Why do some religious traditions insist that certain aspects of their beliefs and practices remain secret and closed to outsiders? Is secrecy a potentially dangerous force within religious traditions, either as a means of concealing immoral activities (such as pedophilia or other sexual crimes) or as a means of conducting subversive and violent activities (such as terrorism)? Conversely, how far should government agencies be allowed to go in order to monitor or infiltrate religious groups that may pose a threat to other individuals or to national security? And to what degree do such groups retain the rights to privacy and freedom from government surveillance?

This conference, conceived and organized by Hugh B. Urban, Associate Professor of Comparative Studies, explored these questions. Drawing from a variety of disciplines, including religious studies, sociology, history, and women’s studies, participants presented research that promotes better understanding of the connections between secrecy and religion and its relationship to issues of security.

These questions have become all the more critical in the wake of recent events within the United States itself. The spread of terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda have generated a whole new wave of fears --not only the fear of infiltration by secretive and destructive religious movements, but also the fear that this will in turn lead to the loss of privacy and freedom for many alternative religious groups who now face more intense government scrutiny within an increasingly "surveilled" society.