



## PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

### **Program #5310**

*First broadcast December 6, 2009*

#### WELCOME

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

**Daniel Pawlus:** And I’m Daniel Pawlus. Our guest today, whom you’ll meet in a moment, is Ingrid Mattson, Director of the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Theological Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut. She’ll be talking with us about Christian-Muslim relations in the 21st century.

**Lydia Talbot:** We also welcome back writer Tom McGrath, who has a few words for us about taking time to get to know each other, moving beyond our first impressions.

**Daniel Pawlus:** We begin with a profile of Scott Alexander, an historian of religions and Director of Catholic-Muslim studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. For Scott, studying Islam and forming meaningful friendships with Muslims has deepened his Christian faith and expanded his worldview. Let’s watch.

#### SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

**Scott Alexander:** My faith journey began in the lap of my maternal grandfather, James, who contracted multiple sclerosis in his late 40s and was homebound when I was a toddler and, therefore, also in my own way, homebound. I would scoot up on his lap and he would show me his holy cards of various saints and he taught me how to say the Our Father and the Hail Mary.

From about age 16 or 17, I was struggling with the idea that I may have had a vocation to the priesthood. I was an only child and my father, in particular, was really looking forward to grandchildren. The second, and probably more important reason, was I was developing an increasingly close relationship with a young lady who is now my wife of 26 years. She called me and asked me a simple question, “Look, Scott, I have to know, am I wasting my time?” And it took me less than 30 seconds, I think, to say no.

It happened to be that my early years in college were the early years of the Iranian Revolution. I matriculated as a freshman in September of 1979 and in early November of 1979, the hostages were taken at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. I was fascinated and confused because I was seeing all these very negative images of Muslims and Islam conveyed through the mass media. At the same time, I was taking my first course in Islamic studies, an introduction to Islam. And it was a huge disconnect between what I was learning in my course and what I was hearing in the mass media. It was evident to me that what I was hearing in the mass media were a bunch of

stereotypes that were extremely superficial and that I really needed to learn more about these folks called Muslims and this religion called Islam.

At the end of my college years I had a stack of applications to law school on my desk, but my roommate asked me a very keen question. He said, “Do you want to be a lawyer?” And I almost immediately said, “No, I don’t think so.” He said, “There. You see why I asked you the question.” People ask all the time, “You’re a Catholic? Then why are you interested in Islam?” Many Catholics ask that question. Many Muslims say, “You’ve been studying Islam all this time. You seem to have a fairly good grasp of it and an appreciation of the tradition. Why aren’t you a Muslim?”

God seems to be calling me to be a Catholic who continues on his journey of faith as a Catholic but who understands that journey to be incredibly enriched by his encounter with people with other faiths, and particularly with Muslims. The great mystery is that that encounter and that dialogue doesn’t threaten or erode faith. The great mystery is that it deepens it.

#### SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

**Lydia Talbot:** Our thanks to Scott Alexander for sharing his story.

Now, let me tell you about today’s speaker. Dr. Ingrid Mattson was born in Canada and studied Philosophy at the University of Waterloo. During a university study program in France, she met a group of Muslims from West Africa whose friendship changed her life. Ingrid began studying the Koran and converted to Islam in 1987. She moved to Pakistan to work with Afghan refugees, and met her husband, an Egyptian engineer. Dr. Mattson earned a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies from the University of Chicago, and is now professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Theological Seminary in Connecticut. In 2007 she was elected president of the Islamic Society of North America. We’re honored to welcome Ingrid Mattson to “30 Good Minutes.” Welcome, Ingrid.

#### MESSAGE

**Ingrid Mattson:** Thanks so much, Lydia.

How often do we hear today that religion is the greatest source of conflict and violence in the world? It is understandable that people feel that way, but is it true?

In his study, *Body Count*, Naveed Sheik, a scholar at the University of Louisville, has compiled lists of major political violence across world history. There he finds that the largest number of deaths were lost in conflicts to protect and expand the interests and borders of nation-states, emerging nations, and colonial or imperial powers in Europe in World War I and World War II, in the Japanese occupation of China, in imperial and communist China and Russia to destroy internal political opposition, by the Mongols in their imperial expansion, and even in American colonialism and expansion whereby millions of natives were killed. In all of these cases, except in the destruction of American indigenous communities, religious differences were a minor or irrelevant factor. Even in the case of Native Americans, religious prejudice could hardly be distinguished from racial prejudice.

This does not mean, however, that religious people can rest easily. Our faiths have been and are used to justify violence and intolerance. Among many examples we can give, I am plagued by the knowledge that thousands of innocent people died in this country in the terrorists attacks of September 11 by men who justify their actions in the name of my religion.

In those cases where religious identity is conflated with ethnic, tribal or national identity, conflicts between different groups seem more injuring. We think of the tragic clashes between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, the genocidal campaign of Serbian Christians against Bosnian Muslims, and the injuring conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims and Christians. Yet in these and in other conflicts, peacemakers motivated by religious faith have contributed to reconciliation and alleviated the suffering of many people. The Grand Mufti of Bosnia, himself a victim of the four year siege of Sarajevo and a man who had to conduct hundreds of funeral prayers for innocent Muslims massacred at Srebrenica in the name of Serbian Christianity, led his people towards reconciliation. The orphans of Srebrenica were taught to pray: "O God, teach us that tolerance is the highest degree of power and the desire for revenge, the first sign of weakness. O God, if we sin against people, give us the strength of apology. And if the people sin against us, give us the strength of forgiveness."

Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, the Dali Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, each one is an individual of faith who has drawn upon the discourse of peace, justice and human dignity in their respective traditions to create powerful, positive movements.

As a Muslim I know that the religion of Islam is mostly a positive force for peace among my community. The majority of the world's Muslims live in poverty, the result in many cases of the legacy of European colonialism and subsequent dictatorship. Yet ordinary Muslims across the world draw upon their faith to continue to live ethical lives, to show gratitude towards God in the most dire of circumstances and to show charity and hospitality towards others even if their own means are limited. American who travel to the Middle East and other regions where there are majority Muslim cultures have experienced this hospitality and kindness.

Since September 11, however, the steady news of suicide bombings and terrorist attacks committed by militant Muslims has resulted in another impression, that Islam promotes violence and that Muslims are in some kind of essential conflict with the West or even with Christianity. It is the nature of the news to focus on the most dramatic, bizarre and disturbing events of the day. Yet when most Americans do not know Muslims personally or have little knowledge about Islam, the result of these persistent violent images leaves a distorted impression.

Certainly it has been appropriate for Muslims to take more responsibility for our faith, to ensure that it is not hijacked to harm others. It is not appropriate, however, for ordinary Muslims to have their own faith defined by the extremists. This is why in 2006, when Pope Benedict XVI delivered a speech in Regensburg, Germany in which it seemed that he suggested that an innate violent tendency and anti-rationality was in Islam, Muslims were deeply hurt. Not only was it upsetting to have such a great spiritual leader misunderstand our religion, but many Muslim leaders were concerned that this speech would contribute to further discriminatory and intolerant actions towards Muslims in Europe, with the result that Muslims would feel further alienated from civic life, a feeling that could contribute to mistrust and even hatred.

In what I can only perceive as a divinely inspired act of reconciliation, a group of prominent Muslim scholars gathered to write an open letter to the Pope and to Christians of the world, to break this cycle of provocation, alienation and division. In October 2007, 138 of the most prominent scholars and leaders from across the world, Muslims from Nigeria to Indonesia, issued an open letter entitled, “A Common Word.” And it begins with this statement:

“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 future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians. The basis for this peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very foundational principals of both faiths: love of the one God and love of neighbor. These principals are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. The unity of God and necessity of love for him, the necessity of love of neighbor is thus a common ground between Islam and Christianity.”

The response to the Common Word has been extraordinary. Hundreds of Christian religious leaders, including American denominations, responded positively and sensitively with their own letters. Over time more and more Muslim and Christian leaders joined in, and Jewish leaders were also invited to comment and participate in the discussions. Major conferences exploring the implications of the two commands of love God and neighbor were held across the world. But most importantly perhaps from my perspective has been the response of ordinary believers who seem relieved to have an authoritative document permitting them to continue what they already wanted to do: to contribute to the common good with people of other faiths.

It is religious ideology that forms a barrier to this intuitive and compassionate impulse for cooperation on the part of ordinary believers. It is thus the responsibility of religious leaders to remove such ideological barriers. There are those who are afraid of interfaith work but we have to accept that there is a Divine command that there be multiple religions in the world. The Koran says. “We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, he would have made you one community, but he wanted to test you through that which he had given you. So compete in good works. You will all return to God and he will make clear to you the matters about which you differed.”

There is so much work to be done in the world today as religious people. As professor Timothy Winter of Cambridge University said, “We are called to prove to the world that we are a force for good.” The modern crisis of faith is all too often triggered by a sense that religion yields the bitter fruit of enmity and conflict. Our most urgent task then, as we seek to recover our place as defenders of human dignity and mutual respect, is to show and practice, and not only in words, that we can cooperate together for the common good. When we cooperate together in good works, everyone will benefit.

#### CONVERSATION

**Daniel Pawlus:** If you’d like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Ingrid Mattson, we’ll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org) to watch the video or read the text anytime.

Now, let's talk with Ingrid Mattson. Ingrid, thank you for joining us today. It's a delight to have you here and have an opportunity to deepen our understanding about the religion of Islam. I thought we might start by talking about your personal journey a little bit. We mentioned in the introduction that you chose to convert and I'm wondering what inspired that and what is the essence and the beauty of this Muslim faith for you.

**Ingrid Mattson:** For me it really was this example of faith in the world. The first Muslims I met, poor West African students living in Paris, not very well accepted by the people of that city as part of the common good, they still maintained a sense of dignity, a sense of generosity. They didn't become angry. But they lived their faith through this compassionate sense of generosity which they shared with me, another poor student hanging around the city. So it was that that appealed to me, that attracted me to see what was the spiritual basis of their presence in the world.

**Lydia Talbot:** I'd be interested, Ingrid, to know, it seems that your life changing friendships with those Muslim students in France and also your work in Pakistan to help Afghan refugees where you met your future husband, it seems to me you were doing ministry, you were doing discipleship about the reduction of human suffering. So what were those attitudes and values in Islam? Did you see a merging of your understanding of the Christian faith and Islam in your conversion?

**Ingrid Mattson:** Absolutely. I was raised a Roman Catholic and when I stopped practicing Catholicism it wasn't a rejection of the Catholic church, but at that time my faith had simply left and it was Islam that gave me back faith in God. But one thing that I always appreciated in my Catholic upbringing was the sense that we were called to alleviate suffering in the world, to show our gratitude to God for what we had, the blessings we had, by demonstrating that, by sharing them with others. And when I became a Muslim I found that message so strong in the Koran: caring for the poor, showing gratitude to God, not just through your words by saying thanks but through your deeds by helping the people of the world and making this a better place especially for those who are the most marginalized. You know, it's such a resonance between these two traditions. I think that's one of the reasons why I find work between Christians and Muslims so easy because it's clear to me that this is just a foundational message in both our traditions.

**Daniel Pawlus:** What do you find are some of the greater challenges of the misperceptions that people have right now in Christian-Muslim relations? You talked about it a little bit in your message, but there seems to be a lot of misunderstandings out there that you alluded to.

**Ingrid Mattson:** Certainly many people believe that Muslims are more violent than other people and that even Islam encourages this violence. This is a problem that is related to the way we understand scripture. It's one of the reasons I wrote a book on the Koran called, "The Story of the Koran," to show how the context of the revelations of the Koran needs to be understood so that we can separate those passages that deal with war and conflict and what are the messages for us today. And given the fact that Muslims are now considered to be a quarter of humanity and that most of them are living very peacefully, in many cases as minorities, in countries like India and Russia and China, that most Muslims certainly are not violent people.

**Lydia Talbot:** In trying to break through these stereotypes, distortions of truth, often fueled by secular media, Ingrid, I wonder if you can help us try to see more clearly the fringe elements. I mean, there is internecine warfare not only between religions but among religionists who claim the same faith. So help us understand some of the fringe pieces of Islam in trying to bring clarity to the stereotypical feelings.

**Ingrid Mattson:** And that's a great point, Lydia, because, in fact, if we look at the kind of violence that has occurred in the last, say, seven or eight years, we see that more Muslims have died as a result of terrorism by Muslim extremists than non-Muslims. So this is primarily directed at their own societies. And what are these people opposing? Certainly there are many different messages, some of them more political, economic. But what we see consistently is an authoritarian attitude, a belief that there is one way, one way or the highway. And that really goes against the construction of authority in traditional Islam. We do not have one authority who can decide what is right or wrong in our religion. Islam has a tradition of dialogue, bringing together Muslims from across different places to form a consensus or try to approach consensus on issues. So this authoritarian perspective, which can almost be totalitarian, seems in fact more inspired by those kinds of 20<sup>th</sup> century fascist or totalitarian movements than anything from the Islamic tradition. I think that is something we need to take seriously is the way that ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have really distorted our tradition.

**Daniel Pawlus:** It's a good segue to talk about A Common Word then that you mentioned in your message as well. This is a document that exists that's constantly evolving. Some people would ask, what can a document itself do? But talk about the practical applications of this in the time that we have left here because it's making an impact in the world in a big way, you would say.

**Ingrid Mattson:** Absolutely. And in the end we are a people of scripture and we are a people who have looked to authoritative statements and creeds to show us the bounds or the limits of proper behavior within our traditions, both Christianity and Islam. So it's important when, as I mentioned, bad ideology comes in the door that there is something that can refute that. And what we've noticed is that there is such a sense of relief on the part of ordinary Christians and Muslims that they now have a document like the Common Word and the Christian responses to them to say, yes, you should engage with your neighbor of the other faith in doing good work. You are not required to dislike them or keep them at an arm's distance. You will not water down your faith if you work with them for the common good to alleviate human suffering. So although people may say it's just words, we need those words as authoritative so that then we can go out and do those good works with the response to the extremists or fundamentalists in our religion who say stay away from those other people.

**Daniel Pawlus:** We're so happy you've joined us today and it's been a wonderful conversation. We're going to continue it on the show I know in future programs. Thank you again.

**Ingrid Mattson:** Thank you so much. It's been my pleasure.

## REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

**Daniel Pawlus:** We turn now to Tom McGrath, Vice President for Product Development at Loyola Press. He has some thoughts for us about the danger of relying on first impressions.

## REFLECTION

**Tom McGrath:** First impressions don't tell the whole story. My family and I went to Vancouver one summer. The evening we arrived I decided to go for a quick run. The hotel doorman advised me, "Go down this street about a mile and you'll run into Stanley Park." And so I did.

In a mile I came to an open, grassy area with a sign saying "Stanley Park." There was a nice little pond in the middle with a fountain. Then I circled it twice and then turned back to the hotel. I decided on the way back, "There's not much to that park!"

The next day dawned bright and sunny and we went off to see the sights of Vancouver. When we came to that small patch of greenery with the Stanley Park sign I realized that this was actually the entrance to the park, not the park itself. It turns out that Stanley Park is an amazing place, with six miles of shoreline, gardens, beaches, restaurants and miles of hiking trails through old-growth forests with towering trees over 250 feet tall. Clearly Stanley Park had more to offer than what first met my eye.

And isn't that true of the people we meet, too? Who can tell at first glance all the God-given wonders that another person holds inside? Now, when I meet new people I recall my experience with Stanley Park and wonder, "What surprises will I discover when I get to know more about you?"

## CLOSING

**Daniel Pawlus:** Thank you, Tom. And our thanks again to Ingrid Mattson, Scott Alexander and you for being with us today on "30 Good Minutes." I'm Daniel Pawlus.

**Lydia Talbot:** And I'm Lydia Talbot. Before we go, I encourage you to visit our website at [30GoodMinutes.org](http://30GoodMinutes.org), where you'll find an extensive collection of reflections and stories, on video and in print, to enrich your spiritual life. Now, from all of us on "30 Good Minutes," may peace be with you in the week ahead.