

Karima  
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When were you first aware of the idea of God?

That's a hard question to answer. I think there was always something there. I was in a funny position as a child. I came from quite an atheistic family. My mother was and is now, a convinced humanist. My father, who is deceased, came from a Jewish, but secular background. In his wider family, I think there's been marryings out, and conflict over religion. Though there were certain aspects of Jewish life, which would come out in my father's speech and world view. However it was a home where atheism reigned. The nearest school in a country area near the outskirts of Coventry was a Church of England primary school. It was very much a church school. Anglicanism was woven into the warp and weft of the place. A very small school, with a maximum ninety pupils. Early on I developed a real love for the words of the bible. I was absolutely fascinated by this language. We're talking here about the King James Authorised version. We're talking about the mid fifties. I insisted on starting school at four. It was still an education where there was a great deal of memorising and learning by heart. So I learned chunks of the bible, hymns... Very much a contradiction to my home life.

How did this contradiction express itself?

There was a fair amount of debunking on their part. Organised religion represented outmoded rules and regulations. It also represented hypocrisy. My dad had fought in the tail end of the Second World War. He had come out of that experience almost a pacifist. Certainly anti-war, maybe even anti-authority. So to my parents with their mind- set, religion represented outmoded authority. When I was eight, one of the baby cousins was going to be baptised. I'd assumed that I'd been baptised my parents told me I hadn't, that they didn't believe in that nonsense. I was absolutely shocked to the core about this and terribly upset.

What did it mean to you, not to be baptised?

That I wasn't a member of the Church. I wanted that sense of belonging. I don't think my parents were aware of how devastated I was.

As a Jew, how aware was your father of the concentration camps?

There is a cloudy history about that, which I'm not quite sure about. He had visited Palestine, and through my great Aunt Rachel, who was very active in Judaism, he'd helped in the resettlement of the refugee Jews in Israel. I remember seeing a black and white photo of the ship, taking people to Israel. It was not spoken of.

How as a Jew, fortunate to be living in England relate to the annihilation of his fellow Jews in Europe?

This was a founding strand in my childhood. My parents were working- class made good. They were the sort of people who didn't take much interest in their children's schooling. It was benign neglect. I do remember my mother going to my school very angry. We'd been told some of the shocking details of the concentration camps, and she felt it was very unsuitable for children to hear about. Any rational person might agree with her, considering we were only primary school age, and the events were just ten years back. But it was more than that. I do think that my parents felt that this was actually anti-Semitism, and by their standards, were willing to stick their necks out.

How did they interpret this as anti-Semitism?

They thought the way the information was presented, suggested, the Jews had somehow deserved it.

Do you think there was some cultural guilt? Your grandfather's family had escaped from Russia where the Jews had had a history of persecution. Your father did not seem to advertise his Judaism.

One thing my father was very strong on, was the idea that we need to support those who are refugees, who have been chased out of their land and who have suffered persecution. That was always an explicit theme with my father. One with which my mother concurred .

Looking back over your own life, have you absorbed his commitment towards refugees?

Oh definitely. It's been an immense theme for me.  
So much so, I've wondered if it's been there in past lives, or in genetic inheritance.

What, this injustice of displacement?

Yes, yes.  
How has your understanding of God changed from that little girl who was in love with the beauty of the biblical language, and who wanted to be part of the Church of England community. Where did Karima travel from there?

Even as a child and young person, I investigated different religions.  
At about thirteen or fourteen I had a brief flirtation with Catholicism.  
I had an Irish Catholic friend.

What drew you to a Catholic God even as a mild flirtation?

I think the ritual was quite exciting. We're talking about a time when the Mass was still in Latin. Now that I think about it, the Latin was more important than the ritual because, as you know, I'm now a Muslim.  
I really love the fact that to have full access to Islam, I've had to learn Arabic. My prayers are said in Arabic. I like the challenge of reframing in a different language. I guess it comes back to the romance of the King James Bible. Because the language is so different, you have to refocus your ideas.

Didn't you study linguistics?

My doctorate was to do with linguistics. I started a university course in French, Spanish and Portuguese.

So your passion was not just for the sound of the language, but the mystery of it. Is this what you're talking about?

Yes...The idea that with a different language, comes a subtle shift in meaning as well.

That's very interesting. So what happened to your concept of God after your flirtation with Catholicism?

Quite soon after that, I rejected the whole thing. To the extent that I insisted on sitting out of religious education classes. I was only fifteen or sixteen at the time.

But had you had a personal relationship with God?

Yes I think so. Yes I think so. A personal relationship with God is really a personal relationship with your self. How you feel about yourself changes. I'm fifty-four now. I'm one of these people that life seems to have got better and better as I've got older.  
I certainly remember my childhood, my youth and my early twenties, as being full of anger And there was a lot of depression in me. I suppose what's called endogenous depression. It didn't seem to come from any particular cause outside myself.

And the anger?

Often a sort of frustration for one reason or another. Feeling boxed in, subjected to other people's will or rules.

Was that part of your nature from an early age?

Yes, yes, I think so. So I'm very aware now as an adult, of that need in me, and I would say in others, my children my grandchildren, clients who come for my services as a homeopath, of that need to channel anger into useful purposes.

Has there ever been a time where that sapping anger, escalated into rage?

Yes I have been capable of rage.

Was there ever an incident, which with age and maturity, you might have handled differently?

Oh I don't know really...[Long pause]...the most important things that happen to us, or we do, happen for a purpose. You learn something from them and that's all part of life's journey. So I'm not the sort of person that has regrets.

With anger, some people turn the anger in on themselves some explode outwards, which type are you?

A bit of both...occasionally I can explode. I've got quite a vicious tongue. I wouldn't like to be on the receiving end of it. Usually after a few minutes I calm down and apologise, try and make amends.

What about angry with God?

Long pause...Yes, maybe. It doesn't tend to be about human suffering.  
[Another long pause]...I'm not sure about that, maybe we should come back to that.

When you said that a relationship with God is really about a relationship with yourself. What do you mean by that?

I've increasingly moved to a more consciously mind/body//spirit position. When you're feeling good about yourself. Things are going well. You're feeling on top of it. Something like the feeling of first being in love, your concept of God, is as a loving God. I have quite a dear friend. She's someone with very low self-confidence, self-esteem. Over the years I've seen several deep troughs. Most of her discourse about God is of a punishing God. She'll say something like "This is God punishing me for a past wrongdoing." I try to jog her out of this but it's useless really.

And you think God is far bigger than our Psychology?

Yes definitely. But also I don't think that mind and brain are synonymous. I think consciousness is immense and we all partake of it. Intellectually I'm quite happy to jiggle various ideas of God, in inverted commas, side by side. I'm happy with a mish-mash of ideas from Carl Jung's collective unconscious, Hahnemann's idea of the vital force which he probably got from people before him like Paracelsus. I'm happy to have all sorts of strands and streams. I think God is a verb, rather than a noun.

What do you mean?

That we're doing God. That God is an activity, a process, rather than a fixed thing.

So how real is a doing God to you?

More real when I'm engaged in some sort of practice. Whether that's an intense spiritual practice like an actual pilgrimage. I've been on Umrah, a lesser pilgrimage than Hajj, which takes place at certain times of the year. On an Umrah, you visit the sacred sites like Mecca and Medina, and perform the rites at those places But it's any time of the year. When I did it, it was a very profound experience. Or going to some sort of workshop on a spiritual topic and participating in that. But in other ways too. When I feel I'm doing God's work. I'm quite a social outgoing person. So when I'm in the company of others, when we're all engaged on a project together.

So shorthand for what you are saying is, to you, God is not a person but a loving energy which we engage with, to perpetuate more loving energy?

Yes and we engage with it as well through other people.

How do we as human beings recognise divine energy?

[Long pause]

Is there such a thing? How do you experience this energy?

[Another long pause]...I suppose when I'm so engaged in some activity, which could be a conventional worshipful activity. Any activity where I forget I'm me. Where the burden of being me as an individual, drops away completely.

Does that happen often in your day?

[Long pause.] I suppose any time in the day, in little flashes. The important thing is not to be so rushed, that you don't notice it when it happens.

When it does happen, what are you noticing?

Well...That it's good to be alive. I receive wise quotes every day by email from a website called thebook.org, and they're usually taken from the three abrahamic faiths, but sometimes from secular sources. One very short offering, which I really treasure, is from Rabbi Abraham Herschel, which says "Just to be alive is a blessing."

I suppose increasingly some of the language and framing of a spiritualist outlook, one that looks at past lives and reincarnation, has started to resonate with me. I don't feel I want to take on board the whole imagery of this. Someone once said,

"Just think there are souls queuing up to be incarnated into this life." So it's a privilege to be here.

Whatever your circumstances. Whatever you're born into, this is a privilege. Unincarnate beings are longing to have the chance. This is a very weird thing to get your head around. It makes sense to me, that just being human, we can feel, we can experience. We have a physical body. We can do more than the angels.

Do you think we come into this life, being aware of this privilege?

Yes I think we do, and we rapidly lose that sense, when we're socialised and civilised.

I had a very profound experience a few years ago. I'd been through a very depressing phase, but felt I was coming out of it. I'd just ridden under the Bridge of Sighs in the old part of Oxford. Whether that particular place was significant, I don't know. I heard a voice, which was outside of myself. It was so clear, Ellen, amazing. This voice said to me...

"You volunteered for this mission, remember!" I was so amazed I almost fell off the bicycle.

Laughter...What really struck me was that this voice was saying to me ..."Come on, don't be a coward, don't be a weakling. You asked for this opportunity. You volunteered. You did know what would be in store for you. You put yourself forward."

For what reason do you think you came into this world?

That's odd isn't it. Because I don't know exactly what I volunteered for. [Laughter]..But I suppose there are so many adventurous things, which if we knew the details of what we were stepping into, we might not do it.

Do you have a sense that you came into this world for a particular reason?

I don't think that's just me. I think it's everybody. That's our mission in life, to find out why. What is it that I have to do? What does being me, really mean? This is the big question.

Where are you in this discovery?

[Long pause]...That's really hard...often we're encouraged to think of ourselves in terms of stories, but is the story really the right form, because stories are very time bound, with various modifications.

They're pretty much linear. You have a beginning, a middle and an end. I wonder if there's another

way of looking at oneself, more kaleidoscopic, a bit more of slivers of everything at one time and less of a false linear progression.

That imagery has much more flashes of colour, confusion and mystery. Is that what you're getting at?

Yes that's it. If we try to cut ourselves to fit a neat story, there'll be nice bits that are left out.

What do we do with the offcuts?

Laughter, yes, yes..Maybe my life is like a patchwork quilt.  
This is more relevant than a neat story.

You said you were a Muslim. For how long have you been in this faith?

I embraced Islam around the time of the first Gulf War.

Have you flirted with any other religion?

I belonged to a Tibetan Buddhist chanting group for a while, which I enjoyed.

What did it give you?

I liked the attitude of the other people involved. There was a marvellous confidence. They were vegetarian, and the families were home schoolers, which I also briefly tried. There was a real community feel.

If you challenged some of these ideas, would the group be flexible enough to embrace your challenge?

Yes I think so, because there were people who dipped in and out of it.  
What prompted you to embrace Islam?

I'd been thinking about it for a long time. I'd already read some of the texts. I had Pakistani neighbours whose children were the same age as mine, and I spent a lot of time at their house. They were quite an influence.

As a mature student, I'd fulfilled an ambition to go to art school. My final year project was on Islamic art. I also read a book which really influenced me. It was professor Keith Prichley's Islamic Geometry. It sounds very dry, but I was blown away by his ideas. Everything in nature, he says, speaks to us of God. He starts the book in a classical, Islamic, philosophy way of talking about the point of the line, developing on from that. Some of it is quite esoteric, linked to numerology and aspects of mathematics, which I can't grasp. It was the development of the idea that patterns repeat themselves in all sorts of ways, with our creator manifest to us in this physical world.

Why did it make such an impact on you, at that time of your life?

I suppose I was studying art and was making things.

Were you still wrestling with depression?

Off and on. Sometime later I did have quite a down time. I was trying to make a living as a textile artist, which was a complete failure. I realised I didn't have the energy to sustain an artistic practice. It was also too hard for me to be a one-woman band. You have to make whatever it is you're making. You have to organise yourself. You have to organise a business. Promote what you're doing. It was all too much for me. That was a disillusioning time.

What was it about the Islamic faith that drew and held you? You had dabbled in other faiths.

I think it's always been the intensity of spiritual practice, which I was able to tap into.

I don't understand that?

I suppose it came into my life at the right time, when I was more able to appreciate how mind, body and spirit are linked. When you do your formal prayers in Islam, you pray five times a day at fixed times according to the amount of daylight. It's not only a mental and spoken thing, you perform certain physical actions whilst praying. In that sense, rather like Yoga, which comes from that route of linking the spiritual and the material. I find it an enormous benefit. Somehow this practice suits my personality. To be carrying out a physical action, at the same time as the thought and the speech.

Is this the way you open yourself to the sacred?

Yes. I also find it immensely satisfying that all over the world, my fellow-Muslims are doing the same thing at the same time. That really hits me and many Muslims at the feast of Ramadan. You know that all over the world, in all sorts of circumstances, people are fasting when you're fasting, breaking fast when you're breaking fast. This vast family, I belong to. People I can't see, I've never met, are feeling that companionship with me, and I with them.

What is the power of fasting?

It helps me to concentrate in all sorts of ways. I'm not distracted by the thought that I'll go off and make myself a cup of tea and have a piece of cake. I try to use the time to concentrate on spiritual matters, so cut down on going out and socialising, or taking long journeys. This is a bit of an odd one, because you're exempted from fasting if you're taking a long journey. But I think you have to look at the context. In days when taking a journey was long and hazardous, and the availability of food and drink was much less than it is today, that was a reasonable exemption. Today most journeys are easy, so you don't need to take advantage of that exemption. I think fasting does bring about real compassion for the sufferings of the poor

What was Mohammed's purpose for fasting, for Ramadan?

That's quite interesting. He knew that other faith communities fasted; Christians and Jews fasted. It's bound up with the whole emphasis of community.

Similar to the other two?

Yes, but ritually and practically marking that sense of community. There's the breaking of the fast every day, which you do with other people, ideally in a community setting. The feasting at the end of Ramadan where you have to specifically share a proportion of that food with the poor. This is when you give your wealth tax.

To whom do you give this tax?

A fortieth of your spare income you give away at the end of Ramadan to those who need it, and there are various other restrictions. It's all about keeping a balance in life and to emphasise that interdependence.

You spoke of going on another form of Hajj, Umrah. You said it was a very profound experience. Can you expand on that?

For ten days my whole life evolved around participating in religious ritual. You have to go with a group, which was very interesting. It was almost like Canterbury Tales, with all sorts of frictions. You learned a lot about your fellow pilgrims. We had to resolve these frictions, because the whole spiritual act of pilgrimage would be nullified by anger, or any sort of violence. You have to keep yourself in a spiritual state.

Is there an idea of redemption in the Islamic faith?

There is no original sin, so what is talked about is the concept of tauba, which means returning. Being sorry for doing wrong, and returning to God. When a Muslim hears about the death of somebody, after conveying sorrow, he will say...

“From God we come, and to Him we return” The human being’s journey is to return to God. It’s this constant balancing of transgression, return, reparation. The five tenets of Islam, is what a follower uses to constantly return to God.

Do you see anything unusual about your Jewish roots finding expression in the Islamic Faith?

No because to me, there is one God, and many ways to him. Or there’s one story, which sadly in a sectarian tribal way, we all want to claim as our own. My dad had a story, which he claimed to be a Jewish story, which is about gratefulness.

If we as children complained, that so-and so had that, and we didn’t, my dad would have this phrase... “I thought I was poor because I had no shoes, and then I saw a boy who had no feet!” Many years later I went on a interfaith workshop in France. Because of my participation, I was given a lovely book with photographs, with short Sufi sayings and stories. In this book there was the Islamic version of the same story. I feel we have the same stories, made of the same human stuff, but in a partisan way, try to claim these as ours. Interestingly in the Koran, this diversity is God given.

God says, “I could have made you all of one tribe and nation, but you are not, because in this, there is a lesson for those who will learn”

What do you think the lesson is?

It is only by contemplating difference, that we can start to think what is essentially human. The next step is rejoicing in difference. Really taking on board that this difference is God-given and good.

How might your life have been different, had you not had a sense of God?

This is a really weird question. For a start it’s hypothetical.

I think everyone does have a sense of spirit. Sadly it’s often damped down, not encouraged. I feel that much of education and conventional child-rearing, is really about squashing that sense of spirit. It’s about squashing a sense of individuality. Putting in place a(‘yes-man’ mentality It’s a way of controlling and making the human being, a lot less than he’s capable of being.

Had the system managed to squash you, how might your depression have manifested itself...Maybe through suicide?

I don’t know. Who’s to say that that’s the worst possible outcome. We don’t know the bigger picture of things.

How has being a woman impacted on your spirituality?

Very important spiritual experiences have been pregnancy and childbirth and the relationship with my children, particularly when they were small.

Did you have a sense of the sacred at childbirth?

Absolutely, absolutely. This amazing feeling of the sacred trust that’s given to me as the mother. Even before that new individual is outside my body, I was aware of the commitment and the two-way promise between my baby and me. To nurture, to care, to love and to do my utmost to shield from harm.

When my youngest daughter was born, I had the most amazing experience. She was born at home, a planned home birth. Everything was going well until near the end. She was born a flat baby, which meant her lungs didn’t inflate. Of course this was absolutely terrifying. One thing went wrong after another. The cord had already been cut, so she wasn’t getting any oxygen. The midwife ran to her car, for the baby oxygen. It didn’t work. For the time needed to get another cylinder of oxygen, clearly the baby would not have survived. The midwife resorted to all sorts of first aid measures. CPR and dunking her alternately in hot and cold water. Meanwhile the time is ticking away. One midwife said to the other...”Give her to the mother to hold.” Meaning that I should say goodbye. I just prayed inside myself, Ellen. I said.. ”Take me instead of her” crying...I could not bear it, that this little being wouldn’t live, wouldn’t survive after all this. The older midwife said “No let’s have one more try” That’s exactly what she said. She had one more go at CPR, mouth to mouth resuscitation and Dahlia breathed. I’m crying as I think of it. From the time she came out of my

body, to that first breath, twelve minutes had passed. Absolutely miraculous.. There was no brain damage at all. She took this few mucousy breaths and then let out a big lusty cry. It was a split second thing. I always felt she decided to stay.

As a woman, you're privileged to have a ringside seat on life.

That story is breathtaking. I wonder what you think of an afterlife?

I think there's probably a before life as well as an afterlife. I've dabbled a bit in spiritualism, learning the basics of mediumship, which I find interesting. I'm just at the stage where, what I access is a load of babble. Rather like me standing on Euston station. The spirit world is like all that activity, fairly indiscriminate. Laughing I don't like the language spiritualist activity, is couched in. It doesn't chime with me.

For example?...

I do think there is another life. Not so much an afterlife, but a life that goes on all around us. Which we can occasionally tap into. The beams, the energy, the influences from that life, can suddenly grab us. It's a two way street. More and more I feel we come from somewhere and we are sent into this life for a purpose.

Sent or do we choose?

Perhaps it's a bit of both. I've been influenced by books on this as well James Hilman's *The Soul's Code*, a really fascinating book.

From my own children I can see how they come into this world with an amazing amount of their personality already formed. I see it again with my new grandchild, a very distinct personality there. Traits that will persist through life and inform most of his choices. I don't think this just comes from nothing. I don't think it's purely inherited either.

I would like to think that when the time comes, I won't be afraid to leave this life. But who can know in advance.

Do you have an idea of a good death?

A good death is rather like a good birth. I would hope to die at home with loved ones saying goodbye, wishing me well. I would like to find ways of minimising the difficulties for them, of loss. Which you can never do completely. A bit of planning might help that.

Can you understand why some people may choose euthanasia?

[Long pause]

I believe that people should be allowed to leave if they want to. I don't believe in keeping people alive when their quality of life is poor and they feel they've had enough.

We spoke about coming on earth for a reason, will you know when you've finished that task?

I think we've got a reason to be here until the moment we draw our last breath. I don't think it's a question of fulfilling one great mission, and then it's over.

You never know what influence you're having on other people.

How do you want to be remembered?

My Muslim name Karima means generous. Generous and loving I think. I do try to be. It's something I've tried to cultivate.

When I was about to graduate from Edinburgh I was a very hard up student, self-funding. Unfortunately I wasn't able to pay my fees for the last year. The university was not willing to let me graduate. A tutor, at that stage unknown to me, stepped in and got me a grant from the Carnegie Foundation. My fees were paid and I was able to graduate. It was a lot of money for the time, and I've always been very grateful for that. What impressed me about Andrew Carnegie was that by the time he died, he had given away everything. Lots of money was spent on education. I think that gesture

was a model for me. I would like to be known for giving in such a way that helps people to help themselves.

Is there a saying you'd like on your tombstone?

Laughter...I'm quite a romantic about that. I quite like graveyards, reading what was said about people. Maybe you can think now Karima. I'd like, 'ONE LOVE!'

What brings you joy?

Being with other people. I'm an absolute people addict.

Which are your most sacred goals?

[Long pause]...Just to be me, to my best ability.