



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Lillian Daniel: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lillian Daniel.

Daniel Pawlus] And I’m Daniel Pawlus. Our guest today is Dr. Diana Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University. She’s going to talk with us about the new religious landscape of America: how we have become a multi-religious nation.

Lillian Daniel: We also welcome back Michael Siegel, Senior Rabbi of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago. He’ll reflect on the importance of having faith in each other, in spite of our differences.

Daniel Pawlus: And to begin, we introduce you to Tom Levinson. Tom was raised in a secular Jewish family in New York City, and when a class on world religions piqued his interest, enrolled at Harvard Divinity School. Following graduation, he longed to know how faith is practiced in people’s ordinary, everyday lives. So he set out on a road trip in search of religious America and made some fascinating discoveries. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Tom Levinson: I was very much a doubting Thomas. I didn’t think there was much place for religion. We would do Passover Seders as an extended family, but we also celebrated Christmas. What turned me on to being interested in religion was a class I took in school. Religion that had seemed pretty staid and sterile and dusty all of a sudden attained a real life and I got a sense of why people were so energized by it. At divinity school I found that I was learning about religion from textbooks, from great scholars, but that I still was left with a deep hunger for religion as it’s lived from peoples own experiences.

I decided to take a road trip to go talk to people around the country about it. I described the trip as a pilgrimage because I was on a quest. Part of the itinerary was just seeing where the road led me. In fact, one of the amazing parts of that process was just how many serendipitous moments I had just by following one path instead of another. One of my first stops on the trip was in Dayton, Ohio. I decided I was just going to get off the interstate and take an exit and just see where that led me. I saw a halal market, which is a market that was run and basically patronized by Muslims. And the man who ran it was a young, twenty-five year old Iraqi refugee named Haydar Al Musawi. I spent a couple of hours with him there that afternoon. I learned a lot of things at the halal market. One is the extent to which all these Muslims from around the world, whether they were from Egypt or Indonesia, Pakistan or Iraq, were developing a life here in America and they were not sacrificing or forfeiting any of their Muslim heritage or traditions.

Another serendipitous moment was in San Francisco. I stopped into a Pentecostal church. The pastor’s name was Johnny Lay. Johnny and I started talking and he introduced me to his wife. Johnny was a

black Pentecostal preacher and his wife, Ellen, was a white agnostic. They had been living together for thirty-five years, married, and obviously gone through a lot of conversations about this process. But they had managed to create a relationship that transcended the religious divides they had.

One of the things I realized most during my travels was just how much people are experimenting with new religious practices and borrowing something from here and incorporating into their own practice. So what you have is a lot of hybrids that are either new religious traditions springing up or people are just inventing their own. I had the thought that this would make an interesting book. So the book, which is called "All That's Holy: A Young Guy, an Old Car and the Search for God in America," is really a religious coming of age story told through a lot of the voices of the people I met. I think I knew it was time to wrap it up and that the pilgrimage, or at least this phase of the pilgrimage, was over because I realized that for me, at least, Judaism was my home. I decided that instead of flitting around the margins of a lot of different religious communities, I would become an active and stable member of one.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: Harvard Divinity School professor, Harvey Cox, says of Tom Levinson's book that it is "the best introduction to what is really going on in the multicolored religious lives of our dappled population." For more information, you can visit our web site at 30goodminutes.org. But now, let me tell you about today's speaker.

Dr. Diana Eck is Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University. Since 1991, she has led the Pluralism Project, a network of researchers exploring the religious dimensions of America's new immigration. Professor Eck has worked closely with churches on inter-religious, including her own United Methodist Church. She is now chair of the Commission on Interfaith Relations of the National Council of Churches. And in 1996, she was honored by President Clinton and the National Endowment for the Humanities, with a National Humanities Medal. It's a great honor to welcome Dr. Diana Eck to "30 Good Minutes." Welcome, Diana.

MESSAGE

Diana Eck: It's great to be here. Thank you very much, Lillian.

Of all the biblical words I carry closest to my own heart, the most important is the succinct teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. "What is the greatest commandment?" he's asked. Jesus answers without hesitation, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

I'm a lifelong Methodist and I've spent most of my life studying and teaching about the religious traditions of India, the faith of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. As we well know, with the new immigration, these are not only the faith traditions of people half way around the world in India, but of our neighbors here in Chicago, or in Boston where I live.

So, as a Christian, I often ask myself how I put it all together. How do I, how do we, think about the one we call God and the many ways of faith that we call "the religions?" This is not just a question of the theological ivory tower, but it's a question that takes us right into our cities and neighborhoods, right into the workplace where we encounter neighbors of other faiths. In my hometown in Bozeman, Montana, I didn't grow up with Muslims as neighbors, but I certainly have Muslim neighbors now: Ali, Leila, and Shabab, my Muslim colleagues at Harvard; Zeba and Ayat, my students this semester; Salma, Lizzie, and Imam Basyouni at the Islamic Society down the street.

Islam is increasingly part of the religious landscape of the U.S., as Muslims have come to America from South

Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. They have come with dreams of prosperity and security, and with their religious faith. Many were surprised to find we have our own home grown African American Islam.

Over the last forty years, we've seen the growth of diverse Muslim communities here. At first the Islamic Center might have been a bowling alley in Hartford, Connecticut; a former U-Haul dealership in Pawtucket, Rhode Island; or a former movie theatre in downtown Chicago. But our Muslim neighbors eventually made their way through zoning boards and city councils, responding to sometimes skeptical and hostile neighbors, to build beautiful Islamic centers.

During the past five years, I have watched a large, new, New England redbrick mosque rise at one of the busiest intersections in Boston. As soon as the shell was up, my friend Salma, wearing a hard-hat over her hijab showed me around inside. When the minaret was capped with a copper finial, I was there with a thousand Muslims, cheering as the crane lifted up the copper cap to the top of the minaret. When the prayer hall first opened for evening prayers during Ramadan, I went with my students to be present.

In America, we understand all too little about Islam, and much of what we think we understand is shaped by acts and images of violence. No wonder some people are still fearful of what they do not know. A Gallup survey recently found that 87% of Americans think Muslims are very committed to their religious beliefs, but 56% confess to knowing little or nothing about Islamic beliefs and 39% admit to having negative prejudice toward Islam.

Throughout the 1990s, Muslims, Christians, and Jews began to make connections, across town or across the street. Our work to build relationships was made all the more difficult and all the more important after September 11, 2001. By mid-afternoon of that terrible day, I had already received email statements from all of the major American Islamic organizations denouncing the attack, both as Muslims and as Americans. But those voices were not really heard, then, or in the years since then. Too often only extremist images and extremist voices make the front page. So how do we really hear what Muslim religious leaders have to say?

So it was a profoundly important moment when, not long ago, 138 Muslim leaders from across the whole spectrum of Islam—Sunni and Shi'a, Salafi and Sufi, from Nigeria to Uzbekistan, Indonesia to Canada—wrote a letter to the Christian world. Called, "A Common Word Between Us and You," this letter was addressed to leaders of Christian churches all over the world and in turn to all of us who are Christians. It was an unprecedented move, boldly reaching out to Christians in a world in which mutual negative stereotypes of one another are common, and reaching out together in a world in which Muslim ecumenism is quite new.

The Muslim letter began, "Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world...The basis for this peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbour. These principles are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity."

The letter recognizes how important the love of God and neighbor is for Christians. And it emphasizes the importance of this in the Qur'an as well. And I quote, "God says in the Holy Qur'an: 'So invoke the Name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him with a complete devotion.' Of the necessity of love for the neighbour, the Prophet Muhammad said: 'None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself.'"

"Thus," they write, "in obedience to the Holy Qur'an, we as Muslims invite Christians to come together with us on the basis of what is common to us, which is also what is most essential to our faith and practice: the two commandments of love."

Now these are not footnotes or sidebars in our respective faiths. These are really at the heart of who we truly are.

Without minimizing very real differences between Islam and Christianity, there is much common ground and finding this common ground, they say, is “not simply a matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between Christians and Muslims,” but this is a matter of our very survival, our common future is at stake.

The letter closes with a sense of urgency, acknowledging that “those who nevertheless relish conflict and destruction for their own sake or reckon that ultimately they stand to gain through them, those people exist. To them we say, ‘Our eternal souls are all also at stake if we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony.’”

Now, when we receive a letter of such deep significance, we have to respond. There have been many individual and denominational responses to "A Common Word." You can see them online on www.acommonword.org. And there have been church-wide responses but these take longer. Now there is an ecumenical response from the National Council of Churches of Christ, representing a wide spectrum of Protestant and Orthodox churches in the U.S. I was involved in that process through four drafts and, believe me, it was thoughtful and prayerful work. There can be no doubt of the importance of this kind of collective responses from the churches, for Muslims around the world have felt that in America respect for Islam has been assaulted by a growing American Islamophobia. Our letter also underlines how important it is that we move beyond polite conversation to deep relationship as neighbors in a world plagued by violence and poverty. Indeed, our very souls are at stake.

Of course we differ in the ways in which we speak of the One God. We as Christians include in our understanding of God the call of Christ to engagement and reconciliation, and the power of the Holy Spirit to teach us new things about God and about ourselves.

So together Christians and Muslims, we say, must ask the questions that lead us deeper: How do we understand God's oneness as communities of faith that call upon God's name? What does it mean to respond to God's love in the world of suffering, strife, and division we see? Who is our neighbor in a world in which Christians, Muslims, people of other faiths, and secular people as well, live together in the same societies? In a world of deep and fracturing differences, of majorities and minorities, and of urgent human needs, how do we respond to our obligation to love our neighbors?

In our letter, we conclude, "Therefore, our churches, commit themselves to actively seek, together with you, ways to take up the challenge you have presented to us in ‘A Common Word.’”

As part of that active seeking, a working group of the Islamic Society of North America and the National Council of Churches has set a common agenda: to encourage local churches and mosques to engage with each other in new and positive ways; to educate each other about ourselves; to foster the healing of painful memories that our two communities have of one another; and to establish a mechanism for response in times of violence or emergency.

In a world in which religious truth claims often divide us, these letters stake out common ground where our truth claims unite us at the very core of our faith. Building on this common ground, rather than focusing on the theologies and politics that divide us, provides a way ahead for both Muslims and Christians in a deeply fractured world. Alas, these letters back and forth may not make the *Chicago Tribune* or the *Boston Globe*, but they are the kind of news that will begin to reshape relationships between the two largest and most widespread religious traditions on earth. May it be so.

CONVERSATION

Daniel Pawlus: If you'd like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Diana Eck, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime. Now, let's talk with Diana Eck. Diana, thank you

for joining us today.

Diana Eck: It's great to be here. Thank you for having me!

Daniel Pawlus: It's a delight to have you and to talk about this fascinating subject of pluralism. I thought we might try to start in a macro kind of way. You've been studying this for a long time. What has the effect of globalization had on this dialogue over the years? Because we've certainly expanded our world as we know it.

Diana Eck: We sure have. One of the things that globalization has meant is the migration of peoples from one part of the globe to another and we've felt that in the United States. That's why we do have so many new people in the U.S., relatively new people who have come here in the last forty years with the change of our immigration laws and also with the tragedies and yearnings of people in other parts of the world. So we do have our own religious diversity: Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and Sikhs and Jains, all of them right here. That's certainly one thing that's happened. The other is that globalization has meant the rapid communications revolution. That means that we know so much more about people in other parts of the world and also they more about us. We can transmit our understandings as well as our prejudices over a heartbeat. That has made a real...that's both a gift and that's a problem.

Lillian Daniel: Speaking of that, I was struck by your comment that on September 11 there were these emails sent out by various Muslims condemning the events of the day and yet that didn't get covered. I had the same experience of reading those emails and then looking on the news for that. There were so many people who were saying, "Where is the voice of the Muslims who are outraged by this?" Well, they were there but not picked up. What do we do about that?

Diana Eck: Well, it's a difficult thing. I mean, the media, as you know, is "if it bleeds, it leads!" There was a lot of violence and lot of pain and suffering that people were experiencing and there was just so much to hear, not just then but in the months and really the years since then. We don't ordinarily send people out to find out how folks are cooperating with one another and searching for understanding; although, local news media do this. One of the things we've done at the Pluralism Project is try to create a news source called "Religious Diversity News" where we kind of go around and read local newspapers all over the country and look for not only the ways in which there might be fire bomb at a local mosque or something, but the ways in which people have really developed new relationships with each other. And that is happening all over the country. It's just that we don't know enough about it.

Daniel Pawlus: You mentioned American's lack of understanding with Islam and the Muslim faith. Do you think that this is a generational thing you're seeing? Are your students having a different understanding, a different openness to this than perhaps their parents or grandparents?

Diana Eck: Absolutely! You're so right. I mean it is true that some of it's generational because students come to my university these days and they're likely to have a Muslim roommate, or a Hindu have a Jewish roommate, or something like that. There are so many people who have now hit college age and are really in a very clear multi-religious context. So whether they go to the trouble of really studying much of about Islam, that's another question. Although I must say that our classes in Arabic and in Islamic studies are booming and bigger than ever. But they do know people, face to face, and so they're not likely to carry the prejudices of another era into the future.

Daniel Pawlus: So you're seeing that as a good sign in your students?

Diana Eck: I see it as a very good sign. And if we're looking at where the places of interfaith activity are happening in the U.S., they are happening on our college campuses. In the last ten years this has been a growing phenomenon in college campuses.

Lillian Daniel: Don't you think so much of the key to this, though, is having real relationships with folks? I've had the experience of taking courses on Islam but getting to visit the mosque and meet colleagues there and building relationships and friendships, that's what changes life for me in my little village.

Diana Eck: It really does. And one of the things that I really insist on with my own students is that we don't treat Islam as if it's happening in the Middle East or around the globe or somewhere else. It's part of our own community and we do go to the mosque. We do go to the Hindu temple. We do the kind of things that the young man at the beginning of the program was yearning to do, to hit the road and find living faith really. And it's so important to do that.

Lillian Daniel: What are the big surprises you've encountered?

Diana Eck: Well, one of the things that one is surprised by again and again is just the enormous hospitality of religious communities. My work and my researchers' work in the Pluralism Project has been a little bit like calling up people you've never met and inviting yourself to dinner: I'd like to come to the gurdwara during this festival or something like this. Of course, you go and they are so welcoming and warm. And they do have dinner, also! Or to ask if you can come and be part of the community. I mentioned the evening prayers during Ramadan. This was such a special time for the Muslim community in Boston. It was the only time at the outset that the mosque was open so to be received there and able to participate, in a sense, in those prayerful, powerful evenings in Ramadan was really a gift.

Daniel Pawlus: We could talk so much longer about this wonderful topic. Thank you for joining us today, Diana. We appreciate it.

Diana Eck: A great privilege to be here! Thank you very, very much.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Daniel Pawlus: And now, we turn to Michael Siegel, Senior Rabbi of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago, with this reflection on a broader definition of "faith."

REFLECTION

Michael Siegel: So often, when we speak of faith, our thoughts turn to God. But sometimes the most powerful type of faith is the kind that we learn to have in each other. When the Nazis came to round up the Jews of Denmark, many were saved because a group of Danish fishermen were willing to risk their lives to ferry them to safety. It has been estimated that 7500 men women and children were saved by these brave souls. A generation of children learned that they need not lose faith in humanity. In Yad Vashem, the Museum dedicated to the Holocaust in Jerusalem, a Danish fishing boat is on display. It is a powerful statement to all who pass by that even at the darkest time in human history there were people worthy of our faith.

CLOSING

Daniel Pawlus: Thank you, Michael, and our thanks again to Diana Eck, Tom Levinson and you for being with us today on "30 Good Minutes." I'm Daniel Pawlus.

Lillian Daniel: And I'm Lillian Daniel. As we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today's program and an extensive collection of other messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at "30 Good Minutes," may peace be with you in the week ahead.