that obviously is not the case. There are some who wear traditional but I expected it to like everybody to be wearing those but it’s not the case. Also I expected less full facial coverings and I have seen more of that than I expected um and just I haven’t interacted with enough Omanis to really challenge my stereotypes of those and I hope to soon.

Interviewer: So What is your opinion on interfaith dialogue and it’s possibilities.

Student 5: Umm so I think it as a mission of a person, a missionary I think it’s the most important thing. And I think the best way to um show Christ to people and show Christ’s love is to have build a relationship and to have a relationship
build on mutual respect of each other. So I think through this this interfaith dialogue that respect can be build. Um and that you can show Christ's love to more people through that dialogue. And I think that’s why it’s so important. Because that is just building that mutual respect is where those talks on faith can be had. So and that can only be done through dialogue.

**Interviewer:** So Um do you have something to add. Regarding these topics we have been discussing?

**Student 5:** I guess that I just hope to be challenged through this and grow and I’m sure I will and I’m excited to see how that growth affects me.

**Interviewer:** So Thank you

*(the last question was asked later on the same day since, it was forgotten in the first interview)*

**Interviewer:** So Ok so could you explain to me your own faith like if you would have to categorize yourself as something what would that be? What do you believe in?

**Student 5:** So I’m a Christian, so I believed that Jesus Christ died and rose to life and saved us from our sins. Umm I tend to have a different view on scripture as a lot of the people from where I’m from, North-West Iowa. Umm I think that there is flaws in Scripture because it is a human book inspired by God but because of that human aspect, it can be flawed. And because of that um there um I take some liberty in what I believe um and um Yea so. I do believe that Jesus died, all that is true. And most of the bible I believe is true but just like areas where it talks about God murdering a city or calling for the wipe out of the Cananites I find trouble in that I don’t know if that’s exactly like God ordained stuff like that. Um yea I’m a Christian. Anything more

**Interviewer:** So No that’s quite enough, thank you
Student 6, Beginning interview

Interviewer: So what made you came to Oman?

Student 6: I’ve taken class in Islam before and I also took a world religion class as well and the more I talked with other people about Islam and the more I learned about Islam I realized that there was a difference between the actual knowledge and what Islam is and what people think Islam is in America and it seemed like a lot of people didn’t really know what Islam is but they had um assumptions or preconceived ideas what it is so I wanted to come here to learn more about Islam and the culture of Oman which is surrounding that religion and I wanted to know these things and increase my knowledge on Christian and Muslim dialogue because uh, so I would be more prepared for uh the people back home to help them understand what this religion is. And how it relates to Christianity, how it doesn’t relate to Christianity and um how we can bridge the gap and come together um even though we have our differences whether in religion or other things.

Interviewer: So concerning that, could you briefly explain to me your view or opinion on Islam?

Student 6: Um I believe Islam is uh is is a peaceful religion with violent aspects to it. Um I believe here is certain parts where it can be violent and can be misinterpreted to uh sound like violence is the only option, but I also know that many Muslims um only want peace and only want the right to um idea that their faith to be out there. I believe that Islam has very devout and very strong followers that um follow their faith, follow their faith in this religion because, not because it’s their parent’s but because it’s something they actually want to do and they are very passionate about and I believe um that it is, ah geez I’ll rephrase that I guess, um that Islam um focuses on Muhammad who received revelations from god to tell the people of this world at least according to Muslims, that um they believe that and that um they don’t think of him as Jesus or as some god but they think of him as somebody that was pure and somebody that um really knew who god was an um will help them someday to prepare for the judgement. Um in the days to come.
I hope that all made sense.

Interviewer: That was a Good one. So could you imagine being friends with a Muslim?

Student 6: Uh yeah I can imagine being friends with a Muslim. When I was younger I thought maybe that that wasn't possible because of our differences in um theology and things like that. But Now I after I got back from, got away from high school and what everyone was telling me to believe, and started to form my own opinions and was able to grow my independence in that I can I could say that I could be a friend with a Muslim even though I’m a Christian and although we may disagree on aspects of our theology um we can still be friends and that doesn’t, uh those differences don’t define that relationship

Interviewer: Do you have any Muslim friends?

Student 6: Uh No, I don’t have any Muslim friends. There was not too many at my school and I’m friends with a Christian that used to be a Muslim but um not. I’ve never, I haven’t met… I haven’t become friends with anyone else. I’m totally uninvolved in that religion. Yea

Interviewer: Do you recognize some stereotypes in your ideas about Muslims or Arabs?

Student 6: Umm The first that is um predominant in America is that Muslims are violent and the second is that Muslims um aren’t very respectful of women. And though there is that split between Muslim men and women there seems to be a divide that like uh like segregation aspect, but um I think that there is a lot of. Here it seems like there is a lot more respect and even in the Qur’an uh Muhammad had several he tried to love them all equally and most of those wives were widows of those soldiers that had died and had very much in that time period of the world and I think that some Muslims might take that out of context sometimes of um doing that but I think that in the Christian faith that can also happen so not saying that Muslims are perfect and they treat all women respectfully but not
saying that we’re perfect as well. And I think um some of those stereotypes like Muslims are violent and the reason they are violent is because of Jihad and that’s just not true either because there is a greater and lesser Jihad and um the greater is more like a devotional like spirituality thing and that’s what they follow and the lesser is violent but that, it takes a lot of different kind of things that have to happen before that can ever even be considered and in America when we say you can’t follow Jihad and Jihad is evil that’s just crazy cause that’s like me doing my devotional like very morning and someone telling me I can’t do that because it says in the time of David that he went of and murdered something or like that. And when you put in that aspect I think it begins to open up some lines about what’s reality and what’s uh assumptions. Next to those kind of different questions.

**Interviewer:** Umm and um what is your view or opinion on other religions in general?

**Student 6:** Um I mean obviously being a Christian I don’t necessarily believe in other religions but that don’t mean I don’t respect them. And I understand there is more happening than I can really see. And umm I believe there is a lot of similarities with Christianity in some ways and in other religions that we can see but there’s also a lot of differences. That makes sense. But uh most of the religions I studied or learned it seems that uh they all have um focus on where they uh where they are going in their life whether that is death or after death or something like that so I guess that’s what I can think of.

**Interviewer:** So do you think that there is uh that there is salvation outside of Christianity?

**Student 6:** Umm that’s something I’m still struggling with to wrap my head around uh. When you’re young you’re told that the only way to salvation is through Christ. Then I… a lots of other ideas came into that kind of affected how I viewed that situation and it’s very hard and complicated thing that God would just condemn, push everyone to hell just because they weren’t Christian cause what if they never had heard about Christianity or what would that look like if somebody had
never heard about Christianity and they were doing, following the same way a Christian would and yea I'm still wrestling with those ideas and trying to form a concrete um idea on them before I can say one thing or the other but yea that's all I have because I wouldn’t wanna say I lean one way or the other. I just don’t know about that.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that God is working through other religions?

**Student 6:** Yea I think God is working through other religions no matter um even if they are not aware of it and even if they are not following them. I was like kind of doing my own thing and not really listening to religion or like Christianity or any of those kind of things around my place I was um you know just not doing things the way I should have and uh couple od months later I realized that god had been there in those moments the whole time even when I was not following him and he was leading me in those things, and I feel like even someone that is um you know an atheist or a Hindu or a Buddhist, I feel like god can still work in those situations and uh in conversation and community with those people we can encounter Christ through those kind of conversations and thins like that. So yea

**Interviewer:** You have told me quite a lot about what you believe in. so could you still briefly explain your own faith. What do you believe in? What do you consider yourself as?

**Student 6:** Uh, I guess stereotypical thing would be to say I consider myself a Christian if we want to put a label on that and um, yea I consider myself a Christian, I consider myself one that believes that Jesus Christ died for me on the cross and when he died he did rise from the dead and um my sins don’t define me anymore you know, what is my past and my future. And that um in this life we’re gonna make mistakes and we’re not perfect and Christ sees that and those things and also calls us to something bigger, calls us to encounter people and not just share the gospel with them but share a piece of what god created so they can see the savior behind it um and I believe that god or Jesus is not someone who is far off that we pray to and always hope answers get back to you but someone that is real someone that is um always by your side and um doesn’t um... when
you think you know he’s not there he’s still there. And guides us and I think that like I said earlier he is with us and he is around us in this world I believe that god created us all and no matter how that may be whether it was through something crazy like a big bang or something like that I don’t know but I know that god created us and that the church as a building doesn’t define where god is but the world and um the followers of Christ as a body is where we can grow and dwell within so throughout the world so not just in a certain space so I guess that’s all I can think of yea.

**Interviewer:** Umm and what is your view or opinion on interfaith dialogue and it’s possibilities?

**Student 6:** Umm I think interfaith dialogue is very important I know plenty of Christians that take Islam or other religions out of context because they don’t know anything about them. So all they have is their assumptions to make and if it is not clearly defined as to what that other faith is and there is not enough information or knowledge on that that um we know about that other faith, we don’t really know we have the right to say a certain faith is this way or a certain faith is that way, because that affects not only yourself but the people that far and around you if you’re a pastor then in your congregation that affects how they’re gonna see and that also leads to contradictions like love your neighbor as yourself unless they are Muslim or unless they are, you know that’s not what Christ is saying I think, I think Christ is calling us to get to know the people around us I think if you look at the story of the good Samaritan, it shows a lot of Christ character and that he was not just there to bring Jews to salvation in him but to bring the world to salvation in him and whether or not the people we interact with belief that I think that knowing about their faith shows a certain level of respect for each other and leads to conversation whether that leads to conversion or a relationship as a friend or a better understanding of each other and the relationship with each other. So I guess that’s why I feel like interfaith dialogue is important. So yea.

**Interviewer:** Thank you is there anything you would like to add about these topics we discussed.
Student 6: Umm Not that I haven’t talked about here already I don’t think yea I’m sure if I.. if something ever comes up so I can talk about it, I’ll remember more things. But that’s just as much I can say off the top of my head.

Interviewer: Thank you

Student 1, Ending interview

Interviewer: So how has the semester abroad program met your expectations?

Student 1: Well I was expecting to be challenged academically and I think I definitely was. Um I was expected to be challenged spiritually and um I definitely wrestled with a few big questions in Justin’s class particularly when writing my theological framework. Umm I uh expected to both be given opportunities to explore the country and be expected to find my own opportunities to explore and both of those weren’t the case. Yea

Interviewer: So um what is your view on Islam right now after the program? Has it changed somehow?

Student 1: Um I don’t exactly remember what I said before I think I was leaning towards the idea that Muslims and Christians worship the same god um now I uh believe that we do um but I think that Christians have, that Christians and Muslims have a different understanding of God and I think that Christianity emphasizes the love of god through Jesus Christ um but I think that there is different emphasis, emphases on god in Islam that I can’t understand so yea those are my views now.

Interviewer: And how about your view on like other religions in general

Student 1: Um I think all religions worship the same one single god. Um because I think that humans are given a curiosity for the divine that suggests an existence of such. But I think that all religions because they are so intertwined with culture
provide different unique lenses to view god. I think Christianity offers the best view of god for god’s love through Jesus Christ but I think other religions may offer umm unique views of god in other ways that I don't understand.

**Interviewer:** So do you think that there’s salvation outside of Christianity?

**Student 1:** Umm Yes. I think that god uh I think that from... So I’m gonna be describing this using Christian language. Um but I think god works through the holy Spirit. So I think the holy spirit is powerful enough that that they permeate all humanity and all religions not that it was, so I’m not trying to suggest that Christianity is like the original religion necessarily but I think that the holy spirit is present in all, in all religions and I think that there is salvation through the holy spirit um and salvation through Jesus Christ um so yes I think there can be salvation outside of Christianity.

**Interviewer:** And do you think that God is working through other religions?

**Student 1:** Yea. Yea I do.

**Interviewer:** Umm could you explain to me your own faith. Like how do you identify in this moment?

**Student 1:** Yea so I identify as umm as Christian. And I'm now... so I remember the first time I went through the apostle’s creed and kind of said it like this is what makes me a Christian um that’s really tricky now because I’ve learned that there’s so much variation in that because there has been so much variation of interpretation of the Bible um but I would say that I am a Christian because I believe that my salvation is through Jesus Christ um and I believe yea I think that’s kind of that’s kind of like the big one. Umm yes so, I would identify as Christian and I believe that it is my job here on this earth to love others well and exemplify the love of Jesus through my actions, not to lead people to Christianity but to lead them closer to god.

**Interviewer:** Could you be friends with a Muslim?
Student 1: Yea.

Interviewer: Do you have any Muslim friends?

Student 1: Yes, I would say I’m friends with Shaa um I would say I’m a strong acquaintances with Assaad, Sumeia umm my language partner

Interviewer: How do you view interfaith dialogue. What is your opinion?

Student 1: I think it’s really, really important, especially for Christ… individuals of other religions that are very isolated. So if you’re pretty isolated you… okay yea. I think it’s especially important I think right now for American Christians especially due to the way that media skews other religions and because of how 9/11 has shaped our outlook of Muslims I think it’s important that we have actual conversations with Muslims too. It illuminates some of the universal ideals that are true.

Interviewer: And do you think some of your stereotypes about Muslims or Arabs has changed or been enforced during this semester.

Student 1: So, I really had hard time finding words to express why the oppression of women within Islam was a stereotype, if that makes sense. But now I think I have better words to describe why it’s a stereotype. Umm because Islam can be used to oppress women but in general within the religion itself it’s not meant to be oppressive, especially originally when the Qu’ran was revealed to the prophet Muhammad. It was originally very liberating religion, that’s why it had so many adherents to it right away. But I think it’s important to recognize like the history of Islam and some of the more extremist political leaders who have risen up and how they’re using the religion for their own gain and it’s a human broken application of the religion that’s causing the oppression, not the religion itself.

Interviewer: Okay here’s a big one. What have you learned during the program?

Student 1: Um yea so… Like I said before the degree to which Islam can be used to oppress individuals. But I also learned that Christianity can be very much be used to... I wrote about this in the little shook that I just gave you. I think very
often Islam can be used to oppress Muslims and Christianity is often used to oppress non-Christians so Christianity has been historically the religion of colonialists slave owners, Christopher Columbus and other assholes, things like that but yea so I think we just need to realize that Christianity can be manipulative and oppressive but it's not to, it's not always to Christians um I also learned quite a bit about myself this semester. Um I learned how I'm loved best, how to better take care of myself and keep myself like in a healthy space um I learned quite a bit about oppression this semester and like a tiny, tiny degree of sorry, not privilege and a tiny degree of what that feels like to be the disadvantaged and so that's given me a better insight into what minorities in the US feel like and though it's like the tiniest little handful of sand in the desert kind of thing but I did learn about privilege here. Um yea and I learned a lot about how to… I learned different ways that I can show devotions to God um and I learned that through non-Christians. And I think that is very interesting. In conversations with Shaa and Ahmed.

**Interviewer:** What experiences have been somehow significant in this learning process?

**Student 1:** Yea umm pretty much every conversation I've had with Shaa has been significant and all of the classes with Ahmed um joining a women’s only gym surprisingly so formative um I think the overall experience of just working through a major depressive episode in another country has been a huge part of the learning process and growing process and so that also thought me quite a bit about psychological privilege um and learning yea and seeing exactly what… So I never thought about it that way before um that other people can be psychologically privileged but I learned that that's an interesting brainwork to have and it really explains a lot of the stigmas and stereotypes against individuals with mental health struggles um because there's also a lot of stigmas and stereotypes against minorities so um it's an interesting explanation. That answered the question I think.

**Interviewer:** Yea that was good… Um what kind of changes have happened. What has changed
**Student 1:** Like in me? Umm

**Interviewer:** Or has anything changed?

**Student 1:** I think I’m a lot like scrappier right now in that for a while I kind of had to be my own support system because I didn’t feel like it was fair to ask other people for help and so it was kind of like a tooth and nail fight just for stability. So that thought me how to be, how to really fight for it if that makes sense um. I think I have… I’m definitely more articulate um in my beliefs which is very great because I know what they were before, they just were kind of swimming in my head in a soup and now they are more organized I think.

**Interviewer:** Anything you would like to add about these things we discussed.

**Student 1:** Umm I don’t think so

**Interviewer:** So thank you.

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**Student 2, Ending interview**

**Interviewer:** So how has the semester abroad program met your expectations?

**Student 2:** It’s kind of hard because I don’t know if I came in with a lot of expectations. I came in with a lot of hopes but not necessarily expectations so… I like hoped this could be a time that I could really reflect on stuff like faith and that sort of stuff and just where I’m at in that. Um and it has been a really good space with people who are also thinking the same things or questioning and that sort of thing. Then also with enough differences to really challenge what you think and even I came already with a tons of questions so it provided me with this space every single day for three and a half months to think about and have those conversations and like looking back thinking it’s just crazy to me that I have those conversations every single day for three and a half months like that’s a lot of deep thinking. Anyway. So That was a hope that was met but it wasn’t an expectation umm
ten I think another hope was that I’d be really, really challenged by the culture. That was one of the reasons why I chose Oman. I was supposed to go to Ghana for this semester and then that fell through, there weren’t enough people that signed up but I chose that because, Europe while it’s amazing is so similar to everything I have ever been used to or like experienced so I really thought it would be important to go to Ghana and that fell through and Oman worked through, it was just like the perfect thing that could have happened to me cause it’s still something that would really challenge me but in all the ways that I really hoped to be challenged so yea.

Interviewer: It’s good to hear.

Student 2: Thanks

Interviewer: So what is your opinion on Islam, has it changed somehow?

Student 2: Yea, I think it’s changed because I understand it more which if only everyone could understand it more, right? And it’s not like it has changed in a sense that they were these awful heretics before it was just this sense of… Now I can explain to people why I don’t think they’re bad humans or I don’t know I think it gave me, it put words to something that I had been thinking about and feeling but I didn’t understand why. Umm and that might contradict something I said earlier or like the beginning of this semester but that’s hard to remember now. And so I think my view has changed because I’ve met people so now I can say something like “in my experience Muslims are X or are not Y…” or whatever and then I think that adds a lot of more validity to that when people wanna go back to the States, somebody says like… I don’t even know what they would ask but if they ask something about Islam and it’s like well no, not really and instead of just saying well I read this it’s more of in my experience, I know people or whatever so I think it’s changed my opinion not my opinion my views have changed… not… what can I say.. my views have not changed it’s just provided words and reason to kind of help me understand why I thought that way or something.

Interviewer: So you think you could be friends with a Muslim?
**Student 2:** I am friends with a Muslim! Yes.

**Interviewer:** That’s great. How about your opinion or view on other faiths in general, not just Islam but like other faiths outside of Christianity. Has that changed.

**Student 2:** Yea. Those were actually, that was probably the root of the majority of the questions that I had coming in to this semester. Umm just how it is… Basically I guess my questions were kind of surrounding if God is this… If god is like the greatest possible being why would god not also be in other religions or whatever. And so it seems to me that if we’re all trying to understand the greatest possible being we can’t understand it and so we do the best that we can with the resources we’re given and so I’m still kind of working out what that would look like but… I guess I’ve been relieved because it has provided me with a lot of hope in different ways. And I think when coming into this semester one of my biggest questions was “Why Christianity?”. Cause I’ve grown up Christian so I kinda like but why? Why am I picking this, I’m not picking this because I wanna pick it. You know what I mean if I’m gonna pick it, I wanna pick it. For reasons that are important to me or whatever. And so, and be all in and so I think… it’s… I’ve had this space to really think about other religions and why Christianity makes sense in my context, why… why it reiterated sort of the ways that I view evangelism and that for me I just don’t I don’t know it just doesn’t feel ok to just Bible thumb someone or demand that they convert and then leave them or something, I think there is something to be said about salvation and Christianity because I think in our world you can see just like glimmering pieces of heaven and you also see pieces of hell and so I think it’s really hard for me to say that there’s not something broken but I think for me Christianity provides a hope um but then what that means for other religions I don’t know other than that it gives me hope that there is a bigger plan and that it’s not my job to know that but my job is to be an agent of renewal and whatever way I can and whether renewal looks like peacebuilding or education or something of that sort I don’t know but I think you can renew with the gifts that you’ve been given and so… Um yea being an agent of renewal and just like loving people. Because I think this semester interestingly I don’t know if you’ve heard this quote from Mother Teresa but She said I… Something along the lines like I finally understand the paradox that if you love until it hurts there’s no room
for more hurt only love. And so I think I’ve kind of come to understand that in this semester with other religions that it’s just love people and creation and who they are and the inherent value of them and then if you love them so much that it’s like hurting you can only love them more. So I think that’s our job whatever that means for other religions I don’t really know but I’m not... I don’t know I’m still working through it but that’s where I’m at right now. And I’m okay with it.

**Interviewer:** So um how would you identify yourself in this... where you are.

**Student 2:** Mess. (laughing)

**Interviewer:** Where you are right now.

**Student 2:** Yea I would say, Yea I would say I’m still holding on to that like I’m Christian I still believe that cause that provides hope for me and it helps me um for what I mean this could be because I grew up Christian but it makes sense in my world it makes sense in my context as well so... I think there is an aspect of it but more cynical of it that religion can be an opioid for the masses and so I think that it is important to look at your context and whether or not it makes sense um to be a certain religion and what not but I think really more than that it.. it’s that it provides something deeper for me but that doesnät mean it would for someone else.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that there’s salvation outside of Christianity.

**Student 2:** Hmm this is where the hope comes in cause it’s so not for me to decide. Umm but... I think there is cause my understanding of god is that... is that it’s just like the amount of like love and care and mercy and grace... so like if you’re saved through grace alone like Karl Barth believes then who is to say that grace isn’t also extended to other people? Umm and then further I... so... I had a really good point just give me one second...

**Interviewer:** Yea we’re not in a hurry
Student 2: Alhamdulillah. That’s good. Salvation and other religions… Salvation and other religions is not for me to decide… God… Yes got it! So that I think often times we have this tendency to focus on one aspect of god so it’s like god is all merciful god is all loving god is all like just and I think they have a tendency to conflict. Umm but I think that how we view those different aspects they actually can work together like justice in our in my worldview is the way I’ve grown up is very guilt and innocent based and I’m not sure if it’s always that way that it could be more restorative and so I don’t know what that means for salvation but I think if justice is restorative then I think there’s hope outside of Christianity and I think if God is outside of Christianity because why do we think we can put god into a box um then then I think yea… I think there is hope but I don’t know what that means.

Interviewer: So you don’t wanna say anything certain?

Student 2: Yea I don’t think you can be certain and I don’t know… I understand that that could change how you live in the world but I don’t think it should change truly change in the sense of being an agent of renewal and loving other people. Um and I think yea… I don’t know.. It’s kind of a mess.

Interviewer: So you kinda started on this but do you think that god is working through other religons?

Student 2: Yea I think so. I don’t think that we can, like I said I don’t think that we can put god in a box but… I don’t know that’s another one that I’m still kind of working through… in the sense that what does this mean for Christianity if god’s working through all other religions or other religions are… I don’t know but I think what that means is that god also works through our religion and so we need to do the best we can with the resources we have and… yea… I don’t know. It’s weird because I feel like I’ve gained a fair amount of uncertainty but like I’m okay with it. Learning to live in the gray. It’s good.

Interviewer: Um what is your opinion on interfaith dialogue?
**Student 2:** I think it’s so important. So important. Because faith influences… If a person has faith or even if they don’t have faith it influences like their entire worldview. So understanding or at least trying to understand Islam you have a deeper understanding of the way society is run the way the laws are made the way whatever… and yes we’re in a like Islamic country so there will be more of that overlap but if you seek to understand Christianity you understand a little bit more of how like the United States the foundation that that’s set on. Whether we’re a Christian country now, that is debatable. I think it does provide a great understanding of a culture and it influences the entire worldview and so not only does that allow you to meet each other on equal ground or more equal ground but I think it provides us greater opportunities for Shalom so…

**Interviewer:** Um have your stereotypes about Muslims and Arabs changed or been enforced?

**Student 2:** I’m sure they have but. Um… I think probably the biggest change that… I don’t know what’s the stereotypes I came in with, I know occasionally and like I hate admitting this but occasionally like back in the States if I would see someone with like have their head wrapped or something it would be sort of like my stomach would clench just a little bit but then I remember thinking like why, this person’s not doing anything and it just makes you think about how you’re like kind of trained to see these different things and that’s not to say that I didn’t have any part in that cause I did but… So I’m sure I did have stereotypes coming into it, I don’t know what they were but probably the biggest thing is that I recognize that… Stereotypes are like trying to like put people in a box you know so that’s just like saying one thing speaks for these thousands of people and that’s just not true, it might be true for the minority or it might be true for one person or it could be true for the majority but I think just recognizing that that’s not always true and that you’re trying to yea just put them in a box was my biggest thing so the their… stereotypes are stereotypes so they’re not necessarily real. I don’t know if that answered your question.

**Interviewer:** No it’s good.
Student 2: Good.

Interviewer: Um ok here’s a big one. What have you learned in this program.

Student 2: It’s okay I knew to practice answering this. Ah geez, what have I not learned… Um … I’ve learned to be a better listener or like yea a better listener in a different way cause I used to… I still think that I’m like an okay listener… I don’t know feels weird to say like “I’m a good listener”. It probably depends on my mood but umm… but in different ways because I’ve, on this trip, I’ve umm heard a lot of different people’s stories that were experiences that I’ve never had I don’t understand what it’s like to have depression or to be suicidal or anything of that sort so those are very very real struggles and I’ve had those conversations with people before but not in depth, and not in a sense when I’ve had those conversations I’ve just gone home afterwards, I haven’t gone home with that person or whatever and so it’s helped me… understand… Yea how to love people who are in that situation and how to set boundaries of here’s what I can do and here’s what’s beyond me or something of that sort. But that’s a very different sort of learning but that’s still really, really important. Um and then I’ve learned just academically I’ve learned a lot about just the basics of Islam and kind of just scratching the surface of that and some other religions and that sort of stuff and kind of the things we’ve been talking about with ummm… forcing me to think about what does that mean for other religions and salvation and Jesus and all these different pieces and so academically I’ve learned a lot about that and Oman’s history and whatever. Umm… I think… I think it’s also reinforced how, how wrong our stereotypes are in the states. And it makes me really really sad and kind of angry to recognize that. It makes me happy that they’re not true. But you know but then it’s also like why the heck do we think they’re true. Anyway. So that and then I have learned how to have innerfaith dialogue and yea I don’t’ think I ever really thought about it before, I always tought it was this intriquing idea but I didn’t, I grew up in a very homogenous society all kind of the same so I never really experienced that so learning how to do that and do it fearlessly that was really really important to me.

Interviewer: What experiences have been significant in this learning process?
Student 2: Hmm I think it's interesting cause it's always the small things. Like... Umm... Hmh... Probably one of the most important or like special experiences for some reason was when girls and Daniel we were talking through the Souq and Daniel stopped to get a shisha pipe and, this is very beginning of the semester, and um well it couldn't have been the beginning because I knew Assalamu aleikum but that's anyway like a weekend or something. And um... I made I contact with this lady and she was wearing like the full all of the hijab she had a niqab so I would only see her eyes I had made eye contact with her so I said assalaamu aleikum and then I did not hear that she like responded, I hear wa’aleikum assalam but I didn’t hear the rest of what she was saying so I just kind of stared at her for a second and then I was like well this is awkward so I like started looking away and Qatwiri responded like bekhair alhamdulillah or something and then I realized what I had done so I was like oh aasifa aasifa, and she just laughed and you could just see it in her eyes and she like just like patted my shoulder and walked away. (laughter) And so I think that was really important for me because it was such a weirdly positive interaction with someone that I’m never gonna see again but it’s also someone who is different from me but also a... similar if that makes sense. And we both thought it was funny we both, I don’t know anything about her life but I think just recognizing this like connection with humanity is really, really important having these experiences so you can say "this matters, interfaith dialogue matters" it matters to... and like you, yea it just matters to understand other people and not just see them on the screens like oh those people because it really breaks down that barrier of us and them that like othering to like have experiences so I think that’s massively important and I think... umm... spending time with Ahmed and having Sultaan as a professor actually both of them I think were really really influential in that process. Sultaan because he’s just so fun loving and then I got to like interview him and it was really interesting to hear his thoughts on like progress and things of that sort but Ahmed because, I just fearlessly asked him stuff just like why are you a muslim I’m just curious or whatever and I think that was kind of the beginning of actually engaging in that dialogue and realizing um how powerful it can be. Yea.

Interviewer: Yea. Um you have been talking a lot about learning and change. So what has changed?
**Student 2:** Hmm… I think… Probably like my understanding of the world and my job in it. And yea. I don’t know what that means for like careers or whatever does anybody really know what they wanna do I don’t know. Um but… understanding my place as like a citizen of the global community as a believer in the divine in whatever capacity that means, as a female as in all of these different identity factors and also just as a being like a spiritual being, a human and so recognizing that connection with everyone would be my thought. And so yea… Umm… has been a really big change and kind of that’s influenced how… I interact with people it’s still influencing that I know it’s gonna influence it for a really long time until I figure out what does this mean or how I, who I am and who I wanna be and whatever. Umm and then what does this mean for what I wanna do with my life what does this mean for I don’t know, any number of things. So I think that’s probably been the biggest change. And just like. I think we can always, everyone can learn, or can afford to learn how to love people better. So I think that’s another work in progress figuring out how can I be like support for other people how can I love them better and never stop learning and that should be something you should never think you’ve achieved. So.

**Interviewer:** Thank you. Do you have anything you would like to add about these broad topics we’ve discussed?

**Student 2:** Hmm… I don’t think so. Other than I do think it’s funny that I’m like here actively here and I’m trying to figure out how to get back and I’m not even going home yet. And I think that’s gonna be an interesting thing to explain to people back home.

**Interviewer:** For sure

**Student 2:** Yes I love this place of course not everybody does and doesn’t, that’s fine but yea… I don’t know.

**Interviewer:** Thank you yea of course. Yea go.
Student 2: Okay so it was interesting because I don’t think I prior to this experience, I don’t think I have been around people who have been either actively questioning in the same way I was or were even like really okay with questioning that way. So like I had a handful of people who were definitely okay with questioning that way I mean like my mom was always so supportive my dad too but just kinda saying like the god of the answers is also the god of the questions so he can handle it or god can handle it, she would say he, I think I would probably say god. (laughing) But that’s a different topic. But anyway and there were also other people that I would talk to them and they would be like I have never even thought about that and that was like the end of the conversation like “do you not wanna think about that right now” and so okay it’s been introduced let’s go umm and so I think that was a really interesting thing with that first interview because… I don’t know if I would say it was shame that was associated with it I think I was just kind of scared to talk about whatever questions I had and I know I remember being honest with you like yea I have been questioning in all these different ways and whatever but I remember being like oh my gosh he like asked this question and I don’t know how to respond and just like I know it’s okay but is it okay and so I think that’s another thing our society needs or the religious community needs to like recognize is that it’s okay to question and it’s okay to talk with people about those questions umm… yea so I think it would be interesting to go back and look at… those first interviews and hear it because I know that I was a little bit like I mean he’s cool and I’ve known him for like a day? And so it’s this mix of I don’t know it was interesting. And then I did have a question but that’s much more for you so I don’t know.

Student 3, Ending interview

Interviewer: So how has this semester met your expectations?

Student 3: Um I didn’t really come in with a lot of expectations cause I didn’t know what to expect. Umm but I guess academically speaking I was most worried about learning Arabic and that went fairly smoothly for me. I quite enjoyed it. Umm
culturally speaking, I guess I would have wanted more to like be a part of the culture, interact more with different people, umm just see more of what like living in Oman actually is like. Like living in Oman but not being part of Oman. Umm but yea I guess apart from those two everything else kind of just happened and I went with it, if that makes sense.

**Interviewer:** So did you expect to make friends or something?

**Student 3:** Umm I wasn’t expecting to make friends but I was expecting to at least meet people. Umm or have more opportunities to just like go through the souq, get lunch, come back, like maybe say hi to two or three people. Umm yea. And I really wasn’t expecting like having a friendship but maybe like acquaintances like people I would see daily, say hi to them, things like that.

**Interviewer:** Yea. Okay umm, so you think you could be friends with a Muslim?

**Student 3:** Yea, I think so. I think we’re more like than we’re different. I think more of the issue would be kind of bridging the American Omani culture gap less than the Christian Muslim gap. Or like religious gap.

**Interviewer:** And umm this. This. What is your opinion on Islam. Has something changed?

**Student 3:** I definitely have a better understanding of it now. And I would say that some of the things I’ve formed in my theology and in my faith over the years was really expressed in certain aspects of Islam that I really relate to. So I think my opinion stating is that probably would share more with like the fundamental ideas of Islam than like some people at my church.

**Interviewer:** Do you know what has caused these changes?

**Student 3:** I think just a better understanding. Umm being able to talk with people. Who are part of this faith and who are adamant about their faith? It think in the past my only knowledge has come from textbooks and people who aren’t Muslim and they tried their best but it’s very different to see or to hear like what a faith is
about and like how worshipping in that faith works from someone who does it than someone who’s reading about it umm second hand. So I think it’s just like a better understanding, like a deeper understanding of the faith.

**Interviewer:** And your, how’s your opinion on other religions outside Christianity in general, has it changed somehow?

**Student 3:** Umm I guess… it’s changed in the sense that I see some more similarities between them and Christianity. I kind of figured that most religions were fairly similar to one another. But I never really had any like backing cause I didn’t read much about that nor looked super deeply into them but after a little bit. Like given that here being exposed to different religions here as well, I realized that all of us are much more like than you think we are different.

**Interviewer:** So, how would you explain to me or someone your personal faith or how do you identify?

**Student 3:** I would identify as Christian. Umm I do worship God, the god of Abraham umm and I do believe that Jesus is the Messiah but I also hold in truth that it might not be the only truth. It might also not be truth. Umm but I guess it’s something that I know, something that I’m comfortable with, it’s something that I’ve seen in my life and I am just kind of putting any doubts and questions that I have into the hands of god knowing that… they know best what’s best and not everything is for me to know. Umm so I would identify Christian but I think that might not be the only truth in reality.

**Interviewer:** So do you think that there is salvation outside of Christianity?

**Student 3:** Umm yea I guess so. Because I do believe that Jesus is our savior but that does not necessarily mean that you have to be Christian to be saved by him. I think god can see more than we think or acknowledge that they can see um god has also set forth all these kind of rules that we follow and so I guess it’s in their power to change them or tweek them or to apply them to whoever they wish. Um so I think just because someone werships in a different way doesn’t
necessarily mean that they can’t still be saved through Jesus Christ and through what He sees them doing. If that makes sense.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that God is working through different religions?

**Student 3:** I think so yea. Umm not sure how but I think it would be difficult to say no considering that so many religions kind of preach the same ideas of love and respect of one another and the earth. I think if there is only one religion that god was working through the earth would be chaos because there os only so many people who are trying to follow this one way and then everyone else I guess would just be, mayhem. So I think yea, God does work through other religions.

**Interviewer:** Yea. Uhh what do you think about interfaith dialogue?

**Student 3:** I think. It should only really be used when necessary. I think sometimes when people are having an understanding and respect for one another it’s not always necessary. But I think in places where there’s like strife and miscom- munication and misunderstanding it would be best to like for whichever religious groups that are having these issues I guess, to come together and talk about them because it’s easier to I guess see things when like someone in front of you is telling them this is how their life’s going. I think interfaith dialogue is like any other dialogue is as long as it’s I guess like intentions are there like if it’s out of curiosity or just out of getting a deeper understanding of like a person of another religions perspective instead of just reading about it, I think it can be good. But sometimes I think it’s just overdone.

**Interviewer:** Umm what have you learned during this semester?

**Student 3:** Hmm… I guess I’ve learned a lot more about Islam. And quite a bit more about Christianity as well. As well as my own faith umm and I’ve also learned that sometimes bridging the gap within religion is harder than bridging the gap between religions. Culturally I’ve learned so much more about Oman than I could have learned reading about it. Umm the history and culture is a lot deeper than I thought it would. And it’s a lot richer. So I’ve learned a lot about like Oman’s
history. And I guess global history and its interactions with other countries because I now understand or know that it had. Yea.

**Interviewer:** Anything else?

**Student 3:** Umm. I guess I also like, my dad always taught me that people always appreciate it when you just make an effort to speak to someone in their language and I’ve like always been understanding of that but I’ve never understood that until coming here and seeing the difference between not knowing any Arabic and to come back with the little Arabic that I know and like engaging people and the way that I can and seeing that they are not mad that I speak broken Arabic or I’m using different conjugations but they’re understanding that I’m making an effort. So I guess yea.

**Interviewer:** Is there any stereotypes or opinions that you’ve had about Muslims or Arabs that’s changed during this course?

**Student 3:** I guess I didn’t realize this like until now but I’ve worked so hard to counteract like everything that the Western media says about Islam that I’ve I guess done the reverse and put Muslims in a separate box and being extremely devout and extremely faithful and all these things that I guess I forget that Muslims have lives as well and they have hobbies and they have aspirations and they want to do things and they’re like funny and they can tease people I guess like from trying to avoid taking away like their humanity in the ways the Western culture has tried to do, I’ve just taken away a different part of their humanity and their individuality. Umm And I guess after interacting with more than just like three people that I know or like follow on Instagram I can see that umm just like everyone else everyone has a personality but I guess not just having personality but they’re like they have freedoms within their own religion.

**Interviewer:** And what have you learned?
**Student 3:** I guess it is easier for me to relate to the stories I’ve heard from the Bible. Coming here and seeing these landscapes that are so similar to the ones they lived in.

**Interviewer:** What experiences have been significant in your learning process?

**Student 3:** I think the Arabic immersion in Ibri has been really helpful. In Muscat you can live quite comfortably without ever speaking a word of Arabic, but in Ibri it’s a little bit more difficult to not speak Arabic so we were forced to practice it. Um I also think that sometimes going on the different hikes and seeing the different terrains that Oman has to offer in like a roundabout way has made me rethink some thoughts I had before like different people in the Bible or different experiences that people have because I’m geographically closer to those experiences and like um I could understand seeing like the terrain here in comparison to extremely wooded Michigan umm I think I have a deeper understanding of what kind of struggles people in the Bible would have gone through, just seeing the terrain like understanding why Jonah really needed shade because now I have experienced kind of heat that maybe he would have experienced or like the frustration that the Israelites had in the forty years in the desert cause like 40 minutes in the desert you get annoyed and it’s hard to be patient with God when they’re telling you to do something but everything in your life is so uncomfortable and not what you want. I think I have kind of grasped the understanding like why all these people would have acted the way they did. Just solely based on their surroundings, I guess. Yea.

**Interviewer:** Anything you would like to add.

**Student 3:** I don’t think so.

Student 4, Ending interview

**Interviewer:** So how has the semester abroad like met your expectations?
Student 4: Um I think I really wanted a challenge to see a different culture uh and have a different understanding of life um yea and I think it has challenged me a lot in understanding a different culture and also asking a lot of really big questions um so yea like seeing a depth to life that I didn’t see before so yea I think it has met my expectations yea when it comes to engaging in conversations with the people around me and trying to like figure things out like you know you can’t really figure it out. Um yea the professors have liked challenged me in that ways yea.

Interviewer: Yea and what is your view on Islam has it changed somehow?

Student 4: Um I don’t remember exactly what I said before um yea I think it has changed because I see the way that people practice it and the fact that I think a really big thing that I heard form Ahmed was like we worship god because he’s worthy of our worship and I’ve always heard the ideas that like Islam is very work-spaced and all these different things but I think now I have an understanding like doing all those things is important in their religion because it’s a way to worship god and to honor him and it’s not necessarily like to earn favor or anything more like going to heaven because, I mean in ways because of what they have done but it’s like the focus is on god, the focus isn’t like on them as much and if you like I have a better understanding of like how much the fact that on sin is so much different than Christianity that has a big impact in a way that they like worship. Yea.

Interviewer: How about your like view on other religions in general. Has that changed somehow?

Student 4: Umm yea I think I would say that there is truth in other religions and there yea we can understand the world and understand god better by like understanding other religions by understanding like people who follow those religions um I don’t… Yea I don’t know exactly how that is whether it’s like to what extent we can do that like whether it’s because general revelation and the fact that like because god has revealed himself through like the whole of the world then like through all humans then god is revealed so then therefore like everybody has an
understanding so even within like other religions there is an understanding of that truth and then…. So I think I understand it more in that aspect rather than… yea.

Interviewer: So do you think that god is working through other religions?

Student 4: Um what do you mean by working?

Interviewer: Like actively being in other religions. Kind of like acting through a Muslim?

Student 4: I don’t know

Interviewer: Okay. Do you think there is salvation outside of Christianity?

Student 4: Um I would say that I still hold that salvation is through Jesus Christ alone but I understand that there’s also like ideas that um yea that like Christ made a way for all people but I don’t know I guess my understanding like as of right now I would say that like um it’s through Jesus Christ and I think that the only way that you can fully understand the love of God is through understanding it through Jesus Christ and so I only like see that within Christianity but I don’t know if it’s like possible for other people for other religions, I think that’s like probably the biggest question that I’ve been wrestling with this time trying to figure out like how that… yea.

Interviewer: So how would you identify?

Student 4: How I would identify?

Interviewer: Yea like if you had to explain your own faith.

Student 4: Um I would identify as a Christian. I think I recognize that especially with a view that like only through Jesus Christ you go to heaven um maybe it can bring of a sense of superiority or something of like wow I’m a Christian so I’m going heaven but like in that, I don’t know, for me that’s not at all what it is. It’s more the fact that it’s entirely through grace and I just want to live in humility
recognizing that it’s god and not me so I think I have insecurities like saying all of that because I don’t want it to come across as like me thinking that I’m better than other people or me thinking that like other people just aren’t as important just because like I don’t know, I do believe that it’s through one religion but I don’t like think that other people are ignorant

**Interviewer:** Um do you think that you could be friends with a Muslim?

**Student 4:** Yea definitely yea. I think like being here seeing Shaa and Ahmed and everyone and just hearing their understanding of the world, I think it’s really important to see it from their perspective and to see and I can definitely learn things from them.

**Interviewer:** Would you say that you have a Muslim friend or that you know a Muslim?

**Student 4:** I would say that I know Muslims from here but I don’t think I have any Muslim friends like back at home.

**Interviewer:** Um what is your view on interfaith dialogue.

**Student 4:** Well I think it’s important when it comes to understanding um other people and understanding like yea the depth in the world um yea. I think it’s important to respect people in like a dialogue setting as well.

**Interviewer:** Umm has your stereotypes about Muslims or Arabs if you’ve had any has they changed or have they been reinforced.

**Student 4:** I think they’re changed. It’s super interesting looking back and seeing how much in the west it’s always talked about Islam being a violent religion and all these different things and I haven’t experienced that at all. Like I recognize that people have interpreted the Qur’an to be violent and there are Muslims who are violent but like I haven’t seen that in this religion at all especially if you look at the specific values in like, the pillars of faith and things like that there’s nothing like violent in there so I think that’s a way that my stereotypes have been changed.
Interviewer: Um okay here’s a big one, what have you learned during the course?

Student 4: I have learned a lot about different like theologies of religion and yea a lot about the idea like it’s only through Jesus Christ but then also like, everybody can go to heaven and through that. I had never really heard that before so kind of how Justin has said that. I’ve learned yea a lot about just like basic understanding of Islam umm… There’s so much it’s hard to…

Interviewer: Well can you identify some experiences that have been significant in your learning process?

Student 4: Umm I think just class with Justin has been very informative for me umm yea I have appreciated like that understanding of different ways of faith and like how to express that with other people and like why it’s important and just like building peace and bringing about like a hope. Yea other things.. I would say going to Thailand actually was really interesting um I have never like been in Asian culture and especially I never had like exposure to like Buddhism or any of those philosophies and yea so I think it was interesting to see how like it affected their daily life and also just understanding that like people just wanna live in a good way I guess, you know they don’t… I’ve always grown up with the idea that like people are heathens if they like believe in multiple gods and things like that and so it was really helpful to see the way that that looks in real life. Yea.

Interviewer: Um has there been some change that has happened during this program.

Student 4: Yea I think I’m way more willing to just listen to different views and ideas I was always afraid like listen to things that weren’t the stereotypical evangelical way just because that’s how I grew up and also yea I was always taught like stand firm in your believes and things like that so like then it just kind of led me to obviously still respect people but maybe not maybe listen as much to see the validity in somebody else’s like views. Especially when it comes to Christianity because yea just kind of the idea that like maybe there is like one perspective
within Christianity when actually there is many different perspectives and understandings. Um so yea just being willing to listen and like ask the big questions and not be afraid of that and that doesn't have to… That doesn't have to like change who I am so. Yea.

Interviewer: What do you think caused this change?

Student 4: Um I think just like continually talking about those questions with people and like having so many people tell me for like asking big questions and it's okay to recognize the bigness of this world and to try to understand it a little bit better. So I think encouragement from other people was a huge huge one.

Interviewer: Um anything that you would like to add?

Student 4: Umm I feel like this is kind of negative and I don't know if it's like specific to this but I feel like something I have struggled with this semester like after hearing so many different views and understandings especially within Christianity um I think I have just struggled with being one who has had like more of a conservative view because yea sometimes I feel like it's not okay to like believe those things um when really I'm just trying to understand the world around me and that's how I grew up and so yea I think sometimes I have been afraid to share my views because I feel like they are not right compared to everybody else's um so I would say like that's one thing that it's been like challenging this semester and it might have like kind of hindered me from being able to like really dig into questions in a different way because I was afraid of like saying the wrong thing which like that's kind of my own thing too like I recognize I've always had that fear and not just here but yea I don't know if that would be helpful at all.

Interviewer: No it's good that you said that.

Interviewer: Yea. Can I turn this off.

Student 5, Ending interview
**Interviewer:** So how has this program met your expectations?

**Student 5:** Coming into this program, I had pretty high expectations um on various things. And yea I think they met them really well umm they did a really good job at forcing us to interact with the culture. But not in an unhealthy way. Like if we needed like to be away from the culture for a little bit to like recover and recharge, we had that space. Which was really nice and they also did a really good job with having us interact with Omanis or Shaa and just a really healthy amount. Yea so they just did a really good job at that um in those expectations. And the classes weren’t too bad um but they also helped in processing how like to interact with the culture to understand the culture in a deeper level than just interacting with it. So like the reason behind some of the cultural tuitions which was really nice.

**Interviewer:** Um so what is your view on Islam right now, like has it changed somehow?

**Student 5:** Yea it’s I definitely, like it’s solidified my view of what like that it is a peaceful religion that the... the ability to live as neighbours is not something that seems distant but it’s something that is present and can be achieved. Yea that can be achieved and, cause I growing up in a fairly conservative area where it just seems like it is not possible. Um going to Oman and seeing muslims, Christians, Hindis all living next to each other is really powerful. And a thing to experience and witness. So yea it’s a positive, more positive view and more peaceful I think to some levels.

**Interviewer:** How about your opinion or view on like other religions in general.

**Student 5:** Yea so, our time in Thailand really like seeing how like and going to places of worship or meditation kind of helped just like gain an understanding because I didn’t have an understanding beforehand, I had like taken a few classes but there was not like the level of understanding I have about Islam. So understanding like the cultural reasons behind some of the religions kind of just gives me a better platform to gain more like respect and appreciation for them.
Um but again I like have a more welcoming view of them and I don’t have enough knowledge to be like certain on my views about them if that makes sense.

**Interviewer:** Yea. Um how would you identify. Like if you had to explain your own faith?

**Student 5:** Aha. Umm I would start like saying like I’m a Christian. Um but it... more progressive Christian. Um I do believe that humans are saved through Jesus Christ but I don’t limit Jesus Christ to Christianity. I think that truths can be found in other religions um but Christianity is like the way. Like the easier way maybe, that’s how I put it. And um I think that my religion’s base, is based on love for other people um and finding out their needs and helping them to achieve those needs. Yea.

**Interviewer:** Has your personal faith somehow changed or uh developed in this, during this semester?

**Student 5:** It definitely has. I’ve learned more about um how like Christianity teaches the approach to those in a different faith um which is nothing I had to experience before um and so that’s been really really helpful um thing to experience um and then I’ve also been challenged in my theology of religions in like how do people gain salvation um Christianity’s doctrine of salvation. And that’s been challenged to not just say something that makes me feel good but say something to have the support to back it up. Yea if that makes sense

**Interviewer:** Um so do you think that there is salvation outside of Christianity?

**Student 5:** I do think that there is salvation outside of Christianity. Um I think that um one thing like I think that um god is revealing god’s self always to all people. Um and I think that through those revelations or revealings that they can be saved through those. I think that’s like the really basic way.

**Interviewer:** And do you think that god is working through other religions?
Student 5: I do I think god can work through other religions um I think that even here in Oman with how um Islam is being viewed and used both in the government and just in the society in general that there is like a work of god there to create a country of peace and tolerance so I would say yes.

Interviewer: Um could you be friends with a Muslim?

Student 5: Yea.

Interviewer: Would you say that you are with a Muslim?

Student 5: I would, I would say that I’m pretty good friends with Shaa especially but even Ahmed and Muhammed and Sultaan.

Interviewer: Has some of your stereotypes if you’ve had any, like about Muslims or Arabs, have they changed or have they been enforced?

Student 5: I think the thing is that has changed is my ability to put like faces to like somethings so like in because I’ve never had a lot if any exposure to Arab people and Arab culture it’s been humanizing to live here for them because yea I just I didn’t have a background so that’s kind of like the big like the stereotype is just putting a face to people who live here and the majority of people wo arelike here are wonderful people so that’s been the big stereotype if that’s a stereotype. So.

Interviewer: Yea I get what you mean. Um what is your view on interfaith dialogue?

Student 5: I think that interfaith dialogue is key in building relationships and peacebuilding I think that through interfaith dialogue we can gain understanding about those who are different from us. And if we gain understanding we can humanize them and relate to them on a very personal level and if we do that, we can really solve the interfaith conflict that is happening.

Interviewer: What have you learned during this course
**Student 5:** Hah, I have learned so much. It’s... this past week... writing like the final papers I have really struggled to put this into words because it’s more just like I’ve learned like information but I’ve, the thing that has impacted me the most is the emotional learning. Um I’ve had. I’ve learned that like having questions and really struggling with your faith and um really struggling with interacting with people of different faiths or strong... who have probably stronger faith than you or know more about their faith than you know about yours. Um like struggling with that is hard but good. Um I have learned more about what I believe and why I believe what I believe. Um I’ve learned a lot about Islam how it it’s for... like formation how it’s founded, why there’s like in-fighting in Islam and like and like I’ve learned why Oman is so special I’ve learned how to have like better conversations between faiths but not only between faiths but between Christians who disagree with each other and other things like that. It’s a really wide range of new information. It’s ahrd to put into words

**Interviewer:** So you mentioned that like emotions have played a role so what kind of experiences have been significant in this learning process.

**Student 5:** Yea um, so like some like smaller examples are like going into a mosque and feeling like a godly presence if that makes sense or spiritual like thing about it like feeling that and interacting like talking to Shaa in his shop about why he believes what he believes and him asking me and like just having this dialogue like it just makes you have these feelings towards Muslims and other things like that. Learning more about Arab culture gives you different feelings about their treatment of women cause going I thought like it is a pretty sexist but then like learning that women use the hijabs and abaiyas as a form of freedom like it’s an expression of freedom in themselves and other things like that like it’s just like changing that feeling so yea.

**Interviewer:** Um can you identify what has been like the most significant change that has happened during this course?

**Student 5:** Um the most significant change for me maybe has been to be able to put faces to people who live in Arab culture uh yeah humanizing them and not
just speaking in like broad terms but being able to put like this person that I met and call my friend is like, just being able to do that has I find very powerful and has been very impactful um for me personally.

**Interviewer:** Um anything you would like to add?

**Student 5:** Um I don’t think so. I really enjoyed this semester.

**Interviewer:** That’s good. Ok we’re finished then thank you.

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Student 6, Ending interview

**Interviewer:** So how has the semester abroad program met your expectations?

**Student 6:** umm, met my expectations… I don’t know I feel like I didn’t really have too many expectations besides just like hoping I would meet friends and things like that. And umm that I would learn some Arabic so if we go with that then all my expectations were met. But I didn’t I wasn’t really I didn’t really have any huge expectations coming in. It was just kind of let’s see what happens. If that makes sense so…

**Interviewer:** Umm alright so, what is your opinion on Islam. Has it changed somehow?

**Student 6:** Umm I think now um that Islam can that our god maybe like um I think they are worshipping our god as well. Umm I don’t know about salvation and those kinds of issues but I think now from what I have seen they are worshipping god and if they are not worshipping god I don’t know who they are worshipping. Because it seems like they have umm sometimes they seem a little more faithful and close to worship than I do sometimes when it comes to worshipping god so I guess. That’s how it’s changed, my opinions, but everything else I think is the same.
Interviewer: So you’re not sure if there is salvation outside of Christianity?

Student 6: I am still wrestling with that. It’s more so because I’m trying to figure out how it all works in the grand scheme of things. I… I think God has something planned, I don’t quite think it’s hell though. I don’t know what is going to happen. But I don’t think it’s hell and you know someday you know, I will find out what God is actually going to do with those people that I wasn’t quite sure of. That’s up to him. It’s hard for me to like really put down a solid answer. It’s just such a touchy subject and especially if you’re gonna say that that’s what you believe you better have everything to back yourself up with it. I don’t think I can, if I can back myself up, I don’t think I’m in a place to really say I believe this or I believe that in that situation always

Interviewer: So do you think this semester has made you more uncertain or less uncertain or… about that.

Student 6: You see, I have a lot more questions than I did about this subject before. But like this semester has at least opened my mind to the possibility it seems more realistic now than it did three months ago. And I was even more unsure then. So, I’m a little bit like I’m starting to lean more towards like figuring out everything but I won’t say umm I have everything straight in my mind yet.

Interviewer: So do you think that God is working through other religions than Christianity.

Student 6: Uh yea I think he is and I know I think in Islam they’re you know worshipping god umm in another religions like Hinduism and Buddhism it’s at least from my experience in Thailand it was that it is harder to see how they would be worshipping god cause it seems kind of like it was very empty if that makes sense. But um I think you know I can’t generalize the entire religion I think that god is working within other religions. I’m not sure if some of the people in those religions are worshipping him or know that they are worshiping him. I guess. If that makes sense.
Interviewer: And has your view on other faiths changed somehow?

Student 6: Yea I think I am a lot more open to what they have to say and I was before but I feel like now I can at least have a conversation without being bothered by anything that’s said in the conversation like, they don’t believe in something that’s core to my foundation that’s fine I don’t believe in something that’s core to their foundation. And I think that now I can at least have the respect for each side and understand like where they are coming from. Now I have seen like so many different people just like worshipping in their own environment like the Buddhist in Thailand or the Taoist temple and how all that looked or the Sikh temple as well. I can see a lot more from where they’re coming from. It's not just words in a book now. It’s more real to me that how like important this thing how important other religions are to other people. And that um it’s not okay to just push them aside and say that they are not correct without at least trying to understand them, I think. So.

Interviewer: Umm could you be friends with a Muslim?

Student 6: Yea I already am. Yea.

Interviewer: You have Muslim friends now?

Student 6: Yea we met some people at the beginning of the semester and it just seems like. I have met a couple people and they all seem just as nice as any of my other friends. They don’t seem like weird or they don’t seem like they are mad at me for being American. Or mad at me for what’s happening with the gulf or anything like that. It seems like they have respect for me and I appreciate them for having that respect even though my country can seem like it can seem like we all of us Americans maybe just believe that Muslims are just going to hell or all terrorists or something like that so.

Interviewer: Um could you explain to me your personal faith like how you identify. Like briefly
Student 6: I identify as a Christian so I believe that Jesus died and rose again on the cross for my sins everyone of the worlds' sins. And that whoever believes in him shall come to salvation in Christ and some day have a place in heaven. But that’s not why I am a Christian. I am a Christian because god is worthy of worship, Christ is worthy of worship and I live to follow him no matter um no matter what happens because he died for me. And he has given me a new life um from my sins. And also, that Christ is um Christ the god is everywhere in this world. And because he is everywhere, I mean he is in everything he is always with us whether like in this conversation or all the things like that. Yes.

Interviewer: Do you have, you noticed any changes in your faith during the semester?

Student 6: I have felt very, very weak I guess if that makes sense. Like coming in, coming from a community that’s like all about worship and Christ and there’s chapel and you know you read your bible at least once a week there. Here it’s like I’m so busy with stuff or I’m so tired that I just don’t haven’t taken the time that I need to spend in like the word or with the Lord and do my devotions so that I can umm I can grow. I mean that’s not the only way you grow but I think that devotion helps. Helps you to understand and contemplate things and talk with god as well as a kind of trigger almost but umm yea I think I feel very weak like I don’t yea I don’t feel like I really been strong in my faith this semester. I feel like it’s been really hard to, I’m not sure if that’s because I’m in an all-Muslim society or you just get so busy here that it’s hard to like, it’s hard to have that time. And it’s especially hard it seems like, to have privacy and space here to like just be with your thoughts and think about things without having to worry about somebody coming in or something like that. So, I guess overall, I felt yea, I haven’t felt really strong in my faith at the moment. That doesn’t mean that Christ is not present in my life or that I’m a bad Christian it just yea it’s just not, I’m not um it’s just caused maybe me to be like a little bit less confident sometimes in myself because I try to lean on my own works to like help me through things instead of God because I haven’t made that time for him. I guess. So yea.

Interviewer: How do you feel about interfaith dialogue?
Student 6: Umm I think interfaith dialogue can be an important tool in the future. To help us understand each other and um each other’s faiths without having to get mad or angry or like you know without the friction or conflict. I think it’s a very good way to get to know the other person without like rally forcing it too much. It is a lot more natural than just trying to debate somebody on a topic and each one is trying to argue for like that they’re right instead of like you know just talking about each thing and having that mutual respect for each other.

Interviewer: Do you think that some of your stereotypes about Muslims or Arabs has changed? Or being enforced.

Student 6: A lot of them have been enforced some of them have changed. I think the women especially. I didn’t think that they’re being oppressed or anything like that but I didn’t, I wasn’t fully aware of just like how culturally like how cultural like wearing a hijab or something like that is like a cultural norm and if you’re not wearing one then it’s like you look kind of weird because you know everyone’s doing it. So it’s not like anyone’s forcing them to do it it’s more their choice because it’s like the style so you’re not gonna go against the style that everybody’s wearing because you look different so I think that’s one stereotype about how women perceive like um they’re moderate or conservative clothing I guess.

Interviewer: What have you learned during the course?

Student 6: Umm I’ve learned a lot about Oman’s history and culture and how the history has affected the society today and how it’s going to continues to affect the society and how they have learned from those mistakes they have made in the past and um like Christian and Muslim dialogue is important but there is many different ways to go about having dialogue and there’s many different um viewpoints of from Christian side I think of what to how to deal with other faiths whether it’s universal love or um universal salvation or something like that. And um also like how to at least begin to try and love myself and love who god has created and be confident in who I am in so that I can be able to love others in the future and to understand that If I want to like be able to love others in the future I will have to be able to love myself first through who god has made me otherwise I
just won’t have the confidence. Or like the understanding to do such things. And um also that uh that women have it a lot harder than I initially thought. I mean it makes sense but there’s a couple of times when the girls would just like talking about how somebody gave them a look or something and I was like in my head at the time was like that’s just a thing you shouldn’t, it shouldn’t bother you at all just like let it be it’s not a big deal. But after um uh going through similar experiences as them where women try to objectify me so that I would give them money and do things like that and like give me looks that made me feel uncomfortable is what made me realize that you know that isn’t so far-fetched that they would believe that that’s how they’re feeling. And that um they do have a lot to say. And that made me a lot more aware of how I can make their time here less stressful and make it more enjoyable to walk out in the streets and not have to worry about people staring at them or like asking them about things that they just don’t want to talk about and things like that and how to just be more present to not only the girls but all the people around me and what they’re struggling with as well. Yea.

Interviewer: Do you recognize any other experiences that have been somehow significant in your learning process?

Student 6: I wouldn’t say I have changed completely over this but having a roommate that’s not like my normal roommate and that’s kind of different from me so that causes me to have struggles sometimes and anger sometimes but that’s I think shown me how to be with people that I’m not really um accustomed to be with and living outside of my comfort zone and learning to understand that person instead of getting mad at them for things that they do that they don’t even realize that they do um but yea I guess that’s been something that’s just having a roommate that’s not like easy to deal with it’s been hard for me because I talk, I like to talk about what’s happening to try to figure out how to like prevent that through like understanding so it’s hard when the other person doesn’t understand or doesn’t seem to try to understand my side and then that leads me angry about the whole situation. It’s given me a lot of patience yea.
Interviewer: You said a lot of things you have learned and what has changed. What do you think is the most significant change that has happened during this course?

Student 6: I think definitely the thing with the girls and understanding their perspective of things. Because as a guy it’s easy to just ignore that and say it’s very far-fetched and that um it’s um thinking they’re overanalyzing how people are actually doing. But I think that it’s really going to help me in the future to um be present for the people around me and understand how I can be respectful with what they’re struggling with instead of just not understanding it and kind of showing it to the side. Yea I’d say that’s probably the biggest thing.

Interviewer: Is there anything you would like to add

Student 6: No

Interviewer: In that case thank you.
## Appendix 3 – Answers to questionnaire

**Student 1, Answers to the questionnaire**

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I understand Islam to be...

An Abrahamic faith not dissimilar to Christianity. I believe all Abrahamic faiths worship the same God. I don't fully understand Islam, but I respect it.

I understand Christianity to be...

An Abrahamic faith in which salvation through faith and belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a central tenant.

I understand my own faith/religion to be...

A liberal view of Christianity
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a peaceful religion that has been used to control & oppress societies as a result of the brokenness of humanity. I think Muslims and Christians worship the same God, but I think Muslims have a different/unique understanding of God.

Societies of Muslims

I understand Christianity to be...

a religion that has been used to control & oppress non-Christian societies as a result of the brokenness of humanity. Christianity focuses on the love of God through Jesus Christ.

I understand my own faith/religion to be...

an evolving love & devotion to God through Christianity.
**Student 2, Answers to the questionnaire**

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I understand Islam to be...

One of the main religions of modern society. It requires more (for example, the prayer 3-5 times a day), though a devout Christian might also do the same or have other requirements/time commitments. Many of its structures are similar in values to both other religions & society today (i.e. the 5 pillars).

I understand Christianity to be...

One of the three main religions of modern society. This is also the faith/belief system I grew up with.

I understand my own faith/religion to be...

In process. I am reasoning with my philosophically/philosophical side, trying to understand what faith looks like for me, & reconciling that with my childhood's understanding of the world/church/beliefs system.

Though I am going through this period of questioning & existential reflection, I still consider myself Christian.
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A peaceful religion (ideally) that is very misunderstood by western society.

Primary beliefs are in the unity of God, the revelation of Muhammad & perfection of the Quran.

I understand Christianity to be...
A peaceful religion (ideally) that is misunderstood in certain cultures.

Primary beliefs are in the trinity God, the death & resurrection of Jesus, the son of God.

I understand my own faith/religion to be...
Christian, but for multiple reasons: It makes sense to me & with my understanding of the world; it makes sense in my society. Beyond this, I understand my call is to be an agent of renewal, loving all creation.
Student 3, Answers to the questionnaire

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I understand Islam to be...

The belief in the oneness of God and Muhammad as his prophets. Islam means peace and the religion reflects that. To believe that there is only one God and Muhammad is his prophet is to be Muslim.

Following the pillars is important to the faith, but ultimately a Muslim’s faith is their relationship with God.

I understand Christianity to be...

The belief in the oneness of the Trinity. The understanding that humans are mortally sinful and require salvation (from Jesus primarily). The acknowledgement of a day of judgment and the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth on that day. Christianity is having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Partaking in sacrament is essential to the faith, however not always a determinant of a Christian’s faith and practice.

I understand my own faith/religion to be...

An open, less rigid Christianity. I go to church when I can and I try to read the Bible. Ultimately, my faith is in the belief that there is only one God and that God is my Savior. She is almighty, eternal, loving and forgiving. She is the final judge and I believe that my faith in her and relationship with her is my faith. My faith is not necessary the same as my religion. I believe in many Christian ideas and fundamental parts, but I understand my faith to be influenced by my religion; they are not one in the same.
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I understand Islam to be...

The submission of one's life, thoughts, and deeds wholly to God. Living in the way God has instructed and taking care of the world they have provided. Devoting every aspect of one's life to worshipping God in any/very way possible.

I understand Christianity to be...

Serving God in a Christ-like manner throughout one's life and the world. Reaching out to those unlike us and those who oppose us and treating them with love and respect.

I understand my own faith/religion to be...

The worship of God and Jesus Christ. My faith is dependent on me living how I think Christ would have lived and how God would want me to. I am obliged to love everyone; no exceptions. I serve God through serving their people.
### Student 4, Answers to the questionnaire

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I understand Islam to be...
a religion that believes in one God and Muhammad as the great prophet. The Qur'an is believed to be God's word transcribed by Muhammad and very important to Muslims. Muhammad is the greatest example and role model of how to live on this earth. Aside from Muhammad, there are several other prophets that have been sent by God throughout history. In all, Islam is works based and focused on following God's law.

I understand Christianity to be...
a religion that believes in one God and Jesus as Messiah. God revealed Himself from the beginning of time. He established a covenant with Abraham to make his children the chosen people of God. God worked throughout history to show His unconditional love and faithfulness to the Israelites. God also promised a Messiah to save the Israelites from bondage. Jesus came as Messiah around 2,000 years ago as a baby. He did not come as a military leader, but as a man, who showed all people the love of God and how to love others. He also saved us from the cruel king's death and, ultimately...

I understand my own faith/religion to be...
Christian. I believe that Jesus died on the cross and His death and resurrection are enough to bring me to heaven. His hecless grace is our greatest hope.

satisfying the wrath of God and creating forgiveness for all. Christians accept what Jesus did on the cross as enough to save them from their sin and ultimate judgement: condemnation to hell. Because of what Jesus did, Christians respond by following God's commands as described in the Old and New Testaments. They are not saved by their good works but by grace...
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I understand Islam to be...
a religion that believes in one God that has revealed Himself through the Quran, which is the literal word of God. God has used many prophets throughout history to reveal His will to people. The final prophet was Mohammed, who recited the Quran. There are five pillars of faith that help define the Muslim religion. These are the Shahada, Prayer, Almsgiving, Fasting, and the Hajj.
Islam is an Abrahamic faith...

I understand Christianity to be...
a religion that believes in one God who is understood in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God revealed Himself through many prophets, as described in the OT. Jesus is the Son of God who came down to Earth to provide a clearer revelation of God’s love. Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected 3 days later. There is hope of eternal life because of what Jesus did. Christianity is also an Abrahamic faith...

I understand my own faith/religion to be...
Christianity
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I understand Islam to be...

A religion that focuses on the submission to God. It teaches submission to the power teachings of God in the Quran. The 2nd largest religion that you will meet if you work in a global job.

I understand Christianity to be...

A religion that focuses on a personal relation to the Trinity or God. A very westernized religion that works within any culture. A religion that focuses on relationships less on law or structure.

I understand my own faith/religion to be...

My faith is based in Christianity, influenced by my family & progressive Christian authors. I believe that Christianity should be spread to everyone, but we should be respectful of others and spread it through relationships & mutual respect.
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I understand Islam to be...

One of the Abrahamic faiths, revealed by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.

I understand Christianity to be...

One of the Abrahamic faiths, Jesus died to reconcile for our sins.

I understand my own faith/religion to be...

A progressive Christianity, I am a Christian and believe that Jesus was God.
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A religion with violent aspects, but most Muslims do not follow this part of Islam. I think that Islam is peaceful and has strong and devoted followers. [Handwritten text: Islam is a way of life through understanding and faith.]

I understand Christianity to be...

A religion that follows the study of God's word and grows to learn about Jesus in order so others may know him.

I understand my own faith/religion to be...

My identity, I believe, is more than some far off person that we pray to but someone who is right here with us. Being a Christian is not just rule and books, but interacting with people to help them encounter Christ.
Circle the number on the right side of the paper that best suits your own opinion.

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I understand Islam to be...

A religion that follows one God that believes Muhammad is the one true prophet and that someday Christ will come again to proclaim this. Also, I understand it to be peaceful, but like Christianity, there are violent aspects.

I understand Christianity to be...

A religion that follows one God that believes Jesus is God in the trinity, and that he died and rose again on the cross, to save the world from their sins.

I understand my own faith/religion to be...

A belief in what Christ has done, and a calling to love others as Christ has loved me. I also believe that Christ is in everything and because of this He is always with us, especially in our sufferings.
Appendix 4 – Students’ final essays

Student 1, Final Essay

Methods of Formation

I remember landing in Muscat and somehow already feeling dread. The next two days of nonstop motion and movement and meetings proved to be too much. I am not so sure I ever recovered. But in the discomfort, in the midst of the shit, I found my strength. At home I questioned whether or not I could actually “make it” here, as did several of my peers and my advisor. However, I feel that I am now a stronger, scrappier, more empathetic person. Here’s how.

As I was on my way home from Albania, the man sitting next to me in the airplane told me that “if too many Muslims come into the country, then we’ll all be living under shari’a law and girls like [me] will have to wear a hijab.” I knew he was incorrect. I knew it in my gut. But I did not have the education required to articulate why he was wrong. I did not have the tools necessary to engage in dialogue. Instead, I said “hm” and turned away to read my book. Now, I can engage that person, and tell him that the majority of shari’a is a guide to proper behavior and living. So, if it was instituted in the United States, likely the meat industry would be less horrific and there would be fewer instances of food poisoning, as one example of a potential outcome. However, non-Muslim women would not be obligated to abide by these laws. The point is, I have learned about Islam during an important period of America’s history, where we are deeply divided and hateful of the “others.” However, this education will allow me to better serve my community as well. I am actually looking forward to it; instead of dreading the ignorance, I can challenge it.

How am I scrappier? As a major depressive, I have had to be my own support system for a large portion of the semester, which has required me to be my own advocate on multiple occasions. I learned that I can be my own support system for a short period of time. It’s kind of like lactic acid fermentation. It can produce enough glucose molecules to keep the system alive, but it is not sustainable. I can fight by myself just long enough to keep myself alive, and unfortunately, that is more than many individuals can say. That is, not everyone can make it. Hopefully, I can provide the tools to others so they can stay afloat.

The Relationship Triangle

Growing up, I operated under the assumption that only Christians worshipped God and everyone else on this Earth was uneducated and damned. Essentially, I overemphasized my place on Earth and shortened the line between myself and God, effectively making myself superior. However, coming here has shown me how others can reflect God when I cannot see God. I no longer see myself as superior. Granted, sometimes this manifests
as an inferiority complex that is not helpful either, but I think proper love can help remedy that. If I can properly love myself, I can properly love others. And if I can properly love God, I can properly love myself. I understood my neighbor to be anyone who is not me. At first, I thought this was far too simplistic of an understanding. But now I don’t think so. Perhaps everyone is my neighbor, but some are placed in my life at specific moments because they need my love in that moment. This may look like an individual directly entering my life, or it may look like a people group coming up in conversation in a negative light. In both instances, I am obligated as a Christian and as a human to protect the dignity of my neighbors. On the concept of dignity, I find it particularly difficult to uphold my own dignity. I have been thinking so little of myself for so long, and I find self respect to be an elusive, lofty goal that may or may not be attainable. While this semester was not a cure for this, I have been reminded of my worth here. Specifically, Rowie reminded me of my worth here. I am a daughter of the King, and I am more than my body. I can write this, but I am still working on believing it.

30-Second Response

This experience has been both uniquely challenging and formative. I felt like I was being refined somehow during the whole semester; I felt every subconscious prejudice and stereotype melt away with every interaction and after every day. In learning about Islam, I learned how similar it is to Christianity, and I learned that I have brothers and sisters around the world. Though we may not be brothers and sisters in Christ per se, we are fellow humans, and I would say that warrants some kindness. I think the most valuable lesson I’ve learned here is just how incorrect our American assumptions about Muslims are. Unfortunately, these assumptions are deeply and firmly held. Maybe my stories can help dispel some of the fears.

2-Minute Response

My semester in Oman has been deeply formative. Through my fear of walking through the streets and receiving looks and attention, I learned an interesting lesson about privilege. I felt so angry when the men had no problems developing friendships and they would tell us to “just put [ourselves] out there” without acknowledging our struggles or difficulties. I recognized my anger, and I wondered how minorities in the United States handle similar feelings. I nearly screamed after only a few weeks; how does one live a life disadvantaged and maintain an aura of grace? I am still working through these feelings and considering how this will impact the way I live moving forward.

One moment that I will hold with me for a long while occurred in Shah’s shop. He asked me what my tattoo meant. I was nervous at first, because tattoos are typically frowned upon in Islam. But after I told him about my diagnoses, he asked if I was ok now, if I had gotten better. I did not know how to answer this, because one does not simply “get better” from major depressive disorder. However, I told him that yes, I think I am getting better. He said “al humdulilah, I am so glad.” Something about hearing another human say that they are glad I am alive affects me deeply. After I told him that I was planning on getting married next May, he said that he would pray for me twice a day. I believe him. This interaction demonstrated to me that I can learn from others’ faith even if it is completely different from my own. It was also a friendly reminder from God that folks like having me around. I could use some of those every now and then.
To summarize, the semester was a positive, formative experience. The weather was hot, the food was tasty, and the people were deeply hospitable. I would not say that it was a “wonderful” experience, but it was great, in many ways.

**Testing Everything**

To me, “testing everything” is an intellectual practice. I don’t think we can verbally express our newly changed theologies every time we have questions or wonder about other claims, as I believe this would prove to be challenging for helpful dialogue to ensue. Maybe it would be quite exciting, as the other participant never knew what the other truly felt, but it would feel insincere, I think. Rather, I wonder if “testing” a claim or prophecy looks more like considering ourselves believing it or accepting it. If we imagine a universe in which we lived our lives under this new assumption or claim or prophecy, do we like what we see? I often utilize this practice when making decisions. Do I feel peace with the potential reality created by this action? If not, I choose against it.

This semester, I have utilized this practice when concluding my theology of religions. I considered what my reality would look like if I believe that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, or if all humans went to heaven, or if my concept of God was completely incorrect. I think this practice will allow me to better empathize with different ideologies. Maybe I can empathize with experiences, but this semester I realized that I have difficulty empathizing with worldviews. Moving forward, I have the tools needed to “try on” another perspective; that is, I can better understand others’ worldview if I imagine it as my own. I think empathy is one of the first steps to peace-building, and I look forward to implementing these tactics as a future physician.

**Student 2, Final Essay**

**Final Journal**

My time in Oman has shaped me, given me new eyes to see topics I may have thought about for years beforehand, but never could quite figure out. It has challenged my worldview and forced me to think about how to share this enlightenment with others. It has turned my eyes inward, looking for the root of my feelings, and recognize that whatever they are, they’re okay. I’ve learned so much more here than I will ever be able to fully recognize, yet somehow I fully appreciate it. Somewhere in my soul, I understand how this experience has shaped me; and though my head has yet to catch up, I am at peace with allowing my heart to understand something my head can’t.

I think the largest change I saw in myself was with my personal theology. I remember talking with one of my advisors throughout fall semester about religion, faith, spirituality, etc. We just talked, not coming to any conclusion— not that a conclusion is really possible in this area. The last time I saw her before the semester ended she told me she hoped this semester would provide me with answers, and if not, peace. She could not have been more right. It was exactly what I needed, having conversations late into the night about that which matters most and gives life depth. I found people so open about
these topics, ready to engage them at any level. I thrived. How often do you get to discuss matters of life and death—literally—every single day for an entire semester? It was a gift. Further, it was a gift to do it in a place like Oman, with its rugged landscape and kind-hearted people. Something about this place spoke to me and speaks to me still.

The journey to peace was not an easy one. It has been a two-year long existential crisis. I do not use those words lightly. It was two years of questioning the very foundation on which my entire world stood. It was exhausting and scary and hard. But here, by the grace of Allah, I found strength in the mountains, quiet in the dunes, warmth in the sun, love in the people. Always love.

This is the foundation on which I began my new understanding or basically my acceptance of the lack thereof, and somehow the subsequent peace. Being concerned with my salvation, what happens to me, is so selfish. Why am I focusing on my soul when there are so many people hurting? Why am I concerned with my heaven when people are living in hell? How can my eyes be blind to the problems in the world, the bigotry, racism, sexism, and hunger that we use to “other” each other, or to blindfold ourselves so we don’t even see others at all? What can I do to be an agent of renewal here and now? Renewal is possible, I have seen it. It is in the changed mindsets of people around me, the recognition of the divine in your neighbor, the recognition of your neighbor, the recognition of humanity.

To think I have the power to save people is foolishly arrogant. But I have the power to love with all of my being. As Mother Theresa said, “I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.” If we can at least try to love each other, truly, I think we can see the heavenly possibility of shalom. Heaven, for me, isn’t wearing a toga, floating on some cloud and playing the harp all day; rather, it is the renewal of this earth, this Eden, this paradise. It is being able to run, climb, laugh, travel and love others without ceasing, enjoying the countless gifts from the divine and the connection we all share with God and with each other.

I am forever grateful for the peace that I have found here, the kind that surpasses all understanding. The challenge now is to discover how I can share this experience with people. How do I explain my holy envy of Islam or how I believe we worship the same God? How do I describe the freedom I found in the hijab that so delicately balances the privilege I discovered or the respect I felt? How do I share the depth of my desire to return here or the tear I feel in my heart at the very notion of leaving? While this is impossible to truly communicate, I will do my best with the language I have.

If I have only 30 seconds, I plan on saying something like: “My time in Oman was phenomenal. I got to indulge my inner adrenaline junkie with crazy fun excursions, as well as my inner nerd with constant deep and lively discussions about the depth of life, connectedness of humanity and faith, and the misconceptions we have about people in the Middle East. I loved learning Arabic and got to meet so many incredible people. I’m not sure how or when, but I will make it back there.”

If that manages to snag the listener’s attention, I will continue, saying: “Yeah, I think the most amazing things were the desert trip and the conversation. I loved the desert! Not just because it was crazy awesome, but it was quiet. We climbed these massive dunes and just took in the scenery and serenity. There weren’t any birds
or many people talking, so we could just hear the sand blowing across the dune. The peace there was so symbolic of for the semester. We learned how to promote Muslim-Christian relations, and how we have such a skewed perspective of the faith in the States. We also constantly talked a lot about our own theologies. It was great to have the discussions people are often too scared to have. It was so real and in such an amazing place to have them."

While I appreciated most of the conversations in class, I think one of the most important for me was the “self-love as self-awareness” topic. We discuss theology in most of the other classes, so this one provided an interesting contrast to all we were learning. I think so often we don’t think about ourselves, which on the surface sounds fine, but when you really think about it, it’s not the best. How can you love someone to the fullest if you don’t love yourself? I think taking the time to focus on the inside helped me engage people better, which helped me see my experience with different eyes. Further, it helped me realize that it’s not selfish to take care of yourself, like the monk in Thailand said, “Take care of yourself. Take care of others. Purify your mind.” I think all three of those components are necessary to attain balance. Granted, it’s not an exclusive list, and taking care of oneself is highly subjective, but this is a good place to start.

I have truly loved and will deeply cherish my time here. It has provided me with a sense of peace I haven’t felt in a while and equipped me to continue questioning and serve as an agent of renewal in a way I had not thought of before. I am excited to see where it takes me!

Student 4, Final Essay

As I reflect on my experience in Oman, I recognize transformation in the following two areas: my respect for other cultures and my respect for other theological views within Christianity. As I have encountered a culture vastly different than the one I grew up in, I quickly recognized many differences in the interactions between men and women, how people act in public, and the emphasis on respect and honor of the family. Identifying these differences has often caused frustration and confusion because the way people live life in Oman seems to be so different from the way life is lived in the U.S. However, as I have continued through this experience, I have begun to recognize that cultures can function in vastly different ways and neither culture is required to be necessarily "right” or "wrong”. This has helped me to respect the Omani culture and recognize the validity in its approach to life.

I have also gained a greater respect and appreciation for other theological views as I have learned about the Islamic perspective as well as other views within Christianity. As I hear others’ views, perspectives, and understandings of scriptures and God, I am able to see the validity in their thoughts. I have come to recognize that most people have a desire to live an impactful and fulfilling life, and their attempt to understand our world through scripture and intellectual capacities are equally as valid as mine. I recognize that life is much more complex than I ever thought it could be and people’s personal experiences in the world greatly impact their
understanding of truth. No human being is able to fully understand absolute truth, but we can all understand a portion of this truth through the experiences we face. Therefore, it is

crucial to respect and honor others’ views because they bring a specific perspective that no one else is able to provide. As I have considered others’ theological views, my views and understanding of truth have been challenged and refined. I have been able to identify inconsistencies in my views as well as additional aspects that should be considered when contemplating important theological questions.

As I prepare to leave Oman, I recognize that most of my big questions in faith, like “Who is saved after death?”, “Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?”, “How does predestination impact our lives?”, “How do I interact with people of other religions?” and many more are still being contemplated. I appreciate that as I leave Oman I am able to continue contemplating these questions in the U.S. As I dive into various aspects of these questions, I recognize that the conclusions I arrive at will greatly impact the way I live my life. This will impact the way I interact with others, other I live out my faith, and the career paths I choose in the future. Though the weight of these conclusions is great, I know I can experience peace in the midst of questioning, ultimately recognizing that the God of the universe is so much bigger than the questions I have, and that God will direct my steps as I continue to seek God.

As I consider the impact of this time on my understanding and love for my neighbor, God, and myself, I recognize a greater depth in my understanding of the whole triangle. My love for my neighbor has grown deeper as I have gained a greater understanding of my Muslim neighbors. Learning about Islam and the various ways people practice Islam has allowed me to respect my Muslim neighbors and acknowledge their way of life. This experience has helped me realize that my neighbor is not only the person who looks like me and holds the same faith as me, but it is every fellow human being on this planet. This experience has also provided me with a greater understanding of God. As I have seen how much more complex the world is than I thought, I am able to see that God is so much bigger than I will ever be able to understand. I cannot confine God to my simple capacity to understand God. As I attempt to embrace my inability to understand the complexities of God, I hope to experience the freedom of letting God expand my understanding with every step and trusting that His understanding and plan is sufficient. I desire that this would propel me into a greater love for and deeper relationship with God. I admit that this experience has made it harder for me to understand and love myself, as I have often felt a great amount of pressure to understand life in the midst of great confusion with the complexities of it all. This has heightened my insecurities and caused frustration with myself as I continue to “solve” the problems and questions of the world. However, I hope that as I reflect on this experience, I will be able to rest in the truth of God’s goodness, forgiveness, and love that defines my worth and identity.

As I think of how I will convey my experiences in Oman to those I encounter at home, I think of 30 second and a two minute response I hope to provide when
people ask me about my experiences. For those who ask me about my trip in passing, I plan to state, “My experience in Oman was positive overall. I learned many things about culture and religion. I saw how respect was quite important in everyday life as well as faith. I’m interested to see how my new perspective will shape the way I live here.” For those who seem to be a bit more interested in my experiences in Oman, I plan to explain, “I had a great time learning about culture and religion while in Oman. It was most impactful to learn about the way Omanis’ religion was integrated into their everyday life. I appreciated hearing the calls to prayer five times a day because it showed how dedicated they are to their faith. It was also interesting to see their deep respect and hospitality toward everyone they meet, even those of different religions. Omanis are known for their genuine kindness, which is seen as they go out of their way to accommodate for guests. We were given food and/or tea at almost every event we were invited to. When it came to interfaith conversations, I often felt respected and heard as I stated my beliefs and listened to others’. As I got to know several Omanis, it was interesting to see how much family is at the center of their way of life. Most extended families all live in one area and they gather together often. Seeing this opened my eyes to different perspectives and shattered common stereotypes I had often heard in the past. Though it was challenging at times to experience a culture quite different than mine, I appreciated seeing that cultures can differ quite extensively while still fostering respect, equality, and kindness.”

As I contemplate the various concepts we discussed during class throughout the semester, I appreciated the concept of love guiding self-control. As I consider this concept further, I realize that love is ultimately the action that drives everything we do. It therefore makes sense that love would be the driving force behind all the fruits of the spirit. As we love God, others, and ourselves deeply, we begin to see life from a new perspective, bringing forth joy which ultimately establishes peace within all circumstances and relationships. This love continues to establish all fruits of the spirit, eventually bringing forth self-control. The love we possess in our relationships leads us to value others so highly that we see their worth as priceless. As we recognize others’ worth, we develop a respect for others that hopes to honor people in all ways. This leads us to self-control. This is seen when we recognize the worth in ourselves, others, and God. When we value ourselves so completely, we hope to prevent any negative outcomes from occurring towards ourselves. When we value others, we hope that no harm will fall on them. As we worship God and see that He is worthy of our praise, we begin to live in a way that reflects our love and adoration of Him. All this is summed up in the concept of self-control. We are able to control thoughts, opinions, and actions because of our love towards those around us. This is reiterated in 1 Peter 4:8 that states, “above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.” This suggests that love forgives, protects, and prevents sin. I have recognized this concept during my time in Oman as I have seen my love for others keep me from immediately becoming frustrated with them. I have desired to understand where they are coming from before I become frustrated. Though there have been times that I have become
frustrated, I recognize they may have arisen due to a lack of love for those around me. I feel that this concept will be particularly helpful in my future career as a teacher. As I remember the deep impact of love on all fruits of the Spirit, I will hope to allow my love for students, parents, and staff to permeate my being and drive my patience and ability to control any negative thoughts or desires in my relationships with others.

Student 5, Final Essay

While here in Oman I have been challenged into so much change. The biggest change has been in how I view and interact with those of other religions. I was also challenged in looking at the world through a different lens. Living in a new culture will force you to be open to new ideas. Talking to Shah about his faith and finally interacting with a person of a different faith with a stronger faith than you is difficult to do. It makes you take a second and look at your faith in the eyes.

I still have so many questions to ask before I leave. These questions are not ones that have right answers which make it so much worse for me. I am a person who struggles “holding the mystery of God” as Justin puts it. I really enjoy finding answers that I can be certain about. While in Oman I have had to learn to hold the mystery of God. I have had questions about salvation for those who are of different religions.

I have also been challenged by living in the gender culture here. I am generally a friendly person to people on the street, but here I feel like I can’t say hello to everyone. I feel like I can’t look into the eye of women here. This was a very big challenge to begin with. Over time it became second nature to me. When I started to notice this, I became nervous. I wonder how I will react to the different culture of the States. The gender norms have been very different and very difficult for me to deal with. I find it difficult to hear what the girls are saying because I know it is true, but also it is so different from my experiences in this culture.

When it comes to how Oman has affected my triangle between God, Others, and Me. The first thing I noticed was how I was dealing with myself. I have learned to love myself more because I put so much emphasis on making sure others are treated well and that the love for them. I also hold God at a very high level. Because of this I may leave little room for myself. I hope that I can continue this journey of learning how to balance my life in a more fulfilling way.

My thirty second summery of this semester is much longer then thirty seconds. I would first start with a summery about what we did. I would talk about the markets, and how in the markets you get these different smells and sights. I will talk about the organized chaos of Muscat due to the mountains. I will talk about the dhow rides and how cool it was to have these conversations on and in a safe place. I will talk about visiting the mosques and the feeling of God in them or spirituality
in them. I will talk about the museum and how powerful it was to see the history of Oman there. The frankincense trade route and the Bible from the Centre. I will talk about the trips to the mountains and desert and the pure beauty of Oman. After I talk about that I will go into how powerful the emotional experience of Oman has been.

I would talk about the different conversations I have had with Shah or in classes. I would talk about how much I have learned about Islam and the peace that Islam preaches. I will talk about how Oman and His Majesty has done in Oman to be a model for the rest of the world on living with neighbors of different faiths. I would try my hardest to express the feelings I’ve had during these conversations. I think that most valuable thing I have is the importance of meeting people of different faiths and having conversations. As Justin says, “in order to know Christianity you must know Christians plural, in order to know Islam you must know Muslims plural.” These lessons are things I want to bring back and share that idea with people. Talking about what Shah and I have discussed about our faiths. How does he view the Bible and the Qur’an? What is his view of the God of Christianity and the God of Islam? Are they the same, are they different? Talk about how class with Ahmed was the most educational way to learn about Islam and Omani culture. Talking about how he told his faith journey when he was younger. Talking about how the Sultan has used Islam to make a nation of peace and tolerance. Talking about how I have worked through the pain of being challenged over my faith. Talking about all the wrong stereotypes about Islam. All of these conversations show that you do need to know more than what is said on the news to get an accurate interpretation of a single religion.

I will also talk about how Oman is dealing with major issues in the States like Climate Change. It makes me so excited to hear the steps they are taking for such a major issue. It is things like this that I will bring back to the States. I have been moved by the kindness Oman has given us these past 4 months. I will bring back the joy I have experienced, but I will also bring the pain that I experienced during it. Yes, Oman has been amazing and I have loved it here, but that doesn’t mean it hasn’t been difficult. I want show that an experience like this isn’t the easiest thing. It is hard and challenging. You will be pushed and pulled in so many different ways. There are days you want to sit in your bed and never leave. I have learned those are the days that you get up and experience the country more.

The idea of testing everything really stuck to me from class. Being a person who likes to be confident and certain in what they believe and thinks in the form of logic. Questioning everything is both a natural and unnatural thing for me. My mom taught me the scientific method on questioning everything. The problem is certainty is much more convenient and is easier to express.

Learning the difficulties of having certainty in your faith and/or suspending certainty when in conversation has been very healthy. Also the use of a curiosity mindset when communicating with others is a much more helpful way to deal with
miscommunications and the breaking of stereotypes. You are also more prepared to deal with unexpected challenges in faith.

Holding and question everything can also help me deal with holding the mystery. While questioning everything you are better able to deal with mysteries and have more constructive conversations with those around whether that is those who differ in religion or those who are in relationship with you.

The other classes I have taken have shown me different ways to deal with conflict and difference. While using a curiosity mindset you are able to learn more about those who you are in dialogue with. In a relationship knowing what the other is thinking and understanding. This will lead to a healthy relationship. Also in dialogue with those in a different religion you can gain a greater understanding on way they think, why they think, and how they think. Over time you are able to learn more about yourself and how you think by learning more about how others think.

In Omani culture we learned how Oman works and that can help us learn about our own culture. You are able to be more critical of your own culture. It also helps you learn how to be more tolerant of those who are different.

**Student 6, Final Essay**

We said goodbye to a good friend today before this week ended. He was a good friend, but before he left that day he gave us a gift. This gift was a leather keychain with my name in Arabic on one side and English on the other side. This gift was simple, but looking more closely at it, the keychain showed a lot about my time here in Oman as well.

When I first arrived here I was just Garrison in English there was nothing really special on my side, but I was a clean slate that was ready to experience the culture of Oman. But, as time went by, I began to lose some of that excitement. In its place was anger, and sadness that I had to be away from everyone. This was a really hard time for me, and I didn't know if I could make it through the rest of the semester, but through some patience and help from God I began to change, and also picked up some Arabic along the way too.

When thinking about how I have formed here in Oman the first thing that comes to mind is being conscious of others. I know this should seem like a very obvious thing today, but there were many times where I just felt like worrying about myself, because it was easier not to think of how other were feeling. I noticed that the girls always had something they were worried about, and it seemed to me ridiculous at times. I thought why do they need to worry it will all work out in the end. It was not until I had a
conversation with a few of them about what the struggles were among the
group that things changed. After this conversation, I began to realize I had been
alittle selfish for just trying to help myself. Also, if I could be present to what the
girls were struggling with, there were small ways that I could help them get
through their anxiety. This in turn helped us all to have a good time as a group.
To summarize what I have said so far by being present to what the girls had
problems with I began to understand how I could help them.

Another thing that I did not realize is just how much unwanted attention the girls
receive I had heard many stories of times when they had gone out and some-
one had been eyeing them the wrong way, but honestly, I thought a lot of what
was happening was probably all in their heads. It wasn’t until I went down a cer-
tain street in Thailand on accident that I had a small idea of how they felt. On
this street girls came out and yelled at me, and tried to get me to stop in their
bar. I was only seen as an object, if they could get me in a bar, would mean mo-
ney for them. What the girls had been saying before didn’t seem so far-fetched
anymore. Just thinking about how uncomfortable I felt gives me anxiety to this
day. But, if it were not for this experience I would have never been able to
comprehend what the girls go through everyday. I mean it must be awful to try
to go out shopping, or to eat and know that at least one person is going to stare
at you. This experience was bad, but it showed me that there is a lot more that I
need to be aware of when trying to understand the people around me, and that
before casting judgement on that person try to get to the root of what their prob-
lem is.

When thinking about how to explain what happened here I guess it could go so-
thing like this: I went to Oman, and it was difficult but it was fun, because of
not only the friends I have made but because of all the new experiences I have
had that help me to understand not only my Muslim neighbors but my friends in
America. This is how I would attempt to explain myself in 30 seconds, and I
know it is vague, but I think if they want to know more they will ask questions
that I would be happy to answer. Most likely this will be enough for people
though, because they may want to know but don’t think they have time for any
more than the 30 second summary of my trip.

My two-minute response would be this: I went to Oman and it was difficult inter-
acting with so many different people as well as learning Arabic. Although it was
difficult I had fun with the friends I made, and learned a lot from the experiences
I had. These experiences have helped me to understand how to interact with
our Muslim neighbors, in a way that is practical and respectful. It has also hel-
ped me to understand the people I interact with in America at home as well.
This response gives a little more information to understand what has happened
on my study abroad in Oman, but unless they ask more questions they will not
have a clear picture of what happened.

The topic I appreciated the most in class was the one talking about self-love as
self-awareness. When I came to Oman I really struggled with how others per-
ceived me and really let my past define who I was. I was already good at being
self-aware, but the topic of self-love helped me to understand that before I can love others in the right ways I first need to love myself for who God has created me to be. This goes with how I can love my Muslim neighbors as well, because by learning to love myself I can learn to love them for who they are as well. Then in turn have healthy dialogue with them. Finally, this will help me with my future as well as not only being present and loving the people I come into contact with as a chaplain, but to grow up. When I say this to be responsible for my actions, and think of others before myself.

I came to this country as the blank side of the keychain as just Garrison in English, but after my time here I am no longer just Garrison, but something more. On the other side of the keychain is my name in Arabic, but it is not just plain and simple, it is something beautiful. Now, I am not sure about what I have learned yet here, but what I am realizing is that I am not the same person I used to be when I came here. I am something more complex, I am something that God has created and that is beautiful. With time, the keychain will wear down and the names may fade, just as some of the memories will, but I believe that even though these things will fade they will always be there. I will never forget this experience I have had, and while it has been hard I know that with time I will come to understand what I have learned here and begin to embrace the other side of the keychain.

Appendix 5 – The interview guide

Warm up questions:

- What made you come to Oman?

Main body of the interview:

- What is your view on Islam?
- What is your view on other faiths in general?
- Could you be friends with a Muslim?
- Do you know a Muslim/Muslims?
- Do you recognize some stereotypes in your ideas about Muslims and Arabs?
- Explain to me your personal faith.
- Do you think that there is salvation outside Christianity?
- Do you think that God works through different religions?
- What is your view on interfaith dialogue and its possibilities?
• Anything you would like to add?