Title: 2010 Seattle Reads 'Secret Son': Facets of Islam

Voiceover:

Welcome to The Seattle Public Library's Podcasts of Author Readings and Library Events, a series of readings, performances, lectures, and discussions. Library Podcasts are brought to you by The Seattle Public Library and Foundation. To learn more about our programs and podcasts, visit our website at www.spl.org. To learn how you can help the Library Foundation support The Seattle Public Library, go to foundation.spl.org. The podcast you are about to hear was recorded in 2010.

Chris Higashi:

Good evening. I'm Chris Higashi, a program manager of the Washington Center for the Book at The Seattle Public Library. Welcome and thanks for joining us for tonight's program, Facets of Islam: Faith, Culture, Politics. Today's event is part of Seattle Reads Secret Son by Laila Lalami. This is the story of a young man, Youseff, who has grown up in the slums of Casablanca with his mother, believing her stories that his father was a poor, respected school teacher, but then he learns that his father is actually alive, a wealthy businessman living in the same city.

So he sets out to meet Nabil and does. Enters his father's sophisticated and corrupt world for a time. So what we get is we get stories of worlds of rich and poor and modern and traditional in this story of Youssef's struggle for identity. And I think a story about the kinds of things that turn disaffected youth to religious extremism. So this is the 12th year of Seattle Reads, the Seattle Public Libraries widely emulated one book community reading program. Literally hundreds of these projects have been done in communities across the country and internationally.

So we're grateful to the Wallace Foundation for generous support for Seattle Reads since its inception. Also, this year, KUOW Public Radio, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill and Seattle Arts and Lectures. We also thank our longtime partner, Elliott Bay Book Company. I hope you'll visit the book table. Rick has many books by and about the Arab world, also Laila's novel for sale.

Thanks to The Seattle Times for generous promotional support for library programs, and finally, to The Seattle Public Library Foundation whose support makes possible so many of our free library programs. So Laila Lalami will visit Seattle May 6th through the 10th. She'll be making six public appearances to talk with readers about her book. There'll be one event here at the Central Library on Friday evening, May 7th.

I hope you will join us for that. And prior to Laila's visit, a whole series of programs, films, panel discussions, Arab story times, and lots of things to help put the book in its cultural and historical context. Have a special event this Sunday downstairs at Town Hall, Arab Cultural Day, Focus on

Morocco, TN Suites, children's activities, storytelling, a children's fashion show, and Henna and lots of other activities that's free. Music, I think. So we hope you'll join us for that.

There are program brochures on the front table that have the complete schedule of events. So the point of the programming leading up to author Laila Lalami's visit is, as I said, to help the reader understand its themes. So to that end, I again enlisted my friend Femi Taiwo, professor of philosophy and head of the Global African Studies Program at Seattle University. I say again because Femi has devoted enormous time and energy to Seattle Reads in the past.

So tonight's discussion is... Um, I'd say it's recreating a program that Seattle University presented shortly after September 11th. So the panelists tonight are Turki Sami Basfar, who was born and raised in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. He's a senior studying electronic commerce and information systems and finance at Seattle University. He's been in the United States for five years. Last year, he received the award of outstanding leadership in faith at Seattle University.

He's been the Saudi student leader, president of the eCommerce and Information System Club, and president and founder of the Kingdom Student Association. Next is Rajaa Gharbi, a poet and painter born and raised in Tunisia, Africa. She's also lived in Morocco, her grandfather's homeland. She's been living in the US and Tunisia since 1982. She was the first North African English language poet in the United States to have been published and awarded public funding for literary work.

Her visual art has been in solo and group exhibitions. Her literary work has been published in anthologies and in two poetry collections. She's a native of Muslim society and an artist. She's been exploring relationships between language, religion, and poetry since adolescence. And then finally, Amine Tais is a graduate student in comparative religion at the University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies. He was born in Morocco, has lived in the United States for more than a decade.

Interested in the dynamics of interaction between religion and modernity. Amin returned to university to pursue advanced degrees in the field of the academic study of religion. His areas of interest include Islam and modernity, Muslims in the West, religious fundamentalism, the intellectual contributions of reformist Islamic thinkers in the 20th century, as well as early Islamic history.

I had the pleasure of participating in the Arab Center of Washington Book Club discussion of Secret Son, which was led by Amine. I will say much greater understanding and appreciation of Laila's novel, the settings, the characters, the themes as a result of that discussion. So thank you all three, and I'm going to turn thanks over to Femi Taiwo for the rest of the evening. Thank you.

Femi Taiwo:

Good evening. Good evening. Thank you very much. I would like to start by thanking all of you for showing up this evening for this session. It's a very important prayer that I always love to order because I've seen it happen before. May you never throw a party that nobody shows up for. So this is not such a party, and we have you to thank for that. I would also like to thank Chris for... I've been joking with people. I saw her last week and I said to people, I said, "Oh, I'll be working for her next week." But on a serious note, it's really an honor to be invited to be a part of this exciting program.

I've done it before with her. And I can assure you, Chris, this is no work. I really do appreciate the opportunity to share this panel. And I want to thank my co-panelists for saying yes when I approached them. There will be no panel if there are no panelists, and all of them in their different ways said yes when I explain to them what this purpose is. And the purpose essentially is to share with you all some reflections on the complexity of Islam as a religion, as a culture, as a civilization, as a way of life, call it what you will.

And this is very important because we live in a country and in a time within the country where Islam has become so vilified that I'm sure that many of my Muslim brothers and sisters can hardly find themselves in much of what is said Islam is around this country, especially in the popular press. The hope is that by having a discussion like this, many of us who knew stuff about Islam before will get deepened in our understanding.

Many of us who have many questions about Islam will have an opportunity to ask the panelists after we have made our short presentations. And that when it's all over, both you who are listening to us and us who are leading the discussion, we leave here mutually enriched as to the importance of this phenomenon that around here is little understood, but for the rest of the world has always been very important, including the world, the history of which this country considers itself an integral part.

That is the Western world. So without further ado, I'm going to ask our speakers to start. The plan is to have each one of us talk for about 15 minutes from a different perspectives there. Some questions that we have all looked at which will frame the contributions that we make. I am performing double duty. I'm moderator, but I'm also a contributor to the panel, but it means that much of what I'm going to say will actually be very, very peripheral.

My teachers here this evening, and I hope yours too, are the three people who are sitting to my left, and I look forward to what I'm going to learn from them. So without further ado, I will ask Amine to please start us off. Amine, please.

Amine Tais:

Thank you. Good evening. I would like to start by sharing my background because I feel like it's important that our experiences as people who come from the Muslim world, who are born into Muslim families, that everybody gets to understand that your experiences shape you as much as anything else and the way you understand religion, the way you practice religion, the way you approach religion and so on.

So I was born and raised in Morocco, as was said earlier, and Morocco is "Muslim" country. And I would like to start by actually problematizing that. What does that mean, that it's a Muslim country? I would like to say that my relation to Islam has always been very complex. Again, growing up in a Muslim country, I never put a foot in a mosque until the age of 16. Now, I mean, so what's my relation to Islam in that case?

As you will see from my talk, you see that my identity has been shifting. There's competing narratives what Islam is and how Islam shapes people's lives. And as far as Islam as a religion, for me for a long time, it's inherited. It's inherited. It's a sociological fact that it is inherited from my family, from my

background. So most people in the world will be raised in a certain tradition and stay within the tradition until they die.

It's conversions that are not something that happen as often as people might think. And so I came to the United States 15 years ago and maybe just for a second talk about the dynamics of immigration. It was a time that was very difficult for me because it's a cultural shock, but also this sense of... I came by myself. So it was sense of loneliness in a new society that a lot of encounters I had were not positive.

And so kind of as a reaction to that, I tried to find the answers in a religious worldview. And perhaps not surprisingly, I chose a religious worldview, a religious perspective that is rather puritan, rather that focus on certainty, that it's also superiority. This is one form that Islam can take. And I chose that because it gave me the sense of superiority within the context that makes me believe I am maybe at of a lower level than other people.

And then came 9/11. 9/11 was a watershed moment for me because it shocked me and put me into a state of spiritual and psychological crisis because I couldn't understand how such a horrible event could happen in the name of a religion that embraced or that gives me meaning in life. And so that pushed me to actually move towards trying to really understand what is religion, what is relation of religion to politics.

And I would say thank God for the libraries of America because I spent months, maybe perhaps years on my own at the libraries. I used to live in California where I just studied and learned and tried to understand how these things function. And then from that, I decided that I wanted to go back to school. I wanted to do an academic career based on the study of religion because I found it to be very rewarding at a personal level, but also through my interactions with other people.

I chose comparative religion as a field. It's rather hard to explain the whole field in 30 seconds, but rather than focus on "Islam" per se, comparative religion provides a lens where people can see how different religions develop and see what are the dynamics of these developments. So you understand the complexities of religions and you don't focus on a religion as if it is a special case that is different from everything else, which is the way Islam has been portrayed at many levels.

Unfortunately, this field has not had so far the impact that it should have on public discourse. So maybe I'll talk a little bit about what is Islam and I would like to problematize this question itself because Islam has been used as a catch all word that confuses more than it gives answers to people. So as a starting point, I'm going to choose something and I hope you guys will problematize me or start thinking about these terms and maybe complicate what I'm talking about even more.

So Islam, we could think of Islam as a high religious tradition that is at the intellectual level. There are different versions of how Muslims intellectually developed what Islam is. For example, you would talk about Sunism or Shiism or Sufism or other intellectual traditions, including like law and theology and so on. And so this itself is extremely diverse. And then you have Islam as a popular religion.

The majority of people who adhere to the religion of Islam are your average Joe. They live in a context, they are born into a context, and they learn religion as a fundamental thing that's part of their life, but none of the complexity of the intellectual tradition really is present with most people. This is shaped by... Very much shaped by your local cultures. So if you go to people who practice religion on a daily basis in Indonesia, it's a lot different than people who practice religion on a daily basis in Africa.

Islam when it entered these areas, it interacted with the local traditions, with the local religions, and the understanding of Islam was shaped by these traditions. And so for example, voodoo influences in Africa and Islam. You have traditions that are in the far east, for example, that influence how Chinese people understand Islam. And so this is the second level, that's a popular culture.

And then the third level, perhaps Islam as the framework of world civilization. Islam, I mean, in Christianity, we make a difference between Christianity and Christendom. Christendom as an area where Christian civilization developed. Islam is used for both. And so when people speak about Islam, that's why you find like, if you look at earlier Western works on Islam, there's this confusion about, well, Islam as a purity religion versus Islam as a religion that everything is allowed in Islam because this idea is that it's based on the fact that there's a mix.

Civilization in Islam has a lot of stuff that is not Islamic in the term of religion, Islamic quote unquote, has thought this anti-Islamic. You had poets and intellectuals who were skeptics. You had people who in poetry that speak about things that are forbidden in the Islamic religion as understood by the intellectual traditions that I talked about. And so this is already the framework I'm trying to create in your minds really here is that when we use the term Islam itself, we have to problematize it.

And only then can we really start approaching Islam, not as this monolithic thing that just everyone just wants to understand, "Tell me quickly what Islam is. Is Islam peace? Is Islam violent? Is Islam here to take over the world or Islam here as a religion that lives with each other? It's complex." And then the other question that we problematized is this idea is everything that Muslims do driven by Islam?

And it's also very problematic because the notion we get from the media, but also from some textbooks, I'm looking at what our children learn in school, you have this perspective where a lot of what's presented is that as if the only thing that drives Muslims every day is Islam. As if someone before they do anything in their life, they turn around and look what Islam says about it.

There are economic, cultural, political factors that shape how people behave. And this is something we saw for those of you who had that chance to read the book, sorry, Laila Lalami's novel, you could see these dynamics at play in the characters in the novel. I mean, again, I don't have a lot of time, so I want to just talk and focus... How am I doing with time?

Femi Taiwo:

About five minutes.

Amine Tais:

Five minutes? So I would like to perhaps... I was going to talk a little bit about the development of Islam as a religious tradition at the intellectual level. And I mean, since I don't have a lot of time, I just quickly want to kind of maybe create again, not a problematic or problematize the idea of the high religious tradition represents Islam per se, and that the high risk tradition is Islam at the level of capital I, if you want.

Maybe I'll spend two minutes on the idea of what they call the queen of Islamic religious sciences is Islamic law, what we call Sharia. You hear that word and people get scared. And Sharia is the idea of Islamic law, and human beings, Muslims, try to kind of understand what God wants. Sharia in a

linguistic way, it means the way. Just the way. And then Muslims want to find out what's the way of God, what God wants them to behave.

So Sharia tries to understand the idea of how to act as a Muslim. Now, Sharia develops in specific contexts, in a specific time, by specific people. There were a lot of debates early on, very messy. But the first thing you want to know is that you had an interaction between early Muslims as they conquered so many new lands and they interacted with legacies, including the Greek intellectual legacy, the Persian intellectual legacy.

And these things, in addition to what they carried with them as Arabs coming out of Arabia, created new notions of how they want to understand their religion. And this shaped a methodology that was developed, a methodology of how scholars are going to talk about Islam. So although there's no clergy in Islam per se, there's a group of people who share certain methodology of how to speak about God.

If you want to be part of that club, you're welcome, but you have to share that methodology. This methodology is developed again by human beings. And so all these levels are mixed up and Islam is just one thing. And I want to finish with how in the modern world, things are more complicated because in the modern world with the impacts of colonialism, you had colonialism coming into the Muslim world and impacting how Islamic law is practiced and understood.

There was a dismantling of all the institutions of Islamic law and replacing them slowly by codified law. And Islamic law, in traditional sense, is very diverse. It's a bunch of opinions about everything. They debate every single thing. But then as you codify things, you're going to impoverish that intellectual legacy because you have to choose. And that's what's happening in the modern world.

The other one is that modernity itself, as a way of looking at things, challenges tradition, and that happens in all religions. In the case of Islam, and this is something I want to finish with, is that responses are not monolithic about how to be a Muslim in the modern world, how to accept or reject modernity. So you...

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:23:04]

Amine Tais:

... [inaudible 00:23:00] how to accept or reject modernity. And the difference here at the summit, I want to stress this, is that the earlier encounter between Muslims, Islam, early on, seventh century, eighth centuries, when they encountered Greek legacies and Persian legacies, they were doing it as a victorious army, as people who are conquering, confident in who they are. The encounter of modernity happens in a time where Muslims are defeated. There's a Western hegemony, there is colonialism, there's a sense of humiliation. And so the encounter is modernity, and how we're going to approach modernity is shaped how Muslims perceived this encounter with the West.

And so you have, for example, just quickly, what I would call at least five or six ways. These are not in these categories, but at least five or six responses to modernity. You have those who I would call modernist Salafis, don't worry about the term here, maybe we'll talk about it in the questions, is that they saw true Islam as really compatible with modernity.

Modernity is Islam. If you actually went back to true Islam and go back to the time of the prophet, Muhammad, it's really just like modernity. And you had a traditional Salafi and also that's embraced by Islamist groups that says, "Who cares about Western modernity? Who cares? We actually just have to go back to how the prophet lived and just implement it."

And then you had a traditionalist perspective that still embraced that traditional legacy I was talking about, of Islamic law and so on, that said, "You know what? Maybe the West has achieved in the material word, but spiritually, we are superior." And then you had a secular perspective, just embrace the idea of separating between religion and politics and between religion and law altogether.

So again, what I want to finish and want you to take with you is these positions, how they actually become dominant in society is not necessarily about the intellectual merit or how strong they are. A lot of it has to do with the context. A lot of it has to do, for example, one easy one, global politics. If you look at, for example, the Cold War, in the Cold War, because of the fear of anything leftist, there was a push to implement a policy globally of actually countering it with more strict conservative Islamic fundamentalist groups. That comes back to bite us later on. And so this is just an example, but there's other things that are involved that shape which perspective of Islam is accepted, which perspective that chooses how to interact with modernity is actually dominant in the Muslim world today.

And so I want to leave you with what I tell my students all the time, which is, if you want to understand Islam, if you want to not be driven by stereotypes, get involved with the story. That is, look at this world that you're trying to interact with as a movie. Get to know the characters. Look at these dynamics. What are people debating? Get to know the characters and get to know and criticize and critique. I mean, a lot of people, because they're afraid, I mean, they don't want to interact. They say, "Well, we just have to respect Islam as is." But the reality is you can have a critical but sympathetic engagement where you actually ask questions and then know these are human beings that have different perspectives and you want to understand where they come from. And so I mean, that will clarify the intent of different groups and will make you understand the dynamics of Islam a lot more. Thank you.

Speaker 1:

Thanks.

Femi Taiwo:

Thank you very much, Amin, and thanks for sticking to the time. So Sami, it's yours.

Turkey Sami Baswell:

[Arabic 00:26:58] peace be upon you. Good evening. My name is Turkey Sami Baswell, and I'm a senior studying e-commerce and information system along with finance at Seattle University. Five years ago, I had to say goodbye and leave my family, my friends, my country, all the places I had the most beautiful memories in my life, to come to a place where I don't know anybody, to come to a new place, a new culture, completely different culture, a place where I didn't even speak the language.

As the kid who came from Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the Holy City, we're all Muslims, more than one billion people. When they want to pray, they pray to that direction. And they come to worship and practice

their religion. I was very fortunate, very lucky, and I'm humbled to grow up in a place where people from every country, literally, from very different backgrounds, come wearing the same exact clothes, walking shoulder to shoulder, regardless to all the differences, regardless to their skin color or within which borders they live, they all come and they're all the same. You can't tell who is rich or who's poor. You can't tell who's a CEO or who's a regular employee.

And to see all those people coming together and to understand that those more than one billion people in the world started with one man who couldn't even read or write, but he had a message and he delivered it to people and he influenced a lot of people ... I'm one of them. My father used to take me around when I was five years old and show me all different places and tell me, "This is where Prophet used to live," and show me other places, say, "This is where he used to pray. And this is where he first stood up and told people to worship God and stop worshiping stones."

It means a lot to me to be from that place and to understand how this man came to people who were considered, at that time, one of the most ignorant people who used to live in Mecca. People who considered by the two great empires at that time, the Roman and the Persian empire, that those people are forgotten. They didn't even want to come and invade them. They thought those people had nothing but desert and burning sun. And this man came from them, who couldn't read or write, wasn't educated, who taught people how to live, how to be better people, who took them from their darkness they used to live and make them, at one point of time in history, the greatest nation at that time.

And one time in history, the Islamic empire was the greatest empire, but they reached their peak. And unfortunately now, Muslims might memorize versus from Quran, Muslims might remember the stories of the prophet or what he used to say and teach, but they don't act to what it says. Unfortunately, most people don't do what the Prophet told them to do. Most people misrepresent Islam, Muslims misrepresent Islam. When I watch Fox News, for example, it hurts me to see them talking about Islam in such a way. And I say to myself, "This is not right, and this is misconception about Islam." But when I now meet a lot of Muslims, I said that these misconceptions were not created by anybody else but Muslims themselves.

I remember before I left Saudi Arabia five years ago to come to the United States, my mother hold my hand and looked in my eyes and told me, "Why do you want to go there? Those people see you as a terrorist. Why do you want to go and live with people who don't like you and see your religion as a thing that encouraged killing and hurting others?" I was younger, I didn't know what to say, but when I came here, I told her ... I go to La Sierra University, which is a Jesuit Catholic school. So if you ask if I was scared, I was scared to death.

But my experience at Seattle University opened my eyes and I saw a lot of new dimensions that I didn't even know about. And I interacted with a lot of people from different faiths, different beliefs, and those people made me a better person. Coming here to America had a lot of ups and downs. We laughed a lot, but we cried a lot. We couldn't find the shoulder to cry on. But those five years, I would say they were the most important five years in my life because it taught me and it made me a better Muslim and thus a better human being. Thank you.

Femi Taiwo:

Thank you very much, Sami. And now Raya. Your turn. Thanks.

Chris Higashi:

Thank you very much. [Arabic 00:34:11] I'd like to know how many Arabic-speaking people are here. [Arabic 00:34:18]. Thank you very much for being here tonight with us. Thank you very much, Chris, and my colleague, Professor Olufumi, for this opportunity of a face-to-face interaction.

Where do we start? How we came here to this panel. I'm going to tell you stories, a bunch of stories. Short, I'll try to make them concise and short. And I would like to read some of the poems in the last book I wrote, which is a book of poems [inaudible 00:35:02], which I coined in English as Prosem.

Let's be honest, to start out, I was surprised to be invited because I'm a poet. I'm a writer, for whatever that's worth, whatever it means. I'm a painter. And what do artists do in religion and in religious discussions? So however humble my work might be, it's respected and read and collected and invited both in the United States and overseas and among my brothers and sisters in the so-called Muslim world.

So what do I do with a discussion on Islam? So this is a confession, non-Catholic confession, that I wasn't sure what my role would be or should be, because for one thing, I came to the United States in '82 and I go back to my native homeland about every year, depending on how I can or time and everything else allows me to go back. So I'm a binational and hopefully just a terrestrial.

So since I came in '82, I developed a certain tradition, which is to check every year, at least once, wherever I am in the world. And here in my hometown, this city, the libraries and the bookstores. I did that for about 20 years. What I wanted, what I checked every time was their collection of poetry, literature, basically, of course translated from the Arabic. That is my first language, even though I am Amazigh, Berber, whatever that means, from North Africa. My first language is Arabic and I'm very passionate about it.

So I've been hungry for decades, since '82. I look for artwork everywhere from our parts of the world where we were born and raised, where our psyche was formed before we came here. And I find usually a Middle East section that has, and I don't want to use academic dryness here ... Nobody's using it. There's no need for it, but I'll use one word. I found myself confined to a specific paradigm, which I have come to name ... actually, I gave it several names several times. The deadly square or the deafening square or, using a take on Noam Chomsky's work, the fateful triangle, the fateful square, and hear how it's been presented up to maybe Laila Lalami's work, and my own, and very, very, very few other writers.

The fateful square has four angles that honestly eat up at our soul if we let them every day. The first part of it, the first angle is that we as a people who come from so many countries in the world, so many class, so many beliefs, so much different behaviors, with so much plurality in everything we do, we are lumped into one angle, which is that we are all Muslims. And brothers and sisters who are Muslims here, don't get offended. Let me continue. Believe me, we will come to an understanding if we don't have one yet. So we are all defined as Muslims, regardless of how many atheists or nots or whatever, or non-believers or Christians or Jews or anybody else, Baha'is.

So therefore, Islam is that religion in one angle that is oppressive, which gives us the other angle, the other corner, which is that, well, who are the oppressors? Usually they're the terrorists, right? So you have religion and you have violence, terrorism by the men.

As a result, we get the third corner, the third really sharp angle, which is that, oh well, their poor women. They're so oppressed. As if we are genetically predisposed to be oppressed and also to accept oppression, as if feminism is a Western invention, as if it is an invention whatsoever.

And then most recently, the last angle completed this square was the addition of the noble savage equation, from which our other ancestors, they're not other, they are our ancestors, our earlier sisters and brothers from Africa were brought here, suffered. And of course, our other relatives who are the American Indians, everybody suffered from the noble savage angle, which is that ... So in our case, I'm not going to extrapolate too much. In our case, I will go straight to the point. Well, it's our mysticism. It's Sufism. And it's specifically the whirling dervishes. Well, I'm extrapolating already, even though most Sufi, sanctified or not, actually are social justice reformers for the most part, most of them. Most of them are artists. Most of them were people who fought very hard for justice. There were exceptions, of course, but we don't know that.

So everywhere I went in all these bookstores and libraries, for the most part, those were the kinds of artworks, if any, if we can call them so, and books that I would find. That's kind of a big dearth, almost total absence of culture. For somebody who was weaned on the arts and literature in Arabic, in French, in other languages, it was really extremely frustrating to go year after year after year and find nothing.

So this time when I was invited to speak, I thought, "Well, fine, you can remain a non-participant in this conversation." And again, I'm not talking about me. I am the best example that I know in terms of details. I'm talking about everybody from where I grew up, which is the African continent, which has millions and millions and millions of all sorts of Muslims. And we're not even talking about the Middle East. We're not talking about the Far East. We're not talking about the fact that the United States is a Muslim country in a good part. We may not want to see it, but the Muslim population in this country probably will not go back. Probably most of it will stay. And there have been Muslims here before the new waves of people who are Muslims who came because their homelands are being swallowed up by our tax dollars.

I go everywhere. And forgive me, I'm not confused, I don't want to confuse you, but I say this to my daughter when I get to talk about several things at the same time. We have to be all over the place. We have to be in the whole place because there is no place without wholeness, without us taking into serious consideration the wholeness of everything we're doing, where we come from, who we are. So this time I thought, "Okay, the dialogue, maybe there is a possibility of a genuine dialogue. Let's call it faces of Islam, whatever it's called." We can no longer stay outside of the conversation. So thank you again. That's a huge big note to say thank you again for this opportunity.

What I would like to share more with you is aspects of language. That's probably because also that's where I work most. That's what I know most or are most comfortable. Islam as a religion, to use Idries Shah, some of you may know him, Idries Shah's words, Islam was not a new religion. It was an affirmation of the values and the principles of Judaism and Christianity. Again, I'm not talking about my personal beliefs. I'm talking about historical facts. So in that sense, really, language was not just needed. Language was absolutely necessary for these three religions to interact.

And they did interact. Islam recognizes all the prophets that preceded the Prophet Muhammad. So in order to understand what values were in common, what the borrowings were, what the inspiration was, there had to be a language that was shared by most people. Well, Aramaic was the language. I

personally, as a historical linguist, that's what I believe. That's where my research has led me, is that Aramaic was the African mother language of Arabic and Hebrew and Swahili and Amharic and other languages. And so to stay with that connection-

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:46:04]

Chris Higashi:

... to stay with that connection by suggestion or what I am offering, submitting to you tonight is what I perceive as a fact. That a lot of you, probably most of you, are Muslims by the mere fact that so much of our language is in yours too, and that we are Christians and Jews and Buddhists and everything else by the fact that at the beginning of Islam, the Arabic language continued to evolve and grow. And the only way it was able, and I'm talking now as a linguist, it was able to do it, it's because it embraced lots of other languages also.

Hence, the fact that our grammar is very complex ... It's not too complicated or difficult to learn, by the way, but it is complex and it has specific words that tell you which word [foreign language 00:47:06]. It has the grammatical definitions that will lead you to the origin of the language where, the word actually, where it came from. And I'll start without opening this book, offering you just a few examples.

I'll start with a crazy one. Masquerade. We use it. It's an English word, right? Masquerade is [foreign language 00:47:38]. It's [foreign language 00:47:40]. It's just gesture, action. It came into English through Italian and through French, at least. And I think old Latin also, possibly. How did it travel? It did need to travel through geography, right? So there is geography that's involved as well.

I want to indicate something else that is crucial that we do have not just in common, but that has touched humanity in ways that most of us don't really recognize. And that is the prophet's wife, Aisha, was a poet and she was a grammarian. And this I didn't learn in school, to be honest. I did not learn it in school. I had to learn it on my own in my adult life. I'm going to allude to four linguistic revolutions in one of the poems that I will read you. One of them ... How am I doing it with time?

Femi Taiwo:

Hmm?

Chris Higashi:

Are we okay with time?

Femi Taiwo:

You have two minutes.

Chris Higashi:

Oh, my God. I was teasing them.

Femi Taiwo:

[inaudible 00:48:57].

Chris Higashi:

I was teasing the brothers when I first came. I said, "First, I am a minority here, since I'm surrounded by wonderful three brothers, albeit, but I am a minority. So I'll take a little bit more time." And the other thing is that in this discourse in the United States in general, the very, very few women who have been invited to this kind of conversation have been, with all sincere due respect, not natives to Islam for the most part.

And they have been invited to converse only within that fatal square that I was telling you about, which includes, by the way, the old Middle East conflict, which is the Palestine-Israel conflict. I forgot, now that I can afford it to mention that aspect. So we don't have ... We're never part of the conversation. So will you forgive me if I take a few more minutes?

Femi Taiwo:

Yeah.

Chris Higashi:

Thank you.

Femi Taiwo:

I'll charge you for it though. [inaudible 00:50:04].

Chris Higashi:

We'll bargain later. Aisha, bless her memory and bless her soul and bless everything she tried to do. Being the great grammarian that she was and being the strong woman that she was, at some point ... And I think probably the Muslims here know the story, but not everybody else does. Aisha was not very happy with one grammatical fact at the beginning of the Quran, which was that pre-Islamic society and actually the current society in the Arab world, especially the Arabic-speaking world, has a specific ... Its grammar is very specific. It's gender-specific. I personally like it. That's not the point. But the women are addressed in a certain way and the men are addressed in a certain way. The Arabic grammar allows for the precision and sentients are addressed in a certain way and things are also addressed or they're described or talked about in a certain way.

So when you speak to a woman, you are speaking with a woman, to a woman and the pronoun shows it and the verb is conjugated accordingly and all that. And Aisha was not happy with a fact at the time and that is the Quran was addressing only ... Its grammar was only used in the masculine form. Well, [foreign language 00:51:28]. So she has a friendship with the prophet. She told them, "I don't like this. How come your new religion doesn't ... What about us?" There were apparently, according to Sahih al-Bukhari, no arguments, no fights, nothing. A little bit later, those who read the Quran, they will find the exact place where the Quran has started addressing women and men together. [foreign language 00:52:01], and so on and so forth.

So just for that, this is one revolution that had impact throughout history on all of us. This is part of our feminist history, if you will, the history of feminism in our parts of the world. Something else that Aisha had reported, again, I think it's according to Sahih al-Bukhari, one asked about the class. Well, of course the word class wasn't used. It's not a contemporary construct. But anyway, she was asked about behavior and the prophet's behavior in the house and privileges and all that. She said, "The messenger mended, repaired his own sandals. He took care of his own things. In the house, he behaved like everybody else. When given the choice between two things, he picked up the lesser one."

So these are some of them, some of the stories. And I would like to share one poem at least about the other things we share linguistically. The title's in French. [foreign language 00:53:34]. What Does Not Inspire You Will Use You Up. God, I should ... There are words here that are the same, but they're pronounced differently in several languages. And that's a little bit of the point I'm trying to make about our linguistic commonalities, which I will let you decide whether they actually reflect other commonalities we have or not. "God, Iblīs, Thoth," this is in Egyptian. These are Egyptian names, God of lower Egypt. That is the God of writing.

"We must retranslate your name." We call Satan also Iblīs in Arabic, by the way. "We must retranslate your name. Who has been calling you Iblīs? And by the way, how did the sacred cow come to appear in everybody's sacred book?" [foreign language 00:54:38], which is [inaudible 00:54:40], [foreign language 00:54:41] for one is a long crossing. Mother (singing) Buddhist Zen called to the creative powers of the great Mother of all. [foreign language 00:55:08]. All of them were just [foreign language 00:55:16], which in Arabic is eve for us. The meaning, breath, air, which apparently at some point in history became YHWH, God in Hebrew, and Yahweh in Arabic, meaning to be in love or to fall down.

Well, how interchangeable the fallings? Did the cow survive in everybody's book because of the sacredness of precious life that milk symbolizes? Not as in the commonly mistranslated Quran, [foreign language 00:56:11]. Paradises under the heels of mothers or the chastity imposed on Mother Mariam, Maria, Mari, but life itself as our collective mother, language detours, lapidary inscriptions on the psyche of everything that breathes. Let there be light. Let there be light was and still is the call of many an African midwife, woman, man and child for the baby being born to come out of the protective darkness of its mother's womb. That's what it used to mean.

In Aramaic, that's what it means, let there be light. A natural outcome. My beautiful poet, beloved brother, lover of all lovers, the moment must be ours entirely. And when? Where shall we meet? Where shall it be? By Sheba's emerald landscapes or Solomon's dream by the sea. I'm not writing scripts or establishing shots about our first convergence. They are writing themselves and what hilarity? No.

Femi Taiwo:

[inaudible 00:57:54].

Chris Higashi:

Okay. I'll do this one fast. I wrote this poem. It's also commentary on religion in general. This is one of the very, very first poems I wrote, so my English was really very young at the time. When I came to the United States and again, the debate about religion, Islam was not included in it, but still there was a debate about different forms of Christianity and Judaism and I think Buddhism was still very young,

relatively young in this country. And I couldn't help but write these verses about Prophets of Today, which is the title of the poem. Because of the observations I had made.

"They plow the streets of little ends and collect tickets for jaywalking on pavement they carpet on the poetry of their nights. The prophets of today need bleached bread into beaches for the yearly pedal back on fumigating boats, bulging with seasonal caravans of hopes. As you know, they sail home. Fly or hitchhike to the nest, get raped on the way, knifed or hijacked for porno slavery or all of the above. The prophets of today are poets of lead hail, confiscated, alive in incarceration hormones, midnight boxes, midnight flesh cages, graveyard shifts, white powders. The prophets of today. The prophet of today is that little sister at five an erudite on fear, mutiness, death, and also survival.

As somebody's blood-moated sheets and footsteps will holler. The prophets of today dig their path out of the steel labyrinth scratch by scratch, their only tool, the dream. Maybe a pen, maybe just a fingernail. The prophets of today have no ladders to decrepit heavens. Only familiarity with those wrapping hell in glistening nightmares. Memory of almost irreversible walls of ice. And we remember. We remember in thanks and shadows, our acts, our flame, and the steely cool wars of winter. Prophets of today are walking ahead, a scale in the heart, weighing two forgotten elements, forces of their babies and ancestors and some answers to the [inaudible 01:01:01] collective conscience."

Femi Taiwo:

Thank you.

Chris Higashi:

Thank you so much for listening and thank you for the extra time.

Femi Taiwo:

No problem. I think I would just like to throw it open. I really don't like to have a panel where members of the audience are not able to weigh in. The other part of our education will not be complete. So please, I'm going to throw it up on, your questions, your comments, your reactions, and maybe then I may be able to say a few words, [inaudible 01:01:34]. So the floor is open. Yes?

Speaker 3:

[inaudible 01:01:37].

Femi Taiwo:

So the question is, you said during your presentation, Sammy, that being here and studying here has made you a better Muslim. Now, he wants to know whether there is not the possibility of some conflict between what you call strict Islam and some of the Western things that you have to do here. Did I report that correctly?

Speaker 3:

No. [inaudible 01:02:03].

Femi Taiwo:

Right.

Speaker 3:

[inaudible 01:02:03] and a better human being.

Femi Taiwo:

And a better human being. Yes. Whether there might be a conflict between being a better Muslim and a better human being.

Turkey Sami Baswell:

Okay.

Femi Taiwo:

Yeah.

Turkey Sami Baswell:

I truly believe being a better Muslim is being a better human being. And you might think of people who call themselves Muslims and they're not acting in a human way, but being a better Muslim, if you really learn the Islam, you will immediately become a better human being. Because Islam, it teaches you all the advice, and regardless to what other people do or how they misrepresent Islam. As I mentioned, I'm talking about if you really follow the religion and the way it teaches, you will be a better human being. So yeah.

Femi Taiwo:

Thanks. Yes? The questioner wants to know why, given what you said in your presentation about the conflicted nature of your coming and what you felt when you came, why you didn't make use of the opportunities at home, she still is interested in knowing why you came specifically to the United States to study?

Turkey Sami Baswell:

Yeah. I received a scholarship, a full scholarship that includes my bachelor, master and PhD to come and study in the United States. So the Saudi government decided to pay for everything and even they gave me a salary every month and they pay for my tickets, my medical insurance, and they cover my tuition. So it was just a great opportunity for me to come and see that I'm beside the great education that it's here in the United States. And I might have regretted, like I was feeling bad when I was leaving, but now as I said, those years were very important to me and made me a better Muslim and person, better human being.

Femi Taiwo:

Maybe I'll just say one thing in addition to that. I think part of what the three speakers have also mentioned, which I can corroborate, I am from Nigeria originally, and part of the reason why I decided to take part in this panel and all that is to reprise the role that Chris referred to when my campus held a session like this after 9/11. And the reason why my experience becomes important is Nigeria is a pluralist country in terms of religions and various cultures, but I come from the part of the country where the split between Muslims and Christians is about 43, 44% each.

And what that means is that I get both from even within my own family. But more important, there is a history behind how Islam got to Nigeria, the northern parts first, where it is about 1,000 years old now, but much later in the 16th century to my part of Nigeria. And this has to do with some of what I think the speakers were referring to. A part of why the Saudi government, I would think, will send a young man to come and study here is actually not doing something that is unlike what Islam presupposes. It is actually underscoring the importance of that universal experience and of learning from other places without any fear that this 18 year old might just come here and be lost forever.

Maybe being lost is also part of what is expected sometimes because you cannot always control what the outcome is going to be. But the fact that you realize that your young people need to know the world is something that I would hope was part of the motivation for spending all this money. And I would like to hope that Seattle University has not disappointed him in that respect.

Turkey Sami Baswell:

Yes. More questions, please? Comments? Yes, sir.

Femi Taiwo:

Just come and use this, please.

Speaker 2:

[foreign language 01:06:13]. I am also a Muslim. I was born in Egypt. It's a great opportunity for an event like that, for us to create this dialogue. I lived in the West in Canada and in the US for more than 25 years. I actually earned a scholarship to do a doctorate in engineering from the University of Alberta. There are problems with both cultures, the Muslim culture or with its subcultures, and also in the West here. And that's where actually I find, as much as we Muslims failed actually to define ourselves to the West and to other cultures too, we had to wait for a Osama bin Laden to actually start the dialogue, unfortunately, on a bad note.

But I would like also to say that there are things in the West, like to me, for example, for the West with its universities and its advanced technology, to end up having a George W. Bush or a future Sarah Palin to become a president and the leader of the free world tells me also that in the West here, there is also quite a bit of educating or advancing in thinking in order to relate to the rest of the world. We should not just limit ourselves to the Muslim world is backward or it needs to learn democracy, where actually democracy itself in the West needs to be questioned and needs to be studied in more detail because ... And I don't want to go too far in saying that today, democracy in the West is actually a matter of money and who has more money to make advertising on television and so on.

I think that that's also part that we need to address in order to listen the conflict that's happening between the Muslim culture or cultures and the Western civilization as well. Thank you.

Femi Taiwo:

Yes. Yes, please. The question asked is, what is Amin's vision for seeing the deepening of comparative religion in our campuses? And I'll take it that's not just universities, but also maybe high schools, all around. Yes, in our educational institutions. Yeah. Amin?

Amine Tais:

I mean, my point was that it's not only about schools, my point is that-

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:09:04]

Amine Tais:

It's not only about schools. My point is that public discourse needs to also be shaped by this perspective because it problematizes this idea that Islam is unique. What is this Islam thing? And instead, kind of put religions next to each other, and you understand that religious traditions, as they develop, there are similarities in the way they function in society. And each one of them is shaped by its local cultures and local settings. And so if on the media, you have an expert instead of standing there and telling something happened. There's a bombing in some place, and then the expert comes in and says, "Well, Islam is peace, and this people don't represent Islam." Or someone who just wants to attack and say, "Well, this is all nonsense. Islam is actually violent religion." The way to move away from this perspective is to actually recognize that religions, all religions play certain roles, develop certain ways.

And then you're going to find people who act different ways based on how they understand religion, but also based on what the framework, the context in which they operate in politically and economically, and so on. So we have to move, and in my opinion, we have to completely move away from trying to find out if Islam is good or bad. We have to focus on people. There are Muslims. There are Muslims. We have four people here. I can guarantee you that our understanding of religion, that our practice of religion, that our encounter with religion is different. And so to actually just come up with... And the comparativism does that because it puts Islam next to each other religions, specifically, specifically Western religions, Christianity, and Judaism, and Islam share a common background. And actually, one of the reasons there's so much conflict between these is because they're so close to each other, because the theological claims are really close.

And so to move away from just singling this religion or that religion, you want to put everything on the table and then realize there's such thing as, let's study scientifically what is this idea of revelation. What does that mean a revelation? Instead of just theologically focusing on it and Islam is this and Christianity is this and Judaism, and keep them separate, you want to understand this phenomenon and how it functions in society and what the result it leads to. If this debate moves away from just basically being eggheads in university speaking about this, nobody understands, and into a dialogue in

society, in media, in just public settings, then people will stop focusing on stereotypes and start actually looking at things at a deeper level.

Speaker 4:

Yes. [inaudible 01:12:01]-

Chris Higashi:

I'd like to add to your answer. Thank you. This the reason why I described to you that paradigm that has been dominating any discourse, any discussion about things that concern people from a very large part of the planet, the reason was not just because the voice of artists and writers from those countries is very absent in the United States. It's absent for a reason. We have stuck in the United States to a so-called debate that is based exclusively on religious understandings or misunderstandings. And I'm saying this sincerely, I respect people who are genuinely curious about Islam and want to learn about it. Regardless of all the pluralism that there is that exists about it, regardless of how complex or not it is, and it's people are. I think there really is a manipulation that is happening. If we keep the dialogue happening, taking place only in this religious paradigm, people have human rights. People need water. The word water... By the way, in Christianity, you say amen. This is another linguistic tangent. Just to prove a point, you say amen. We say-

Amine Tais:

Amen.

Chris Higashi:

Amen. And the word amen or amen in fact means water in Aramaic. Think of that in terms of John's baptism, baptizing. I'm probably mispronouncing the word, right? Translate that into contemporary terms. Everybody has the right to pure and clean water. If we really, really want to stick to the religious paradigm, let's translate the metaphor into contemporary, its contemporary needed meaning. Water has become the privilege of those who have the factories to bottle water that belongs to all of us. Yes, thank you. So I think I really want to encourage you very, very much, however interested and curious you might be about Islam, to move the conversation to its political realms, to its economic realms, to its militaristic realms, to everything else.

Bring in more, talk directly, connect, create relationships, create organizations, to talk directly with artists and writers and people from the street and everybody from all those Muslim countries, because it's really necessary. We are in danger. And the danger is not terrorism, really. That is tiny, tiny, small part. The danger is all the terrorisms, including famishing people, depriving them of water, bombarding their countries, eating them alive, basically, eating their children life. We can go on. We want to communicate with everybody about religion, as far as whatever little knowledge really. Spirituality is another story we have, but the debate is kept in the religious idea, so that we can avoid talking about the other things. I think we should do it later. I think there are very, very urgent needs right now between us as members of the same human population.

Femi Taiwo:

Yes. More questions? Yes. So your question is, how does Ameen see the negative view of Western culture that is widespread in Islam changing?

Speaker 5:

From the colonial aspect. From the-

Amine Tais:

Okay. So Ameen, I just want to clarify a little bit about what I said earlier, which is when you encounter other thoughts that challenge you and you feel that you are comfortable with who you are and confident with what you have, you're actually more likely to embrace, learn, take from it. When you actually are on the defensive, then you're more likely to close on yourself because you see anything that enters to your world as threatening to your identity. And so you're right, since the colonial times, this has been the case in the Muslim world, and it continues because there hasn't been movement forward, in my opinion, since that time. Ameen, obviously colonial powers left, but the dynamics of interaction has still continued to be one of hegemony, one of top looking at bottom. And so instead of that, I don't see this... Ameen, I don't want to sound like I'm completely negative, but I don't see that changing anytime soon, except if people like you and me and everybody here interact as people and stop talking in terms of groups that are perceived certain ways.

And so the same way I'm talking to you today, I hope we have people going to the Muslim world from America, from Europe, and so on, and then interacting with the people, talking to people about Western civilization. Is America really the caricature that some people you hear about on the TV and so on? So this interaction of human beings is the key to move away from that paradigm. And the other thing is, I mean, for me, the other thing is knowledge. And knowledge comes from reading and studying and pushing yourself a little bit.

In our modern culture, it's a lot more difficult to do that. It's a lot easier to sit down after a hard day of work and watch, I don't know, The Simpsons, but reality is if you want to push yourself a little bit more and then interact with these things... By the way, I have made some copies of a list of suggested readings, so make sure that you stop by if you're interested to kind of like... These are different from what you hear all the time. Okay? They might not be representative of all Muslims, but they are different. But more important than that, in my opinion, as I said, is actually interaction, human interaction.

Femi Taiwo:

The gentleman there. Yes. So Islam enabled him to deal with culture shock because it forced him to go to his religion as a place where he could find some security, some certainty. Does he still feel that way?

Speaker 6:

Well, yeah. [inaudible 01:19:07].

Femi Taiwo:

So, where are you now, Ameen?

Amine Tais:

Yeah. So Ameen, this is-

Femi Taiwo:

We know you are here with us, but mentally speaking, in terms of that.

Amine Tais:

This is a very important issue in my opinion because yes, I mean, the dynamics, this is a debate we should have not only in terms of Islam, but I think in general when we talk about immigration in this country, which is that as you move on to a new environment and you interact with people, and your experiences and those interactions shape where you want to go next. And for me at that time, I felt weak, I felt rejected, I felt in an environment that did not seem to be... It must have been a perception, but the reality is that's how I saw it. And there's certain things that I see around me that make sure that actually I kept that mentality. And for me, so to find security and certainty, I wanted not faith, I wanted the faith that actually contradicts that. A faith that tells me I'm superior to you.

I mean, God is with me, and I'm superior to you, and I'm going to heaven, and you're going to hell. And so this interaction is really interesting because I continued to have that until 9/11. 9/11 is what changed me because it just seemed to me that I was just embracing something I didn't understand really well, and it's like horrible things are happening that just don't make sense to me anymore as a human being. And so yeah, I moved beyond that because that's the period where I said, "Oh, I need to learn." And then not only learning about my religion because I got into that, learning about the other as well. I came to actually really appreciate American history and American culture in ways that I didn't before, understanding the founders and understanding the dynamics of how America is a project that is continuously progressing with some setbacks, but it's a project that's still going on. And I want to be part of that process from now on, instead of being someone who's just an outsider who thinks they have the understanding of the world.

The analogy I usually give to people is this: at that point in my life, I thought it's basically if this is the ground, I was this high from the ground, and I thought I had control over what's under me. I felt this is the world, and then once I started actually looking into it and reading more and learning more and interacting with people, I started elevating and then I realized the world is huge and I can't really hold and grasp it. It's almost like it's a lifetime process, and so yeah, I'm changing, and I'm embracing change, embracing change continuously. You might meet me next year, and I'll be different. So that's how I...

Femi Taiwo:

Anyone else who has a question? I wanted to pose one to Sammy because it's really a great opportunity to have a much younger person who is dealing with all these questions that we're asking.

And my question to you is, for your cohort, your peers, both here, have you been back home since you've been here?

Turkey Sami Baswell:

No.

Femi Taiwo:

No. Very good. How do you think things are going to be if you were to show up tomorrow morning in Mecca for you and your peers at this point in time, given what your experiences have been and your Islam right now in exactly the way that you said? So, actually, this is now asking you the question that the gentleman just asked Ameen. Will you be a misfit now in Mecca? Will you be a perfect fit? Will you be somewhat of each one of those things, and what will make the difference?

Turkey Sami Baswell:

I think when you live in a country for a time, like five years, to me, I'll never feel that I'll fit in America 100%. Even if I talk just like the guy right there with no accent, even if I look or dress very Americans, I'll never fit in this country 100%, and I know that. But the thing is now, when I go back to my country, I don't feel that I will fit the way I used to be. So people who live, and maybe some of you have experienced that, if you live abroad for a while and then you go back, you feel you're lost. You never will belong to that country, and you don't fit the way you used to be in your home, own country. So that will be a big challenge for me, and I will let you know how it goes.

Femi Taiwo:

And what difference will Islam make to that either way?

Turkey Sami Baswell:

What do you mean? Like what?

Femi Taiwo:

Is your Islam different now? Will it be different from the Islam that you're going to go back to, or has the Islam there also changed, and you'll expect there to be... Yes, there will be those tensions and all that, but do you have a sense of what they might be, specifically speaking?

Turkey Sami Baswell:

Now I'm much more, I would say, open-minded Muslim. I used to live in a city where literally 100% people are Muslim. Mecca, everyone is Muslim. So now I met a lot of people who are not Muslims, Christian, Jews, or even atheists. I met homosexual people, and they're my friends. So I've met a lot of people that I never met back home, and I have understanding of how they believe and I understand that there is more than just one way to truth. I have my own way, and I believe this is the way, but I also respect other people have their own way as well, and they believe that this is the right way. So I'm more

focused on myself, and I don't see... I believe in my religion 100%, but I totally respect and admire other religions and other beliefs.

Femi Taiwo:

Thank you very much for indulging my questions. I needed to ask that question, and I'm glad that in line with what the two other speakers also said, because I think that part of what all of us need to come to realize is how much differentiation there is within Islam, how much debate, how much diversity, and the fact that each person, as in any other traditional culture or religion, has his or her own way towards it. Unfortunately, the cutout cardboard picture that we usually have are things that are different, and it's not just Islam. I'm from Nigeria, I'm African, so I know what I'm talking about. There are so many strikes that you're dealing with, but in exactly the way that it is not right for people to objectify Islam in that way, I hope that part of, and I think this part of what all the speakers are saying, when we get to know people, it changes us just as it changes them, and it then makes it less and less easy to live with those comforting truths that really have no bearing on their reality.

And I'm glad that's why I really put that question to you. The gentleman, the final question, I'm sure there are Indians, American Indians who are Muslims right now. You may not have met them, but this again goes back to what I just said, and I'm glad that Raha did say that Islam is much older in this country than people think it is. And a whole lot of the Islam that came to this country came from my part of the world as part of the cargoes that came, especially in the areas of South Carolina and Georgia, Florida, Southern Florida especially. And that fact is not often known because people think that Black people became Muslims with the Nation of Islam. Islam in this country dated way back before then, and it spread to other parts. In fact, that's precisely how the Nation of Islam also got its initial start.

So what I'm saying in essence is that if you then begin to walk through some of the connections, interactions, hostings that people have across all these cultural boundaries at various times in this country, I haven't met a Native American who is a Muslim, but I will not dare say that there are no Native Americans who are Muslims and who are really comfortable in their skin as Native Americans and Muslim. Human beings are infinitely adaptable, and we see that every day once we get beyond the comforting truths that Ameen was talking about. Yes.

Chris Higashi:

I'd like to add to what you said. I have worked on several reservations and lived on one specific reservation for many months because I was working with colleagues on a specific project from a specific reservation, and we had many, many conversations about religion. And honestly, what I understood is that it would be actually very difficult for many American Indians to not... It will be difficult for them to disrespect Muslims, but at the same time, it would be difficult for them to accept monotheism because I'm not talking about Catholic Indians, because, in what I was told, is that they respect representations and manifestations of the great spirit, which a lot of people misunderstand as sun worship or whatever, Wathena.

And to have one male idea, God idea is problematic for lots of American Indians who believe that the gender isn't right because there is no gender, although a lot of Muslims will tell you the creator is a soul. It's not a woman or a man and that just one power over everything doesn't do it for them because I'm

told everybody is part of the greater power. And the truth is that maybe we didn't have enough conversations because that's Sufism for me. That's the essence of Sufism. It's we're all part of the same entity and just smaller, and we make up a big one.

Speaker 7:

Thank you.

Speaker 4:

Thank you, Rama.

Voiceover:

This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.