An Interview with
Mohammed Hamid Mohammed

Claiming A Role in the Search for a
Meaningful Spirituality

Mohammed Hamid Mohammed is a senior program officer at the Fetzer Institute where he leads a portfolio of projects that focuses on the relationship between science and spirituality, spirituality and technology, and spirituality and health. His publications include "Communities and Freedom: Transforming Governance" in *Why Love Matters: Values in Governance* and "Enabling Community and Trust: Shared Leadership for Collective Creativity" in *The Foundation Review*. LCWR communications director **Annmarie Sanders, IHM** interviewed Mohammed about some of the findings of a recent study by the Fetzer Institute, "What Does Spirituality Mean to Us? A Study of Spirituality in the United States" and their implications for the mission of women religious.

Q The mission of Fetzer Institute: "helping build the spiritual foundation for a loving world" has strong resonance with the mission of Catholic women religious. We too believe that the more we understand the human world in which we live -- and particularly the hungers for a meaningful spirituality -- the better we can contribute to transforming the world so that it is more just for all who live in it. From your work at Fetzer, what can you say to us about the importance of engaging these spiritual hungers at this moment for the world?

More than at any other time in human history, we live in a very abstract world, meaning we are separated in all dimensions of reality and are living in a sort of virtual bubble. Our relationships with the Divine, with one another, and with the natural world are becoming more distant every day -- despite all the material wealth and knowledge we have of our planet and of the universe. Even with all of this, we feel very incomplete. In that incompleteness, we see searching. Think of how the word "Google" has become a verb. How many times a day do we Google things?

I think that behind that searching is a spiritual search, even if we don't always recognize it as such. Until we acknowledge our searching as a spiritual search, our feelings of frustration and of being incomplete will continue. I think that is the hunger and generally we have not yet named that hunger. Thus, we try to fill that emptiness with more material things and then we never reach the stage of contentment. This is something we have to recognize and we don't have to go far to find it. It's in us.

Q The Fetzer spirituality study notes that "we lack an understanding of the breadth and depth of what being spiritual means to people in the United States today." In a commentary on the study's

findings, Rev. Sue Phillips wrote, "When it comes to questions of belief, it's almost always easier for people to say what they don't believe than it is to describe what they do…. That's why 'spiritual' is such a fertile category: it allows people to claim the longing and connection they feel to something bigger than themselves without a firm definition." What suggestions can you make to those of us who would like to help people grapple with that longing and connection, even if they cannot give it a definition?

I would suggest that we name the longing. Naming is different from defining. There is a quote that I like from Maurice Blanchot, "la réponse est le malheur de la question" which translates as "the answer is the misfortune of the question." Putting a definition on something that is not easy to define often is not helpful since it limits the possibilities. Some people are comfortable with definitions and structures, but most people are not. So, naming the goal of the search and giving room for the searching are very important.

Q What have you found helpful when working with people who are trying to name their longing?

Listen to them. As you know, listening is a spiritual experience. When you listen to another, you become a witness and you allow that person to find something in your presence that frees expression. So, we create spiritual containers for people when we create spaces and processes or technologies that enable them to speak and be heard. I know your tradition provides not only space for speaking and listening, but also for silence, which is very important.

Q Another study commentator, Dr. Nancy T. Ammerman, notes that there are "few if any organized locations where people talk together about what it [spirituality] means – except, of course, organized religious groups." What impact do you see this lack of opportunity having?

What might be the advantage of providing those spaces today?

History has brought us to this point where we have almost a separation between the material and the spiritual. We created that split and, over time, the material started to predominate. Our spirituality now is a sort of limited, compartmentalized activity that we do in private or in very limited or delimited spaces. This is true for spiritual knowledge as well. Our universities, especially the public institutions, don't teach spirituality, unless it is from a sociological, cultural, historical, or philosophical perspective.

The larger cultural solution seems to be to integrate spirituality into our everyday lives, whether that's through grocery shopping, going to school, sports, or any other activity. Those are the places where we can create space for spirituality. I know that is easier said than done, but it is worth the effort. One of the wonderful things of our time is technology. Previous generations had to build churches in order to have spiritual space. Now we can build an app where people can visit, meditate, do yoga, study the Bible, or congregate. It can be expensive to build our own apps, but we can also use third-party platforms or share our virtual spiritual spaces with others. This to me is where the opportunity is to integrate the spiritual and material.

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Q The study noted that people sense divine presence in their lives in a variety of ways including "love from God, selfless love from others, transcendent presence through the awe of creation, and gratitude for life." The study notes that "spiritual experiences such as these have been shown to fuel people's faith, propel them to act in the world in loving ways, and influence how people give of themselves to others." What can you recommend that we do with this finding that correlates spiritual experiences with loving action? How might we work more with it?

One thing is clear -- we cannot induce spiritual experiences. There are people who come from the school of belief that says that with the help of certain substances or particular practices we can have spiritual experiences. But these things are just aids or crutches, they do not necessarily create the experience.

Spiritual experiences are very powerful and they change us profoundly. Think of the stories of our great spiritual leaders -- be they Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and others. Their stories have the power to change our relationships and what we do in the world. I think the closest you can get to an experience is through stories. In contemporary times, we have digital stories, documentaries, and more. Stories create empathy and so we can leverage the power of stories so that they impact what we do. They may not have the same impact as the stories of our prophets and saints, but our human stories at least get close.

Q Study commentator Dr. Pamela Ebstyne King, reminds us that the traditionally reliable sources of trust, belonging, and ideals provided by US civic and religious structures are eroding, forcing us to "find meaning and purpose on our own, with little or no institutional guidance." What insights do you have for how we can help people better integrate spirituality into their lives in order to, as Dr. King suggests, "construct a thriving life of transcendent meaning, purpose, and engagement"?

First, I would say that history does not follow a single direction. If we mapped the history of religion over the last 5000 years, we would probably see a line that goes up and down. We would see periods of excitement and firm belief in teachings of scripture. We would also see periods marked by doubt. A lot happens in life that influences what we believe and how we act in the world. If we looked at just the history of spirituality and religion in the United States in the 20th century, we would see a great surge in religiosity in the 1950s following World War II, the bloodiest chapter of our human history. That's when we saw big increases in the sale of Bibles and religious goods and the construction of churches. Then in the 1960s, there was a countercultural movement that took us in a different direction and then a rise in interest again in spirituality in the 1980s. So, if we look at just a 25-year time frame, it might look like there is a decline and that's true, but if we look from a longer historical perspective, it may very well change again. What might happen in the future that will remind us of our vulnerability and our dependence on others and on the Divine?

Second, if we compare trust in institutions across the board, religious institutions are trusted more than secular ones. Yes, the trust is declining, but it's relative. Whether that is a non-reversable trend we will have to wait and see.

So, in order for us to construct a thriving environment for meaning, purpose, and engagement, I think, we have to focus on the integration of the secular/material dimension of life with the spiritual. We see this happening through "workplace spirituality" where the importance of things such as mindfulness, yoga, and meditation are openly acknowledged in companies. This movement to integration rather than compartmentalization creates the kind of space that allows us to thrive. I would add that technology can play a key role in this as well.

Q Dr. Ruth Braunstein proposed from the study findings that people who feel a strong connection to their community may feel more invested in its future and more willing to sacrifice for the good of the whole. She raises an interesting question: "How might we cultivate and strengthen a connection not just to our own communities, but rather to all of humanity or the entire natural world?" What insights do you have about her question?

We are in a moment in our history now where we can see ourselves in a global context. There is a consciousness that is emerging about the vulnerability of our planet and how what happens in one place can affect another. As that consciousness emerges, so does our concern about issues of justice and human rights. All of this leads us to think beyond ourselves and our local communities. We now see ourselves as one human family living on one planet that depends upon our collaboration to care for it. Much of this has been made possible by technology – satellite technology, radio technology, the Internet, and so forth. We see the vast benefits of technology while recognizing that it has also created a toxic culture.

I suggest that we have to re-envision the historical concept of "mission" where

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a group of people traveled to another part of the world to share a message of humanity. There is still some baggage with us from some of the ways mission was done in the past with its connections to colonialism and more. Today we might do mission in a multi-directional way, so it is not one group going out to another, but many groups creating a new sense of mission and community. And today, we don't even need to travel by air to do this, we can do it through technology. The consciousness and desire are there among many people, so this may be the time when a new sense of mission could emerge.

Q Is there anything else that you would like to say to us?

I would like to note a finding from a study by Heidi Campbell from Texas A&M University where she found that religious institutions use technology less than other institutions. They might use Facebook and other social media, but she found that there was so much more they could do with apps and websites. I am thinking of how Uber got started. The company didn't invent anything new. It built the ride-share concept on existing cars. I think that is something that could be modeled and adapted for religious spaces. You have monasteries and other kinds of infrastructure that with some creativity and the help of technology could create spiritual opportunities that could be as successful as Uber.

I also recently attended a meeting with the leading research houses like Pew, Gallup, and others to talk about how to study spirituality, especially in the age of AI. We can use AI to see patterns in the data we already have. Much of the data we have now comes from self-reporting. But now we are looking at how to go even deeper and try to capture spiritual experience through AI. The meeting gave me a great glimpse of what the future of this kind of study could look like and its possibilities for supporting and growing spirituality. □