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## **Why Tolerance is Not Enough: Myths About Pluralism | Diana Eck & Vinoth Ramachandra**

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### **The Veritas Forum**

The project of pluralism promises inclusiveness, tolerance, and peace, but it rarely satisfies. At a Veritas Forum from Harvard, Diana Eck (Harvard) and Vinoth Ramachandra (IFES) discuss the nature of pluralism and the challenges that keep us from genuine dialogue. How can we maintain our deepest core beliefs while also engaging with the beliefs of others? • Please like, share, subscribe to, and review this podcast. Thank you.

### **Transcript**

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are in history, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this in God. The project of pluralism promises inclusiveness, tolerance, and peace, but it seems that it rarely satisfies.

Today, we hear from Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies, Frederick Wertham Professor of Law and Psychiatry and Society at Harvard University, Diana Eck. In conversation with the Secretary for Dialogue and Social Engagement at the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, Vinoth Ramachandra. They discuss the nature of pluralism and the challenges that keep us from genuine dialogue.

How can we maintain our deepest core beliefs while also engaging with the beliefs of others? A conversation titled "Why Tolerance is Not Enough." Myths about pluralism. From the stage at Harvard University. 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, 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. But, 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.

We went, 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 DC on spring break in my freshman year in 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 city 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 humanist. 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 own 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 that 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. He, 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. 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 enrich 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 and religious communities in Baron and Strasbourg and Gujaratis like the Global Swami Narayan movement, have landmarked 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 the 16th speeches, etc. Sheikh Khadadawi and Doha has a popular show on Al Jazeera and issues.

Khadadawi is 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 mean, 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. 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. And 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 faiths is 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 and *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 canonic 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.

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 we invited you to speak on you know 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 to 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 spelt with a capital R. Religion like mysticism and supernatural these terms reflect linguistic habits first learned in 17th century Europe and shaped by diasim. 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 privileged position outside of every specific faith community try to elaborate a general structure of religious truth that can provide 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 worldviews 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 worldviews 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 we 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 liturgies, rituals, the aura of the mysterious. They place a high premium on community and collective loyalty and blind worship. 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 is 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, 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 already 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 counter-intuitive, so topsy-turvy 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. 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 Vannath, 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.

And 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? Yes. 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. And 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.

And I thought, well, 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 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, due to 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, or 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 were 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 at 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. And 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 so, 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 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. And 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 one tries me. Yeah. It's the best kind of the all.

Historically, historically, and that's why historically, the people who pioneer disciplines like social anthropology and linguistics was called a missionaries. And even in my country, the people who gave the Buddhists their religious texts for 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 Christian publisher, SPCK.

I don't know a single Buddhist publisher today who publishes Christian textbooks. 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 ask, finish one other piece that I was thinking when you were talking about the importance of the crucifixion and the madness of this.

Because I actually did try to talk about that once in the Islamic Society of Southern California in Los Angeles, and that's another story. But it had to do with what I felt about the issue of God's will in the world, that they were talking about God's will. And 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. And there is a kind of Muslim theological stance that would say nothing happens without God's will. But 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 Emmaus 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. This is that sense of mystery.

Well, the mystery and the sense that, yeah, 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.

That question of dialogue has often, Diana, in your work with the World Council of Churches, been divided into the questions of institutional dialogue. And that raises certain political issues and others. The question of theological or academic dialogue, and that raises many epistemological questions that we've only touched on here and there.

And then, of course, the dialogue of life. And each of these are important areas of dialogue. We might want to be thinking about these, but let me see questions from the audience come to the mics.

And what we'll do is we'll see how many people can line up. Let's get three people behind each mic. And then we'll see if we can take another set of three people.

Please, on my right. Hi. My name is Scott Brielle.

Thank you. You're doing exactly what I should have said. Say your name.

And if you're at Harvard College or somewhere else or whatever, just do that as well, just so we can personalize this a little bit. Thank you. Hi.

I'm a freshman at the Harvard College. And I just became a Christian a year ago and about to have my first virtual birthday. So I'm really excited.

I do have a question in seeing just realizes mature Christians and going and living in a pluralistic society as like Christians. I've always struggled with knowing the balance between being respectful of other peoples, but still being bold in the proclamation of the gospel and following in the good commandment and wanting people to know about Jesus and love him. You know, so I'd just like to see get inside of how y'all have treaded this balance in your Christian faith and your Christian walk.

I take that as a question to both speakers. Okay, we don't have a lot of time, so both speakers are welcome to answer briefly. I can answer in only one one line, which is that I feel of course we all have a witness to bear as Christians.

We also have a witness to hear. That means we need to listen and inquire about the deep questions of truth that others have come to find or maybe just their questions. Maybe they haven't found anything, but I think listening, witnessing and kind of mutual witness is important.

Yes, I don't know why you see it as a balance unless you think that respecting others means just leaving them alone. And I think I said in my talk that leaving people alone is not to sure respect. Respecting people is engaging with them so that we listen to them.

And we also share honestly with them what really drives us, what are our deepest convictions. And so all witness takes place in the context of a relationship and a

relationship is two way. I'm opening up my life to the other, even as the other is opening up his or her life to me.

And in that kind of equal relationship, we must be honest enough to share what really is most important to us as well as listening to what is most important in the other. Thank you. Gabriella.

Please, on my left. My name is Jeremy. I'm a graduate student in Religious Studies.

And I just, I want you to complete John 14, it says, "Jesus answered, 'I'm the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' So that's the complete verse. Professor Ramashandar, you said that to be a Christian is to proclaim that Jesus is Lord.

And Professor Eck, I was wondering, what does that mean for your faith? When you engage in dialogue, dialogue is understanding, but what are the implications for what you profess to believe as a Christian? Well, I mean, let me begin with that particular verse, which is contextualized in the last night that Jesus had with his disciples and the question of poor old Thomas, Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way? That was right after the part about in my father's house, there are many rooms. And if I did not, you know, etc., you know, Father's many mansions, etc.

So it is a question that is a pastoral response to Thomas. It's not a dogma. It's not a sense that, you know, Lord, you know, when the prophet Muhammad comes in 600 years and speaks the revelation in the Quran, will Muslims be saved? Or it's not an answer to the question whether Buddhists will find their way across the sea of suffering to the far shore.

It's a question that is embedded in the pastoral work of Jesus. And by the way, I, in that gospel, is huge. I am the way, as well, you know, how the gospel of John begins with, in the beginning, was the Word.

And the Word was with God, and nothing was created, except through the Word. So it's a cosmic eye. So I don't, you know, it's a wonderful passage, and it means a great deal to me.

But it doesn't mean what many people would like it to mean. So if you were to profess what you believe as a Christian, what do you believe? I believe that Christ is my path. And, you know, this is the way that I follow.

But it is not in my view the way that everyone else must follow. You think it's the only prescription for salvation? No. I don't believe that.

Thank you very much. I might say it's interesting the way a text like that opens us up into the debate of inclusivism, exclusivism, pluralism. And that's just the tip of the



iceberg.

I'm sure we're all aware of that. Please, on the right. Hi.

Hi. My name is Dallong. I'm a sophomore at the other renowned college here in Cambridge, i.e. MIT.

I was wondering, is our society in itself currently moving toward pluralism? Or do we, as Christians, have to take certain concrete steps in order to achieve pluralism? Well, I mean, yeah, pluralism isn't just here we all are and we're all different, you know, I mean, because there is a huge amount of diversity and difference. Pluralism does mean we have a responsibility to engage as citizens, as people of faith with that difference. That means, well, it means all the things that engagement means.

It's social, justice, work, dialogue, and moving toward a greater understanding of the people who live across the street. So, is that these particular to today's society? Well, it's more intense today. I mean, you certainly, there have been pluralistic societies throughout history.

I mean, there have been diverse societies in which this kind of engagement has taken place. Yeah. Thank you very much.

Yeah. But after you want to add to that at all? Well, my wife and I live in a small housing associate, well, it's called condominium with 15 other apartments. We are the only Christians.

We have Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and we have, when the housing association meets, we have all the political problems of a pluralist society in microcosms. In your condo, okay. But how do we go beyond self-interest and actually work towards the common good? So, pluralism for us is just it's everyday experience.

And that dialogue begins out of involvement in issues of common concern. It's not some artificial activity that we add on to our everyday activities. Real dialogue, real conversation with people take place in these kind of everyday involvement of life.

That's the dialogue of life, please. Hello, I'm Anna and I'm a graduate student at Harvard. I was wondering if you could describe a little bit more about how pluralism works when on one hand it seems that some Christians are very absolute in their belief that Jesus is Lord, but then that same idea is offensive to other people of other faiths.

I missed Christians very active in... Oh, some Christians seem to be very absolute in their belief that Jesus is Lord and there's only one method of salvation. And then that idea of Jesus' deity is offensive to people of other faiths. So, how does pluralism work when one idea, one religious idea is actually quite offensive to another group? I'll take that as a question to both of our speakers.

I mean, pluralism doesn't mean we're not going to offend one another. Really, I mean, I think honesty requires just that. It does also require listening to the other though.

Every faith tradition makes those absolute claims. I mean, a Buddhist will never say that by practicing the Sermon on the Mount, you can attain Nirvana. They will say you have to follow, you'd believe in the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, practice Buddhist meditation and follow the Eightfold Path.

So, every faith would make those claims because they define salvation in a way that's specific to their tradition. And like I said, salvation for the Christian is not salvation for the Buddhist. So, the Buddhist is not interested as a Buddhist in the salvation of Christians and Christians are not talking of Nirvana.

We have to respect that difference. It's not that these all different parts leading to the same goal. They're leading in different directions.

There are different goals. But that's a different question from asking whether a person actually has to make an explicit profession of faith in Jesus to be saved in the Christian sense of salvation. That's a different question.

And I think maybe some of the Christians you're talking about make that mistake. Because if you were to say that, then you have to also say all those who lived before Jesus, including people like Abraham and Moses and David and all the people whom Paul the Apostle says are examples of faith to us. They are not saved because they did not know about Jesus.

They did not explicitly put their faith in Jesus. So, the Bible itself questions it. So, while Christ is the savior of all and there is no salvation outside of Christ, that is not the same as saying that therefore only Christians are saved.

Jesus made it very clear that there may be people who are following him, serving him who don't know that it is he whom they follow and serve. They're not saved through their religious traditions. The Christian gospel doesn't say that it's by being a good Buddhist or a good Hindu or a devout Christian or a good Muslim that you're saved.

It's a very opposite and this is where the message becomes offensive that it is the bad Buddhist. It is the bad Christian. It's the people who are moral failures and who know that they are moral failures, who may be closer to the kingdom of God than the good Christians and the good Buddhists and the good Muslims.

I think we're just beginning to get into our topic. Please, over here. Thank you.

My name is Chris. I'm a local product designer. Thank you very, thank you both very much for your words.

Even for people such as myself that sort of buy the value of pluralism, it can actually be really hard even if you're sold on it, both likely because I didn't grow up being taught how to do it well. Like you say, even at the university, it's certainly not a priority in some ways. I've heard some good examples listening, prioritizing the sort of specific learning of knowledge of other people that may be helpful.

But I was wondering if you could both speak from experience as to actually in that actual conversation between two people or a small group of people, some specific strategies that you've found helpful for getting to the good stuff. Well, I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

I don't understand the question. What do you mean by the value of pluralism? For me, pluralism is a fact of life. It's not a matter of choosing it.

Right. But you can either engage it in a way that, like you say, leads to all these good things or you cannot. And so I feel like you're both advocating a certain approach or a certain positively, sorry, I'm settling with them, where certain behaviors that will lead to the good value of pluralism rather than obviously the majority of the world that lives in pluralism but doesn't benefit from it.

Well, I think I can give you some example. And one of the reasons that the pluralism project is called that is that I think it's worth actually studying some of the ways in which people are deliberately trying to reach beyond their own sphere of comfort and knowledge to engage one another. So, you know, I could give a day full of examples of this, but let me just give you a couple.

Okay, Houston, Texas, the amazing faith-dinner parties of Houston, Texas, where suddenly in Houston, over the course of the last five years or so, they have developed a set of dinner parties that are deliberately constructed in which people of eight or ten different people come around in somebody's home for a dinner party that begins with a deck of cards. And each one of those cards has a question on it. And it is a question that asks you to talk about who you are and what what your faith, not the faith that you say you belong to, but your own personal faith guides you to.

So, the question might be, do you pray and what do you experience when you don't get what you pray for? Or what is a miracle to you? Have you ever experienced a miracle? Or where do you see generosity and justice being practiced in the world that you know? I mean, the sort of thing that enables people somehow to begin talking across lines that they don't necessarily cross. Now, I mean, you know, this is just one local example except that it has now been repeated in about ten other cities in the United States. So, there is this sort of season of amazing faith, dinner parties that seem to be growing, but that's just one example of hundreds and hundreds of things that either habitat projects or interfaith initiatives or multi-faith discussion groups or Abrahamic book study groups.

I mean, there are all of these examples of things that ordinary people are trying to do to

break down the, I mean, they don't all live in the notes wonderful condo. I wish we all did, but in fact, you know, to create the sort of the notes condo of life in which we then have the opportunity to experience what they experience in their condo meetings. Anyway, that's just some, our website has a lot of those examples.

But I assume that in your class here at Harvard, you have students from all kinds of backgrounds, nationalities and religions. So, why don't you just ask them questions? Why are they studying what they're studying? What do they hope to do with their studies when they graduate? What is it that motivates them? What are their ambitions? What is the framework or worldview within which they make these choices? You know, you ask these questions and you listen to people. Well, and this, of course, is the point of this kind of forum, is that sometimes people don't ask these questions of one another.

There becomes a kind of superficiality of discourse where the things that matter most to you are often not the things you talk about at the dinner table. And I think it's a great thing if we can begin to break some of that down in our day-to-day lives as well. It's often been said that Jesus has been called the master of the good question.

What has Caesar to do with whatever? And there are many good questions that I'm sure are still in your minds, at least in terms of the schedule I've been given, we're running up against a deadline. So what I would like to do is the following. I'd like those who are still standing to ask their question, but you're not going to get a reply.

But ask your question because your question will be valuable for all of us to think about and to ponder. And then we will have refreshments in the lobby and maybe our speakers or together we can approach your questions as well. So let me go to this side of the room.

Your question, please. Hi, I'm Jordan Monge. I'm a junior at the college and I converted from being a militant atheist, being a Christian my freshman year here.

Now I'm the editor and chief of the Harvard Agpis, which is a journal of Christian thought and expression here. And I was curious because both of you presented kind of a vision of pluralism that involved engagement and discussion and you both emphasized that was important. But I was a little bit unclear as to how your two views differ.

Professor Eck, my impression from you is that you would firmly believe that we need to affirm the truths in other religions. No, you don't. Not really.

So then I guess I had a mistake. I want to listen to it. Read off.

So I don't have to affirm it. So you don't think that I guess my question was just that do you think that pluralism has to affirm the truth and I guess the answer is no. All right.

Well, thank you. Yeah. If you like this and you want to hear more, like, share, review, and

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And from all of us here at the Veritas Forum, thank you.

(gentle music)