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An Anchor and a Path: Student Reflections on the Certificate in Religion and Public Life



## An Anchor and a Path:

# Student Reflections on the Certificate in Religion and Public Life

Mon, 07/10/2023

When Susie Hayward, associate director of the Religious Literacy and the Professions Initiative, came to Harvard Divinity School as a student, she knew that she wanted to pursue a career in foreign policy, peacebuilding, and diplomacy.

“I wanted to bring an understanding of religion into those spaces where a lack of it was preventing progress,” she says. “But I quickly learned that I would have to forge my own way at HDS to develop the relationships and pragmatic skills needed to work in policymaking and diplomacy post-graduation.”

Hayward is one of decades of HDS students who have wanted to pursue vocations outside the two defined dimensions of HDS programs—academia and traditional forms of ministry. When Religion and Public Life (RPL) was created, it responded to this student need with one of its two curricular components, the Certificate in Religion and Public Life (CRPL).

The CRPL provides a structured opportunity for current Master of Divinity

(MDiv) and Master of Theological Studies (MTS) students to think about their degrees in context.

“The very possibility that I could help create the program that I wish had existed when I was a student, that offers that critical work of translating and leveraging the study of religion in different professional fields through internships, skills building, and relationships with professionals, was exciting to me and everyone I talked to,” Hayward says.

The program is built on “the assumption of collaboration,” Diane L. Moore, associate dean of Religion and Public Life, explains. “We have a lot to learn from experts in arenas outside our own, and we believe we have something to offer relevant to a complex understanding of religion.”

“With professionals in other fields, we create pathways for those pursuing ‘secular professions’ to deeply consider how religious literacy fits into larger questions of inclusion and building opportunities for just peace,” Moore says. “Our students can become real leaders in a world that desperately needs an understanding of the powerful force of religion.”

Now, three years after the debut of Religion and Public Life, the first CRPL cohort of MDiv and MTS students are graduating. CRPL students Prabhroop Kaur Chawla, MTS ‘23, Kevin Keystone, MTS ‘23, Auds Hope Jenkins, MDiv ‘24, Ariella Gayotto Hohl, MDiv ‘24, and Camilla Gray, MTS ‘23, reflect on their experiences in the program.

Associate Dean of RPL Diane L. Moore, Associate Director of RLPI Susan O. Hayward, and CRPL Students, from left, Camilla Gray, Prabhroop Kaur Chawla, Kevin Keystone, Ariella Gayotto Hohl, and Auds Hope Jenkins, discuss the CRPL program. HDS photo/Natalie Cherie Campbell.

## The Possibilities When Religion Is Part of The Conversation

AUDS HOPE JENKINS (JOURNALISM): Reading Professor Moore's white paper about the RPL method was the first thing that got me excited about the program. The paper is simultaneously a rigorous piece of scholarly work and a humble invitation to professionals across many different fields to contribute their expertise to advancing religious literacy at a time when we desperately need it. I love that the paper says "DRAFT" all over it. It illustrates the deeply collaborative, iterative nature of this coalition-

building project. The CRPL program has expanded my sense of possibility for how the study of religion can support our collective pursuit of justice.

ARIELLA GAYOTTO HOHL (ENTERTAINMENT AND MEDIA): I was lucky to be at HDS right when the first cohort for CRPL formed. My calling is storytelling, and I want to dedicate myself to creating a space for my community, the Muslim community, and bring my abilities to bear for the communities I'm trying to build.

Pursuing filmmaking as an MDiv student was hard, though. I didn't have a lot of resources to figure out the technical aspects of my education. But then Maytha Alhassan was named an RPL Media and Entertainment Fellow. She worked on the TV series *Ramy*, and I was like, "This is the kind of story I want to tell." It gave me a path.

I thought I had to choose before: either I'm going to go into chaplaincy or I'm going to be a filmmaker. CRPL was the first time I didn't have to choose, where I could think of ministry and filmmaking in the same way. It gave me a framework and support system to bring together my two vocations.

CAMILLA GRAY (HUMANITARIAN ACTION): Like Ariella, I was in a position before coming here where I felt like I needed to pick between a PhD in religion or work in humanitarian spaces. I did my bachelor's in Islamic studies and Sufism. Then I stepped into the humanitarian space, working with the United Nations Development Program, among other organizations. My work didn't relate to religion at all, and I wanted to bridge those two interests. CRPL was an incredible opportunity to do that.

PRABHROOP KAUR CHAWLA (GOVERNMENT): I also wanted to bridge my bachelor's degree in international development and globalization and my master's degree in international affairs, diplomacy, and foreign policy with this focus on religion. In those arenas, we often talk about intersectionality or "bottom-up" approaches to diplomacy and development, all those areas where one considers the range of factors that are at play. Religion is one of those factors. It is often the most

salient one—in explicit, implicit, and embedded forms—but it can be overlooked.

I thought my MTS in religion, ethics and politics would help me understand those linkages, and it was the certificate that acted as the anchor, that was pivotal in concretely making that connection. The MTS broadened my understanding, and CRPL deeply rooted me and helped me understand and situate religious literacy in the context of international relations. It was the pillar from which I understood that linkage.

KEVIN KEYSTONE (ORGANIZING AND ACTIVISM): I want to dovetail on what Prabhroop said about the CRPL rooting us. CRPL was the anchor for my degree. The virtues of CRPL for me, came down to three things: religious literacy, plus an internship in my profession of choice, plus the opportunity to do a capstone. That for me was a perfect thread through my degree in religion, ethics, and politics. It meant that I got to examine questions of Zionism and Anti-Zionism, in particular in Palestine and Israel and in the North American Jewish context, through a religious literacy lens. I got to do an internship in community organizing. Now the capstone gives me the opportunity to tie everything together, to look back and say, 'Okay. What have I learned? What work have I been doing here? And how can I wrap a bow around it and then apply it into the thing that I'm going to do next?'"

## The Opportunity for Life-changing Interactions

CAMILLA: My CRPL project has become my career, and my project wouldn't even exist if Mike Delaney, the RPL Humanitarian Fellow, hadn't been such an incredible support the entire way through.

Mike connected me with humanitarian workers working in Cox's Bazar for my very first report in the first semester of the CRPL course. He has also written all my cover letters for grants that I've applied for to go to

Bangladesh.

After my CRPL internship, where I worked in the Islamic Law and jurisprudence team in Geneva with the International Committee for the Red Cross, I went to Bangladesh with Oxfam, another connection through Mike. I worked with the gender team to conduct research on their work with religious leaders in relation to women's rights. That work was funded by a grant from the Harvard Kennedy School Women and Public Policy Program (WAPPP), which I applied for with the paper I wrote for the fall CRPL course.

I have continued to receive funding for my research, specifically looking at how NGOs can collaborate with Rohingya imams and muftis to address issues related to the provisioning of humanitarian aid and gender equity in the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh, from the Harvard Asia Center and the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute. The final humanitarian report I'm putting together, which combines all my field research and original interviews, serves as my capstone.

I truly don't know where I would be if I didn't do this certificate. To be honest, I feel like my career would be so fundamentally different. It's actually impossible for me to fathom.

ARIELLA: Can I jump in on the CRPL-changed-my-life train? When I started looking for an internship, I emailed the full list of HDS grads who had ever worked in filmmaking. When I talked to Unity Productions Foundation's Award-Winning Director Alex Kronemer, an HDS grad and one of the contacts that Susie supplied, my initial ask was simply, "Can I please have an internship?" I was met with, "Yeah, maybe you can assist the production or something," which then became, "Actually, here's your talent contract. Would you like to host the show?"

What was just supposed to be my CRPL internship has now turned into my first TV-host job for a show I'm co-writing and co-creating. The show is a dream. It's called Islam's Greatest Love Stories, so it is dear to me. It's centered around me and my experience as a student.

I didn't know this was even possible. That was the important thing for me. CRPL gave me the ability to say, "What if I dream really big?" I remember saying, "You know what? I want to be the Anthony Bourdain of religion, and then it just fell on my lap.

Being in the CRPL course, building a vocabulary around the things that were important to me, and then seeing the example of the fellows really helped me. It wasn't just the work that we were doing and the doors that they were opening for me, although Maytha would have opened many doors. It was just seeing someone doing it and thinking, "I can be doing that, too." I'm Brazilian and Lebanese and seeing a woman who dresses similar to the way I do, who likes talking about the same things that I do, who is doing the kind of work I am doing, who didn't choose between one or the other and works in these two worlds, gave me confidence.

I can trust the stories and the conversations we are having, which have completely catapulted my career in ways that I couldn't imagine. I'm thankful for this program letting me dream.

AUDS: Something that I appreciate about HDS is the way we celebrate each other in the spirit of mutual thriving. There's a lot of synergy and overlapping interests, and yet everyone is forging their own unique path as a scholar and practitioner in the world. I love the way CRPL taps into this energy. This is an all-hands-on-deck project where everyone is actively encouraged to bring their own situated perspectives and experiences to the table. Advancing the public understanding of religion is something too big for any one person, field, or institution to do alone. CRPL encourages collaboration and affirms multiplicity as part of the path.

Like Ariella's experience with Maytha Alhassan, learning with RPL Journalism Fellow Debbie Jian Lee was life-changing for me. Debbie is an incredibly smart, skilled, and empathetic instructor. Her class was challenging, well-structured, and hands-on, and that's exactly what I was looking for. It was very important for me to learn from a fellow Asian American woman and person of color. Being trusted with other people's



stories as a journalist is a privilege, and Debbie's careful instruction and keen insights made me more worthy of the task.

This summer, I am interning at the Star Tribune in Minneapolis. I will be in the features section, reporting on faith and spirituality. I am so grateful for this opportunity to deepen my capacity as a storyteller. I wanted to be a journalist when I was younger, but I thought, "Oh, that ship has sailed. I'm too old. I didn't do this right after college." But, coming here, I was told, "You can do the journalism thing. It's not too late."

This program has opened the doors of a world of possibility that I scarcely dared to dream of. It has given me the courage to assert the value of nuanced religion reporting and the tools to cultivate my voice.

PRABHROOP: Whether the internship, fellows, or the program in general with its environment, thought process, and thought building, this program has played a role in my consciousness building. It's been a lens and awareness that will persist directly and indirectly in the work of everyone who's been even tangentially related to RPL. For me, it's like a tool kit that we are going to continue carrying in a little "purse," bringing it to other parts of our lives and other people in our lives as well.

KEVIN: The networks and practice that I've received here have been life-changing for me as well. One of the things I loved most about working with my Fellows was their lived experience and ability to connect us with others. Through RPL Organizing Fellow Álvaro Huerta's network, we heard from people with actual experience organizing and mobilizing. It made the things we were learning so real. It's one thing to read about it. It's another thing to hear from people who not only are doing it, but are it, are the thing that we're reading.

With RPL Racial Justice Fellow Rhon Manigault-Bryant, not only is she an incredible expert in her field, but she was also able to create a container through which we could have difficult conversations across all kinds of lived experiences, identities, and intersectionality. She handled it with such grace and generosity that we also were able to handle the conversation

with grace and generosity for one another. It wasn't only learning. It was also a practice that we could bring out into the world in our internship. My internship was working with an anti-Zionist Jewish organization in Canada, and much of the work we did, which I am continuing in my own synagogue, was holding those same types of difficult conversations for folks.

## What Will You Leave With?

PRABHROOP: The concept of situatedness has stuck with me. I think we're all aware of it in our lives but having a theoretical grounding that allows me to see it in everything has been valuable. It applies in different realms of life, not only in relation to religion. Being able to see situatedness helps in mediation, in understanding debates and arguments, and in knowing when to draw the line when you're in a discussion that's heading nowhere. It's an approach that I'll take with me.

CAMILLA: To riff off Prabhroop's mention of situatedness, I came into this degree with such a one-dimensional understanding of religion, and the certificate forced me to fundamentally question my preconceptions, recognize nuance and my own positionality, and completely rethink how religion does and can function in spaces where it doesn't outwardly reside. I wouldn't have done this if I hadn't come to HDS and undertaken this certificate, and as a result I would have done my work in the humanitarian space so fundamentally differently.

It's been a difficult process. Grappling, rethinking, recognizing, and embracing the complexities of working in these different and complicated contexts is what I'll take away from my experience here. Now I feel like I can bridge these divides between normatively secular and religious spaces and not feel the need to silo the two.

KEVIN: For me, it is inclusion. After I graduate, I hope to create more space within the Jewish community for different understandings of Zionism and anti-Zionism. Religious literacy helped me to see that that

was possible. One rabbi may make a claim, but that doesn't mean it's the only possibility. There isn't just one Judaism; there are Judaisms. We can create inclusive communities across different understandings of Judaism.

AUDS: Divinity school has been a series of experiments that turn around the question of how we can live in deeper harmony with all beings. And it really is a series of experiments! It's about coming up with ideas and then asking, "What do you think?" And every once in a while, someone will say, "Yes, that is exactly what I've been yearning for. That's what my soul needs."

Being part of a community that is seeking wholeness, seeking justice is a great joy. And it will be a joy to continue stewarding it for years to come. Who knows? We might be RPL Fellows in the future! The relationships we build enable the work. As we seek collective liberation, relationships are the work. This program is building coalition in that way.

## What Comes Next?

ARIELLA: There's this Islamic concept that I've always really liked called the fitrat. It is about your primordial essence and the joy you find when you tap into the veils of all the things you've learned. What I'm taking onward from this experience is to listen to that fitrat, to really listen to my interests.

I love John Paul Laderach's concept of moral imagination, that when you see a glimpse of what's possible, it expands what your world can look like. I'm learning to trust that. I will keep listening to my fitrat and keep creating things with the tools that I've received as I follow my own path.

KEVIN: I'm in an interfaith marriage. My partner comes from an evangelical background. We're looking to adopt, so I am thinking about what kind of understanding of religion and religious literacy my partner and I want to imbue our child with. We're having conversations that sound

something like, “Will our child be Jewish? Will our child be Christian? Or maybe our child will be both.”

Maybe it's actually possible to build a world in which there aren't such clearly defined boundaries and delineations between different religions. And all those understandings, I credit to this program.

PRABHROOP: As much as this has been an academic experience, it's been a personal one as well. Being in CRPL while at HDS has been a major part of my experience connecting the dots between personal and professional, between school and life, between one's own thoughts and others' world views.

I've gained more clarity, and shaped and reshaped many things. It has been an experience of personal and spiritual development. It was exciting to be in CRPL in the first year because we grew with it and watched it grow live and in front of our eyes.

AUDS: I never wanted to be entirely consumed by academia if it meant coming out of the world. For me, reading and researching and writing are an act of love. In the RPL program, I like that the stance is, “We're in the academy and that's really cool, but there's so much happening outside of this that is also cool, and we'll use everything we've got to build a more just world.” That feels like love in action. It feels like the point of all of this. It feels like the future of our world.

by Natalie Cherie Campbell, MTS '18

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