Mark Gonnerman: Good evening and welcome to the Aurora Forum of Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, the Forum’s director, and I thank everyone here for taking time out tonight to be with us for a conversation on spirituality and social change. Our vehicle for this discussion is an interfaith roundtable with Professor Susannah Heschel of Dartmouth College, Imam Zaid Shakir of the Zaytuna Institute in Hayward, the Rev. Dr. Heng Sure of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, and the Rev. Dr. Raphael Warnock of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, the spiritual home of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Tonight’s conversation will be moderated by Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann of Stanford’s Office for Religious Life.

We just saw a short video introduction to the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute here at Stanford, and it is an honor for the Aurora Forum to collaborate with the King Institute to bring tonight’s program to you. To learn more about the King Institute, visit kinginstitute.info and you will find yourself in the world’s most extensive body of online information regarding Dr. King’s life and times.

Professor Clayborne Carson, the director of the Institute, regrets very much that he can’t be with us here tonight and sends his regards. He has authored a play entitled Passages of Martin Luther King, and it is being performed this evening in Oakland. He is there at the performance as an honored guest. Clay’s play will also be performed in March by the Chinese National Theatre Company in Beijing—yet another indication of the international scope of the King Institute’s outreach, and of the worldwide interest in King by those who seek to foster nonviolent social change.

The first volume of definitive scholarly editions of Dr. King’s papers was published by the King Papers Project in 1992. Tonight we celebrate the publication of volume six of the projected fourteen volumes. The new book is entitled Advocate of the Social Gospel, and it contains papers and sermons from the years 1948 through 1963 that show King’s independent thinking as a theologian in pursuit of a vision of justice for everyone here in this life. The lead editor of this particular volume, Dr. Susan Englander, is with us tonight and will be in the lobby with books in hand at the close of the evening.
Tonight we will follow our typical Aurora Forum program format. That is, we will open with 45 to 50 minutes of on-stage conversation and then open up to audience conversation for an additional 45 minutes. If, when we get to that portion of the program, you have a question or comment to contribute, please line up behind one of the two aisle mikes and our moderator will recognize you.

Tonight’s program is being recorded for later broadcast on KQED Public Radio. Please check our Web site—auroraforum.org—for details concerning the broadcast date and time.

In anticipation of tonight’s interfaith roundtable, these words from Rev. King’s “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” penned on Easter weekend, 1963, keep coming to mind: “I am cognizant,” writes King,

of the interrelatedness of all communities and states….Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.

Recognition of interdependence is something the Aurora Forum always aims to promote. It is relevant to every aspect of our lives, and, fortunately, our time is one where people are waking up to the ways this applies to relations among the world’s various faith communities. There is nothing more troubling than intra- or inter-religious strife, for if those who profess to live according to the highest ideals expressed by the most renowned of humanity’s teachers cannot learn how to learn from each other as they aim to become better human beings and create a more just world, what hope is there?

These days I have also been remembering Dr. King’s April 4, 1967, “Beyond Vietnam” speech in Riverside Church in New York City. If you have not gone back to this lately, please do, for what King has to say about Vietnam applies all too well to our situation now, forty years later. Here King invokes—and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was present and a speaker at Riverside that day, too—what he calls a “Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about the ultimate reality” of love. He goes on to say:

We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation….History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate. As Arnold Toynbee says, ‘Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word.

So there is hope. And we trust that tonight’s Forum will regenerate our awareness of this and embolden each of us to embrace what Stanford religious studies professor Lee
Yearley calls “the new religious virtue of making friends with someone from a faith tradition that is not your own.”

Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann will guide our discussion tonight. She came to Stanford in 1996 and is the first university chaplain from a tradition other than Christianity in our University’s long history. In 2001, she was appointed Senior Associate Dean for Religious Life. She teaches and lectures widely on Jewish feminism, rabbinical ethics, the relationship between religion and education, and social justice.

Please join me in welcoming Rabbi Karlin-Neumann and our esteemed guests to the Aurora Forum stage. [Applause]

**Rabbi Karlin-Neumann:** Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum Interfaith Roundtable on Spirituality and Social Change. We are here this evening to celebrate the publication of an extraordinary book, the sixth volume of the papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: *Advocate of the Social Gospel*. The gift of this volume of King’s papers is that it takes us on a theological and homiletical journey of our nation’s most powerful and effective preacher. It contains facsimiles of King’s handwritten seminary papers as well as early drafts and later rewrites of some of his best-known homilies.

It is noteworthy that a book has brought us together. Each of the religious traditions represented here this evening—Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism—hold distinctive texts as sacred. Yet this book, the commitment to social activism that it represents, and the man—indeed, the preacher—who embodied this activism, unites us. This book calls us to a dialogue and discussion concerning the relationship between spiritual practice and social change. And it does so through examining the role of Dr. King as preacher—one who uses words to awaken our deepest hopes and dreams—not for individual uplift and spiritual salvation, but rather for the sake of community and justice.

Our panelists this evening not only represent different religious paths; they also offer a range of religious practices—teaching, scholarship, pilgrimage, and preaching—that sustain them in fostering their own commitment to spirituality and social change. I hope that along with the knowledge and wisdom they will offer us this evening, we will also experience a model for interfaith dialogue—one that is steeped in the particular religious traditions of each of our participants, yet expansive and inclusive in the gifts of others’ traditions.

I will briefly introduce our teachers for the evening and invite you to refer to your program for more information. We will begin a conversation between them and we will then open the conversation to involve the audience. It is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to spend the evening in this interfaith roundtable with all of you and with four preeminent, thoughtful, and engaging teachers and leaders of contemporary religious communities.
To my immediate left is Professor Susannah Heschel. Professor Heschel is a scholar of religious studies. She holds the Eli Black Chair in Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College. Her scholarship focuses on Jewish-Christian relations in Germany during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Professor Susannah Heschel is the daughter of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the philosopher and civil rights activist, and also a great friend of Dr. King. In addition to her own copious scholarship, she edited a volume of her father’s writings entitled *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays of Abraham Joshua Heschel*.

To Professor Heschel’s left is Berkeley-born Imam Zaid Shakir, who accepted Islam in 1977 while serving in the United States Air Force. He holds degrees from the American University in Washington, D.C., Rutgers University, and Syria’s prestigious Abu Noor University. Imam Shakir taught political science at Southern Connecticut State University and co-founded Masjid al-Islam in Connecticut. As Imam there, he initiated a community renewal and grassroots anti-drug effort in the local neighborhood. Since 2003, he has acted as professor and scholar-in-residence at the Zaytuna Institute in Hayward, California. He currently serves as a Board Advisor for MeccaOne Media.

To my immediate right is the Rev. Raphael G. Warnock, who serves as the Senior Pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, the spiritual home of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Rev. Warnock holds a bachelor’s degree from Morehouse College and a Master of Divinity degree and a Ph.D. degree from Union Theological Seminary in New York. While Rev. Warnock’s work and activism have been local, his vision has always been global. His leadership and advocacy include the creation of a People’s Convention in memory of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer and work with The National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS. An award-winning preacher and scholar, Rev. Warnock demonstrates an abiding commitment to Christian ministry, disciplined scholarship, and diligent struggle on behalf of the oppressed.

To Rev. Warnock’s right is Dharma Master Heng Sure. He was ordained as a Buddhist monk in 1976. Rev. Heng Sure received his master’s degree from UC-Berkeley and his Ph.D. degree from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. He serves as the Managing Director of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery and teaches at the Institute for World Religions and at the Graduate Theological Union. For the sake of world peace, Master Sure undertook a two-year, 600-mile pilgrimage through California, repeatedly taking three steps and one bow to cover the entire journey. He did this pilgrimage observing a practice of total silence. Master Sure is actively involved in both interfaith dialogue and the ongoing conversation between spirituality and technology.

I hope that tonight we will hear words as well as silence from our panelists, so let us begin.

As a young man in his first year of seminary, Martin Luther King, Jr. had the foresight and conviction to write:
Above all, I see the preaching ministry as a dual process. On the one hand I must attempt to change the soul of individuals so that their societies may be changed. On the other I must attempt to change the societies so that the individual soul will have a chance. Therefore, I must be concerned about unemployment, slums and economic insecurity. I am a profound advocate of the social gospel.

Pastor Warnock, as the present incumbent in the very pulpit from which Dr. King gave his inaugural sermon, can you share how the concept of “social gospel” as Dr. King uses it informs your understanding of Christianity and your own ministry?

**Pastor Warnock:** I’m tempted to begin in silence so as not to answer the question, but I’m glad to be here at Stanford. I want to thank Professor Carson and Dr. Gonnerman and Rabbi Neumann for the invitation.

I was very struck upon reading again some of the earlier writings of Dr. King and how he was focused, very early on, on social Christianity, or the social gospel. And we were discussing this, of course, earlier among ourselves at dinner, and the fact that you have to put “social” in front of “gospel” in some sense points to the way in which any kind of social understanding of the meaning of the gospel has been marginal in Christianity in the West for the entire history of Christianity. There are historical reasons for that. Some would point to as early as Constantine, for example, when the sect—the small Christian cult—becomes the religion of the empire. And so, if it is the religion of the empire, then it becomes problematic to stand over against the empire. And of course this plays itself out in various ways throughout the history of Christianity. But I would argue that any kind of sharp and sustained focus on an understanding of the gospel that is fundamentally social has been marginal to the faith, and there are various historical reasons for that.

Dr. King stood on the foundation of a long and historic tradition among African-American Christians who always embraced the kind of social understanding—not as much as I and some others would like—and that story is complicated. But as he speaks to this issue of Christianity that speaks to race, speaks to the ills in the society, he is being informed by a long tradition among African Americans beginning in slavery, the independent black church movement, and social gospel preachers in his father’s generation before him, which he then takes to another level. Certainly, standing in that pulpit informs my ministry and everything that I attempt to do. I feel privileged to be at Ebenezer, but it certainly gives me a platform to do the kinds of things that I would be focused on anyway.

**Rabbi Karlin-Neumann:** So social gospel is a particular Christian formulation, but the commitment to social justice appears in all of the other traditions that are represented here this evening. So I’m wondering if the others of you might be able to speak to how your religion understands the notion of social gospel or social engagement or social commitment, and what texts or authority might underpin it in your understanding.
Rev. Heng Sure: Well, let me also echo what an honor it is for me to be here. Although I’m the only non-Abrahamic representative here on the stage, I am an American—born and raised in Ohio. So, by that fact, Martin Luther King Jr.’s ministry and his emphasis on the social gospel and his constantly calling Christians back to their roots—he redefined it over and over and I’m always struck by that—has influenced me in my understanding of what it means to be a religious person in the world.

The Buddhist tradition I come from is the Chinese Mahayana. My late teacher, the Rev. Master Hsuan Hua, was born in Manchuria. He brought the northern tradition, the Mahayana (the “Great Vehicle”), to Buddhism here in the sixties, and the purview of the Mahayana defines what a Buddhist does in terms of not just social justice for humans but for all beings.

Here is just an example of the kind of thing that moved me and is one of the reasons that I, while raised a Methodist, became a Buddhist thirty-one years ago. There was serious injustice in Manchuria in the thirties and forties with the invasion of the Japanese, etcetera, and Master Hua saw the maltreatment of his fellow Manchurians and decided to eat one meal a day. He was a tall man who could eat nine bowls of rice in three meals, and he saw that people were being starved and, as a teenager, he could do nothing about it. So he cut back his intake to three bowls of rice a day. Although he couldn’t directly give the food to the people who were hungry, at least he didn’t use it for his own nutrition. There is a text in the Mahayana tradition called the Sutra of the Forty-two Sections where the Buddha himself ate one meal a day at noon, slept under trees, etcetera. So Master Hua made that the practice of his whole life, and when he brought that to the West, I was an impressionable young American and I thought, That is very impressive; I wonder if I could do that? And so the Sangha, the Buddhist community of monks and nuns under Master Hua, eat one meal a day. And that’s been my practice for thirty years now. The idea is that we fast for twenty-three hours a day, fully aware of the joy of having food to eat, and it’s not narrow, it’s not bitter, it’s not a kind of tight-lipped practice. It’s a sense of being able to rejoice in finding enough—just enough—to sustain our lives while leaving the rest for what UNESCO says is the 40,000 children who starve every day of nutrition-related causes worldwide.

So there is a kind of social activism simply by refusing to use more than you need. It also gives you a sense of exploring the boundaries of what is necessary to sustain life, so every grain of rice that I consume is a gift and a joy. So that’s one way: kind of expanding it away from purely homocentric, with humans in the center, and trying to see the earth as a planet. And Dr. Gonnerman mentioned the interdependence that is very much a part of our daily practice. That’s not unique to Master Sheng Hua; it’s part of the Mahayana ideal.

Imam Zaid Shakir: Growing up in America, and my mother being from rural Georgia—Hamilton, Georgia—but her family eventually becoming rooted in Atlanta, and they being African-American Baptists, Martin Luther King was an iconic figure during my childhood. So even though I subsequently converted to Islam, the influences that he had over my thinking and social thinking and social vision were very profound, and those
things didn’t go away after I converted to a religion that was not his particular religion. I think that of the general concerns that he had, and he expressed those very early (we were speaking earlier in terms of some of the messages that this latest compilation of sermons and essays brought to light), one thing that impressed me was that early on, in his seminary days, Dr. King was talking about poverty, as was just mentioned, he was talking about militarism, he was talking about having a vision that was broader than one’s particular context: the ability to encompass, to understand, and to empathize with others. So that was a big part of what I brought with me into Islam. And in Islam I found teachings that were very compatible with that vision, things that might be fairly simple—not particularly profound on the surface—such as Prophetic Hadith, where there’s a conversation between God and a person who had neglected his social duties: “Oh, my servant, I was sick and you didn’t visit me.” “Oh, Lord, you are the Lord of the world, the Master of the universe. How can I visit you?” “My servant was sick, and you knew of him and you did not visit him. Had you visited him, you would have found me there. My servant, I was hungry and you refused to feed me.” “You’re the Lord of the world, you are free of all needs; how could I provide nourishment to you?” “My servant was hungry, and you refused to extend food to him. Had you fed him, you would have found me there.” So, there are little traditions such as that.

In the general orientation of the Koran, especially early on in the Meccan period when a particular type of social consciousness was being forged, you find over and over the message of one’s spirituality translating itself into social responsibility. Just to give a couple of brief examples, there’s one chapter called “The City”: I have shown my servant the two ways, and he or she has made no progress on the steep path. And what will let you know what the steep path is: providing food, and a day of starvation, to the orphan who is related and to the indigent one who is dust-covered. And the one who is able to do that, then and only then will he or she attain true faith and be amongst those who provide mercy and be amongst those who truly believe.

These sorts of messages are repeated over and over. So collectively, those sorts of messages had a general impact on my life during my formative years. They included the messages of the likes of Dr. King and also the history of Islam in the African-American community, even though a lot of people see that as sort of a paradoxical type of movement. But movements such as Noble Drew Ali’s Moorish Science Temple, beginning in Newark, New Jersey, in 1913; the Nation of Islam that Elijah Muhammad started in Detroit, Michigan, in 1930; various Sunni Muslim movements, such as the first Cleveland mosque in the thirties; and the involvement of the Ahmadi movement predominantly in the American ghettos in the thirties and forties—all of these movements were very much focused on extending basic services to people who were really down and out, those people who had migrated from the South and during that migration or as a result of that migration lost the safety net of the extended family. The solace that the well-established African-American black church provided in the South coming to the North, being in this strange, alienating, oftentimes very bitter and cruel environment; these new forms of religious expressions such as the ones I’ve mentioned; and other faith traditions also, were very much focused on providing relief for the people who found themselves in those environments and many times found their lives bitterly and
negatively affected by drug addiction and other things. So serving those people—meeting the needs of that underclass and providing direction, providing solace, providing spiritual food for those people—was very much a part of the tradition of Islam in the African-American context. So when I converted, I immediately got involved in that sort of understanding of Islam. So the social gospel is there, as far as I’m concerned, and it’s a big part of my life and it’s a big part of my religious experience.

**Professor Susannah Heschel:** The social gospel is, of course, rooted not only in the teachings of Jesus but also in the prophets. And I think sometimes the prophets are neglected today as they have been in the past because they are such a challenge to us. In a sense, religious people have the choice either to ally themselves with those in power or to stand, as the prophets did, as the critics of power, in order to be able to say to King David, “Thou art the man.” One of the things that disturbs me nowadays is the attempt to forge an alliance between Christian leaders and the White House or religious leaders and the White House in a way that is very damaging to religion. It doesn’t elevate religion to be brought into the seat of power. On the contrary, it cuts off our legs.

There are several roots of social gospel efforts within Judaism that would be equivalent to social gospel. On the one hand, what are the prophets concerned with? What do they talk about? They talk about war crimes, they talk about injustice in the marketplace, they talk about widows and orphans. At the same time, there are also traditions that come out of pietistic movements within Judaism, from Hasidism, for example. Normally, we think about social gospel or religious leaders being involved politically as something very active. But also, in an inward way, the turn inward can be an inspiration, and I’ll just give an example from the pietistic movement of Hasidism, which emphasizes so much empathy and compassion. A Hasidic leader, a Hasidic rebbe, took care of his community—all aspects of the community in every way: people’s need for emotional support but also for money, for food. And just as an example, I’ll give you one Hasidic teaching. There was a famous Hasidic rebbe, the Apter Rov, who passed away in 1825, so it’s an old story. He was quite a charismatic figure. People came to him every day with their troubles—dozens and dozens of people. They poured out their hearts to him and they told him to pray for a sick wife or husband or child or for help to get a job; they were impoverished. And one day someone asked this rebbe, “How is it possible? All of these people come to you every day and they pour out their troubles to you. How do you remember, when you go to pray, what their trouble is and who they are?” He said, “You know, when someone comes to me and they pour out their troubles, I open my heart and the sorrows that I hear from them come inside my heart and make a scar. And when I go to pray, I take my heart and I show it to God and I say, ‘Look at all these scars.’”

It’s a tradition of empathy and compassion that is so important, I think, to motivate us, first of all, if we are going to be concerned about the world. I think it’s also a lesson because, of course, when you talk to somebody, whom do you really want to talk to? You know, at the beginning of Isaiah, God says, “Whom shall I send?” I sometimes think, “Whom can I talk to…really talk to?” And I think we all ask ourselves that. And what do we really want? We want to talk to somebody who’s like that rebbe, who opens the heart in that way. That is the model of what it is to be an empathic person, and that’s
the starting point. From there, one goes to the lessons of injustice at the prophets. It’s an old Jewish teaching: God says, “I am God and you are my witnesses. And if you are not my witnesses, I am not God.” So the commandment is that we are obligated to be God’s witnesses. God needs us to be witnesses—to go out there like the prophets and say, “Thou art the man” to those leaders in power.

**Rabbi Karlin-Neumann:** I’m struck by how much, for everyone who spoke, the American experience and King’s place in the American experience, has shaped not only the Christianity we now understand but a uniquely American manifestation of Buddhism, of Judaism, of Islam. And clearly, King was one who was not only an effective and thoughtful preacher but who was very concerned with theological questions, with intellectual inquiry. And part of what this book allows us to see is the evolution of that intellectual inquiry. So it makes me wonder what role the intellectual realm plays in your understandings of your own religious journeys and of the traditions that you embody in your religious practice. Who are you as thinkers and what role does thinking play? Professor Heschel was so articulate in elaborating what it means to feel religiously, and Master Sure helped us to see with our bodies what the food that we eat can convey about empathy. So we have not only our bodies and not only our hearts, but also our minds. So what do we learn from Dr. King and our own religious traditions in our minds?

**Imam Shakir:** I think, since everyone else is practicing silence, [Laughter] that one aspect of the intellectual life is that it allows you to expand your horizons. I think one of the reasons that allowed Dr. King to be so constructively critical of his own tradition was the fact that his intellectual background in philosophy, theology, and looking at theologians outside of his particular specific religious context—even other Christian theologians and their writings and works—provided a base where he could look more objectively at his own church and could critically assess its successes and its failures and to speak objectively on the basis of that intellectual foundation that his readings had provided for him. So I think—I’m sure I wouldn’t be putting words in the mouths of the other panelists—that for all of us, that’s very important, because the ability to examine the works, the thoughts, the ideas of others provides us with an intellectual foundation to then look more critically at our own traditions because we’re getting something that we might not necessarily get—or we might get it, but we might be more reluctant to accept it—from within our own traditions. So I think that basis to be critical in a constructive fashion is a function of one’s intellectual pursuits. And there are other fruits of that endeavor. That’s just one that immediately came to my mind and that King’s experience reminded me of.

**Professor Heschel:** I find Dr. King extraordinarily sharp in the way he can identify on the one hand as a theological liberal and, at the same time, speak as a critic of theological liberalism, and I like that very much—that sharpness. On the one hand, he will say that he doesn’t like the rigidity of certain doctrinal formulations. It’s very clear that he was a liberal in that sense. But on the other hand, he doesn’t like some of the—how should I say this?—the sloppiness of liberalism—the lack of challenge. So he’s very critical of Paul Tillich. What is the “ground of being”? It’s very nice to have a ground of being, but how does it challenge me? What does it do for me? What does it accomplish? It’s
so smooth and easy but it doesn’t stimulate anything. Sometimes he has a phrase: “God is not the unmoved mover of Aristotle but the most moved mover of the Bible.” God is affected by us and empathic. It’s a phrase, by the way, that I found in the speeches of both Dr. King and my father—using the same language. He’s very much engaged, and you can see in this volume, with certain contemporary thinkers and popular writers, popular psychologists, but also with Freud, but he’s also clear in making certain distinctions.

People, of course, have fear, and psychologists like to talk about fear and how to cope with it. Fine. First of all, some fears aren’t psychological; they’re real. People don’t have enough food; they don’t have the money to pay rent. That’s real. It’s not going to be psychologized away. And there’s also a distinction he makes between fear and anxiety. Yes, you can have a fear of something specific, but what about the generalized sense of anxiety that people have? They’re not sure why, but there it is (which, by the way, is being manipulated for us by the White House these days, as we know; we should all have the same anxieties). [Laughter] But he says very clearly, Who can respond to that kind of anxiety? That’s not something the psychologists understand; that’s something that takes faith. Only faith can respond to anxiety. So he’s so engaged on the one hand with general culture, and on the other hand, he’s so grounded in Christian scripture and belief.

Pastor Warnock: For me, the life of the man is central to what it means to be a person of faith, and that’s part of the reason why I’m so drawn to Dr. King. Here again, you see him asking really, really tough questions very early on. As a grade-school student, he challenged his Sunday school teacher at Ebenezer Baptist Church regarding the bodily resurrection of Jesus. I don’t think that went over too well in Atlanta. [Laughter] But he was always asking these very, very tough questions.

For me, critical reflection is an act of worship. It’s part of what it means to be a person of faith, and he’s a thinker, but he’s an engaged thinker. I do think the first act, in a real sense, is what the liberation theologians call praxis: you’re engaged in the world; you’re actually involved in the effort of trying to make a difference. And in the course of confronting evil, confronting dogs and water hoses, reflection—that critical reflection on the action that you just took—then moves you deeper into praxis. And you see this played out over the course of a thirteen-year journey as he gets deeper and deeper and moves from reformer to revolutionary, from speaking to Jim Crow laws in the South to more fundamental structural issues about poverty in American and seeing just how inerterate this whole issue of class and poverty is, and what he saw in Watts after the bombings or the riots in Watts, and then standing up to a civil-rights president on the issue of Vietnam. So it was a sustained, critical reflection, constantly asking the tough questions that took him deeper and deeper into praxis. The more he engaged himself, the more he thought about it and then went deeper into the praxis.

So I think it’s a tremendous example for us in this moment of a kind of mindless Christianity in which the worst thing you could possibly do, it seems to me, in the thinking of some in our churches, is to actually think about something in a serious way.
And Susannah talked about how religious people can make the choice and sort of ignore the prophets. That’s certainly a choice that some can make, but what I see often or more likely in American culture is that people are less likely to completely ignore the prophets. What we’re seeing, at least in the preaching that I hear, is this reading of biblical texts—this uncritical reading of biblical texts—through the narrow lens of American individualism. So that even though Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos are dealing with basic structural inequities, that even gets read through the narrow lens of American individualism. And that’s where you need a thinking person to unpack some of that, so that you can actually see that the prophets aren’t just speaking to a few venal or evil individuals. They are talking about the ways in which the peasants are being robbed, they’re talking about the distribution of resources: now that you’re in the promised land, how do you treat the widow? How do you treat the poor person? And so you see King wrestling with this.

Certainly it’s a kind of refreshing thing to read again over against the backdrop of what we’re dealing with in this moment with the emergence, for example, of prosperity preaching, which is very prevalent, particularly in Atlanta. You know, Atlanta is the black Mecca. There’s a lot of prosperity, a burgeoning black middle class, but still deep class issues, a lot of poor people. You don’t see them but they’re there. So it’s interesting that at this moment, Atlanta, the cradle of the civil rights movement, is now the epicenter of prosperity preaching, where the argument is that the sure sign of God’s blessing on your life is individual material acquisition. And some of my colleagues, who shall remain nameless, are very adept at making this argument, and they see themselves as the logical extension of the civil rights movement. So how do you unpack all of that? That requires a critical engagement of ancient texts, deep social analysis, historical understanding, and conversation with people on the margins of the society itself, which Dr. King was always very good at doing.

Rabbi Karlin-Neumann: We live in a kind of bumper-sticker culture, and one of the bumper stickers I once saw was “Prosperity: Your Divine Right.” Entitlement Christianity.

Rev. Heng Sure: Sitting here as a spokesperson for Buddhism, I need to say right away that there are many Buddhas, and what I am going to be presenting is coming from my particular perspective and training and also with some study of the other Buddhas, but by no means is there a Buddhist answer to this. In fact, because Buddhism is historically the newest religion here in America on the stage—we’re the new kid on the block, so to speak—many folks have stereotypes about what Buddhists do and what Buddhism is about. One of those stereotypes is that Buddhists sit under trees and try to empty their minds seeking nirvaaaana. [Laughter] And while there are Buddhists for whom that is indeed a noble and sacred goal, that’s only an expedient. The Mahayana, the tradition that comes through China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam—the northern tradition—has as a different ideal the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva means that we can be socially engaged at the core. A Bodhisattva is someone who says that all beings’ suffering is my suffering. There is no difference because they have identified away from the individuated self center. From this rugged monad who is here and broken from everything else, the
Bodhisattva starts from a place, male or female, where he wants to move away from that center and start and act and move and think and feel connected—restitched back into the fabric of being—not just to people, again, but with all beings. So that’s the ideal that I come from.

Of course, measuring up to that is tough because the self is pernicious, but in terms of the Bodhisattva path, the way that we are inspired by these ideal beings is both meditative, which would be sitting there emptying your mind, and strongly devotional, pouring out your heart towards the Buddha Amitabha or the Bodhisattva Kuan Yin (Avalokiteshvara). There’s also a strong moral thrust. The precepts are the basis of a Mahayana Buddhist’s action, which are identical in thrust to four of the Ten Commandments, to the Holy Koran, and also to the Patanjali Yoga aphorisms from the Hindu tradition. Then there’s the mantra tradition.

But the last one pertains to Rabbi Karlin-Neumann’s question, which is the scriptural tradition, and that’s what I was particularly trained in. My teacher, Master Hsuan Hua, was an exegete. He lectured on texts every night for thirty years. I was often his translator. So when you meet Buddhism in this tradition, first of all you encounter language. It’s been 2,500 years that these texts have been flowing through, and there are 1,300 specific texts that are called sutras—sutras meaning words of the Buddha. So I was trained as an exegete, somebody who makes commentary—a kind of midrash—on the texts, and so the intellectual tradition is very strongly alive. In fact, if you had to say, What is the ministry of a Buddhist in my tradition, it is education.

We teach; we’re schoolmasters. And this is funny: at the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, where I live and work, every Thursday night we have a vipassana community that comes. They’re from Spirit Rock, which is a tradition that is very interested in psychology. And it’s a meditation tradition. It makes very little demand that people would renounce as a monastic, as I have done, but you do practice. Their verb is “sit”: “Oh, we sat a retreat,” “We sat ten days,” “We sat down at the vipassana center.” Lots of sitting going on.

They’re very self-aware, and we did a survey of who was there. It turned out that of the eighty folks who are there regularly every week, fifty of them are Jewish, and of those fifty, half are psychotherapists. [Laughter] Now, what conclusion from that? Those of you who have done psychotherapy or are currently involved in psychotherapy here at Stanford or wherever you might be studying recall your encounter with rats, with statistics, with demographics, and with something called cognitive dissonance that would take you very much away from your experience as a mind in a body trying to make sense of your human life. And so when these folks who have been frustrated, to some extent, with their academic studies of psychology, get to sit still and watch their minds work in vivo, there’s real excitement.

So the Buddha dharma is profoundly a teaching of the mind, and the Buddha, you could say, from one perspective, is someone who investigated … what you would say walked every road of his mind to its end and came back and told the story, and that’s what the sutras are. So there’s the life of the mind. Right now, there’s an annual conference on consciousness and spirituality from the Buddhist tradition. His Holiness the Dalai Lama
is involved in it. Last year, it was at MIT, the year before that, at Harvard; back from Dharamsala to America. So this is certainly a front. It’s kind of the beachhead of discovering consciousness and its impact on the world that we walk through as we create it.

**Rabbi Karlin-Neumann:** One thing that you’re reminding us of so clearly and again is reflected in the biographies of people here is how malleable are the boundaries between religious traditions. So what might once have been a very clear, distinctive tradition that only someone who was born and raised in that view of the world would maintain is actually now quite amorphous. There’s a lot of traveling between one and the other. And Robert Wuthnow now talks about King actually being the center of that movement in the sense of his commitment to freedom being about freedom of seeking as well as freedom of dwelling or the spirituality of dwelling. And it’s so clear that what’s represented here—that notion of the freedom to explore different religious traditions—is also part of what came out of the civil rights movement. The synagogues and the churches and the mosques that once confined people were too small for the vision that Dr. King provided for all of us.

In a sense, part of what you’ve started us on is thinking about practice, and clearly, preaching is one of the essential ways within the Christian community of conveying the essence of Christianity. It would be interesting to hear how the essence of each of the religious traditions that we are adherents of are conveyed. What are the practices, either in your own life or in your community, that help to both inculcate and transmit an understanding of what it means to be a Buddhist, what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be a Jew, what it means to be a Muslim?

**Imam Shakir:** For the Muslim, I think it’s preaching and teaching. We have what we call the Friday *khutba*, or sermon, which is equivalent to a Sunday sermon or an address by a rabbi on a Saturday. That’s Friday, Saturday, Sunday. I guess with Buddhists, it’s every day [Laughter] or whenever the psychotherapists show up. [Laughter] So in both preaching and teaching—and this is something in terms of preaching that Dr. King mentioned—there is the importance of human contact. And in this particular volume, he mentions how even an audible address that’s conveyed by a radio doesn’t have the same power and impact of actually attending the church. And so as Muslims, we place great value on actual physical presence, because in our teaching, we believe that the speaker conveys more than information—that the speaker also conveys something of his or her state, and that’s called the “*han*.” And that state in many instances has a more profound impact on the person being addressed than the words themselves. So physical contact is very important. Our institution, in fact, is predicated on reviving that tradition of the actual interaction with a physical teacher. Of course, it has its limitations, especially in the electronic age, in terms of the immediate audience one has the ability to reach. But those people who might be impacted by being in the physical presence of a teacher who, through devotion, meditation, and study, has attained a certain state, can then go out and they themselves will eventually reach a larger audience. So the actual physical preaching and the physical teaching—the conveyance of knowledge and information, but also
conveying a particular state—these are very integral parts of the Islamic tradition in terms of conveying knowledge.

Just a concluding remark. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him and upon all of God’s messengers, he or the scholars say (I don’t know if it’s a prophetic tradition), but the scholars say knowledge is in the hearts of human beings and not in the minds of books. And so what people actually learn is more informed by what they receive from the heart. Another saying is that a word that emanates from the heart will find its way into the hearts of others, and a word that emanates from the tongue will bounce off the ears. So the physical interaction is very important and I’m sure that’s something that Dr. King placed great emphasis on. For that reason, I would assume that is one of the reasons he always went back to preaching, no matter what his intellectual, political, or social endeavors. He was always drawn back to preaching because that interaction is not from speaker to audience; that interaction also involves the energy that the audience projects to the speaker. That’s why if you have a really excitable, electric audience, then you’ll give a good speech, but if you have a dead audience, you’ll give a dead speech. So it’s a two-way exchange.

Rabbi Karlin-Neumann: Let me go back to something you said right at the beginning. It had to do with the question of when we come together, do we look for what we have in common? Do we come together as people from different religious traditions? Do we look for a commonality, and to what extent do we begin to meld in such a way that you almost can’t tell the difference between, let’s say, Judaism and Christianity?

Professor Heschel: I think it’s a problem. We often try to define ourselves as if we’re all singing the same song religiously, theologically. And I think what’s more important is that we understand our differences and respect the other in the difference. That seems to me to be something that is very difficult for us to accomplish. I can find sometimes very strong parallels with other religious traditions, and that’s fine, but then I also want to be clear about why, then, am I Jewish, what’s different about Judaism, and keep that difference.

So just to pick up on something that you alluded to a moment ago, in Christianity we’re told, “The Word was made flesh.” God became man. And in Judaism, actually, it’s the reverse. It’s the flesh became Word in the sense that what happened at the moment of revelation at Mount Sinai is what’s told allegorically in the Song of Songs. That is, we were given a kiss by God, and we took that kiss and made it into Torah—into words. We took that fleshly experience, the kiss and love, and made it into Torah—Torah that is sometimes described as breasts that we suckle like a baby suckles, and we derive milk. So very much we receive the flesh and make it into Word rather than the other way around, and I think sometimes it’s nice to keep the differences that we have and show that we do have perhaps some parallels but also some distinctions.

In that way, it seems to me all the more profound when we have an encounter, and I’d just like to mention this one. We were talking about this before. There was a convention of Conservative rabbis that was held at the Concord Hotel in the Catskills, and Dr. King
was invited to speak. It was just ten days before he was killed. And when he came into the room (I was there so I remember this), there were one thousand rabbis in the room and they all stood up and they linked arms like this and they sang “We Shall Overcome” in Hebrew. [Laughter] It was wonderful, and Dr. King was moved and the rabbis were moved, and it was precisely the fact that we had two different traditions coming together that made it so moving. Not that we’re all the same, but that we have our differences and we come together, and isn’t that moving?

**Pastor Warnock:** Amen!  [Laughter, applause]

**Rabbi Karlin-Neumann:** Perhaps that’s the appropriate juncture to invite our audience to participate in this conversation. There are microphones, so if you have a question or a comment, please make your way to one of the microphones and we would be happy to entertain them.

**Question from the Audience:** I’m a devotee of the social philosophy of Henry George, a San Francisco economist in the nineteenth century. In Martin Luther King’s last book, the title of which I believe is *Where Do We Go From Here?*, he quotes Henry George in a description of poverty, of which George writes in *Progress and Poverty*, which is George’s signature piece. I’m interested in to what extent, if our panelists are familiar with this, to what depth of knowledge and advocacy the Rev. Martin Luther King was indeed familiar with Henry George’s ideas. And just to be helpful to the audience, the centerpiece of George’s social gospel advocacy was that the earth is the birthright of all people, and as an economist, he translated that into the advocacy of socializing the economic rent of the earth—not socializing land ownership, but socializing the economic rent to be derived from owning the earth and using that as social revenue. And that means to equalize access to the Creator’s creation and eliminate the root causes of poverty, as George saw it.

**Pastor Warnock:** I’m not sure of the depth or the extent to which he was influenced by George, but what you see in Dr. King is this incredible mind, this ability to synthesize various thinkers who don’t necessarily have some sort of automatic or natural affinity to each other, but just this ability to absorb ideas and synthesize them in the kind of coherent philosophy for social change that he had. But early on, he was very concerned again about poverty—exposed to issues of social justice and the kind of Marxist or Socialist understanding of the problems with the fundamental distribution of wealth in the country but then rejecting a purely materialist reading of history. So he pulled from various thinkers and recognized both their strengths and their limitations, but I think it would probably be a mistake to overstate—and I’m not suggesting that that’s what you’ve done—the influence of a single thinker, for example, on the issue of poverty or the distribution of wealth on Dr. King’s thinking. I think there were various sources. I see Clarence Jones shaking his head, so I must be doing all right. [Laugh] (He was Dr. King’s lawyer; I wasn’t even born). And there were ideas that he was exposed to early on in graduate school that, again, as he was engaged and struggled, he had to revisit.
During the Montgomery bus boycott, for example, he was visited by Stanley Levinson and others, and they began to talk to him about Gandhi and nonviolence. Well, it wasn’t his first exposure to Gandhi and nonviolence; there was Howard Thurman and Benjamin Mays, president of the very distinguished college in Atlanta, Morehouse College, where I went. So King had some exposure early on, and as he was engaged and struggled, he would integrate and reintegrate all these various ideas into a wonderful kind of synthesis. And sometimes I think he synthesized…sometimes I think because he was busy—he wasn’t an academic theologian in that sense—but because he was busy, I think sometimes Dr. King smoothed over the differences between himself and some other thinkers. He sort of quotes Martin Luther, for example, in the “Letter from the Birmingham Jail”: “Here I stand. I can do no other.” He talks about Martin Luther as an extremist. But there are some very fundamental differences between the social ethics of Martin Luther, who couldn’t stand with the peasants after they said that they were being informed by his writing. He said, No, you’re making of this Christian freedom something political, and it’s spiritual. So there’s a fundamental difference between his social ethics and those of his namesake. And he didn’t always accentuate those very important differences, in part because he was speaking to a larger majority audience that would be impressed that he had quoted Martin Luther and some of these other thinkers. I think they helped to refine some of his thinking, but [they weren’t] the basis for what he thought he got out of the black church tradition.

Question from the Audience: In this Web 2.0 user-defined-content technological world, what kind of spirituality do you see emerging and what do you envision as possible in terms of social justice vehicles? In other words, if Martin Luther King Jr. were alive today, how would he take advantage of blogging and story creation, and how would he preach for the betterment of our society and for individuals? He obviously took advantage of radio and television, and today there’s the Internet. So I’m wondering what kind of social justice vehicles are really possible through that venue.

Rev. Heng Sure: This is speculation, and I hope that everybody else will weigh in, too. We’ve heard that Dr. King went back to preaching. And if you recall the “I Have a Dream” speech—there was that vista of the Washington Monument and that ocean of humanity, many of them young people, soaking up the contact with the prophet. In a paradoxical way, it was his voice and their ears, but it’s that image now carried on through the media that continues to resonate, resonate, resonate…inspire, inspire, inspire. I listened to that speech the other day on YouTube and was in tears. This is a prophet in the full autumn—in the full harvest of his powers. So would there be a Dr. King podcast, for example? [Laughter]

Pastor Warnock: MySpace. [Laughter]

Rev. Heng Sure: I would be a “friend,” I guarantee it. So it’s speculative, but I think more importantly than would he or would he not use technology would be the content. And his mind continued to expand. There’s a story about him nominating Rev. Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Prize, and that’s a Buddhist monk. What the conditions behind that were are not clear, but in any case, I think he was foremost a storyteller, and certainly
online in the virtual world now there is lots of stuff you don’t want to listen to twice. There’s a lot of static or popcorn, you could say. You taste it and you haven’t eaten anything. Dr. King never wasted a word. In the few opportunities that I had to actually see a video image of him speak, he was a storyteller and a spiritual storyteller. He gave parables. He was a master at quoting the European scholars to a variety of audiences and then to tie it back to the tradition of black preaching. So my first response would be to say I wouldn’t pay so much attention to the vehicle as to the content, and I think that he would continue to teach…continue to expand the measure of the minds of all who listened. That’s my guess.

Imam Shakir: If I could say very quickly, since I mentioned him coming back to preaching: I wouldn’t mean to imply that he would not utilize [technology]. In our institution we have podcasts, we have downloadable lectures, and so on. But consistent with what Rev. Heng Sure was saying, I don’t think he would tailor his message to those media. I think that he would use those media to convey his message and not tailor his message particularly to those media, because I think to a large extent the rapidity that is generated or engineered a lot of times by those media cheapens the message. So I think the message itself would be presented in a church or in an auditorium full of human beings, and if he didn’t have his own camera there, someone would have a cell phone [Laughter] or he would be on YouTube tomorrow.

Pastor Warnock: I’m struck by this WWMD. Not WMD, WWMD: “What would Martin do?” [Laughter] And I say that kind of flippantly to underscore the way in which you hear this almost as much as “What would Jesus do?” And I can’t think of another thinker, another figure, that we regularly ask this of at least once a year, no matter what the moment is, whether we’re dealing with Iraq this year or something else next year. We study other thinkers, but I can’t call to mind another thinker for whom I consistently hear, no matter where you are in the country or in the world, people asking the question, “What would Dr. King think about this?” “What would Dr. King do about that?” Just that very premise, and the fact that we feel compelled to ask that question with regard to this man who didn’t see age forty, it’s just fascinating to me.

For me, it begs another question: what is it about Dr. King that compels all of us from various faith traditions, ethnic traditions, or places and spaces, to ask the question about stuff he couldn’t have even imagined? And I suspect that maybe part of the answer is that he managed to speak to a place in us—to speak to a kind of spiritual crisis. It wasn’t just a political change or a social change. The civil rights movement was a religious revival that impacted the society, that traversed religious traditions, and called all of us to something better and higher than our own individual well-being, whether we conceive of that individual well-being as some place of bliss in the afterlife or nowadays, increasingly, this kind of material well-being in this life for me as an individual—this kind of deep and profound spiritual malaise and spiritual crisis that I think is deepening in American culture. Neither the left nor the right is adequately speaking to it. And he managed to tap into it as he called us to something higher, pulling together his personal and social vision and holding those things together so that now, forty years later, we’re
asking what would Dr. King do and what would he think. I’m just fascinated that we continually ask that question.

**Rabbi Karlin-Neumann:** I think part of the answer to that is what Imam Zaid said, which is that he was a preacher. I love this quote: “I am many things to many people, but in the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher. This is my being and my heritage, for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher, and the great-grandson of a Baptist preacher.” So it was something in his DNA, his ability to always use words to enter the soul. I think that’s part of why we’re so captivated two generations later.

**Question from the Audience:** I guess I want to ask a “What would Martin do?” question. I’m one of those who was very inspired by his spiritual vision of social justice and am struck by how each of you in such different, beautiful ways summon that vision: the heart, the compassion, the ministry to others, the respect for life and for other human beings. And yet, it seems to me that within each religious tradition, there seems to be a mechanism that permits the suspension of compassion, the suspension of a concern for human life, and in fact it sometimes seems that witnessing that religion even requires the exercise of power over another human life: fighting, capital punishment, war, death, torture, and that sort of thing. I just wonder how Martin would have opened this conversation about what the limits are and what the controls on that suspension of compassion would be in each tradition?

**Rev. Heng Sure:** One of the compelling facts about Buddhist history—2,500 years—is that with two exceptions that I know of, there has never been a Buddhist war. There’s never been a mobilization, a marching off righteously to kill the enemy under the flag of the Buddha. Currently, Sri Lanka is one of the few sad instances of a Buddhist community being in armed conflict. It happened again in Japan in Tokugawa, I believe, and then some people point to a resurgence of Buddhist blessing for kamikaze pilots under Emperor Hirohito, for example. But it’s a case of the exceptions proving the rule. So, not to say “different” or “better”; not that. But historically, in terms of a suspension of compassion, you have to look hard to find that. It’s not specifically Buddhist. I think once you see the connection, the deeper fabric—we heard the word “interdependence”—once you see the connection of earth, air, fire, and water that makes up the body, and then whatever that thing is inside—whatever name we call it—it’s then very hard to point to “enemy,” to point to “other,” to point to “opposition,” or “that party,” or “different.” That’s not Buddhist Circle R [®], by any means.

So when it’s a question of compassion, I’m not comfortable looking to religion and saying, Oh, this has more or less compassion. I think it’s a very individual question of your vision. How wide are your eyes? How big is the capacity of your heart? And once you see that connection and walk in it and feel it, it’s very hard to go back to drawing lines again. So what would Martin do? I never failed to be edified by talks he gave. We heard examples of his preaching. He was a good reason to look at Jesus and more importantly past Jesus to your own responsibility as a Christian. I was always compelled to examine myself when listening to a sermon or a political message—a message not
specifically about the Gospels—by Dr. King. But there was a deeper wellspring of something he was calling us to, and I can’t imagine that would get more shallow or dry up. I think it would have continued had he lived past forty. So what would Martin do? I think he would touch on ever deeper pools of humanity and, I would expect, beyond humanity to include suffering of all kinds.

**Pastor Warnock:** His posture, in terms of his faith, was one of self-criticism. He was a theologian by training, and that’s part of what faith does when it’s authentic. Faith asks hard questions about itself, and you see that early on in the writings that we looked at in this latest volume. Early on, he’s really anguished about the church; the essay is “The Church: The Hope of the World.” And he says, how can the church be the hope of the world when it is the most reactionary institution in society? In other words, the church is supposed to be the most radical opposer of the status quo in society, yet in many instances it is the greatest preserver of the status quo. Then he goes on to talk about how slavery, for example, receives an easy sanction. And he’s anguished about this throughout his career. I think of one moment in “Why We Can’t Wait” when he said that when he drives through the South and sees the church steeples, he asks himself what kind of people worship there and allow segregation to continue. Who is their God? So he’s a Christian radically interrogating the faith as it is practiced as a form of faithfulness. So I just think it’s a profound lesson for us. I think any religion has its dangerous and destructive possibilities. There’s Islamic fundamentalism and there’s Christian fundamentalism, and other forms of fundamentalism.

**Rev. Heng Sure:** There’s Buddhist fundamentalism.

**Pastor Warnock:** Buddhist fundamentalism?

**Rev. Heng Sure:** We got ‘em. [Laughter]

**Pastor Warnock:** Fundamentalism is a dangerous thing. And I guess there could be a kind of liberal fundamentalism, a secular fundamentalism, [Laughter] and a kind of bowing down to science as a god in and of itself. But, to use a jazz metaphor, there’s this kind of improvisational approach to your faith so that you have this theme that’s running along but you’re willing to approach it in a syncopated fashion and look at variations on the theme so that you lift the thing to a higher plane.

**Imam Shakir:** I think, in response to that question, that it’s not so much a question of human beings suspending the compassion that emanates from their various religious teachings, but it’s a question of human beings eliminating or suspending the compassion that should emanate from their humanity. Therefore, you find that across religious lines; you find it across ideological lines. You can find excesses not just in religious communities, but you can find and point to the excesses of people such as Stalin or Mao who professed no religion. So I think it’s very important for us to try to discover that critical ability to look at ourselves as human beings or to look at our own religious communities. That’s something, as Muslims, that is not well popularized or publicized, but that is going on. I was talking earlier with Dr. Heschel and we were discussing the
life of Leopold Weiss, a Jewish convert to Islam in the early part of the twentieth century. He wrote a commentary on the Koran and his commentary is being promoted in Bangladesh as sort of an antidote to more fundamentalist understandings of the religion. So this sort of inner debate and criticism is going on in a big way.

I think what’s important for us here in this country is to look at how our excesses impact the lives of others because we have a lot more to be excessive with. And when we’re excessive with how we distribute our bombs and our napalm and our phosphorus and other goodies to the people of the world, it has a far greater impact than do the excesses of other people in other societies. So in terms of “What would Martin do?” I think he would do what he did. That is, he found the courage to look at American society and to look at our excesses and to look at our suspension of our compassion and how that affected other people, and to challenge that, and he was willing to suffer the consequences for that courage. So I think it is very important for us at this point in time. And that requires everything that we’ve been talking about tonight.

It comes back to this: we are talking about our intellectual life. We have to really study and understand what’s happening in the world. I’ll give you a small example. We have the ability to go to the supermarket any time of the year and purchase nice beautiful flowers that smell good and we can give them to people to express how much we love them. Where are those flowers coming from? Most of those flowers are coming from Latin America. What does a million acres of flowers in Latin America do to the local economy and the ability of people there to feed themselves so that we can tell each other how much we love each other, as if our words aren’t sufficient? So unless we can begin to address our own excesses and our own suspension of compassion, I think it’s just an intellectual exercise to question the abilities of others to do so or to fail to do so. And I think that Martin Luther King had that ability, that strength, and that courage to really look at what’s happening right here where there’s a lot of power and there’s also a lot of excess and sometimes there’s not very much compassion. [Applause]

**Question from the Audience:** This is a kind of “What would Yahweh do?” question. [Laughter] All of you inspired some questions in me, but I’m going to go for Professor Heschel with this question. You led off with the prophets, who would be a natural choice for an evening like this. You can get scriptures, however, to say anything, as you know—or maybe different things—so I naturally think when you cite the prophets, who also inspire me, that you can find episodes in the Hebrew Bible that are kind of like divine charters for genocide or smaller-scale mass murder (at least I read them that way in my youth). So what do you do with the co-presence of all those things? Do you say: the prophets are the good stuff, we’ll be inspired by them; and what looks like the bad stuff we’ll sort of relativize and historicize that and distance ourselves from that? How do you deal with that?

**Professor Heschel:** You know, I think you’re asking your question at several levels. What is it doing in the Bible in the first place? What do we do with it today? What do we do with passages like Genesis 34 (the rape of Dinah), Judges 19…? What does one do? First of all, I’d have to say to you, of course these passages trouble many of us.
What do we do with passages like that. I think all of us in our scriptures have highly problematic passages we have to deal with. I wonder sometimes, first of all, Why wasn’t this pointed out to me when I was going to Orthodox day school as a child? Why wasn’t I given some response analysis, some way to cope with these problems? And why didn’t they see it? Didn’t my teachers see it? Is this something new that people are suddenly awakening to? I have this sense also that it was only when I became an adult that people were talking about this. Why? What is that about? Were they blind to it? I don’t understand that. Now look, the Bible sanctions slavery. It doesn’t advocate, but it doesn’t prohibit it. What do we do with things like this?

Such questions aren’t entirely new, obviously, and there have been various explanations. In the Middle Ages, for instance, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish theologians came up with the notion of *Dibra Torah Beleshon Bnei Adam* (the Torah speaks in human language). That is, God can’t speak to us in God’s own words; it would be too much for us to absorb. So certain teachings have to be put into the level at which we can cope. Certain things had to be modified. I don’t think that’s necessarily a helpful explanation today.

I would say, first of all, we have the question of liturgical reading of the Bible. What do we do when we’re reading Genesis 34 in the synagogue, when we chant that passage? Shouldn’t we mark it somehow? Shouldn’t we chant it in a different melody of tragedy or perhaps whisper it? Should we omit it? I’m not sure because rape is with us. Let me put it this way: if a woman had written the Ten Commandments, “Rape forbidden” would be one of them. What do we do with those passages? To some extent, you can hold them up and say, here’s a mirror. This is who we are. We are people who commit rape, murder, we have hatred, so let’s read the Bible not clearly as advocating rape but as a mirror to ourselves and let’s look at ourselves in this way.

Do I historicize? Yes, I suppose I historicize certain passages that command wicked deeds in the name of God. And I also look at them and say, I hear that around me right now in this world. I hear religious people advocating horrors and atrocities. Does the Bible sanction us for that? Do I have to read against the Bible in some way? I suppose I do. And either words have entered my Bible and have taken it over in some sense just as I think certain religious leaders have taken God captive for their own purposes, and I hear God crying out, “Save me! Save me from the so-called religious right.” So we have to rescue something also—rescue what we need from the Bible. It’s troubling that it’s not simple, but faith isn’t simple, is it? Reading the Bible isn’t so simple, and that’s the struggle that we have.

**Pastor Warnock:** Can I say just a little bit on what Susannah was saying? It’s a very complicated question and all of us wrestle with it and we have these texts and biblical scholars have something they call the hermeneutic—that is, what is the basic principle by which you interpret text? I think, since we’re talking about Dr. King, that in terms of civic law, he had this principle. He talked about how there are some laws that you obey and there are some you disobey. There are just laws and there are unjust laws. He said a just law is one that uplifts human personality and so that was sort of his principle for
outright disobedience of laws that he thought degraded human personality. I’m just wondering out loud the extent to which that might be something of a hermeneutic for those of us who wrestle with text which then could lead you to engage the text in various ways, maybe reading against the text, as Susannah says.

I think there is some tradition in the African-American faith experience, although people don’t always own it and they’re not aware of it, about how we handle Ephesians, the household code: “Slaves, obey your masters.” We skipped over it. [Laughter] It really wasn’t that complicated; we just skipped over it. I don’t know any black preacher who stands up and reads that as a text from which to preach except the few who have really been messed up. [Laughter] I mean, some have been so influenced by the most uncritical versions of American evangelicalism that they’ll take it and try to make it nice and say, “Well, it’s really about a work ethic.” [Laughter] But most black preachers just skip over it. But what’s interesting, as we talk about having a principle, is that it doesn’t just push the text, it pushes you. What’s interesting is you will not hear a black preacher preach, “Slaves, obey your masters.” But in that same passage, the household codes—a formula for how the society is organized, so free property-owning males are at the top and “Slaves, obey your masters”—they won’t preach that, but they certainly preach, “Wives...[Laughter]...obey your husbands!” You know, I can’t take credit for that insight. Clarice Martin writes a whole essay on that in Stony the Road We Trod. So you have this kind of selective hermeneutic based on how the saying impacts me.

Rabbi Karlin-Neumann: Evolving hermeneutics.

Pastor Warnock: Yes. So empathy is critical because if you plod a path of empathy, then we might be forced to rethink and think more deeply about issues of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, all of these kinds of very, very sticky issues that all of us in our various faith traditions will have to engage. [Applause]

Question from the Audience: That’s a perfect lead-in to my question. First, to say thank you so much for this amazing evening, and gratitude to the civil rights movement and to Dr. King for what led into the women’s movement. We certainly wouldn’t be having the two women onstage today if it weren’t for the women’s movement. And I wanted to simply ask the question as to where women are at this moment of history within the individual religions and what still needs to be done. [Laughter, applause]

Rabbi Karlin-Neumann: I think you’ve given us a topic for another Aurora Forum.

Pastor Warnock: Well, let’s start with the movement itself: deep gender contradictions within the civil rights movement itself. Dr. King had very traditional ideas about where women fit, and that played itself out, I think, in the structure of SCLC. So it’s an enduring issue. It is particularly glaring for me as a child and product and now pastor in the black church tradition. Black folk walked out of white churches in the late eighteenth century—early nineteenth century because they refused to live with the fundamental contradiction of segregated seating in the house of God—this kind of stratification. Even communion was segregated. So that’s why there’s such a thing as the black church in
America. But here we are in 2007 and while there are women in the pulpit at Ebenezer and women on the diaconate in all forms of leadership at that particular Baptist church—and we wouldn’t have it any other way—the marginalization of women is probably one of the most serious problems confronting certainly the African-American church, where boards of deacons are still….I can think of some very progressive churches that I won’t name that have very, very eloquent, vociferous, engaged rhetoric about issues of race, but when it comes to issues of gender and sexism, sexism might be seen as an inconvenience, at worst, but certainly not as a sin, not as anything that divides the human family. And so here is a fundamental contradiction. Some progress made; a whole lot of progress left. I’ve had occasion to ordain a few preachers, and it’s interesting that when I go to get certificates to ordain someone in the Christian ministry, sometimes I have a very hard time finding gender-inclusive language for the ordination of someone in the Christian ministry. “Acknowledging his gifts, we hereby…."

Meanwhile, the seminaries are fifty percent women, and more. So the tide is going to….[Laughter] It’s coming, so maybe my successor will be…maybe the sixth pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church will be a woman.

Rabbi Karlin-Neumann: Amen! [Laughter]

Pastor Warnock: I’d like to see that happen.

Imam Shakir: Since this is interactive, I would like all the Muslim women who are here to stand up. Now, I know many of them, and I can assure you that Silicon Valley is well represented by these women. Academia is well represented. And also motherhood is very well represented. Sister Leila over there with her husband: she doesn’t work at Hewlett-Packard or Sun Microsystems. She works in her house with three beautiful daughters. And if you met her daughters—if she had brought her daughters—you would just say, Wow, we need some more of this. So I say that to say this: there are a lot of things that people frequently point to in terms of Islam and the role of women in Islam, and the negative things that you all are familiar with, those things are being addressed. But I think there are other things that are very precious, and I think that if we lose those things, then humanity itself has lost something. If the women—and not all the Muslim sisters are wearing scarves—but if the ones that do take their scarves off and try to become the latest cheap imitation of Britney Spears, I think that we’ve really lost something precious. So in the sense that Islam is saying we have to do a better job facilitating those things that are the measure of the modern woman in terms of entrance into the workplace and the pulpit and this, that, or the other, there are also a lot of things we have to hold onto: motherhood, femininity, modesty. And in that sense, I think in Islam, despite the many challenges and struggles, we’re still fighting the good fight.

Rabbi Karlin-Neumann: I didn’t say the names of all of Susannah’s works, but one of them is *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, so perhaps she wants to speak to this.

Professor Heschel: Perhaps I’ll go back to an experience that I had when I was twelve and I decided that I wanted to have a bat mitzvah. My father was a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, which, although it is a Conservative seminary, was
actually an Orthodox institution. Men and women sat separately in the synagogue and women were definitely not allowed to do anything—neither women nor little girls. Nothing: just sit there and be quiet. So I wanted a bat mitzvah and my father invited the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary to come to tea one Sabbath afternoon so that we could discuss this. Professor Louis Finkelstein came to tea, and how did I engage him? My father and mother let me do the talking. So I asked him first of all about his involvement in the civil rights movement. He sat up very proudly and told me about his involvement. He had met Martin Luther King and so on and so on, and he was very involved, and this was very important for equality, etcetera. He went on and on for a while and I let him talk and he finished and I said, “Well, what about equality for women? I want a bat mitzvah.” And he said, “Oh, you want a bat mitzvah.” (You know: You little girl…little nothing child.) “I’ll make a party for you in my house and we’ll have cookies and punch. Would you like that?” Now of course that was completely unacceptable to me. He wouldn’t allow a bat mitzvah in the synagogue there and my parents arranged a bat mitzvah for me in a different synagogue. Fine. But the tone of voice….First of all, the patronizing tone of voice is something that I think is still—when you ask about what the problems are—that’s a problem, a very big problem. Yes, there are now numerous women rabbis, for example, and rabbinical schools that are almost fifty-fifty in the Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative movements, but nonetheless, there is that patronizing voice. I hear it from male colleagues, even some who are junior to me. I’m a tenured professor, I have colleagues who are young men still seeking tenure who ask me to write letters of recommendation for them, etcetera, evaluate their work, and yet somehow when they put on a suit and tie at a conference and they say hello to me, what goes along with putting on that suit and tie is that patronizing tone of voice. That’s a problem. That’s a big problem.

I would say, though, that there are of course structural inequities, and that’s the issue. Whatever a man or a woman may choose to do, whether it has to do with education, career, job, children, whatever, one has to earn the same amount of money for doing the same piece of work. [Applause] We know that perfectly well. And the issue is, why are institutions resistant to this? Women rabbis don’t earn as much as men rabbis. Why is it women rabbis aren’t achieving as easily senior positions as the men? A lot of these things have to do with attitudes. We can make certain structural changes and we can pass laws, but the patronizing tone of voice remains. And I hear Professor Finkelstein’s tone of voice.

And just finally as an example, if you don’t mind, I have to tell you this. In 1974, the Conservative movement was debating, Should we ordain women rabbis? Should we allow women to do this and that? So what did they do? They had a big convention, a big conference. Who gave the keynote address? Who should give a keynote address on the issue of women’s equality in the synagogue? You might think, first of all, a woman. No. Whom did they invite? They invited a man who is a very Orthodox Freudian psychoanalyst. Mortimer Ostow got up there and talked about all the terrible things that would happen to men, men’s masculinity, and so on, if women had equality in the synagogue.
It’s that kind of notion, that I think has changed to some extent but not entirely, that we have to be concerned with as religious people. I think our obligation is to worry about the patronizing tone of voice, to worry about the attitudes that sometimes can be quite subtle because we as religious people are trained to be attentive to subtlety. That’s what it’s about: the subtlety of the text, of the teaching, of the tone of voice, and also of the heart. We know what’s gone on in our heart. Did we really pray with sincerity or not? We know these subtleties and that’s what we need to bring to the attention of the world when we want to make these kinds of changes.

And finally, what’s so important and what I certainly got from Dr. King and what allowed me to speak in such a...I’d say a rather arrogant tone of voice for a twelve-year-old speaking to the chancellor of an institution, and my father’s boss, no less, was courage. It was courage. Where do we get the courage? Where did I get my courage? Well, I know where I got my courage. I got my courage from Dr. King. I got the courage to know that it may be that there are some men who want women sitting behind a curtain in the synagogue, but I knew in my courage that God didn’t want that. I knew that. I knew that from the moment I was born; I knew that. Dr. King gave me the courage to speak it, and that’s what we all have to do. We have to not only have courage but give courage. Give courage to our politicians to speak out on the right things on the basis of principle and not expediency. Where will they get their courage? They need courage because they haven’t got any. We need to give them courage. [Applause]

Rabbi Karlin-Neumann: An important footnote to what we just heard is that the present chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary comes from our community: Professor, now Chancellor, Arnold Eisen.

Rev. Heng Sure: There have been Buddhist female clergy for 2,500 years in the Buddhist lifetime. It’s a mixed bag at present. I’ll be attending a conference in Germany in July on the Dalai Lama’s insistence that the old mossbacks in the Tibetan tradition finally allow Tibetan women to ordain as nuns. In the Thai tradition, women don’t have equal ordination with monks. Are these cultural issues having to do with Tibetan society, Thai society? Perhaps. People are people, and this is a slow thing. In my order in the Chinese tradition, there are five times as many nuns as there are monks, and I had an opportunity to sit down and listen to the dharma spoken by women regularly, and the idea that a women’s body can be a vessel of awakening in the dharma? Absolutely. In the Buddhist tradition, the focus is truly on wisdom, not on verticality, so what body are you wearing now? I’m more interested in what’s inside—how much wisdom is there?

Dr. Gonnerman: Professor Susannah Heschel, Imam Zaid Shakir, Reverend Heng Sure, and Pastor Raphael Warnock, thank you very much. Thank you to Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann for moderating, and a thank-you to the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute. Good night. [Applause]
Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann (moderator) came to Stanford in 1996. She is the first university chaplain from a tradition other than Christianity in Stanford’s history. In 2001, she was appointed Senior Associate Dean for Religious Life. She teaches and lectures widely on Jewish feminism, rabbinical ethics, the relationship between religion and education, and social justice.

Professor Susannah Heschel holds the Eli Black Chair in Jewish Studies in the Department of Religion at Dartmouth College. Her scholarship focuses on Jewish-Christian relations in Germany during the 19th and 20th centuries, and her numerous publications include a prize-winning monograph, Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus, which won a National Jewish Book Award, and a forthcoming book, The Aryan Jesus: Christians, Nazis and the Bible. Several years ago she edited a volume of her father's writings, Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays of Abraham Joshua Heschel, that includes a biographical introduction.

Imam Zaid Shakir was born in Berkeley and accepted Islam in 1977 while serving in the United States Air Force. As Imam of Masjid al-Islam in Connecticut from 1988 to 1994, he initiated a community renewal and grassroots anti-drug effort in the local neighborhood. In 2001, he graduated from Syria’s prestigious Abu Noor University and returned to continue his work with the Muslim community in America. Since 2003, he has acted as a professor and scholar-in-residence at the Zaytuna Institute in Hayward and currently serves as a Board Advisor for MeccaOne Media.

The Rev. Dr. Heng Sure was ordained as a Buddhist monk in 1976. For the sake of world peace, he undertook a six hundred mile pilgrimage in total silence from South Pasadena to Ukiah, California, repeatedly taking three steps and one bow to cover the entire journey. He currently serves as managing director of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery and teaches at the Institute for World Religions and at Graduate Theological Union. He is actively involved in interfaith dialogue and in the ongoing conversation between spirituality and technology.

The Rev. Dr. Raphael Warnock serves as Senior Pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, spiritual home of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His leadership and passion for social justice have been demonstrated through his organization of various public political events and his service to the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS. A 1993 recipient of Union Theological Seminary’s coveted William H. Hudnut Preaching Award, he is sought after as a preacher and scholar who demonstrates an abiding commitment to Christian ministry, disciplined scholarship, and diligent struggle on behalf of the oppressed.

Comments?
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Aurora Forum at Stanford University
425 Santa Teresa Street
Stanford CA 94305

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