**Sample Essay 1: Migration and South India’s Shifting Landscapes: Social and Religious Change in Kerala**

Before coming to Elon I had limited exposure to religious traditions outside of my own Christian background: the primary other interaction was through Yoga, where I developed an interest in the religious history underlying the physical practice. At Elon I took “Religion in a Global Context,” which opened my eyes to the possibility of pursuing my curiosity about religion within the realm of academics. The next semester I took “Religion Goes Global,” which furthered my interests and knowledge about multifaith engagements, intersectionality, and the evolving dynamics of religion by providing information about intersections between religions as well as religion and capitalistic trends in a globalizing world. These courses spurred me to declare a double major in Political Science and International Global Studies (with a Middle East concentration), and minors in Interreligious Studies and Asian Studies.

As a Multifaith Scholar I propose to study the flow of worker migration from South India to Gulf states, focusing on how more conservative Gulf ideologies return along with the remittances sent back to India. My project examines how this phenomenon is affecting religious practices and changing the landscape of interreligious encounters. The costal South Indian state of Kerala, a religiously plural community (majority Hindu with sizable Christian and Muslim populations) made up of people with diverse identities living alongside each other, is an ideal location in which to study changing dynamics between and among religions. This project – which will entail academic research as well as ethnographic fieldwork in India and virtual ethnography with migrants in the Gulf – connects various aspects of my background and training thus far with its focus on globalization, the connections between the two geographical areas I study, and the implications of these relationships on religious practices and communities. This project represents a holistic confluence of my majors and minors and coursework in Arabic, religious studies classes about both Islam and interreligious encounters, and political studies courses about the Middle East and South Asia.

Along with my mentor, I have carefully planned my academic coursework and study abroad programs so as to position myself to successfully complete this project. I am currently enrolled in a 499 course to survey the existing academic literature about religious pluralism in Kerala, the history of connections with Gulf states, and the effects of outmigration. As I have read extensively and assessed the feasibility of this project this semester, I have grown deeply invested in my topic. I am participating in Elon in New York City this summer, wherein I will enroll in a Core Capstone course. I intend to leverage the student project component of this course as an opportunity to conduct participant-observation research of religious communities in New York and practice ethnographic research methods that I will to employ in my MFS project. Additionally, I am planning a semester of study abroad in India next Fall in order to gain sustained exposure to and immersion in Indian culture and religions. I would thus become more prepared to undertake fieldwork and execute my project idea in India the next summer, when I plan to participate in SURE. Finally, I plan to take “Qualitative Methods” and “India and South Asia” when I return next Spring in order to become knowledgeable about the research methods and have a comprehensive understanding of the region.

By the end of next Spring I will be prepared to conduct research on account of a comprehensive knowledge of Kerala through the 499 course, practice of ethnographic research methods, additional coursework on religion and South Asia, and direct experiences in India. I anticipate that alongside the academic growth associated with conducting this research, I will experience personal growth as I challenge myself to pursue my academic interests in global settings.

**Sample Essay 2: Analyzing Recruitment and Retention Techniques of Christian Identity Extremist Groups in an Online Context**

Throughout my childhood, I have had enormous exposure to a variety of religions and religious traditions. My hometown has a significantly large percentage of residents who identify as Indian American or Asian, so in high school, every single one of my friends identified as Muslim or Hindu. Yet, religion never became a topic of conversation. Since I was raised in a non-religious household, I did not think much about faith, or the power that religion held in each of my friends’ lives. I grew up without knowing what the words Muslim or Hindu meant, but once I got to Elon that changed.

Dr. Sandy Marshall’s Human Geography course my freshman fall at Elon was my first experience understanding the largest world religions. In that class, I learned about Sunnis and Shia, and was exposed to the Vedas for the first time. I enjoyed that unit on world religions greatly, and although it was just a small part of the class, the significance of religion stuck with me. Additionally, by taking classes towards a history minor, I have been able to understand the power of religion and its root in virtually all historical events. My local community, Dr. Sandy Marshall, and my history classes have sparked my interest and need to study interreligious encounters.

As part of the Multifaith Scholars program, I intend to work with Dr. Megan Squire in order to understand how one religious group, Christian Identity, has used its beliefs to spread terrorist actions and propaganda for almost 100 years in the United States. Christian Identity (CI) is an anti-Semetic and racist ideology that has been very influential among white supremicist groups. This belief system has inspired a wide range of violent acts of terrorism, including bank robberies and murders in the 1980s by CI sect "The Order", and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombings by CI believer Timothy McVeigh.

The initial step in my research process will be to create a network graph of the key individuals, organizations, and events associated with Christian Identity since its beginnings in the 1920s. The graph will initially be based on historical data such as arrest reports, news coverage, books, and primary source documents describing the members of violent extremist groups who practiced CI from the early 1920s through the mid-1990s. In addition to building this visual history of CI groups over time, we will also use social network analysis (SNA) techniques to derive statistical measures of the connections between the groups and people. SNA can help answer which groups are the most important and which groups were the most influential.

Next, we will focus on how CI exists today by using the social media platform Telegram. Telegram has public channels where groups can share pictures and short text posts. Its strength in easily spreading propaganda makes it a very popular social media platform for terrorists worldwide including Christian Identity, but also ISIS, Boko Haram, and Al Qaeda. We will apply database and data mining techniques to extract the information from CI propaganda channels on Telegram, and then we will extend the initial network graph to connect the past and the present. One challenge with this process is that the network graph showing the past focuses on the interaction between humans joining in-person CI groups, but today CI believers on Telegram spread propaganda in order to inspire "lone wolf" acts of violence. The common thing in both cases is Christian Identity beliefs.

With Professor Squire, I have formed a basic research schedule for this project that extends over the next two years. The first step is working with Dr. Squire this semester to understand the variety of extremist groups that have practiced Christian Identity for the last 100 years, and to familiarize myself with terminologies and crimes committed by these groups. By next fall, I will have taken a Data Mining and Machine Learning course, become familiar with Christian Identity groups and terminology, and completed part of the literature review, so I will be ready to dive into my research.

Overall, this research project supports one of my overall personal goals: to use computer science for social good. Since I am a computer science major, this research combines my widespread interests and dream of interdisciplinary research. I believe that fusing my computer science skills with my knowledge of history and religious studies will further enable my ability to aid people in need, as well as communicate my findings to a larger audience.

**Sample Essay 3: Then and Now: The History of Black Muslims in North Carolina Personal Statement**

I grew up in a nondenominational Christian family in Charlotte, NC. However, in middle school, I began spending time around peers of different religious backgrounds, including Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists. My friendships with these students led me to take Religion in a Global Context with Dr. Winfield during my first year at Elon. This course inspired me to declare a minor in Religious Studies even as I continued to major in Cinema and Television Arts. Then, in the fall of my sophomore year, I took “Christianity, Capitalism, and Crisis,” with Dr. Peters which introduced me to the idea of research within the context of Religious Studies. My peers in that class were older than me, had already begun their journey with research, and encouraged me to do so as well when I expressed interest. That same year, I developed a growing relationship with Kiah Glenn, learned more about her cultural and religious background, and took “Love Ecstasy” with Dr. Marcus-Sells. In consultation with these mentors, I decided to apply for the Multifaith Scholars Program so that I could pursue a sustained research and community-based project in a Muslim community in North Carolina.

I propose to undertake an oral history project to collect and record the memories of the senior members of the al-Razzaq Islamic Center in Durham, NC. This mosque was founded as a part of Warith Deen Muhammad’s community after he disbanded the Nation of Islam following the death of his father, Elijah Muhammad. As such, the history of this community is connected to the origin and development of Black Muslim communities in NC. The founding and senior members of this community are aging, and recording their memories will preserve an important local history that has connections to national and global Islamic movements. I will contact members of the al-Razzaq Islamic Center through Kiah Glenn and Imam Atkinson, and if they desire and consent, I will construct a body of work consisting of the oral history of the center, as told by elders of the community. This will serve the community by preserving the voices of their elders and the wider public by shedding light on the Black Muslim experience in NC. I will also produce a research paper that situates this history within the history of Black Islamic movements. This project will draw on both knowledge from my Interreligious Studies minor and technical skills developed in my Communications major to tell the history of this community.

My mentor and I have laid out a rigorous academic course of action for the next two years. This summer, I will reach out to the al-Razzaq Islamic Center through Kiah Glenn and Imam

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Atkinson, and find out how I can best serve their community. I will also begin to look into the history of African American Muslims in the United States. In Fall 2020 I will take REL183: Islamic Traditions and ANT215: Qualitative Research methods to prepare to conduct interviews in the summer of 2021. I will also submit a research proposal for IRB approval with my research mentor. In the spring of 2021, I will study abroad in Morocco so that I can gain a firsthand immersive experience in a Muslim society as well as understand the similarities and differences between the lived experiences of African American Muslims and those living in a predominantly Muslim country. Upon my return, and conditional on their consent, I will begin conducting interviews at the al-Razzaq Islamic Center in the summer of 2021. In the fall of my senior year, I will transcribe these interviews, as well as complete a fifteen-page research paper for submission to SECSOR, and complete follow-up interviews as necessary. During this period I will determine, with the community, the best online site for hosting the final archive, which I will create in the spring. Finally, that spring, I will present my research during SURF day, and if accepted, at SECSOR and NCUR.

This project will challenge me to step outside of my own lived experiences and to engage with the experiences of other African Americans that come from a different religious tradition. With the help of my research mentor, and the foundation of my past and future academic coursework, by the summer of 2021 I will be prepared to conduct oral history interviews, which will push my global experience further, exercise my skills in Religious Studies and multimedia communication, serve the community I intend to work with, and produce a public oral history archive for the global community at large.

**Sample Essay 4: Then and Now: The History of Black Muslims in North Carolina**

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**Sample Essay 5: Jewish Identity and Wall Street**

Entering college, my goal was to pursue journalism as a mechanism to learn about the world. While this goal is still very much in effect, studying religion has taken on that same purpose in an entirely new way. Last semester, in a spur of the moment decision, I registered for two religious studies classes: “Religion in a Global Context” and “Jewish Traditions.” Since then, I have developed a passion for religious studies. Furthermore, I have come to understand the study of religion as delving into people’s values, how they think, how they view the world, and how they make decisions thereafter. As such, interreligious encounters have come to mean the same thing to me as that which my journalistic education urges me to pursue: current events. In fact, if there’s anything that my “Irreligious and Secular Traditions” class has taught me so far, it is that even events that appear to occur without the influence of religion can be studied under this scope through a lens of secularism and the implications of such. Thus, in a way, my interest in multifaith issues is synonymous with my interest in the world and its events, because I have come to understand that the study of multifaith issues is really just one way of studying the world.

The project I am proposing seeks to understand one aspect of a controversial industry that shapes many American and world narratives: the New York financial industry. I propose to study the intersection of Wall Street and Judaism, focusing on the relationship between Jewish values and identity, and the New York financial industry. Especially following the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street movement, the financial industry in New York has come to be associated with Jewish people, sometimes with anti-Semitic implications. At the same time, many of those who have opposed the financial industry have also been Jewish, and they have at times drawn from Jewish traditions as they protested.

Specifically, I propose to study Jewish people in two categories: those working in the New York financial industry and those who have publicly opposed it. Through interviews, I hope to learn more about the values that they associate with being Jewish and how these come into play in the controversy over Wall Street’s morality. How do they understand their Jewish identities and values as shaping their understandings of the financial industry? I would also like to talk to people associated with the Occupy movement who identify as faiths other than Jewish to learn about how these outsiders have come to associate Judaism with Wall Street in a negative light.

This is a topic that I am excited about studying because of my own identity and experiences as a Jewish New Yorker and daughter of someone in the financial industry. I feel prepared to study this topic because at its core, what I plan to look into is people’s perceptions of Jewish identity and what people think it means to be Jewish. In “Jewish Traditions,” I learned that ‘Judaism’ does not dictate one set of values, and I have come to the conclusion that in practice, Judaism can mean a lot of different things to its practitioners. Additionally, history tells us that Judaism can also have very different significance for people who do not identify as Jewish and that this is not always a multifaith encounter that ends peacefully or without prejudice. However, while my close relationship to the subjects within this project is useful because it provides me with many connections to make research possible, I understand that it can also hinder objective investigation, and that I will have to make a conscious effort to remove any preconceived notions I may have from the equation.

This project coincides with my plans for Elon because I view it as not only an extension of my interest in multifaith issues aligning with my minor in Interreligious Studies, but also as practice within my Journalism major. The project I have proposed is heavily dependent on qualitative research methods and will allow me to expand my interviewing and investigative journalism skills. Additionally, I would love for this project to produce not only academic writing, but also a long-form journalistic piece and maybe even a visual component documenting the variation in Jewish thought and identity politics surrounding the controversy around Wall Street. Moreover, as an aspiring journalist who would love to investigate and report on religious encounters and multifaith issues, this project would also be extremely meaningful for my career goals.