

A New Voice for Islam

TRANSCRIPT

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KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: I'm Krista Tippett. Today, a conversation with Ingrid Mattson, the first woman president of the Islamic Society of North America. She speaks about her experience of Islamic spirituality, which she discovered in her 20s after a Catholic upbringing. And she describes her original and determined approach to pressures within Islam and outside it.

DR. INGRID MATTSON: I wish people outside of our community would understand this — that we could stand, you know, on the soapbox from morning to night and say, 'I condemn this, I condemn that.' But, you know, it wouldn't have the kind of impact that our, you know, much slower, more patient work of building a well-functioning model American Muslim community will have.

MS. TIPPETT: This is *Speaking of Faith*. Stay with us.

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett. Last fall, Ingrid Mattson became the first woman and the first convert to head the Islamic Society of North America, one of the oldest and largest consortiums of the estimated six million Muslims in the U.S. and Canada. Mattson wears an Islamic head covering or *hijab*, and leads a thoroughly modest life as a scholar, public figure, wife, and mother. This hour, we'll probe her unusual perspective on a tumultuous age for Islam in the West and around the world.

From American Public Media, this is *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. Today, "A New Voice for Islam" — Muslim leader Ingrid Mattson. Ingrid Mattson grew up in a large Catholic family in Ontario in Canada, and studied philosophy and fine arts there. She took off for Paris the summer of her junior year to study art and indulge her love of cycling. There, at an outdoor conference, she met some West African students with whom she became friends. With a force that would change the very course of her life, she was drawn to the qualities of their character.

DR. MATTSON: These were people who were far from home, quite impoverished most of them, discriminated against in a very explicit way that I hadn't experienced before in Canada. Yet, they were incredibly dignified, very generous, self-confident without being arrogant, kind to the people around them, even those who did not treat them well. And there was a spirit in them that I found very attractive. And I was drawn to them and wanted to spend more time with them, and understand what was the secret of this character that was, to me, very different and profound.

MS. TIPPETT: At the heart of that secret, Mattson learned, was a deep Islamic faith. There's a low-key spirituality, as she puts it, more a way of being in the world than of displaying religion. And this epitomizes the true spirit of Islamic faith for Ingrid Mattson, a spirit she labors to describe, lead, and represent in the midst of better-publicized stridencies and violence. At the age of 23, Ingrid Mattson converted to Islam. She went on to earn a Ph.D. in Islamic studies at the University of Chicago, and is now a professor of Islamic Studies and Director of Islamic Chaplaincy at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

In the many profiles that have been written about Ingrid Mattson, her transition from Catholic girlhood to Muslim role model is noted with interest, but rarely dwelt upon. I wanted to hear about her discovery of Islamic spirituality and about the practices that underpin her evident love for Islam to this day.

DR. MATTSON: When I started reading the Qur'an, and, and I have to say that what I was reading was, more than anything, a poor English translation of the meaning and...

MS. TIPPETT: Right. Right. Which doesn't really work at all, does it?

DR. MATTSON: Right. I mean, now, years later, and knowing the Qur'an and having studied it and its recitation in the Arabic, what astounds me is how the beauty of the message did come through to me in that poor translation. And it struck me, really, like a thunderbolt. I mean, this awakening of, I would say, an almost childlike wonderment at the beauty and glory of creation, and the sense of majesty, the sense of the universe being pervaded with meaning and purpose. And that's really what the Qur'an brought to me before anything. It was this awareness of God before it gave me any specific guidelines for how I should live my life as a Muslim.

MS. TIPPETT: You know, I also think it is interesting. I mean, you were also reading it, imagining these people of great dignity and kindness who you knew. Whereas sometimes, now, people might pick up the Qur'an with these headlines of violence, right?

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DR. MATTSON: Well, that's a good point. And, absolutely. You can't, I mean, we are in our historical time. And it's impossible for us to divest ourselves of these images that we have, that are real images and real people, who are creating the background for how we read the Qur'an and hear anything about Islam.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm. You've also spoken in other interviews about how you experience bowing and prostration that's involved in Muslim prayer to be something very enlivening and important.

DR. MATTSON: I was really surprised the first time I prayed as a — in a Muslim prayer. I was not a Muslim at that time. I was just starting to study the Qur'an and study some Arabic, so I could have some sense of the scripture. And, you know, the people who were teaching me said, 'Well, you know, do you want to join us in prayer?' I said, 'Well, OK. I don't know how to do it.' They said, 'Just follow along with us.' So I did. And, of course, you know, it feels, at first, very awkward. You're looking, trying to see what they're doing. These movements are different. But as soon as I prostrated and had my — my head to the ground and felt that sense of connection with the earth, of blocking everything out, because when you're prostrating you, you don't see anything around you. And so, really, it is, the words that you're saying in your mind, glorifying God, I felt such a holistic connection to God. I mean, it's a full-body connection, you know?

MS. TIPPETT: A full-body connection. Right. Right.

DR. MATTSON: And, and that was really extraordinary. And I continue to look at this prayer, the ritual prayer as such a gift. It's not even just a question of doing that in a house of worship. The Qur'an says that the whole Earth has been made for us a masjid, a place of prostration. Sacred space is created by the individual. It's not so much about a particular location, but the action that you do. You know, I think this is a kind of existential definition of Islam.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. MATTSON: You know, what you do creates the sacred time and space. Whether it is prayer, that ritual prayer, or having our encounters with people, giving them, imbuing them with this sense of meaning. The fact that the Prophet Muhammad taught us that we should greet people with a smile. So you're creating that sacred space in that interaction, in smiling in someone's face, letting them be at ease with you and comfortable in that initial encounter.

To be a Muslim, yes, means it believing in certain things. But those beliefs are embodied in all sorts of actions. And that's the only thing that we can judge. We can't judge the depth of someone's belief, or even our own, in many cases. But we can try to improve our encounters and our actions to the point that there is less of a disconnect between what we say we believe and how we are in the world.

MS. TIPPETT: Muslim leader Ingrid Mattson. I'm Krista Tippett and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Mattson initially became a vice president of the Islamic Society of North America on the first day of September, 2001. She said she felt at that time that North American Muslims were just coming into their own. And the future was full of new possibility for vital, creative participation in Western society. Ten days later, she watched airplanes crash into the World Trade Center and feared that all she had worked for had been lost. But she cultivated a diplomatic leadership style, skillfully bridging gaps of gender, ethnicity, and politics among North American Muslims.

MS. TIPPETT: Here you are in 2007. You are the first woman, the first non-immigrant, and the first convert to lead the Islamic Society of North America. And to lead it in a tumultuous time, you know? History may look back on this time 100 years from now as a, as a moment of great crisis and also, perhaps, as a great turning point in one direction or the other for Islam and for the world. When you look back at your life, I mean, your early life, where do you see what prepared you for this, for this destiny?

DR. MATTSON: I don't think anything could have prepared me for this. I was, the other day, I was, I said to my husband, I said, "Can you believe that I am the one who is supposed to be doing this job?" I mean, how did it come to this? I mean, that's why we have to say that God has His plan and, and we have our plan. And that is how I look at it. And I look back and I say, "Well, you know, there are things that have prepared me for this." The fact that I grew up in a large family with four brothers. Being the sixth of seven children.

MS. TIPPETT: OK.

DR. MATTSON: And, you know, always at the bottom of a headlock or a pile-on. So learning to be, maybe, calm under situations of stress and conflict certainly helped. I was born into a Catholic family. And I'm able to appreciate what Catholic schools gave me in terms of an education and a vision of social justice that certainly the nuns in my community had. So that, you know, people talk about my ability to bridge different communities.

And for me, it's not even so much a bridge as really being able to understand and place myself in that community and appreciate what it has to offer. I see that my job, at this time, is to try to make those connections, find those connections, negotiate our differences in a way that will, not only not lead to conflict, but lead to growth. We're so focused on just trying to keep the peace that we don't really benefit from those differences.

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MS. TIPPETT: And I want to ask you, a couple of weeks ago, I interviewed someone named Douglas Johnston who is a foreign policy expert, and diplomat, and is doing a lot of work, and kind of, what is preventive diplomacy, also, with, in many conflicts that have some kind of Muslim interface. An observation he's made, and I'm curious about how you would respond to this, you know, simply put, that Americans speak the language of separation when they think about faith and public life. And that Muslims speak a language of integration. And, I mean, I wonder how you approach that, having kind of both worlds and both sensibilities as part of your experience and identity.

DR. MATTSON: Well, Americans may speak about a separation, but how does that really work itself out? You know — it's not easy. What I see as the real issue is the extent to which the authority of the state in the 20th century has, has increased to such a level that everyone seems to think that, you know, the only way to solve this is to kind of struggle over who has control over that. Because it is so intrusive, whether it has to do with public education or health care and the policies that the government will give for that, or accessing the natural resources that ordinary people are, you know, have in the ground underneath them and around them. And so I think this is why the discussion of what is the role between religion and the state was jacked up to such a high level in the 20th century. And I think what we need to do in this century, is to think about the ways to, you know, push the authority to lower levels. You don't want to go back to a completely parochial model, where all it meant to say you had to, you know, they had the tyranny of the local leader. I think what we need is real democracy in politics and in religion where ordinary people have control over who is representing them, whether that is who is, is heading the mosque or who is heading their regional government.

MS. TIPPETT: And what I also think you're describing is lessening some of that authority, also kind of putting it in its place. I mean, one thing I think is happening with globalization is people exerting influence in other ways than being in government.

DR. MATTSON: Right. And what you see is, I mean, if I just focus on the example of Muslim women, I see that globalization has helped Muslim women in many ways in terms of giving them access to information about what Muslim women in other parts of the world are doing. Because one of the problems that we have is that local culture is so often conflated with, with religion, religious norms and whether it has to do with, you know, so-called honor killing or marriage without consent. All of those issues, these are cultural practices that people in power will tend to conflate with Islam and say, 'Well, you know, this is our culture. This is our tradition,' as if they're all one theme. And I was really moved by Mukhtar Mai's book. You know, Mukhtar Mai, the Pakistani woman who was brutally gang raped by...

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. Right.

DR. MATTSON: ...you know, the strong tribe of her village. And in her book, she talks about how she went to this international conference. I mean, not everything wasn't good about it. But one thing that, that amazed her and gave her some strength and energy was to realize that women in many other parts of the world were also facing struggles. Not exactly the same. I mean, what's amazing is that the kinds of oppression that they were experiencing was different from hers, but it was structurally the same in terms of, you know, someone saying in a very authoritarian way, 'This is Islam. This is your religion. This is your culture. We have to do it this way.'

MS. TIPPETT: Islamic Society of North America president Ingrid Mattson. Her predecessor, Sheikh Muhammed Nur Abdullah, praised her election as a clear signal that Muslim women can be leaders and partners with brothers in the Islamic world. She has received expressions of support from Muslim leaders around the world, though some have questioned whether her leadership conforms to Islamic tradition.

Yet Mattson's own theology is fairly conservative. She seeks a deeper understanding of not a departure from historic Islamic tradition. That is to say, how Muslims have lived and interpreted the core of Islam from the earliest days of the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Ingrid Mattson wears a *hijab* or Islamic head covering by choice. I asked her what this means for her.

DR. MATTSON: While I was convinced by those who were teaching me about Islam early on that a head covering for women is part of what is required in Islamic law, I was not convinced of the reasons for it. I mean, people talked about, you know, society and gender mixing and all these kind of things. So when I first heard about that, I said, 'Well, that didn't make much sense to me.' But I did it as an act of obedience.

And once I started wearing it, I did notice the benefit in terms of being treated in a more, I would say, professional manner by even, you know, those people who I'd known earlier, whether they were professors or others. I was surprised at the way that the kind of, you know, language that I'd become so used to, with sexual innuendo and, I mean, now, you know, I wasn't around people who were very vulgar. Just talking with people, at work or at school, how many jokes and things have, have this sexual innuendo, how they're kind of just dropped away. And I hadn't been aware of it — well, you know, really aware of how pervasive it was 'til I started wearing hijab. And I felt that, you know, an advantage, and I was surprised at that. It doesn't mean it's not difficult sometimes. I mean, it is difficult at times and it does present its own challenges. But more than the social dynamics, I would say, for me it has spiritual benefit. You know, it's interesting, I was teaching a class earlier this week, and I have an African priest in my class. And he was talking about how, in African Christianity, still, women, and even men, will feel that some gesture of covering...

MS. TIPPETT: Yes.

DR. MATTSON: ...is important in the presence of God. That when you're in the presence of the Sacred, whether it is the Eucharist or in the church, or approaching the Bible, that...

MS. TIPPETT: And you find that impulse in Judaism as well.

DR. MATTSON: Right. You know, Islam doesn't have a clergy. Each Muslim needs to be responsible for his or her own ritual life, so that when the time for prayer comes, you know, and I'm alone, I need to be my own imam. I need to organize myself and organize the prayer and lead myself in prayer, to conduct that ritual myself. And the whole Earth is a mosque for us. The whole of creation is sacred. So that fact that I wear this covering throughout the day, to me, also symbolizes my acknowledgment that there is no place where I am that is devoid of the presence of the sacred.

MS. TIPPETT: Hmm. You are not an uncontroversial figure for Islamic women. There are women in places like San Francisco and Virginia and New York who are trying to remove divisions between men and women in worship. What is your understanding of what the core of Islam has to say about women and worship and leadership? I mean, is there a body of essential teachings on that?

DR. MATTSON: At the basic, love all. And the fundamental love all is the absolute, complete spiritual equality of men and women. That is clear from the Qur'an. Then the question is, well, what about positions of leadership? And the ruling in Islamic law is that anything is permissible unless there is an explicit teaching that it's not permissible. You know, if we want to say that there are limits, then we have to prove that. So, the real question is are there any positions or roles that women are excluded from occupying? And my argument is that, as a general rule, no. On a relative level or relational level in some cases, yes. Just as in some situations, a man can't take a certain position of authority depending on sort of who the individuals are in that room. And what I mean by that is, can a woman be an imam? Yes.

An imam is the leader of prayer. And a woman can, and women have been leaders of congregations. Those are all-female congregations. And there also is good evidence that women have led their families in congregational prayer. The question is, in a public setting that includes non-family members, you know, males who are non-family members, then should she take leadership? And that's really the, you know, the one issue where there's a lot of debate right now. The majority view at this point is that, no, she shouldn't take that leadership when there are non-related males in the congregation. There are others who, who look at it at a different way. But you know, my point is that, we should then look and say, "Well, are there certain situations where it would be improper for a man to lead?"

I've been to some communities on the prayer, the Eid prayer. There are two Eids, two holidays a year that are the major Islamic holidays. And sometimes, the way the community is set up is that there are so many people who come to that prayer that there maybe two different halls that the prayer is being held in simultaneously.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. MATTSON: And I've actually been to a prayer where the whole hall was women, yet they sent a man to lead those women in prayer. And I thought to myself, "Should that man really be in this room with a thousand women?" And is that...

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. MATTSON: You know, even in terms of the, the kind of gender sensitivities of Islam, wouldn't it be better to appoint a woman to lead that congregation? You know, I'm not necessarily giving any answers here.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. MATTSON: But I'm saying that we need to start thinking about these issues.

MS. TIPPETT: And, I mean, you are a diplomat, and that comes through very clearly. And that's, that's why, that's one of the answers to the, that question you asked your husband. You said, the other day, why are you doing this? I mean, you are able to speak to many people. You also have a high regard for the — what you call the conservative approach to tradition that Islam takes. You've also talked about how, because of that, it's important for modern Muslim women to find the archeology of women within the tradition?

DR. MATTSON: Well, let me, let me say why it's important to engage in a dialogue with tradition. My point is that tradition is not, in itself, a, you know, a sacred object. But what it does is it helps us purify our, our intentions. And what I mean by that is the goal of spirituality is to discern what is God's will. And it's very easy for us to mistake our own desires and wishes for God's will. It's the constant spiritual battle and struggle within ourselves to try to silence our own desires and our selfishness and self-centeredness and open

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ourselves to what God is asking us to do.

What engaging in tradition does is it helps us reflect on those impulses that we have that may be particularly strong and loud because of the time that we live in. So when we engage in tradition, and we see how Muslims in different times have lived, what kind of responses they've had, comparing that with our own priorities and our own burning questions, we're able to say, 'Hmm, you know, maybe this is so important to me because of the particular age I live in. And that may be good. I mean, it may be the, the necessity of the time I live in. But on the other hand, I may be giving it disproportionate attention.' And so that's why, from a spiritual perspective, I believe it's important to engage in tradition.

And one of the challenges for scholars is to find an accurate representation of what really happened, you know? How do we do that? We'd look back, primarily through books. And books don't necessarily reflect all that happened in a society. And so it requires a more subtle approach. We have to dig deeper. We have to look for more sources to see if there are some, some gaps that, you know, even the silences might teach us something and indicate something to us. Frankly, the goal of, you know, digging up those great women of the past is not that difficult.

MS. TIPPETT: Really?

DR. MATTSON: Exactly.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

DR. MATTSON: I mean, there are all sorts of stories out there that have not been told, and they're right there on the surface of those books. We can tell them and we can revive them and they can teach us a lot. You know, I feel really happy about the scholarship that's been undertaken by many of the younger scholars in the last decade or so that are showing us all of the possibilities that are there that we forgot about.

MS. TIPPETT: You know, and something that distinguishes Islam from some of the other major traditions is that the Prophet had women in his life, that he was married, that he had daughters, and he had a long marriage to the mother of his children and then other marriages when he was a political leader. Is that meaningful for you as you wrestle with these kinds of questions?

DR. MATTSON: It is. And the Prophet Muhammad's relationships with women are very empowering to women because he loved women, he loved the women in his life. He was always praising them and praising them to others in a public way. He made a point of showing them honor and dignity. And that is a great lesson for us, because somehow Muslim society became, you know, imbued with this notion that — like they used to say about children, you know — women should be not even seen and not heard.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. MATTSON: That a man wouldn't even talk about the women in his life. That that's sort of, you know, private and women belong to this, you know, area that of life that just is unknown and unheard. Historically, that's not even true, but that was the kind of the narrative, normative-narrative that was passed down and it's just so contrary to the Prophet Muhammad's own life.

MS. TIPPETT: Muslim scholar and leader Ingrid Mattson. This is *Speaking of Faith*. After a short break, what she calls the double bind of Muslims in the U.S. in the post-9/11 world and the countercultural work of slow, patient change to which she feels called.

Visit our award-winning Web site, speakingoffaith.org, to hear behind-the-scenes clips of my conversation with Ingrid Mattson. Read her essay "Discovering (Not Uncovering) the Spirituality of Muslim Women" and "Can a Woman be an Imam?" Also subscribe to our podcast, an iTunes "Best of 2006" selection, for a free download of this and each week's program. Our podcast now includes audio clips from my new book. Discover more at speakingoffaith.org.

I'm Krista Tippett. Stay with us. *Speaking of Faith* comes to you from American Public Media.

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: Welcome back to *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. I'm Krista Tippett. Today with Ingrid Mattson, who was elected the first woman president of the Islamic Society of North America in the fall of 2006. She was raised in Canada in a Catholic home and converted to Islam two decades ago, in her 20s. She later studied Islamic theology and spent time volunteering at a camp for refugees in Peshawar on the Pakistan-Afghani border during the Soviet occupation of

Afghanistan. It was there that she met her husband, an Egyptian engineer. Now, she's a professor at the Macdonald Center for Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

Ingrid Mattson has written and spoken widely about what she calls the double bind that North American Muslims have experienced for sometime and more acutely since 9/11. Though the history of Islam in North America is overwhelmingly peaceful and positive, Muslims in Canada and the U.S. feel continually compelled to apologize for reprehensible actions committed in the name of Islam. At the same time, they endeavor globally to represent an Islamic identity that is at once devout and compatible with democratic values. But they struggled to gain credibility in the wider Muslim world when U.S. foreign policy is perceived as antithetical to those values.

DR. MATTSON: Well, I think it has become more difficult, and those tensions that I spoke about have become far more pronounced. It's interesting especially in the wake of many of the things that have gone on in Europe, that many European governments now are looking to the American Muslim community as a kind of model Muslim community.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. MATTSON: How could we, you know, how could we teach them about how to be Muslims in the so-called West. And the U.S. State Department has even facilitated some delegations of American Muslims going to Europe and, you know, talking about how we deal with these things and what kind of models we've developed. But do we have any authority? It's certainly true that there are those who look at us and say, well, either they think we're being used by the government or they think that if we are not completely in opposition to the policies of the government, and I mean out in the streets demonstrating, that we have no moral credibility, that we've kind of sold our Islam for living a cushy lifestyle in America. So it's a difficult line to walk, but I'm convinced that this is what we need to do and it's our responsibility.

There are many Muslims who would like us simply to condemn, you know, the United States government for its foreign policy, for its actions, but it's much more complicated than that. I mean, our roles simply can't be one of opposition to any particular policy when we know on the other hand that many in the Muslim world need to understand the benefits of democracy and the flaws in their own approach to politics, which is confrontational, oppositional and does not engage in the patient work of coalition building, consensus building, and conceding the rights of the other parties.

MS. TIPPETT: Hmm. You spent some time in Afghanistan also at a young age. Was that after your conversion to Islam in your 20s maybe or?

DR. MATTSON: After I became a Muslim, I was with Afghan refugees...

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. MATTSON: ...but I was in Pakistan. I never went to Afghanistan.

MS. TIPPETT: OK.

DR. MATTSON: The Soviets were still fighting in Afghanistan at that time.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. But, you know, Pakistan, Afghanistan, those are places now that are intimately involved in American foreign policy and our struggle to come to terms with the new world we inhabit and the American place in that. I'm just curious about how your personal experiences there or maybe other personal experiences you have also bring home this complexity to you and some of the paradox that's involved.

DR. MATTSON: Right. Well, when I was in Pakistan, I was living in Peshawar. At that time, no one knew where that place was. Now, everyone knows where Peshawar is.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

DR. MATTSON: It was an amazing complicated place. Everyone in the world was there trying to put their hand in the struggle and try to influence it one way or another, whether it was, you know, the U.S. government with its many agencies or Gulf States or individuals who had their own dreams of what Afghanistan would be. And that was a great lesson for me to see what the stakes were, how ordinary people really suffered. I mean, how just the ordinary everyday Afghan person was suffering under this — in the midst of this ideological battle and struggle.

My best friend is Afghani and she worked with me in the camps and she continues to be my friend until this day, and is very bitter about the fact that after the Soviets withdrew, that her own people were unable to make concessions to each other, that the different Afghan

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parties, who had fought the war, were unable to make peace with each other. And she herself gave birth to her child in the Kabul hospital with — I think, there were a few hundred missiles that were fired into Kabul that night. She talks about giving birth under the bed in the Kabul hospital. And, you know, she said, Look, you know, we fought the Soviets to get them out. This was now our country, and why could these men, these warring parties, our Mujahideen, why could they not give something to each other, so that there could be peace for our people? Instead, they, they were so intransigent, each insisting on their way or the highway that it led to civil war and then, eventually, to such chaos that the Taliban came in and took over.'

So the lesson I learned from that is you can't just blame outside forces. You know, you can't just say, 'Well, there are these powers who are intervening and putting pressure.' We have to, each of us, take responsibility individually and collectively for the welfare of our community. And yes, there will be, be challenges. Sometimes, there, there will be, you know, like the Soviets coming in and invading your country. But, your first responsibility is to be generous with each other and to embrace the diversity that your own community has so that you can be strong enough to withstand these kind of challenges.

MS. TIPPETT: Muslim scholar and leader Ingrid Mattson. I'm Krista Tippett and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Today, in conversation with Ingrid Mattson, the first woman president of the Islamic Society of North America about her perspective on the 21st-century world.

MS. TIPPETT: You have written also in these last years that you fault yourself for not being critical enough of the Taliban in those years in Afghanistan — American Muslims perhaps for not always speaking about oppressive situations within Islam. And I mean, I wonder when you described that complexity — even if it suggests that, let's say, the political role of the United States government is going to be a very complicated thing to get right — is there a special obligation that you, as a fellow Muslim, have for, I don't know, aiding, helping in those internal dynamics you just described among other Muslims in a place like Afghanistan?

DR. MATTSON: Yeah. It's a really difficult balance. And I've, I've struggled with prioritizing our activities because...

MS. TIPPETT: Right. Of the Islamic Society of North America?

DR. MATTSON: Yeah. And as an individual in my writing and speaking and, I mean, you can't simply be responding to negative actions all the time. You can't, you know, only say, 'I condemn this. I condemn that.' To that extent, I think that perhaps, when I wrote that, I was, you know, really feeling the tragedy of the moment and was sincere in that. But realistically, when I think about what is the most effective way to make change, I think that it's better for us to put our energies, first of all, in getting our own house in order — institutionally, organizationally — so that we can be that model. We can be that example whether it is to, you know, Muslim minorities in Europe or elsewhere. But then also, into developing the kind of intellectual approaches, academic work, papers that can then in this globalized world be disseminated quickly and easily to other communities. So I think that we need an — and I wish people outside of our community could understand this — that we could stand, you know, on the soapbox from morning to night and say, 'I condemn this. I condemn that.' But you know, it wouldn't have the kind of impact that our, you know, much slower, more patient work of building a well-functioning model American Muslim community will have.

MS. TIPPETT: This is a personal question. I wonder what your husband and your children think about this role you have now.

DR. MATTSON: Well, I, before I accepted the nomination for president and before I accepted the nomination for vice president of the Islamic Society of North America, I consulted with my children and my husband, because I knew it would impact their lives and that it would make me more busy, away from home more often. And you know, I asked them what they thought about it. And in each case, they, they urged me to do it. My husband is, you know, an Arab Muslim who came to North America in his late 20s, traditionally raised. And he is probably the most supportive husband you could find on the face of this earth. He is the primary cook in my household. He takes care of my kids' homework. He, he's just so supportive because he feels that the Muslim community generally, and Muslim women specifically, need someone who's advocating for their needs. And so I, you know, really pray that God will bless him for his sacrifice. And also, well, you know, that my children will benefit from it in some way as well.

MS. TIPPETT: You've told a story about your husband who, as you said, was born in Egypt, who you met, I believe, when you were working with the Afghan refugees in Pakistan, describing to you a Muslim woman he admired for her intelligence and eloquence and generosity. And then you met her and, and there was a surprise in that.

DR. MATTSON: Right. She's — when I met her, I saw that she fully covers her face, her whole body so that you couldn't see any part of her. Yet, I had created such an image of her in my mind based on the qualities and characteristics that my husband so admired that, I guess that taught me something about how important, as a Westerner, images were to me. And sort of, you know, to what extent someone's physical appearance embodied who they were in my mind. But clearly, it wasn't for him.

MS. TIPPETT: And, you know, I interviewed you once before in 2002, not that long after September 11. Many people had become aware of Islam for the first time through that act of very dramatic violence and were wanting now to understand what Islam was about. And I asked you where non-Muslims could look to find images as vivid as those images of, you know, towers crashing to the ground, airplanes

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flying into buildings. And you said there probably won't be those dramatic images, but that we have to train our eyes on ordinary Muslims. I thought of that again when I was reading the story you tell about this woman because you, you finished this essay by saying, "He knew her by her actions, by the effect she left on other people. We seem to make the mistake of thinking that seeing means knowing. And that the more exposed a person is, the more important they are." And I don't know, I'm just wondering if in this and your answer to my question five years ago and in this essay you wrote more recently, if that is kind of — if that kind of crystallizes some of your philosophy of being a Muslim in the post-9/11 world.

DR. MATTSO: Yeah. And to the extent that everyday, we have these dramatic images of bombs blowing up in markets in Baghdad, fire and destruction and death, I think I feel that way even more so. I mean, even if we spent some time looking at the beautiful, beautiful image of 3 million Muslims in absolute peace and harmony, making the pilgrimage together to Mecca every year — which is such a profound image — still, could that really, you know, outweigh this daily bombardment of bombardments that we get on TV? We just have to try to get away from that to some extent and engage with individuals. And I'm saying that not just because I want people to have a different idea about Muslims, but I want Americans to feel hopeful. And there's a basis for hope. There is a reason to feel that we can get out of this mess, and that the future is not necessarily one of bleakness and conflict and violence, but that there are millions and millions of Muslims who are engaged in good work. You know, people like Muhammad Yunus who won the Nobel Prize this year for the great work he's done with the Grameen Bank and so many others who are just trying to build a better future for their families and in societies. So we need to look elsewhere so that we can feel hopeful, and we won't give up in despair and just capitulate to this vision of an imminent apocalyptic violent ending to our earth.

MS. TIPPETT: Ingrid Mattson is professor of Islamic studies and director of Islamic Chaplaincy at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut. Here in closing is a reading from the essay we just discussed, "Finding the Prophet in his People."

READER: "The Prophet Muhammad said, 'When you see one who has more, look to one who has less.' When I was married in Pakistan, my husband and I, as refugee workers, did not have much money. Returning to the refugee camp a few days after our wedding, the Afghan women eagerly asked to see the many dresses and gold bracelets my husband must have presented to me as is customary throughout the Muslim world. I showed them my simple gold ring and told them we had borrowed a dress for the wedding. (The women's faces fell and they looked at me with profound sadness and sympathy.) The next week, sitting in a tent in that dusty hot camp, the same women, women who had been driven out of their homes and country, women who had lost their husbands and children, women who had sold their own personal belongings to buy food for their families, presented me with a wedding outfit. (Bright blue satin pants stitched with gold embroidery, a red velveteen dress decorated with colorful pompoms, and a matching blue scarf trimmed with what I could only think of as a lampshade fringe.) It was the most extraordinary gift I have ever received — not just the outfit, but the lesson in pure empathy that is one of the sweetest fruits of real faith.

"An accurate representation of the Prophet is to be found first and foremost on the faces and bodies of his sincere followers: in the smile that he called 'an act of charity,' in the slim build of one who fasts regularly, in the solitary prostrations of the one who prays when all others are asleep. The Prophet's most profound legacy is found in the best behavior of his followers. Look to his people, and you will find the Prophet."

MS. TIPPETT: We'd love to hear your thoughts. Contact us at speakingoffaith.org. The companion site for this program features more of my conversation with Ingrid Mattson and several essays she's written, including "Finding the Prophet in His People" and "Stopping Oppression: A Muslim Obligation." Our podcast includes an mp3 of each week's show. And now, we're adding exclusive content beginning with audio excerpts from my new book. Discover more at speakingoffaith.org.

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