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Myths About Pluralism | Diana Eck & Vinoth Ramachandra

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The Veritas Forum

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Transcript

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How can we maintain our deepest core beliefs while also engaging with the beliefs of others? At a Veritas Forum from Harvard, Diana Eck, a professor at the Harvard Divinity School, and Vinoth Ramachandra, secretary for dialogue and social engagement at the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, discussed the nature of pluralism and the challenges that keep us from genuine dialogue.

[Music] One of the things we want to do with both you and Vinoth is to not just hear you as an academic person, which you are, but hear you as a person. And so we're interested, first of all, as you prepare to speak, if you would say something about yourself, and why this topic has so dominated your life in so many ways.

Well, I'm sort of going to speak about that as a person, Rodney, but it is true that, you know, as a lifelong Methodist, I think I probably prayed in more Hindu temples than any living Methodist, so I have to figure out what that means. That's a good question. Diana, why don't you go ahead and give us your talk.

Thank you. [Applause] Thank you very much. It's great to see this room filled with so

many people tonight.

I'm delighted to be here. I feel very honored to have been asked by the Veritas Forum to speak. Last time I saw Peter Gomes, we could go last Sunday, and Dorothy and I were visiting with him at Mass General, and I said, "Yeah, I was going to speak at the Veritas Forum." He kind of raised an eyebrow and wondered who was in for what at that.

I think he had an image of the Veritas Forum that was formed in its very early years, and wasn't sure about how this particular Christian woman that he knows was going to fit in there. Anyway, he was delighted, and I'm delighted that we began with the word of his memory tonight. The theme of pluralism, that really is a big theme.

I've lived all my adult life as a Christian, a lifelong Methodist, wrestling with these issues of how we think about our deepest human differences. What kind of questions do they raise for our faith? And I do believe this is one of the most important issues for the world in our time. I grew up in a mountain valley in Montana, an absolutely beautiful place, the Gallatin Valley, where religious diversity was not a salient fact of life.

There were Methodist Presbyterians, Catholics, and some evangelical independent churches, and there were native peoples to be sure. In fact, my very first job was on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, working for the State Department of Health in lame deer. There were no Jewish communities that I knew then in Bozeman, but I did get very involved with my church.

I was involved with the Methodist Youth Fellowship, both on the state and on the national level, and we were engaged in some of the big issues of the day. We did work camps, I suppose, what they now call habitat projects in Mexico, on the Blackfoot Reservation. I went with the National Methodist Youth Fellowship and Methodist Student Movement to a conference in Ohio in 1963, and we drove all night from that conference and arrived in the early morning of August day in 1963 to Washington for the march on Washington.

So it was with Christian students that I went to that march and heard those words of Dr. Martin Luther King on that steamy August day, and with my Christian student group that I went to Washington, D.C. on spring break in my freshman year and lobbied for the Civil Rights Bill. Those were heady days and we spoke of race relations, we didn't really talk of interfaith in those days. I have to confess that I had never met anyone who was Jewish until I went to college.

In 1965 as a junior in college, I went even further east from my home in Montana and spent that junior year in India. It was a year abroad program, it was in Asia, and that was the thing that mattered most. We were deeply, deeply involved in the Vietnam War in those days.

Our friends, our classmates were being drafted, were being killed, our involvement of our

lives was part of the ruin of Vietnam and Cambodia. And all of our involvement far outstripped our knowledge of those parts of the world in ways that reminded me very much today of our involvement as Americans in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Pakistan, in parts of the world, in which our cultural and religious knowledge as Americans is so shallow compared to our involvement as a nation. And I felt I needed to know more about the traditions of Asia, that's why I went to India, it wasn't Vietnam, but it was close enough.

And it was there in India that I really found my life's calling. What I would consider God's calling to my life, my vocation. I might have gone into Christian ministry, but my sense of calling was something different.

It was a challenge of studying and trying to understand the religious worlds of Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs that were religious worlds I did not share entirely at all, really, that were strange to me as I lived that first year in the city of Benares on the banks of the Ganges, one of the holiest cities in India. But religious worlds that I was challenged to understand, and my attention was then especially on the Hindus, so many gods, so many understandings of God, singular, multiple, how was I to understand it, how did they understand it, what were their many understandings. But it was also in that sacred city of the Hindus that I first heard the call to prayer, and it was in India that I first went to a synagogue in Kochen in the state of Kerala.

Well, since then, there have been many, many years spent in India. Many Hindu temples, I work on sacred geography and pilgrimage from the Himalayas to the southern seas, and as I said, I probably spent more time in Hindu temples than any other living Methodist. And since then, dialogue has really become a very deeply important and natural part of my life.

Not a dialogue set apart around an artificial table somewhere, but the dialogue that accompanies day to day life lived in a multi-religious environment, which is almost everywhere these days. I continued my work in India to be sure. I also began working in the United States when it became clear that so many people of Indian origin came as immigrants to the United States after the 1965 Immigration Act opened the doors to immigration in the US for the first time ever really to immigrants from Asia.

And I also became involved as a participant in some of the dialogue movements of the World Council of Churches, of the National Council of Churches, of the World Conference on Religion and Peace. And as I took up my work at Harvard, I have colleagues who are Hindu, who are Muslim, like my colleague right next door in the Barker Center, Ali Asani, who are Jewish, who are humanists. I have foster children who are co-sivar Muslims.

Dialogue is not something set apart, but is the way in which we engage with the people who are our neighbors, either neighbors across the street, across the hall, in our dorm rooms, or around the world. And it's not all happy hand-holding, although there is some happiness involved in it, but a difficult dialogue to communicate across some of the

great chasms that separate us as human beings. And there also is that dialogue within, within our own tradition.

Those are some of the most difficult dialogues in a way, because all Christians don't think the same thing about these issues, as you may well know, and the same with Muslims and the same with Jews. My teacher, as a student here at Harvard, and a young professor as well, was Wilford Cantwell Smith, and it was 50 years ago. And in 1961, gave his inaugural convocation address in the Memorial Church for Harvard Divinity School, in which he said, and it's germane to our understanding of pluralism, that any serious intellectual statement of the Christian faith today must include some sort of doctrine of other religious ways.

He challenged the Divinity School faculty, and that was 50 years ago, and I'm still not so sure how they've come up to that challenge. Calling for a new theological thinking that would take seriously the voices and visions of equally rigorous thinkers who are Muslim or Hindu or Jewish. From now on, he said, "The articulation of our faith as Christians must take into account the world of religious vibrancy and intellectual depth that the study of the world's religions reveals." "I don't know how we'll contend with these questions," he said, "but I do know that from now on these are the questions with which we must contend." These are the questions that are at the heart of Veritas, engagement with our own religious tradition, and engagement with the religious ideas and faith of others.

And this is a challenge of people in every tradition. Does the study and engagement with another destabilize our own faith? Does it threaten our own? Does it relativize our own and rich our own, etc.? And of course, in these 50 years, the world has changed so much in the 50 years since Wilford Cantwell Smith's inaugural address here. It changed with two major engines of change.

The first, of course, the massive migration of peoples from one part of the world to another, including the migration of so many peoples to the United States. The religious landscape of the United States is totally unlike what it was 50 years ago, 40 years ago, 30, even 20 years ago. And this is true of countries in Europe as well, where Tamil Hindus have temples in religious communities in Beren and Strasbourg and Gujurati's, like the global Swami Narayan movement, have landmark temples in London and Houston, and seeks litigate for the right to wear their turbans in Canada and carry the kirpan, or Christians and Jews and ardent secularists in our society, encounter new religious neighbors, sometimes with a kind of wary uncertainty.

And the other twin engine of this vibrant and rapid, fast moving change is, of course, the communications revolution, that even if you don't venture around the world or even across the street, the religious teachings and scriptures and words and ideas of people of other faiths are very much part of the discourse of the world. And it's on the news, it's on the internet, and Vatican Television has launched its own YouTube channel, powered by

Google Italia, that makes clips of all of Pope Benedict's 16 speeches, etc. Sheikh Kharadawi and Doha has a popular show on Al Jazeera and issues Fatwa's in response to questions submitted from around the world.

So in our time, this deep and widespread encounter with religious diversity is more pervasive than ever before. And if I ask, how is this related to pluralism? Well, we've already said a little bit. I have a pluralism project, I gave the Gifford lectures in Edinburgh on what I call the age of pluralism.

And to me, if we look at pluralism, I need to say a few things about it. One, that it is a topic of study, that to study the complexity of our world today, places those who are religious scholars of religion want to know something about the energies of religion in a completely different, challenging place. And you cannot study a single religious tradition as if it grew up all by itself.

No religious tradition has, and especially today, they are engaged with one another in complex societies. And so the challenges for us as scholars of studying pluralism are significant. There are also challenges for us as citizens, because we share our cities and towns and our countries increasingly with co-citizens of other faiths.

And the challenge of multi-religious democracy is certainly ours in the United States. It's part of the challenge of every single nation of Europe, of India, Indonesia, Malaysia. And even for deeply secular people who have absolutely no personal use for religion, this is a situation that demands a response of how to live in a multi-religious society in which our citizens, our fellow citizens, are as different from one another as they are today.

And these problems and the challenges of creativity they pose for all of us as citizens are not just theoretical. They're grounded in our everyday context in cities and neighborhoods. These are the workshops in which our future is being built.

The third context, of course, is that the age of pluralism is not just about how we study this diversity or how we appropriate it as citizens, but how we appropriate it as people of faith. Because people in every single faith tradition are faced with this same question that brings you here tonight. How do we interpret the diversity of human religious experience? How do we understand it as Christians or as Muslims? And one thing is very clear that pluralism is not just this diversity.

Pluralism is engagement with this diversity. It is not just tolerance because tolerance is far too thin a foundation for a world in which we live as closely with one another as we do. We need to know more about each other and not simply tolerate each other.

And pluralism is not relativism. Pluralism does not mean we all agree on this thing or that thing. The paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and commitments behind because pluralism is the encounter of commitments.

And it means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relation to one another. And the language of pluralism finally is the language of dialogue. And it is a language as we enter into the world in which we live today and will live for the rest of our lives.

It is this language of dialogue that we need to learn. A language of hearing and listening, of witnessing and hearing the other. And this is the language, so to speak, the discourse of the future.

Now, let me say a word in conclusion about how deeply important this is for communities of faith. And for every community. If Rabbi Jonathan Sacks were with us tonight, the Chief Rabbi of England, he might draw on the resources of the Exodus and the lessons of being strangers in an alien land.

How do we regard as Jews the strangers within our gates? In his book, *The Dignity of Difference*, he writes, "Can we recognize God's image in one who is not in my image? Can we recognize God in the face of a stranger in this global age which has turned us all into society of strangers? Can I as a Jew hear the echoes of God's voice in that of a Hindu, or Sikh, or Christian? Can I do so and not feel diminished, but enlarged? Or a Muslim like Tarek Ramadan might turn to the doctrine of *Talheed*, the oneness of God. How does the Quran's revelation of God's oneness shape a Muslim understanding of human religious diversity? And as a Christian, I have to say I'm astonished at how many Christians seem to think that the only resource Christians have for thinking about their relations with people of other faces, a verse from John 14, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," etc. In our relations with people of other faiths, I as a Christian might turn to the Gospels anew and decide that this good news is not in the first instance about ideas or dogment.

It's about relationships. Relationships that transcend the boundaries of tradition, ethnicity, and social standing. It's even about transgressing those boundaries and restrictions and legalistic constructs of one's own tradition, even as Jesus did, to reach out not only to neighbors, but to strangers and outsiders.

And in my book *"In Countering God,"* I explore how my own encounters with those of other faiths have shaped and deepened my own faith as a Christian. And finally, let me turn to some of the ways in which, theologically, we need to think together. And I mentioned the World Council of Churches because I actually believe that whoever the group is you think with, that Christians don't think all by themselves.

We think together with others. And this has been an important topic of work in the Christians of the World Council of Churches. Thinkers from Britain and Germany, Ghana, South Africa, Lebanon, thinking together as theologians about the changes of our time that they say require us to be more attentive than before to our relationship with other religious communities.

Challenge us to acknowledge others in their differences, to welcome strangers, even if their strangeness sometimes threatens us. And to seek reconciliation, even with those who have declared themselves our enemies. In other words, we say we're challenged to develop a spiritual climate and theological approach that contributes to creative and positive relations among the religious traditions of the world.

And this is serious business. Now, let me highlight just a few words that are words that have been highlighted here. One, mystery.

The mystery of God's relationship to all people and the many ways in which people have responded to God's mystery, invite us to explore more fully the reality of other religious traditions and our own identity as Christians. Two, creation. What does this truly imply, the starting point of creation, the conviction that God as creator of all is present and active in the plurality of religions makes it inconceivable to us that God's saving activity could be confined to any one continent, cultural type, or group of people? Three, the hospitality of Christ.

Christ's hospitality is not limited to those in our own community, but extends to the stranger and the outsider, involves us in the kind of self-emptying and receiving others in unconditional love, even for our enemies. As Christians, therefore, we need to search for the right balance between our own identity in Christ and our openness to others in canotic love that comes from that identity. And finally, the renewal of the Holy Spirit.

That Holy Spirit that the gospel of John tells us blows where it wills. "We discern the Spirit of God," these theologians said, "moving in ways we cannot predict. We see the nurturing power of the Holy Spirit working within inspiring human beings in their universal longing for and seeking after truth or peace and justice.

We believe that this encompassing work of the Holy Spirit is also present in the life and traditions of people of living faiths." Our ability to think in new ways challenges us in this age of pluralism, and it challenges us as scholars in a university committed to veritas, as citizens in multi-religious nations, and as people of faith as we think deeply from the resources of our own faith about our encounter with the religious other. Thank you.
[Applause]

[Music] I would like to ask our next speaker to come forward, Benoth Ramachandra, who is Secretary for Dialogue and Social Engagement for IFES.

That's the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. I don't know how many of you know this, but IFES was founded on this campus in 1947. And so in a wave, Enoth, this is your home as well as its Diana's home, and we're so glad that you're here.

Benoth is a Sri Lankan thinker, author, social critic. He's thought broadly on issues of social engagement, ethnic and religious pluralism. His degrees are in nuclear

engineering from the University of London, both his BA and PhD.

And we might want to think about the fact that he has moved from that direction to the proclamation of the gospel in many of the things you do. And Diana, you've moved to focus on pluralism. And that might be a question we come back to later.

But first of all, Benoth, as you prepare to speak, let us know something about yourself and why this topic is important. Well, you gather from my name that my father's family are Hindu. My surname is actually the name of a Hindu god.

So I was born and grew up in a very pluralistic society with all the major world faiths, accepting Judaism, present in Sri Lanka. And all my life I wrestle with some of the questions that Diana raised for us. So these are very important challenges, both on the political as well as the personal level.

Thank you very much. [applause] Thank you to the Veritas Forum for their invitation. It's a great honor.

Pleasure for me to be with you this evening. I endorse much of what Professor Ek has been saying, and I'm not going to directly respond to her, but just speak to the topic of religious pluralism and tolerance. We don't know what we believe and why, let alone how much our lives match up to what we claim to believe until we engage in serious dialogue with others, especially those who are profoundly different to us.

In other words, the other is indispensable to our own self discovery. An argument and disagreement far from showing lack of respect are actually honoring of others. We are saying that the others' views are important enough for us to engage with them seriously.

Not so when we refuse to engage, is when we either demonize others or we say something like, well, they're all saying the same thing anyway, but in different ways. There is a profound lack of respect for people. So often the language of tolerance is used as a way of avoiding the dangerous act of exploring the world of others.

We are in effect saying, leave me alone. Don't examine and critique my world. And that is essentially what both relativism and the myth of a supposedly neutral secularity both entail.

Tolerance also raises important issues about power and control. Who is tolerating whom? Who speaks of the weak and the powerless tolerating the strong? Or of minorities tolerating the majority? And even when it comes to interfaith dialogue, we need to ask who gets to sit at the dialogue table? Last year I met a prominent American theologian who was invited to Tehran to participate in a conference of over 2000 Iranian Shiite clergy. He was the only Christian in this conference.

I was so envious of the opportunity that he received. I knew coming from Sri Lanka. I

would never be invited.

And I asked him, you know, these Shiite clergy who have invited you to speak on how Christians understand peace and reconciliation. Do they ever talk with the Iranian Christian leaders? And he laughed and he said, no, never. They invited me because I'm an American.

And they want to have good relations with America and they think America is a Christian power, so we need to invite an American Christian. So these are some of the myths that we encounter, myths that are prominent not only amongst Muslims, but amongst many Americans, including American Christians. There is a profound ignorance on all sides that we have to struggle to dispel.

Most Muslims, indeed most Americans, are not aware that two-thirds of Christians in the world live in the global south. Or that the majority of recent immigrants to the US are Christians, at least by name. They're often poor.

They're located in inner city areas. And these new urban congregations represent a growing de-Europeanization of American Christianity. Most Americans tend to identify Arab with Muslim.

They're shocked to learn that there are more Christians in the Palestinian refugee camps than in the entire state of Israel. As for Christian mission, myths are plentiful. It was freed slaves from Jamaica who carried into the heart of Africa a generation before the first European missionary set foot on African soil.

And the fastest growth of the African church occurred in the post-colonial era. It was Muslims in Africa who profited most from colonial rule. As for Asia, the ancient Persian church of the 4th century witnessed more martyrdoms than in the first 300 years of the church of the Western Roman Empire.

And the first Christians in China and India emerged centuries before the creation of Europe itself. But perhaps the greatest myths of all revolve around the use of the word religion, spelled with a capital R. Religion like mysticism and supernatural, these terms reflect linguistic habits first learned in 17th century Europe and shaped by dasim. The idea that there is a universal genus, religion, with Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and so on viewed as subspecies of this genus.

It's assumed that there is a common universal religious experience that undergirds these faiths and a common morality that's refracted in different practices. And those scholars usually European and American who adopt a theoretical privilege position outside of every specific faith community try to elaborate a general structure of religious truth that can provide a space for every religion. A space for every religious tradition but which nobody believes in.

Lack of commitment under the pretext of openness leads to no real dialogue. We cannot put our faith in parentheses to connect with another's faith. Moreover, the more that we explore the faith traditions and their practices, we discover that they are embedded in world views that make conflicting even incommensurable truth claims.

They embody radically different visions of human flourishing. The shalom of the kingdom of God is not the moksha of dominant Hindu schools or Buddhist nirvana. Theoretical attempts to bring them under some overarching rational metanarrative end up denying genuine pluralism.

Of not respecting the otherness of the other. And this is the paradox at the heart of many pluralistic philosophies and theologies of religion. I think it's more intellectually honest to accept these divergent world views and social practices.

And to say that we have to choose which we consider more truthful than others. Exercising hospitality towards unfamiliar and alien ways of thought and life does not absolve us of the responsibility to be critical. Public indifference to truth is no less harmful to a civilization than fanatical insistence on truth.

A second reason that I'm uncomfortable with talk about religion in this generic sense is that it occludes from view the way that consumerism, sport, nationalism, capitalism, scientism, for example, function as global religions today. The shopping mall, the health club, the football stadium, the stock exchange, July 4 celebrations, these are great places to study religious behavior. They are the new temples and the sacred icons of the late modern world.

They are all surrounded by elaborate litigies, rituals, the aura of the mysterious. They place a high premium on community and collective loyalty and blind worship. [laughter] So by treating religion as a separate academic discipline, we may be blinding ourselves to the ways that religion is flourishing among so-called secular people.

Thirdly, so much of religion, traditional or modern, is the locus of superstition, gullibility, cruelty, exploitation. And that goes so much of Christianity too in its history, not least the folk Christianity of Christendom. But the assumption that the human divine encounter takes place primarily in the realm of religious experience or religious communities, this assumption is challenged fundamentally by the heart of the Christian gospel.

The earliest Christian profession, what made a man or woman a Christian, was a confession, Jesus is Lord. And Jesus' Lord was never merely a statement of personal devotion. It was an announcement of a decisive event within secular human history that had universal indeed cosmic implications.

The Jesus of whom the first Christian spoke had been crucified by the Roman authorities. And in the Roman Empire, crucifixion, the widespread was viewed with universal disgust

and horror. It was the most humiliating form of execution.

The death penalty reserved for rebellious slaves, insurgents against the state, people would call terrorists today. No Roman citizen could be crucified. Romans didn't even discuss the subject, they pretended it never existed.

It was the way they preserved the Pax Romana. So, crucifixion was a way of obliterating not only the victim, but also the memory of him. And that's why not a single ancient historian pays attention to crucifixion.

So, I cannot overemphasize the absurdity, the foolishness of the Christian proclamation. If you wanted to convert the educated and pious religious people of the Empire to your cause, whatever that cause may have been, the worst thing you could ever do would be to link that cause to a recently crucified man in an obscure part of the Empire. To put it mildly, that would have been a public relations disaster.

And to associate God with the source of life with this crucified criminal was to invite mockery, ridicule, sheer incomprehension. And that was indeed the experience of the early church. But if this message were true, then surely it subverts the world of religion.

It claimed that if you wanted to know what God is like, what are God's purposes for the world? You had to go not to the countless religious temples and sacred groves that dotted the Empire, or even to the lofty speculations of the sages and philosophers. But you had to go outside the walls of Jerusalem and gaze in your imagination on that broken, battered, tortured corpse, that that is what God is like. For the Jews, a crucified Savior, this was a contradiction in terms.

It expressed not God's power, but God's powerlessness. For Greeks, the idea that a God or a son of God should die as a state criminal, that human salvation should depend on that particular historical event, was not only offensive, it was sheer madness. The Roman pantheon was most hospitable.

It could readily accommodate any new deity in a manner very similar to that of Hindu Vedanta. The public cult of the emperor was a way of preserving the religious pluralism of the empire. The new Christian movement would have been accorded a ready welcome if it simply took its place as another private cult amongst the myriad of cults that the empire boasted.

But the early Christians refused that offer, because for them Jesus was not a day-fied man, like the emperors at the senate from time to time, decreed to be divine. Nor was he a mythological hero like Hercules or Arjuna in the Hindu epics. His labors were real.

The agony of a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. Now it is the madness of this word of the cross that compels us to take it seriously. And I am a Christian today because there is something so foolish, so absurd, so counterintuitive.

So tops its tervy about the Christian message that it gets under my skin. It has the ring of truth about it. No one can say that this was some pious invention because it ran counter to all notions of piety.

This vision of ultimate reality as self-giving love, a love that suffers with us and for us, and yet is not overcome by suffering. This vision of ultimate reality is not found anywhere in the religious traditions of humankind or even in the great literatures of humankind. And the church that has been entrusted with this message for the sake of the world is still itself discovering the richness and ramifications of that message through the churches encounter with others.

An encounter that is not confined to the realm of the religious or the spiritual, but embraces the economic, the cultural, the political and every other area of life. The Christian movement is the world's most extensive and longest sustained engagement with human otherness. Wherever the church has been faithful to the gospel, it has recognized the intrinsic worth of peoples and cultures long despised by the dominant religious and political elites.

The church has been motivated to serve the so-called "drags of humanity", the destitute, the disabled, the dispossessed. And this is a continuing story of Christian witness in many parts of the world. So far from the message of the incarnation of God in the human person of Jesus of Nazareth, breeding any notions of religious or cultural superiority, it actually humbles human pride.

Thank you. [applause] Before we open this up for general discussion, I just thought I might ask a couple of questions and ask the two speakers to engage with one another on these questions, and then we're going to open it up generally. I'm so struck by the fact, Professor Eck, that you have come from a rich religious background and have given yourself to the study of the religious other, very much as Dr. Ramachandra spoke about.

And Dr. Ramachandra Vannath, if I can use first names as well as the vanilla, thank you as well as last names. I'm so struck by the fact that you come from a background in Hinduism and in nuclear science and now have given yourself so much to the particularity of the call of the gospel. I wonder if you could each just share for a moment or two something about that significant journey you've been on with one another in some way.

Vannath, can you go first perhaps? Well, my background was not strictly Hindu. My father's family, like I said, were Hindu, but very nominally so. And my mother came from a very nominal Christian Anglican background.

I didn't have a very religious upbringing. I didn't like religious people, including church leaders, found them all a bunch of hypocrites. It was in my late teens as I was asking the big questions of life.

I thought I'd give the gospels a chance and began to read the New Testament. And I, over a period about a year, I really fell in love with Jesus. And what attracted me to him was that he was so different to the religious people that I knew.

And I loved the things that he said against the religious establishment, the religious leaders. And I found myself at the age of 17, just needing by my bedside and saying, "I believe that you're risen from the dead and I want to give you my life." A very individual experience. I didn't really know any Christians my own age, who were real Christians, genuine Christians.

I went to university a few months later. That's where I met Christians my own age in London. And I found myself reading again the Bible and theology and philosophy.

You couldn't get very far before you came across in the Bible. The God of Justice, the God who cares for the widow, the orphan, the alien, expresses solidarity with the poor and the weak. So how can I now, a follower of Jesus coming from a very poor country, how can I settle down in the rich west because the subject that I had chosen had a future only in the west? And so I began to struggle with these issues of what I was going to do now with my life, with what I was studying.

To cut a long story short, well, during my graduate studies I met many Muslim students from Egypt and started a Christian Muslim dialogue group in the university. And for a long time I thought maybe I should take up a teaching position in a Muslim university, sorry, a university in a Muslim majority country. But then I thought, well, maybe I should just go back for a year to Sri Lanka and see what's happening in the country.

I'd been away for nearly eight years. So I went back, I spent that year traveling around the island, I saw a country on the brink of civil war, a separatist movement in the north fighting for a separate state for Tamils, who are predominantly Hindu. It wasn't a religious conflict, it was primarily ethnic and political, but religion is intertwined with all conflicts in Asia.

And I found myself sitting in the University of Colombo listening to the questions that Hindu and Buddhist and Marxist and atheist students would fire at me as a Christian. What did I think about ethnicity and nationalism and violence, war and I found it very exhilarating. These were not questions I had to wrestle with in England.

But they were live burning questions there in Sri Lanka. I had to reread the Bible, rethink and unlearn a lot of the theology that I had learned, which I found was not very relevant in dealing with the questions that I was facing. Not just about relating to people of other faiths, but also relating to some of the political issues of poverty and violence and war.

So that's where I learned to do theology by actually working with students in secular universities. And at the end of that year, I thought, well, I can't really go back to England.

I need to stay here.

I want to be that grain of wheat in the words of Jesus that falls to the earth and dies and is buried in order to bear fruit. And I thought the best way to serve my country would be to actually stay and work with students so that through this student ministry that I was involved in, there would come leaders for different professions and areas of secular life in Sri Lanka. As well as for the church.

Thank you. That's so helpful. Diana, you as well, so much of your talk was autobiographical and it was great.

I mean, how can we imagine pluralist studies today without you and the wonderful work you've done? But what would you add to what you've said about the direction of the trajectory of your life? Well, it's such a privilege to be here with you. I mean, I learned so much from your talk. And I feel that that subversive Jesus who pushes against all the categories of the day, who is the person who is constantly crossing boundaries and talking about justice for the widow, the prisoner, the outcast.

I mean, that is a vision of Jesus that I was lucky enough to grow up with. I mean, I had really great Christian role models, I will say, as a young person. And this was, I mean, I've met a lot of versions of Jesus that I don't much like since then, but that one I really believed in.

And I think that is part of what has sort of driven me through the kind of trajectory I've had in life. I think the issue of calling to go beyond my own tradition, though, is something that I think I find very striking. I mean, what does it mean for a person of faith to take seriously, intellectually, the task of understanding of faith that is not your own? Now, this is not something that is done very much in universities anywhere in the world, actually.

I mean, in India, people think it's very odd that I would, as a Christian, study the Hindu tradition. I mean, there are Hindus who go to Benares Hindu University and study Hindu philosophy and Muslims who go to Aligarh and study Islam, but the idea that you would study someone else's faith. I mean, what kind of intellectual world is that? And what kind of spiritual calling is that? I mean, it is unusual, I think.

So, you know, I can't say much about it except that I think that's what I was called to do. I mean, I thought about Christian ministry, and it would have been, I mean, it would have been another alternative for me. But this is the sense of vocation that was fine.

I mean, in my case, it's really the desire to discover Christ, communicate Christ that has motivated me to study not just other traditional faiths, but also the new philosophies, secular philosophies, because I have a passion to discern the face of Christ and also articulate the presence of Christ in all areas of life. So, that's why I don't have any formal

qualifications in theology, but I am a theologian because what Christ means. It's the best kind of theologian.

Historically, historically, and that's why historically the people who pioneer disciplines like social anthropology and linguistics was called "emissionaries". And even in my country, the people who gave the Buddhists their religious texts were Christian missionaries who took the trouble to learn local and ancient languages, Pali and Sanskrit and so on, recover those texts for the Buddhists. The first English translation of a Buddhist, a work on Buddhism in 1860 was published by a Christian publisher, SBCK.

I don't know a single Buddhist publisher today who publishes Christian books. I don't know any Muslims who have contributed to the study of the Bible, but I know many Christians who have contributed to the study of the Quran. Let me finish one other piece that I was thinking when you were talking about the importance of the crucifixion and the madness of this.

I actually did try to talk about that once in the Islamic Society of Southern California and Los Angeles. That's another story. But it had to do with what I felt about the issue of God's will in the world.

They were talking about God's will. It was during the time of the rape of women in the Balkans, Muslim women, a form of aggression that was just unspeakable. And so I asked if they thought that it was God's will that this happened.

There is a kind of Muslim theological stance that would say nothing happens without God's will. Anyway, they wanted me to talk about what I thought about this. And what I thought about it is deeply entwined in the notion that God does not will our suffering but accompanies us in whatever suffering is that we have.

But it's not only the suffering part, it's also the resurrection part. It's the road to a mayus part where the disciples are walking with the resurrected Christ and they don't even know who he is. They don't recognize him.

And I take that piece seriously too that in our ongoing journey, we don't actually have a keen sense of who that stranger walking beside us might be. What is that sense of mystery? Well, the mystery and the sense that the resurrected Christ is a mystery to us and that we may be walking alongside that one and not until later even know he was with us. So, I mean, it's that I also want to hold along with the suffering.

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