

Studenting Season 2 – Interfaith Episode (transcript)

Guests: Khadija Ahmed, Mary Zhang, Nancy Kaul, and Carlene Gardner.

Host: Margaret

MARGARET: Perfect, so welcome everyone to the faith and interfaith community episode of *Studenting*. I have so many guests here with me today, and we're really, really excited to chat with all of you. So just working around, why don't we start with Khadija? Would you mind introducing yourself?

KHADIJA: Sure. My name is Khadija Ahmed, and I am a third-year law student at McGill's Faculty of Law. I'm also the president of the Muslim Law Student Association this year.

MARGARET: Awesome, we're really happy to have you here with us. Thank you for joining. Mary?

MARY: Hi, I'm Mary. I am a final year BCom student here at McGill Desautels, and I am the president and co-founder of Secular Student Alliance in Montreal Chapter, and I am also a volunteer with MORSL for the secular humanist tradition.

MARGARET: Awesome, thanks so much for joining. Nancy?

NANCY: Hi, my name's Nancy Kaul. I'm the co-president for McGill Dharma Society. I'm currently in my third year studying anatomy and cell biology at McGill as well.

MARGARET: And last but not least, Carlene, please.

CARLENE: Hi there, I'm Carlene. I'm the director of McGill's Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, or MORSL; we're part of Student Services. And I'm in my fourth year in this role.

MARGARET: So close to graduation. Congrats. Well, we're very happy to have you all here today. And since you're each representing a student group or an office here at McGill, we'd love to just get an introduction of what your group is all about, what kind of students your group serves. Khadija, would you mind starting us off?

KHADIJA: Happily. So, McGill's Muslim Law Student Association basically provides a forum where law students can discuss legal issues relating to Muslim communities in Canada, but also within a global landscape. We seek to raise awareness of issues affecting Muslims within both the law school community and our broader communities.

We also serve to combat prejudice and aims to create a more inclusive and integrated society, both within the faculty and beyond. So, we are seeking to remove legal barriers to justice within our local Muslim communities. In Quebec, for instance, [we] provide support and guidance to Muslims entering the legal profession, challenge the ever evasive ideology of Islamophobia, and some recent initiatives that I hope we'll get into by the MLS have been including core organizing, anti-Bill 21 initiatives, panels on the Uyghur crisis and participation in interfaith dialogs with fellow Christian and Jewish law student groups, and of course, social events for MLC members and law school community.

MARGARET: That's amazing and so lovely to have you here. Mary, would you mind telling us about the secular student group that you're a part of?

MARY: Yeah, of course. So, the Secular Student Alliance in Montreal is a chapter under the national U. S. based Secular Student Alliance organization – I'm involved with the national organization as well. Specifically, the Montreal chapter aims to serve two purposes, and of course, we aim to serve basically the agnostic, atheist, secular and non-religious (kind of an umbrella term) students and youth in the Montreal area.

And our mission is twofold: we aim to create a safe and positive community for these students that I mentioned, but also, we serve as a space and avenue for secular advocacy — that means issues that have historically been affected by religion and forces of religion within our society. An example of this is we had a panel series of secular criticisms against Bill 21, very similar to what Khadija was talking about. So that's kind of the line of work that we do.

MARGARET: Awesome. Thanks so much. We're really excited to have a secular voice involved, especially when discussing faith and interfaith community across campus. So, thank you so much for joining us, Mary. And, Nancy, please tell us a little bit more about the Dharma society.

NANCY: Yeah, sure. So, McGill Dharma society serves as the official campus representation for students belonging to Hindu and other Dharmic traditions, and we aim to allow students of all backgrounds to collectively learn and participate in our spiritual and cultural practices.

MARGARET: Lovely. Thank you so much for joining us, Nancy and Carlene. Can you tell us a little bit about your role in MORSL?

CARLENE: Sure. So, our office, the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, we're part of Student Services, and we're here to support religious and spiritual life students for their wellbeing, their personal growth, their understanding of what it means to live in a pluralistic society.

Now we ourselves, of course, are not a religious organization, but rather we're a service for all students. So, whether they identify as religious or spiritual or secular or in that space of still trying to figure it out, we are really here for all of our students. So in addition to the work that we do that supports those kind of individual and personal explorations, we also aim to form a community for students of all backgrounds to come together for learning, for dialog, and to create a community that is itself defined by open mindedness and an open heart also and a real curiosity about life's big questions.

MARGARET: That's awesome, and we're excited to sort of tap into that curiosity today and then hear what each of you have to say. So again, thank you all for joining us. And now that we sort of know what groups you're from and what communities you're seeking to get in touch with, I would be personally really curious to know when was your group — respectively — founded? What need did it meet when it was created, and how long has it sort of been active in the McGill community and on campus? We can start with the MLSA and Khadija, please.

KHADIJA: Yeah, so we actually don't know the origin story of the MLSA. I think it's probably because participation within the MLSA or group membership, there's been ebbs and flows. Being in law school can be really demanding, and so I think there have been some years where there's been a higher level of participation, and so we haven't been able to retain that origin story knowledge, sadly. But sorry, what was the second part of the question?

MARGARET: Just if you did know the genesis of your group, and what sort of need did it meet at the time that it arose. But if it's a mystery to you, that's okay, you can make up your own genesis story, if you'd like.

KHADIJA: Yeah, I think I can imagine... I imagine the genesis to be Muslim law students wanting to find a space to come together, to talk about issues that touch on our community but may not be discussed in a very holistic or an empathetic or compassionate way.

I think that's definitely been the case for sort of my affinity to my fellow Muslim law students where we sort of come together and talk about Bill 21 or doctrinal readings on certain types of law. And so, I think... I would imagine that they would probably be the genesis and sort of just breaking bread, having food with people that share similar perspective, is always, is always nice.

MARGARET: Absolutely. I think that makes great sense as the genesis story. And Mary, would you please tell us about the founding of the Secular Student Alliance?

MARY: Yeah, absolutely. The genesis of the secular student alliance, we were... well, I founded the organization along with my co-founder and co-president, Lloyd Eloy, who is a McGill grad, a McGill alum, and so we — a bit of a backtrack, I, my personal relationship with Secular Student Alliance, the national organization, goes way back to when I was in high school and I tried to

found a chapter in my high school, which unfortunately, due to external factors, was unable to happen.

And when I came to McGill in my first year, I was able to build some networks, get a sense of the campus. I was really interested in starting this organization again, because I noticed that there wasn't a space for secular students on campus, and in the process of trying to gauge interest for the organization and trying to found this organization at the end of my first year — this would have been 2019 — I had a lot of conversations and dialogs.

And one of the concerns that I received often was the implication of the term secular in Quebec, specifically its association with secular legislation, secular law, such as Bill 21 — which is coming up over and over in this in this discussion by pure coincidence — and how just how much this term has caught on a very negative connotation. And this was something that I was having dialogs with other people, having conversations with myself over, of if we should go forward with this name for our organization and basically how to reconcile that.

And in 2020, when this organization was officially founded, my co-founder actually reached out to me over LinkedIn when I posted something about me speaking at a national event for secularism. And we came together, and we chatted over coffee, and we decided that this — well, chatted over coffee over Zoom, because it was 2020 — and we decided that this was something that we were going to do.

And a major part of it was that we wanted to reclaim the term secularism and secular for students who actually are secular, for people who actually are secular. I thought it was wildly unfair that a term that a lot of us identify as part of our personal and religious and faith identity has been essentially taken and appropriated by a group of mostly white, mostly religious legislators, who are not involved in our community, who use our name as a cover for their own ulterior agendas. And we wanted a space where students could see positive secularism modeled and reclaim that term for themselves and have a community for advocacy and just for belonging. So that's our little back story there.

MARGARET: Well, congratulations on establishing a chapter, especially here at McGill, what an awesome way to sort of build community and find a network. And Nancy, could you please tell us about the Dharma Society?

NANCY: Sure. So McGill Dharma Society is actually like a really new club; we were actually just founded last year in the winter semester by my Co-President Shreya Mahasenan, and we had tried before — like I hadn't tried, or Shreya hadn't tried, but I know another group of people had tried a few years prior, but it didn't go through, because there was already the Indian Student Association. So, then we had tried again, because obviously your religious identity and your country of origin isn't the same thing.

We wanted to fill that gap because we didn't have any Hindu representation on campus. So, we were really happy when we finally got approved, and we just recently got full status as well. We're really happy to have been able to bridge that gap.

MARGARET: That's awesome. And congratulations, congratulations are in order for the recent full status as a campus group. We're really excited to sort of include you in this conversation, and hopefully more people will also get to know about — I mean, not only the Dharma society, but also all of these campus groups, and if they speak to them as a student or as a secular or faith-interested person, hopefully they can interact with your groups, your clubs, your community.

And then Carlene, MORSL. So, it is a part of the administration, but how long? How long has MORSL been around, do you know?

CARLENE: That's a really good question, Margaret, I know that McGill has had some kind of a campus chaplaincy since the 1960s, primarily with a Christian focus in those days. But I would say that around the 1990s, it became much more diverse and much more actually multi-faith. And it's been integrated into Student Services as a service for all students, for, I'd say, well over 30 years now. And we did change the name from the chaplaincy service to the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life about ten years ago. So that's more of an inclusive naming of the of the office because, you know, chaplaincy can often be seen as just a Christian term.

MARGARET: It's awesome that the office has sort of recognized the needs and the demographics of those students on campus and sort of reflecting back on itself and adopted to suit those needs.

So that's all really interesting stuff about sort of your start points. I mean, two of the groups, the secular group and the Dharma group, both of you guys are pretty new, pretty fresh on campus. So, we're excited to have sort of both old and new here today.

Just a question about the communities you're trying to establish, connect, develop. What kind of events or activities are your groups currently leading under the pandemic? Or if you were having those events before the pandemic, what did that life look like? So how do you — how do you foster community through events and outreach community? Would you mind telling us about how the MLSA does community?

KHADIJA: For sure. Yeah. So, during the pandemic, I would actually say it was a lot easier logistically to coordinate and bring people together. I'm thinking about the numerous panels we've held in the past two years now, and we've had some really cool panels, I'd say. For instance, we hosted a panel on the Uyghur crisis last fall, so fall 2020, and we were able to get two out of the three panelists that were not in Montréal. And I think it's really difficult to actually get people to speak on this crisis and who have authority in doing so and can.

And so we had a member of Parliament, Garrett Genius, who has been really outspoken on this crisis, and we also had a Uyghur activist, Rukiye Turdush, and so it was really cool to be able to bring together people that are directly affected or contributing to such an important cause that matters so much to our community because what in the happening in the region of Xinjiang is

genocide and has been declared that, so that the gravity of that and having created the first space within the Faculty of Law virtually, to be able to talk about that has been great.

And we've been also able to collaborate with the Christian Legal Fellowship and the Jewish Law Student Associations, and we've been able to primary timely topics such as women, women of faith in law and the place of religious law today. So, two different panels there. And so, we've been able to get really interesting speakers.

So, it's sometimes it feels pretty lonely to talk about spirituality and religiosity in certain spaces because it's not al-Ahmad, you know, it's not really cool to talk about it, or just religion has such a bad rep because of things we mentioned earlier in terms of systemic issues and contributing to systemic issues. There's not a lot of space to speak openly and compassionately about the value of religion, so to be able to carve out that space and bring in speakers that aren't directly in Montreal or directly associated with the Faculty of Law and through Zoom has been such a gift and we've been happy to be able to share that space with people.

MARGARET: That's lovely. Yeah, we often we often focus on the limitations of life under the pandemic and life through, sort of, teleconferencing. But you're absolutely right there is — while there are certain negatives, that is absolutely a positive, getting to speak with people you may not usually get to and hearing really important voices and perspectives like, as you mentioned, people acutely connected to those who... I like that you use the word compassionate, those who can speak compassionately and empathetically to it.

What about the Secular Student Alliance? What kind of group events Zoom events are you guys currently running?

MARY: As I said, we were founded during the pandemic, so we were really more virtual, as we would say in the business world. And so, everything we've had, all the events we've had, for better or for worse, have been online. And so, our first year of our founding, we hosted the panel on Secular Perspectives Against Bill 21. The semester after that, we collaborated with the SSA chapter at University of Manitoba and their version of MORSL, basically a series of interfaith series on various topics of discussion that spanned the entirety of the semester.

And this semester we also have a speaker event, more or less cultural diversity and interfaith aspects that's being planned, that's in the working right now, so stay tuned for that.

Definitely like I said, building a community is a major goal of mine with this organization. So, as we're coming out of COVID restrictions, I'm definitely hoping to start organizing more in-person events, socials, findings, and things of that nature, rather than just speaker series panels and things that are more lecture-based, if you will. So that's certainly my hopes for the organization going forward.

MARGARET: Absolutely. And yeah, we'll be crossing our fingers for you guys that there's a way for — I mean, both a secular student society and the Dharma Society were born online, as you said, born over Zoom. So hopefully there's space in the coming months for you guys to

connect in person because, I think it was Khadija that said it earlier, but just being able to break bread and interact in a room together and have that casual, community-focused conversation is really valuable. Not that these speaker series and panels aren't really informative and really enlightening. But yeah, just the chance to be in a room together is really valuable. Nancy, what about the Dharma society?

NANCY: Yeah, so we've actually had a number of virtual events as well. Our most popular event was our Raags for Relief fundraiser. So, during that, we raised over \$2,000 for COVID-19 relief in India. So, we had featured artists from all over the world, and we showcased their talents in the Hindustani classical music schools. And we had a lot of engagement for that event, and that was our first event. So, we really started really strong, so we're really happy about that.

And then after we've had a lot of online workshops with the Chinmaya Mission Toronto, such as understanding happiness, and ancient techniques for mastering modern life, led by Devji. And those were really nice discussions.

And we also collaborate with the University of Toronto that way. So, you meet other people and get to talk to other people. So, it's really nice. So, we had also hosted an online Bharatanatyam dance workshop, and when we were able to, we also did have in-person events. So last semester we had organized temple trips for Durga Puja. Because there's no temple that's really close to McGill, so we had taken a group together to a temple and we had gone together, and it was really nice.

We took the metro together and everything, and we attended their celebration that they had going on. And then another event that we had was the night before Diwali events, so for that event, we had a night of Mehndi, or Henna, painting and food, and we had also prepared and delivered a presentation highlighting the diverse regional practices for Diwali and the associated traditions.

Right now, we're also going to be having an interfaith dialog event with Am McGill, which is a Jewish association on campus, and we're not sure if that's going to be online or in-person, but that's the next event coming up.

MARGARET: Awesome. And congratulations on your first event being so successful that that really speaks to the community that is here on campus that just sort of needs like a central gathering point to come towards. So, congratulations on that. And yeah, we're really excited for everybody to keep developing and keep growing. And I think it's really cool, actually, that each of you spoke to the connections that you're making with other groups.

Khadija, you talked about the other religious groups on campus that the MLSA is interacting with; Mary, you talked about a different university; Nancy you talked about U of T. So, I think it's really awesome that these groups aren't only speaking to things happening in the McGill bubble, but they're happening elsewhere too, and there's people to connect with about this.

There's all this amazing stuff that you guys are offering. How would a prospective student get involved? Where are your channels, where are your social medias? Like, how would an

incoming or even returning student get involved with your group, for example, the MLSA? How would you get in touch with the MLSA, Khadija?

KHADIJA: For sure. It's been a little harder to reach students who've joined the Faculty of Law during the pandemic and this year, just because there's just less opportunity to socialize in larger groups. And I think that's kind of how, organically, you hear about so and so, who's really interested in X or Y, and then that kind of — you know you go for coffee and then, you know, that's how collaborations kind of are organically born, and it's hard in a virtual world, but with events, it's been it's been helpful.

But I think having a Facebook page has been helpful, too. It's Muslim Law Student Association, our Facebook page, and also our Instagram, which is @MLSA_McGill. And, you know, reach out to us through our inbox, or follow us. And I think we're a really friendly group. If anyone wanted to be invited to our Facebook group chat to keep people in the loop on things from getting exam accommodations from the Faculty of Law, with the Ramadan coming up during exam season — I think a lot of Muslim students are worried about that, because this is the second year that Ramadan has overlapped with final exams. And so whether it be something logistical or social or just kind of wanting guidance from a fellow Muslim law student navigating networking events and networking events at law firms, which sometimes have a lot of alcohol, and if that's something that you don't want to partake in... you know, just getting small support on matters that matter to you, and navigating this new space. We're always happy to chat with anybody who's interested to hear about our experiences.

MARGARET: Awesome. And I'm sure there are people that are interested to chat back, so hopefully those that are interested can reach out. Mary, where does the Secular Student Alliance exist in the online world?

MARY: Yeah, for sure. Of course, with things being virtual, there is an inherent difficulty to connecting and building communities, and that's certainly been felt. Currently, we are active on Facebook. We have a Facebook page, and we have an Instagram page, both of which are active and are managed by our exec team, so feel free to reach out to us there. And from there you can also find our contact information like our emails, et cetera. So, you can reach out pretty much anywhere and we'll be quick to get back to you.

We also have a Facebook group, however, that's been a little bit less active, since I believe the younger, the younger Gen-Zs are moving away from Facebook, surprisingly, so I'm becoming old, that is what I'm learning.

As I said, as we're moving out of COVID, and we certainly hope to bring a lot of more stuff in person and hopefully be able to build that community. But one thing I found that's really helpful when it comes to building a community online is really putting a personal touch in and going forward kind of human-first. I believe Khadija was the one that mentioned this, but it's difficult talking about issues of religiosity or non-religiosity, for that matter. It's something that in

Western “secular society” is seen as almost unprofessional or even taboo, and it can be very powerful to just put yourself out there and put your religiosity or non-religiosity, your faith identity, out there in a way that is positive and inviting.

And that in of itself will start a lot of really great conversations, and you'll have a lot more people reach out to you in very genuine ways that you wouldn't expect otherwise. Also joining the MORSL network has also been incredibly helpful in helping us have a bigger reach and build communities and just have a reach to students we otherwise wouldn't be able to connect with.

MARGARET: Thank you so much for sharing. And Nancy, where could interested parties find the Dharma Society?

NANCY: For us as well, honestly, just reach out to us on our social media. We're active on Facebook, Instagram. You could even give us your email and we could add you to our listserv, which we send out every month. We try to send it out monthly. As well, you could just reach out to us, and we have a lot of volunteer opportunities to help out at events. Or if you're interested, you could even potentially be part of the exec team. Otherwise, just attending our events, whether virtually or in person, are a great way to kind of connect with the community as well.

MARGARET: And Carlene, finally, how would a student interact with MORSL? How would they find you on campus?

CARLENE: Well, we're actually fortunate compared to most student groups, and we actually have office space on campus. We have beautiful drop-in center on McTavish, 3610 McTavish up on the third floor. We've got a fantastic reception area, a little student lounge and a beautiful prayer and meditation space.

So, I think a lot of students have maybe not known about this, especially since many of our students have started their university career online and haven't really been much on campus. But we do have a physical footprint on campus, which we're really fortunate to have.

We also, like everyone else, have Facebook and Instagram. You can find us on Facebook under MORSL and on Instagram under MORSL McGill. But I think the most reliable way to connect with us is going to be, like what Nancy said, through our listserv. Our newsletter goes out every Friday. We put out events that are happening across all different faith clubs, partner organizations in the Montréal area, everything related to spirituality, inner wellness, religious literacy, things that are happening in and around the McGill campus.

So, subscribing to our newsletter honestly is the best way to know about the upcoming events, the classes, the workshops, the interfaith panels, training opportunities, and so on that we've got going on.

MARGARET: Awesome. Well, hopefully students that are interested can now take advantage of the existence of these groups and reach out to any of you guys if they're interested. Moving

sort of away from the logistics, I would be really interested to hear from each of you — what are some just more anecdotal stories about ways that you've seen students come to collect around their faith, around their beliefs, around secularism as a sort of reclaimed identity? How have you sort of seen that in your tenure, at your group? Khadijah, could we start with you and the MLSA?

KHADIJA: Sure. So, if I understood your question correctly, it would be more so about members exploring their own religious identity within the group.

MARGARET: Yeah. And what has that looked like? What changes do you feel like you've been making? How do you feel people have been responding to the group, things like that, like what does participation look like?

KHADIJA: Yeah, participation has looked — we're a pretty non-rigid group, I would say, in terms of, you know, coming and joining and supporting in terms of the administration of our student group. I think we've been really open, that I think that people do feel comfortable, members feel comfortable to speak to us and approach us, I'd like to think, and I think there would be some people who would corroborate that, regardless of what level of faith they're at. And I think sometimes we can be really self critical, about the groups we identify with and sort of not being “up to par” and whatnot.

And I'm using air quotations for those who are listening, which is everybody except us. But the reason being is that I think it's — people shouldn't feel like they are not good enough or Muslim enough to join our student group, and that's what's most important to us, and everything after that is a bonus in terms of what we're able to accomplish together. But I think people felt comfortable in joining our group as their authentic self. And that's really something I cherish.

MARGARET: Absolutely. And that's such a lovely goal and such a lovely purpose to have as a student group, but even more specifically, as a faith-based student group: being really open, accepting where everyone's at, meeting everyone where they're at.

Mary, how have students sort of connected around the founding of a secular group on campus?

MARY: I think there's a uniqueness with secular identity that perhaps religious identities don't really share. It's that it's kind of centered around a lack of; it centered around... it's entirely centered around a nothingness, an atheist, agnosticism, I mean, the “a” prefix is lack of.

And how do you define identity, or a community based on not having something? So, I think it's... always an interesting space to try to navigate. And I think it's been a refreshing experience for many to have a secular, non-religious space that's not focused on negativity or a lack of something, which is why we place a lot of emphasis on secular advocacy and advocating for social justice and community issues that have historically been affected by religiosity and religion in our society.

Because I really believe that it's powerful when we can focus on something we do have, which is to care for our community, our care for each other, or enthusiasm for our identities and exploring our identities rather than focusing on that lack of. I think a lot of atheist, agnostic, etc....

This was a conversation I had with my co-founder when he first reached out to me, he told me this. I never thought I would be sitting down and having a conversation with anyone about the fact that I'm atheist. I felt like this deep, dark secret that I never wanted to talk to anybody about. That was a bit facetious, but maybe not deep, dark, murderous secret, but it is something that we don't talk about in polite Western society. But it is refreshing for many to have a community where we can positively and meaningfully discuss and build on these identities in a healthy and open way.

MARGARET: Absolutely 100%. And I think that's something that all of, I mean, all of campus groups in general, but all campus faith-based groups or secular groups should hopefully seek to explore. Absolutely. What about the Dharma society, Nancy?

NANCY: So, we've actually been overwhelmed with the amount of interest that we've received, so our events in person usually sell out pretty quick. And we've met people who have been really happy that they finally kind of received an avenue to participate in their religious traditions.

And we really welcome everyone to our events. So, we've had many non-Dharmics come as well, and they seem really happy and accepting to learn about the traditions. And that's also really nice to see as well. Seeing people who maybe aren't part of that religion embracing it and learning about it. I think that kind of takes away any like stigma or anything that they may have had before. So that's also something really nice to see.

MARGARET: Absolutely. It's really lovely to see not only students who are already know that it's something that works for them and that they love, but also just students with curiosity wanting to learn more about their peers and more about their campus.

MARGARET: Carlene, has MORSL noticed any sort of uptick, downtick, sort of a consistent stream of students interested in getting involved with spiritual life on campus in recent years?

CARLENE: Well, I think we've got three great examples with us here today in our student leaders. You know there's so much going on in faith communities or communities of different worldviews regarding volunteering, mentorship, advocacy, interfaith understanding, intellectual growth as well as spiritual growth.

And I think we've heard some great examples of that. I've certainly seen, I think, more openness and more activity among faith-based groups on campus, particularly during the pandemic. As I mentioned, I've been in this role now for four years, so half of my time at McGill has been in a remote situation. So sometimes it can be a little bit difficult to gauge. But you

know, I'm consistently hearing that people really do want to connect around something that is going to provide them a deeper sense of grounding in this very uncertain time that we've been going through.

So, I have seen an increased interest. We have a lot of people coming to MORSL who are in that kind of questioning or exploration mode and interested in meeting students of like mind or who are also questioning and who are also exploring and not wanting to be alone in that "I don't know" space.

So, like I said, that's another form of community. It's another way of feeling like not just intellectually knowing that other students don't always have everything figured out, but actually walking a path alongside somebody being accompanied by somebody who's in that "I don't know" space. I think that can be really powerful. There are a couple of interfaith projects that MORSL does that have actually received more attention recently... In the fall, we took a group of students — when I say took, it was a virtual conference — but we took them to a virtual conference called the Parliament of the World's Religions, which is a global interfaith conference that happens every three or four years and attracts anywhere from five to 10,000 participants. So, this was a major event that doesn't happen every year, and we advertised to the general McGill student body, and we got responses from students that weren't necessarily connected to MORSL before, which was really interesting to see, that there are a lot of people out there who want that interfaith understanding. They realize that faith and spirituality is an important part of life. They see it on campus here. They see that they're going to be entering a workforce that's going to be incredibly diverse and they want to understand, they want to know more.

They want to know how people's faiths inform their decision making, their values, their choice of vocation. So, I thought that was really powerful to see so many students interested in that from a very wide range of worldviews and religions as well as secular students.

And another area, I think, where we've seen some interest around this idea of wanting to connect across different views is just through our magazine, the Radix magazine, that we've been publishing since, well since the year 2000; we're in our 22nd year now. So, this is a great opportunity to kind of go beyond the panel discussion and to explore spiritual themes through poetry, through art, through photography. It's another way of bringing the conversation to campus, another way of normalizing these topics.

MARGARET: That's awesome. And yeah, what a fun way to sort of interact in a non-academic environment. Because of course, just speaking more so for myself, I don't know about other people, but interaction with a faith community or a secular community can be a really important way of maintaining a life outside of school and maintaining your own personal well-being and spiritual well-being and fulfillment. So, yeah, the fact that the students are engaged and interested and curious, I think just really speaks to that.

Coming up sort of on the end of our discussion, because we've had a really lovely conversation, but unfortunately, all good things come to an end... I'd be really interested to hear from each of you, just sort of like as a closing note, what is something you really want people to

know about your group, anyone listening? It can be anecdotal. It can be whatever you think is most interesting.

But yeah, what do you want people to know most?

KHADIJA: One of the things that I think... Maybe I'll share a little story that within our Faculty of Law, there is usually about... our student body is about 800 people, and as I mentioned before, law school can be really demanding and so not everybody gets involved with extracurriculars. It was the case that when we organized an event and people found out last year how many we were, which was a small but mighty number, four people.

People were really surprised with how many events we were able to coordinate and our presence, which has been felt on campus. And we're increasing in membership, thankfully, but sometimes I think what's important to know is that quantity and numbers of people in a group doesn't matter as much as the vision and the leadership of people involved, and I'm really grateful for the memories of last year and all that we've accomplished together.

And that's Asiyah Siddique, Sara Wright, Irfan Tahiri, and myself, we were able to really, I think, come together and put together a lot of things we were proud of, including not just external events, but, you know, we hosted an Iftar that had such... we had more non-Muslims attending the Muslims. And so just bringing our community together in different forms, that was really, really beautiful and a powerful message that we took to heart when people found out how many people we were, and just sort of reflecting on the impact that we had all year last year, and onwards.

MARGARET: I've crossed paths with the MLSA before through on campus journalism and things like that. I had no idea you guys were four people previously because you're so right, your presence and the aim of your group extends so far past yourselves.

And yeah, you said it perfectly that it's a very powerful thing. You just actually gave me goosebumps through the video call. And what about what about you, Mary? What would you like people to really know about the Secular Student Alliance?

MARY: I don't know if this is as specific, maybe, to the Secular Student Alliance, but I think I just want people to have more curiosity and to have more... more openness towards their own faith, their own faith expression, their own religiosity or lack thereof.

There's nothing scary about being an atheist or an agnostic, and there is nothing scary about questioning your faith, and there's nothing scary about being reaffirmed in your faith. I just want to invite everybody to take some time out of your busy lives and really negotiate what you believe in and why you believe in it with yourself.

I always say this: I have no interest in everybody... in the ideal world, my ideal world, it wouldn't be that everybody would be atheist, but it's that everybody would have spent a significant effort in their lives understanding and negotiating and consolidating what they believe in. And they feel 100% good about whatever faith system and moral systems they decided to

depend on themselves. So, I guess this just goes out as an invitation to take some time to understand what you believe in and why you believe in it and feel good about it and feel proud of it. And you might come out with a better understanding of what other people believe and feel good about what they believe in as well.

MARGARET: That's a really awesome invitation, and I hope that people do take you up on it, because you're right. Everybody deserves to have a positive and meaningful relationship with whatever religious or moral belief system they feel is right for them. Nancy, what about the Dharma Society?

NANCY: So, you guys both did so well — I don't think I'll be able to come on that level. But we would want students to know that we are here to provide religious education, awareness, and celebration, and we want to provide a community for people who follow our traditions and people who don't.

So, we really just want to be open to everyone. And because our traditions can be so diverse, we want to hear from you. Like what you would like to see us put on, what you would like to see us do. So, we can kind of encompass all the diverse traditions and kind of let the community be a part of that.

MARGARET: That's awesome. Yeah, I think it's really cool that you've said a couple of times now that your group really focuses on not only faith based and your community based events, but also opening those up to the wider community that's curious about Dharmic traditions and getting involved or learning about them.

So hopefully people that are interested or people that connect with those faith beliefs can check out your group and what you're doing. And Carlene, what would you really like people to know about MORSL?

CARLENE: Yeah, I mean, again, we've had such great responses to this question, and I think for more so I mean, part of it I've already said, is that I'd like students to know that MORSL is for every student on campus and that we are there really to lift up this idea that everyone should be able to bring their whole selves to their studies. And we talk a lot about creating a community of inclusion, a campus climate that really is inclusive. And for me, that's an endeavor where everybody takes part in creating that conclusion.

And, you know, we've been talking a lot about community in this podcast, and I think community and university life is often about finding new connections, right. New spaces of belonging and that might go beyond or even contradict what you experienced in high school or CEGEP. And I think that when we come to a new environment, we tend to gravitate to groups that share our values and our beliefs, whether that's religious or political or moral and so forth. But one of the things that's really wonderful about being part of a community like McGill is just

how incredibly diverse it is and how many opportunities there are to be in community with people who are entirely different from yourself.

I know when I was a student, I took it for granted, being surrounded by all these brilliant people from all sorts of backgrounds. I assume that life would always be like that, that I would have a constant flow of interesting people. Yet the reality is that as time goes by, we tend to settle into smaller social circles. Most people don't change jobs every three months like students have the opportunity to meet new classmates every semester. So, I think what I'd like people to know is, kind of like what Mary said, to share a hope and an invitation to take advantage of this time to really connect with people who are not at all like yourself and to make this kind of connection a lifelong practice. And I think that's something that will go a long way towards building a more harmonious society in general.

KHADIJA: A piece of advice that I'd love to share is reach out and reach out early. I think you never know where a connection, a conversation, may lead you. Don't overthink reaching out to student groups, and people who are exploring religiosity and spirituality, because you don't necessarily have to commit to an administrative role or for hosting a panel or even attending a panel. You just really don't know where a conversation will lead you, and having the opportunity to connect with someone, even for a moment.

Just touching on what Carlene said about bringing your whole self, I think too many times where we're splicing up ourselves, and not necessarily bringing our full self, or wearing our hearts on our sleeve, or making values-based conversations or decisions, and I think it's time that we do that. I think it's important that we do that.

So as Mary mentioned, maybe it's not really popular, but we should have this human-first approach and we should have these conversations about faith more broadly and to question is important. To do it respectfully is even more important, and to just take the plunge and you never know where a conversation with somebody may lead you. I think that's really important to highlight.

MARGARET: It absolutely is, and I hope that everybody listening really does... that that does sort of really stick with them, and that they do take a moment to do so within their own lives. Beautifully said. Yeah, I think that everything you've all, all four of you, have contributed to this conversation has really shown how this conversation can be taken past the boundaries of the McGill institution, past your identity as a student, as an administrator, as however you identify within the McGill bubble, so to speak.

So yeah, thank you so much again for taking the time out of your days and your schedules to meet with us and tell us about your groups. I'll just re-mention that all of the groups will be in the description of this episode. And yeah, Khadija, Mary, Nancy, Carlene, thank you again so much. It's lovely, lovely, lovely chatting with all of you.