

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Alumni Q&A

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BY MELÍN A. SOTIRIOU DROZ, MTS '23



Born and raised in Philadelphia, Professor Aaron J. Hahn Tapper grew up in multiple communities, something that helped him understand his own intersecting identities from a young age. Living in both South Philly and suburban Lower Merion, his diverse upbringing set the stage for the work that would define his career: how differences can both fuel conflict and foster connection.

One distinction had to do with the religious identities of his family. "My mom converted before she married my dad, so I grew up with two grandparents who were Jewish and two who were nominally Christian," Hahn Tapper shares. "I attended Jewish day school through 12th grade, but it wasn't until my time at HDS that I really explored the historical nature of Judaism, in large part by looking at how other religions developed."

From his travels in the Middle East to his latest ethnographic work on Australia's Indigenous peoples, Hahn Tapper's research and teaching focus on marginalized communities, identity formation, and social in/justice. We sat down with Hahn Tapper to discuss comparative conflict analysis, social justice education, and how facilitating intentional conversations can expand a limited worldview to embrace our shared humanity.

HDS: With an undergraduate degree in psychology, a master's degree focused on world religions, and a PhD in religious studies, how did your time at HDS help guide your curiosity and career?

HAHN TAPPER: Out of college, I spent a year in Jerusalem at a Jewish seminary, a year working in DC, and a year backpacking Southeast Asia and the Middle East. In Israel/Palestine, sectarian violence seemed to be getting worse. The intensity of the conflict, and a drive to help mitigate and transform things for the better, led me to graduate school. At HDS, along with four semesters of Arabic, I took classes in Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. My newfound love of Arabic led me to spend a summer studying the language in Morocco, an opportunity that opened my eyes to Jewish Arab communities, largely unknown to me as a young man with an Eastern European Ashkenazi Jewish background whose schooling had decentered such groups. My HDS studies taught me that all religious traditions and communities are varied and multilayered, most extraordinarily so.

HDS: Your PhD dissertation focuses on the relationship between power and the sociopolitical context of Israel/Palestine. Can you tell us about your research and how it informs your current work, particularly with the Center for Transformative Education?

HAHN TAPPER: My dissertation focused on how leaders from different religious traditions—rabbis, sheikhs, and imams—interpret law in relation to non/violence: Who is a combatant? Who is a civilian? What does self-defense mean? I traveled all over Israel and Palestine, including Gaza, interviewing religious figures, many of whom had nonmainstream ideas. In a roundabout way, this led to my book *Judaisms* (2016), which incorporates historically marginalized Jewish voices in an attempt to re-present the heterogeneous nature of Judaism

and Jews. (Note that the title of the book—*Judaisms*—was inspired by an HDS professor who, during his Introduction to Hinduism course, explained that it should really be called "Hinduisms," noting the religion's multiplicity.)

While studying for my PhD, I also founded a nonprofit, Abraham's Vision (2003–13), a conflict transformation organization working within and between the Muslim, Jewish, Palestinian, and Israeli communities. This work gradually grew into another NGO, the Center for Transformative Education, whose mission is to educate participants about how to transform societies into their potential.

These pedagogical approaches continue to be central to my teaching at the University of San Francisco, where I direct the school's Jewish Studies and Social Justice Program. For example, each fall I teach a course called "Social Justice, Activism, and Jews," where I bring in speakers from the Jewish community who are activists working on issues related to specific social identities (e.g., race, gender). Aside from empowering students to embrace USF's motto, "Change the World from Here," the intention of this course is not to find a universally agreed-upon solution to a specific problem, but rather



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to illustrate the vastness of possibilities when we expand our collective understanding of the world.

HDS: Can you tell us more about the intersection between identity formation, social justice, and marginalized groups and how understanding these dynamics inspired your recent work with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia?

HAHN TAPPER: Over the last decade, I've expanded my research to include Indigenous communities in Australia and the United States, peoples who have survived against all odds. In 2008, during an intergroup conference in Kalamazoo, Michigan, I saw a short film on the apology that former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered to Indigenous Australians on his first day in office. This sparked the idea that I might be able to apply my expertise in comparative conflict to what was happening in Australia. Thanks to a Fulbright grant, I was able to relocate with my family to Melbourne for six months, during which time I traveled throughout the country, interviewing activists, scholars, and politicians to better understand what they thought about the prime minister's apology. Along the way, I couldn't help but think about Indigenous people in the United States. The book I'm working on now connects the dots between these distinct—yet horrifically similar—genocidal histories, and points toward what reparations can and should look like for these groups.

HDS: From your perspective, how can we hold conversations about conflict and peacebuilding centered on our shared humanity?

HAHN TAPPER: It may seem counterintuitive, but emphasizing the complexities of situations can help students deepen their understanding of their own conflicts. For example, one of the flagship programs of Abraham's Vision took Palestinian and Jewish university students to the Balkans for a summer. Because the Balkan conflicts are more stratified than many other regions, our students had a challenging time in not being able to simply "take a side," which is but one example of how the human condition can rarely be understood through a binary lens. Once people begin to grasp life's complexities, even if they are not directly affected by them, they can start comparing such intricacies to something more personal, which often helps expand their perspective. But this work isn't just about embracing diversity, which goes without saying. It's about confronting inequity, oppression, and disadvantage—challenging power. It's about exploring the role each one of us plays in shaping injustice, how to take responsibility for it, and how to take action.

A Week in the Life

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
Work on manuscript for current book (Drive kids to/from school)	Lead meetings focused on current and new projects of USF's Swig Program in Jewish Studies and Social Justice *	Teach "Social Justice, Activism, and Jews" course Meet with students	Work on fundraising to endow Jewish and Queer studies roles at USF	Edit colleague's book manuscript Work on new academic article	Spend dedicated time with life partner and kids Play pick-up basketball Rest/Read/Watch Netflix	Meet and break bread with close friends (Drive kids to/from various activities)

* Prof. Hahn Tapper is developing a graduate certificate program at USF in Education, Jewish Studies, and Social Justice.