

## Marshall Scholarships Sample E

### Personal Statement

Perhaps because I feed people for a living, I see the dinner table as the ultimate equalizer. When we sit down to share a meal, we do not leave our identities and opinions behind as we might do at work, at church, or on the playing field. Rather, we engage in a fundamentally human activity that puts these identities and opinions on the same level: a level where they can be parsed, translated, and more fully understood.

One meal stands out in my mind as the embodiment of this principle. On Easter Sunday, 200\_\_, I was studying in the town of Ceret, in French Catalonia. Come dinnertime, I sat down as the lone American among twelve strangers of eight nationalities - and we realized to our chagrin that there was no one language we could all understand. Undaunted, we set into a multilingual discussion lasting late into the night. As an Anabaptist, I discussed the ritual of Lent with Spanish Catholics and Algerian Muslims. As a native of small-town \_\_\_\_\_, I analyzed the rural Catalan economy with French and Swedish businessmen. By the end of the conversation, I realized that changing words from French to Spanish to German was the least profound translation that had happened at that table. We had also translated our values and outlooks so that they could be understood by people coming from seemingly incompatible perspectives. In so doing, we gained a better grasp not only of our own languages, but of our own viewpoints and assumptions.

This sort of interaction fosters a translational understanding that I find essential to life in a postmodern world. With this mentality, individuals neither subsume their personal identities to that of the group nor assert their individuality at the expense of common understanding. Rather, they fluidly translate their own beliefs into others' conceptual vocabularies -thus reaching mutual comprehension without compromising their identities and beliefs. I began to learn this method of dialogue when I first left America at thirteen. Later, working with youths who were strangers to my country, I drew from my own bi-cultural childhood to teach these students how to translate from one world to another. In their struggles, I saw my own adolescent self, engaging in linguistic and cultural translation not for philosophical reasons but as a basic survival tactic in a foreign land.

Success for these youths involves translating not only across linguistic and educational borders, but across religious borders as well. As my student \_\_\_\_\_ progresses through high school, she is realizing that the Catholicism so intrinsic to her Mexican heritage often comes into conflict with the mainstream of American culture she desperately wants to blend into. Meanwhile, \_\_\_\_\_, whom I met while researching laicite in France, tries to reconcile her Muslim beliefs with the secular French society that is her home. \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ do not have to give up their faiths to thrive in their countries - but they do have to live in translation between two worlds.

These young women brought to light for me the ways in which religion shapes the boundaries that I have been trying to bridge: not only the borders between cultural groups but schisms within American culture as well. Political and

social differences between Americans are increasingly being phrased in religious terms, and the influence of religious principles on our social policymaking is a point of vitriolic debate. As \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ struggle to find the role of religion on a personal scale, we as a country contend over the place of religion on a national scale.

This contention over the relation between religion and politics is built into the fabric of American democracy. Our country's founders engaged in a philosophical experiment when they wrote the separation of Church and State into our constitution - and they were beginning, not ending, this debate. Today we are far from the Enlightenment era of the first Americans. Our country now contains a vast diversity of religious beliefs and practices. The once-firm boundary between private and public has been challenged, and so we question the validity - even the possibility - of separating religious and secular identities. We ask: can religion contribute constructively to our national political dialogue, or does the unconditional nature of faith make such dialogue impossible?

I believe that the unconditional nature of faith makes such dialogue necessary.

The answer to the conflicts that divide us along religious lines is neither to water down our convictions nor to try to produce unanimity among us. What these confrontations need are translators: individuals who understand the workings of religion and political life, and who bring all sides to the equalizing table. In my classroom, I currently engage in this translation on a micro level. Through advanced study of religion and politics, I will acquire the theoretical tools needed to facilitate religious and cultural translation on a macro level: as a professor, writer, and social activist. In the future, I might work with Islamic intellectuals to translate the beliefs and practices of Islam into concepts most Westerners can relate to. In the same spirit, I might help American evangelical Protestants translate their faith into terms and images that would make sense to secular humanists. Endeavors like these do not compromise the beliefs of their participants in the name of finding a middle ground. Rather, they acknowledge both the gulf of difference and the possibility of crossing it.

As I pursue this role of translator, I keep my students and the import of translation in their lives at the forefront of my mind. As immigrants, their livelihoods depend upon the bridging of linguistic, political, and religious borders. Indeed, we all live in a world that depends upon bridging these borders. In a globalized economy and postmodern culture, knowing how to translate our views into someone else's conceptual vocabulary is a survival tactic for everyone. My goal, both in my studies and in my public service, is to facilitate this translation and thus, this survival.