



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

Program #5320

One God – Part 2

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I met Brother Wayne in the spring of 1997, when I was living and working in Chicago after university. Besides being a Catholic monk, Brother Wayne had a PhD in philosophy and had spent years at an ashram in India.

Brother Wayne fascinated me. He was a cross between Don Quixote, Zorba the Greek, Saint Francis of Assisi and the mad scientist from "Back to the Future." He was interested in me because he wanted more action from the interfaith movement. He told me, "I think you can play a leadership role in the global interfaith youth movement."

My friend Kevin and I started tagging along with Brother Wayne to various interfaith events. After finishing his talk, he would invite Kevin and me to the stage, introducing us as the leaders of the next generation, a Muslim and a Jew building a global interfaith youth movement. Then he would whisper to us, "Tell them about the movement!"

Kevin and I were both a little uncomfortable with this. First of all, at that time we were both trying to be Buddhists and there was no interfaith youth movement that, at least, we knew about. But not long after, at a conference at Stanford University, the right number of interesting young people from around the world gathered. After many discussions long into the night, Kevin and I began to get an idea of what an interfaith youth movement could actually look like.

Brother Wayne, always one step ahead of us, had his own idea of who might be interested in this concept. He sent us to India to see the Dalai Lama. Kevin and I traveled together to Bombay, staying with my grandmother, and from there departed for Dharamsala. We met with His Holiness in a visiting room in his small palace.

I looked on as the Dalai Lama and Kevin discussed the similar idea of emptiness in Buddhism and Judaism. I listened as the Dalai Lama told Kevin, "Judaism is a very good religion. I have

many Jewish friends. We have interfaith dialogue and I learn a lot from them. Judaism and Buddhism are very similar. You should learn more about both and become a better Jew.”

Then the Dalai Lama turned to me. I was pretty sure after listening to his discussion with Kevin that he was not about to be impressed with my story of trying to be a Buddhist. But when he opened his mouth it wasn't to ask a question, it was to make a statement. “You are a Muslim,” the Dalai Lama said.

I replied, “Yes.”

He said, “Islam is a very beautiful religion. Buddhists and Muslims have lived in peace in Tibet for many generations. You should visit them.”

We then spent a few minutes talking about our idea for the interfaith youth movement, and how we could bring young people from different religions together to serve others. The Dalai Lama perked up and he said, “This is very important. Religions must dialogue, but even more important, they must come together to serve others. Service is most important. This is a very good project.” And with the Dalai Lama's blessing, and much to think about, we headed back to Bombay.

Not long after, I woke up in my grandmother's apartment and there was a woman who I had never seen before. She didn't look like she was part of the family. She didn't look like she was part of the household help. I said to my grandmother “Who is she? She looks a little scared.”

My grandmother said, “I don't know her real name. We will call her Anisa. The leader of the local Muslim prayer house brought her here because she was being abused at home. So we will take care of her.”

I said to my grandmother, “Don't you think this is a little bit dangerous? What if the people who were abusing her come looking for her here?”

And my grandmother gave me that arched eyebrows look—one that perhaps you are familiar with—and she said to me, “How old are you?”

“I'm 22,” I said.

She said, “I've been doing this for more than twice the amount of time you've been alive.”

She got up off the couch and she padded over to the cupboard. She brought out a shoebox. Inside that shoebox were Polaroid pictures of all these women that my grandmother had taken into her home, whose lives that she had literally saved. Women from Aminabad and Calcutta. Women from the Punjab and Hyderabad. Women who had heard that in Bombay there was a woman named Ashraf Manji, who if you needed help would be there for you. If your husband died and the sole breadwinner in your family was now gone, if your father took a bad turn and started abusing you, you come in a monsoon, you can come with your hand out needy. There is a woman who will help you.

My grandmother kept the stories of these women, written on the back of those Polaroids in little chicken scratch writing. Dozens and dozens of women my grandmother had taken into her home: Sikhs and Jains, Hindus and Christians and Muslims.

After she finished, I wanted to hear one more story: my grandmother's story. "Why would you do this?" I asked her. She replied with one simple line: "Because I'm a Muslim, and this is what Muslims do."

Nothing could have shocked me more than those words. Nothing could have made me question my existence, my purpose more, than the use of the term Muslim in that sentence.

Muslim: "One who submits to the will of God." And I was going to call myself a Muslim? What was I doing that was anywhere near the heroism that my grandmother had shown, that was worthy of the title Muslim?

There's a great line in the work of the poet T. S. Elliot: "We do not inherit traditions; we work to make ourselves worthy of them." My grandmother was striving with every breath in her 75-year-old body to make herself worthy of the term Muslim, worthy of the tradition that is Islam. What was I doing to make myself worthy?

Watching my grandmother not only convinced me that I was a Muslim, but forced me to ask the question, "What am I called to do *as* a Muslim?" Her call was to work with abused women in this way. My experiences with Brother Wayne, Kevin and the Dalai Lama had taught me something; they had culminated in one important, life changing realization. My call as a Muslim was to live out the vision of interfaith cooperation. That is why I started the Interfaith Youth Core, or the IFYC.

Ten years ago, IFYC was a big idea; today, we have a thirty person staff and a four million dollar plus budget. We have trained thousands of young interfaith leaders spanning six continents on how to bridge the divide between faith communities and come together to work for the common good. We have worked with Presidents Clinton and Obama, Queen Rania of Jordan and Prime Minister Tony Blair.

At Interfaith Youth Core, we believe that interfaith cooperation can become a social norm, like environmentalism became a social norm, like civil rights became a social norm. We believe that interfaith leaders, like environmental leaders, like civil rights leaders, are the key to making this happen.

Interfaith leaders do three main things: they change the conversation about religion in public life, transforming the narrative from negative to positive; they bring together faith communities to launch projects that address local and global issues; and they transform environments, most often working on their college and university campuses to transform them into models of interfaith cooperation.

I can only hope that through building this kind of interfaith cooperation with my Jewish, Christian, Hindu, secular and Buddhist colleagues, I make myself worthy of the tradition of Islam.

Conversation with Eboo Patel

Christine Chakoian: One of the most striking pieces of your story, which was so moving, was the sense that syncretism, that kind of blending or least common denominator way for us to look at religion may not be, in fact, the most healing or whole way for us to approach it, that somehow claiming your own faith was the way forward.

Eboo Patel: I think that's exactly right. If I look at my life, I've had the blessing of that message through mentors at every stage. That was what Brother Wayne taught me, as a Catholic monk who had taken and was very serious about his vows. He was Catholic. Those were his roots, that was his commitment. He admired and learned from Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, but it was clear he was a Catholic. And of course the Dalai Lama is not confused about who he is and what tradition he belongs to. So these people modeled a way for me. When it finally clicked—and it took me longer than perhaps it takes most people—that it's about being a Muslim who is living a Muslim life in a world of diversity, my goal is to be enriched by the diversity and, in turn, to serve and enrich it.

Sherre Hirsch: How do you feel, Eboo, that since 9/11 there is so much misunderstanding about Islam and so much fear? You heard it in Sayira's story how people threw stones at her and mocked her because there is so much confusion. What do you think is the most effective way for us as religious leaders, and for our audience listening, to change the narrative into a positive narrative? What can we tell people post 9/11?

Patel: Thank you for that question, Rabbi Hirsch. Well, I'll tell you, I really wish that people's first encounter with Islam was with my grandmother and not with Osama Bin Laden. So my concern is that for millions of Americans, for hundred of millions of people around the world, the first time they thought seriously about Islam was on September 11, 2001. Their vacuum of knowledge about what a Muslim was or what Islam is was filled by an unbelievably heinous, murderous, hateful act. I think what people can do is to tell stories of people they know, stories that they admire, stories like my grandmother's and say, "This is what a Muslim is." What Osama Bin Laden did is antithetical to the tradition of Islam. He's not a Muslim, he's an extremist! Let me tell you about a Muslim that I know or that I've heard of. I try to do the same thing when it comes to people from other religions. I think we are in a way all responsible for holding up the best in other religious traditions and in other religious communities.

Hirsch: There is a great line about that in Judaism, that we're all responsible for one another and that isn't just Jews, but everyone.

Patel: Right. How else are we going to make it on planet Earth unless we're responsible for another?

Hirsch: Absolutely.

Chakoian: There is also a sense in Christianity right now, at least those of us in the mainline, that we have ceded the conversation to those who are more adamant about their views and so our silence is deafening. So as I think about Islam, what would be a message you would give about what is Islam about, in addition to your grandmother's story?

Patel: That's a great point. Well, one of the things that I say is the most common prayer in Islam is *Bismi-Llahi-r-Rahmani-r-Rahim*. It's what you begin meals with, it's what you begin every prayer with, and it means "In the name of God, the all merciful, the ever merciful." The dominant value in Islam, the central value is mercy. It's expressed in that prayer. It's expressed many times in the Holy Qur'an. In fact, there is one verse in which God says, "We sent the prophet Mohammed to be nothing but a special mercy upon all the worlds."

Chakoian: It reminds me so much of the call of Abraham, who is sent to be a blessing.

Hirsch: Absolutely. Also that God acts with a measure of mercy and a measure of *din*, which is judgment, that we carry this balance but always the tip of mercy is just a little bit stronger.

Patel: That's the exact message in Islam, that there is judgment and there is mercy. God's mercy overcomes his judgment is a Qur'anic line.

Hirsch: So you work with a lot of youth. What I see, a lot of youth are becoming more traditional, turning back to their own faith and feeling more closed in. What do you say to them to open them up and to get them more excited about exploring but without feeling threatened?

Patel: Right. Well, first of all, I think that religion is going to play a major role in the 21st century. There are a variety of ways that religion can go. Religion can be a bubble that isolates us. Religion can be barrier that divides us. Religion can be a bomb that destroys us. Religion can be a bridge to understanding and cooperation. I personally believe that young people can play a really powerful role as bridge builders. They can also play a powerful role as barriers builders or as bomb throwers. Right? I think one of the things that religious leaders can do, adults in religious traditions, is to talk about what I call a "theology of cooperation." This is a theology of justice in our different traditions. There is a theology of service. There is a theology of cooperation. Do the young people in your church or synagogue or mosque know the theology of cooperation? If you were to say to them what in your religion inspires you to cooperate with those who are different, would they be able to cite chapter and verse?

Hirsch: No, because they don't even speak that language. I think that's what you're saying. We have to make that part of our parlance.

Patel: I personally believe, in my own understanding of Islam and in my appreciative study of other traditions, that this is not a hidden value. This is highly salient. This is a central value. In the Holy Qur'an there is a line that God made us different nations and tribes that we may come to know one another. There are many, many stories of the Prophet Mohammed, may the peace

and blessings of God be upon him, of how he engaged respectfully, admiringly in some ways, with people from other religions.

Chakoian: But part of the key to cooperation is having a sense of identity for one's self. I'm struck by so many of our young people in the suburbs of Chicago still who have a cursory understanding of their own faith and who kind of drop off from it at some point. Maybe it's later in college or maybe it's later after that.

Hirsch: Sometimes there is a liminal moment, something that shifts and you think maybe I need to change this, to look deeper into myself.

Chakoian: That's right. One of the questions I have, in your experience, is how that has happened. How do we help, not only young people but older adults as well, reconnect with that identity?

Patel: I am aware that I am talking to a pulpit preacher and somebody who left the pulpit very recently but may return and so I'm speaking with two leaders in religious traditions. One of the things that I recognize in my own tradition, just to tell you my own experience here, is when I rediscovered Islam through Brother Wayne and my friend Kevin, who is Jewish, and the Dalai Lama, I started to read about compassionate justice in Islam. I started to read Rumi. I started to read the mercy chapters in the Koran. Part of my response was: why didn't anyone tell me about this? I belonged to a magnificent faith.

I was just at the Montreat Conference Center with 850 young Presbyterian college students. The thing that I told them was they belong to a magnificent faith. Discover the magnificence in it. And to the idea of faith being exciting and relevant, that's what young people want. The heroes of the 20th century were people of faith: Nelson Mandela, a Methodist and an African traditionalist; Martin Luther King, Jr., a Baptist from the South; Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Dalai Lama, Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Jane Addams. The list goes on and on and on. We need to view young people as the next faith heroes and raise them up as such.

Hirsch: So your grandmother found her calling and did it, and I assume she's still doing it, God willing. Have you found yours?

Patel: I think so. Absolutely. I think for me, building the Interfaith Youth Core is what I was meant to do. I personally feel that the opportunities to make a real difference don't come along every day and I feel like I have been blessed with the opportunity to try to help nurture a movement in which young people are interfaith bridge builders in a world in which a lot of other people are nurturing young people to be bomb throwers and barrier builders.

Hirsch: You've been blessed, but so have we.

Chakoian: That's exactly right. As we've been blessed, one of the things that comes to mind is how it's not just through young people, but at any time in a person's life they can start claiming that reality for themselves. It is never too late. Sometimes that liminal moment is when you're

young and sometimes it's when you're a little older. Whenever it happens it's crucial that we pay attention to that voice.