

This Being Human
Episode 3 Transcript – Craig Considine

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience — of being alive — better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem, "The Guest House."

FEMALE VOICE:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

So welcome to *This Being Human*, a podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today. Today, Craig Considine.

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

This being human is love. It's that feeling that each and every one of us has and it's existential, it's transcendent, it's something that makes the hair on our arms stand up.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

"Experts like immunologist Dr. Anthony Fauci and medical reporter Dr. Sanjay Gupta are saying that good hygiene and quarantining, or the practice of isolating from others in the hope of preventing the spread of contagious diseases, are the most effective tools to contain COVID-19. Do you know who else suggested good hygiene and quarantining during a pandemic? Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, over 1,300 years ago."

That's a quote from an article by Craig Considine in *Newsweek*, looking to the Prophet Muhammad for lessons about living through a pandemic. The article was quickly shared around the world. Craig Considine has a history of sparking discussions around topics like this one — how to apply the lessons of Islam to contemporary life and issues. He has hundreds of thousands of followers on his social media accounts, where he often posts hadiths — sayings of the prophet Muhammad — or verses from the Qur'an along with Biblical teachings that closely mirror each other. But despite being an ardent student of the Prophet Mohammed and the Qu'ran, Craig Considine is not Muslim himself. He often begins his lectures and speeches at conferences by saying he is an Irish-Italian-American Catholic from the suburbs of Boston. Today, he's a lecturer at Rice University in Texas.

I sat down with him last May to talk about what drew him to studying Islam so closely, his passion for drawing parallels between Islamic and Christian teachings, and about the lessons we can draw from the Prophet as we live with COVID-19.

Craig Considine, it's a pleasure to have you with us on *This Being Human*.

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

Thank you so much, Abdul-Rehman. It's a pleasure to finally meet you.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Craig, let's start at the very beginning. How often do people think you're a Muslim? Does it happen a lot?

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

It does, especially on social media. You know, questions on a daily basis will pop up and just say, you know, "Are you are you Muslim? Or what are you? Or what religion do you follow?" And actually this morning, someone had sent me the last question. You know, "What religion do you follow?" And you know, I kind of took a step back and I figured this person wanted me to box myself into a category and I actually said I follow the religion of love. And it was kind of a, you know, a clever way of answering it. But, you know, I believe that there are higher principles than these categories that, you know, box us into religions. And I think ultimately we're better off by even transcending some of these categories and thinking about something like love and humanity and forgiveness.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Craig, give us a snapshot of where you grew up and what your world looked like when you were younger.

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

Sure. So I grew up in Needham, Massachusetts. It's considered a suburb of Boston at this point. It's basically part of Boston. It borders West Roxbury and Brookline, where JFK was from. So like we were from Boston. I grew up in a kind of middle-class home, Irish and Italian ancestors, went to Catholic school growing up. Religion was never really overly pronounced in my house. You know, kind of like a lot of families in the United States, we were relatively secular, but we celebrated all the holidays and all that stuff. But we were really kind of cultural Catholics, I think, in many ways. And when 9/11 happened, you know, let me just tell you that the one of the real poignant things that sticks out into my mind is when classes were cancelled and all of us went into the hallway. And I remember hearing chants, you know, "USA, USA" and hearing slanderous racist terms being thrown out about the perception of the alleged people that carried out these heinous acts. And, you know, in the months that followed, we were fed so much — for lack of a better term, really — propaganda on this foreign entity. They tried to depict it as this like one Muslim bloc that was out there and they were out to get us. And George Bush said they hated our freedoms. And, you know, I was 16, 17, 18 years old, like I was a basketball player. That was it. That's all I did. I didn't really think deeply about these things, but I was influenced by them. I didn't know I was influenced by, you know, world events in the media, but I was. And

when it came time to go to college, I actually went to play basketball. And when I got to college, the Iraq war happened and I decided that I needed to figure out why something like 9/11 and why something like the Iraq war happened.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Craig went to study at American University in D.C. He was hoping to become an intelligence officer for the CIA or the FBI. Part of that meant studying Arabic and trying to get a better understanding of Islam.

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

You know, I went into this class, The World of Islam, by Professor Akbar Ahmed, who is a really notable anthropologist and diplomat, well-respected. And he had really good teacher evaluations. And I jumped in his course and I sat down and little did I know the first person that I sat next to in that class in the School of International Service was my friend Ali. And Ali was the first Muslim I've ever met in my life. And the first thing we started talking about was NBA basketball. And I was like, "Wait a minute." It was kind of like, "a Muslim likes basketball?" Like that's where I was at. That's where I was at when I was 19. So anyways, Akbar Ahmed takes control of the lecture and at the very beginning of the class, maybe within the first couple of minutes, he shared a hadith or many hadith. But the one that stuck out to me most was "the ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr," which in essence reminds us of the power, of the beauty and of the potential, like, transcendence that comes with learning. And learning not simply by means of scholarship. Learning knowledge through human interaction. This is more precious and more sacred than, you know, a nationalistic cause or becoming a martyr. And that hadith really rocked my post-9/11 mindset right then and there and I trusted what Professor Ahmed was saying. I'm like, "He knows what he's talking about and I believe him." And that was one of those moments. It's like he knocked down a wall and he entered into kind of my sphere. But I also let him in as well, like I trusted him. And if I had a teacher when I was a freshman in college who, let's say, was slightly — what's the term? — like, anti-Muslim or Islamophobic, I could have been in trouble. Like, I could have had a different path. I could have gone down the route of being an intelligence officer. But I rolled with the books. I rolled with the knowledge, the writing, the collaborations. I found that allowed me to create, and it allowed me to interact with my fellow humans, which I loved.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

When Craig graduated from college, he decided to leave the United States. At the age of 22, he got his first passport. He enrolled in a Master's program at the University of London. It was an eye-opening experience to suddenly be "The American." And he found himself fielding some questions on behalf of his entire country.

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

One of the first things I remember someone asking me was, did you vote for George Bush? And I was shocked by that. No one had ever asked me that before. And I'm like, "do I look like someone that would vote for George Bush?" You know? But like, that's how the world saw America. And they labelled me as an American. And I'm like, "Wow, so like, this is how the world

kind of situates itself around us.” And that really opened my mind to how kind of insular Americans can be at times. And you know, this was a humbling experience as well, like kind of de-centring the Americanness in me and making sure that I'm digesting various sociological narratives from people of all walks of life, you know? So it's kind of a good reality check that a big chunk of the world was very critical of the country that I came from. So it was a good dose of humble pie, as they say.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

He moved on to get his PhD in Dublin. While he was there, he came across a book that made a huge impact on him. It was called *Six Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of His Time*, edited by John Andrew Morrow. The book presents treaties Muhammad made with various Christian communities.

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

And I'll give you a few highlights of what they say. I mean, I think in general, they provide freedom of religion, freedom of conscience under Islamic rule. But the things that really moved me are things like: Muhammad is saying that if a church within an Islamic realm falls into disrepair, it is the obligation of Muslims to help the Christians repair their churches. And this was 2013 I was reading this. And ISIS was going nuts around the Middle East and mosques were being burned in America. And I was like, OK, so here's Muhammad, someone who is largely denounced by a lot of people in my own country, saying things that are extremely powerful, making sure that we organize ourselves and societies in a mutually dependent way. Basically saying the well-being of one community is dependent on the well-being of all the communities. And that just really kind of — it moves me not only in a theological sense. I was like, “Wow, so this is Muhammad saying this,” but I saw the timeliness of it. And I thought that these, you know, theories or these documents, however you want to kind of frame it, need to be shared. So I kind of made it a mission to share them. And I've written papers about it and so on and so forth. That was the main moment when the lightbulb with kind of Muhammad went off. He is someone I've really come to admire for a lot of different reasons, which I'm sure we can get into.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

When did you start drawing the parallels as you begin to explore the prophet and his teachings, how do you begin to square that with your Christian texts and teachings?

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

Well, I'd say, part of me wants to go back to 2016 when I wrote a paper on the covenants. And I think one of the reasons why the lightbulb continued to become more pronounced was because I saw the reaction of other people. So a lot of Muslims were like, “You need to share this more. These are really, really important.” And then other Christians are like, “I didn't know about this.” And then I had reactions from the poles. So you had some Muslims who are saying, “We don't want this, we want to persecute Christians.” And then you had Christians on the other side of the poles saying, “No, we don't want to look at Muhammad favorably.” So when I realized that I had kind of pushed a button, I thought to myself, “OK, I might be onto something.” My purpose is not to press people's buttons, but I'm making people think. So that was like 2016. And then I

kind of exhausted myself in a way with the covenants and I moved onto his position on racial equality. And for me, studying his views on racial equality made a link to Jesus to me. Even though we know that Jesus never explicitly mentioned race, or racial inequality or racial equality, Jesus, to me, was always the person that focused on humans first over any other category. And when I saw Muhammad advocating for humanity and defending people who were being abused because they were brought into this world looking a certain way, to me I was like, "That's Jesus right there." So I kind of made the connection.

DR. ULRIKE AL-KHAMIS:

Hello, I am Dr. Ulrike Al-Khamis, interim director and CEO of the Aga Khan Museum. If you are enjoying our *This Being Human* podcast, why not visit our website at Agakhanmuseum.org? Here you will find a treasure trove of digital collections and online resources related to the arts and achievements of the Muslim world. From historical artifacts and thought-provoking exhibitions, to a wide range of educational materials and contemporary living arts performances. All of this is made possible from the vision and dedication of Prince Ayn Aga Khan and His Highness the Aga Khan himself to encourage the appreciation of the cultural threads that bind us all together. Again, our website is agakhanmuseum.org. And now, back to *This Being Human*.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, what's interesting to me, Craig, is that as you're engaging in this kind of deep spiritual and theological interfacing and sharing. And as you're beginning to amplify that into the world, you're drawing some pretty serious questions and criticism for the work that you're doing. And, you know, you start encountering this as you start speaking more about Islam. And, you know, I'm reading some of the negative reactions you've elicited. For example, you know there was an article titled "The Twisted World of Craig Considine," asking "How much damage does his flagrant misinformation about Islam do?" Another person wrote, "Considine's purported interfaith bridge between Christianity and Islam, however, does not withstand any serious examination. Some apologists for Islam labor to quote unquote 'reinterpret' problematic passages of its holy books. Considine takes an easier route. He simply wills those out of existence." How did you respond to this criticism that in some ways was coming from folks who probably looked like you and came from backgrounds like the background that you came from?

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

Well, it's been happening for quite some time. I think the first element of this kind of backlash came when I wrote an article for the *Huffington Post* in 2012, maybe. And it actually compared George Washington's rules of civility and Prophet Muhammad's life and legacy. And I was making some very kind of broad connections. So, yeah, it's been happening for quite some time. And I'll tell you this Abdul-Rehman, I don't respond to it. I don't respond to it because I don't debate. I really don't. I don't debate with people. And I don't participate in debates. You know, part of this journey I'm on is not to condemn other people or to try to win an argument. You know, I'm about dialogue. I'm about listening to people, considering their points, seeing how they may agree or disagree with my own views. I don't think it's healthy for me or for any

individual in my shoes to engage with people who don't really have an open mindset into coming into a conversation. You know, like, these are my beliefs. The stuff I write about is personal to me. And it seems like some of these critics are kind of attacking me in a way that, you know, I'm trying to prove that I'm right. I'm not trying to do that. So, I'm concerned that there are people like these critics who, for whatever reason, want to focus on things that divide us rather than unite us. And I think we as human beings have a choice. We can go into any holy book and we can find something that could justify, based on a passage, some of the cruelest acts known to mankind. Or we can engage with our religious traditions in a way that can foster understanding, potential cohesion. I am positioned specifically in the realm of that openness, and I don't think the critics are in that space. You know, they want to find things that divide us. I do not want to find things that divide us. I don't think it's productive. And that's it really.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, in the same way as certain Christians come to you with this criticism, I imagine that there are some Muslims who probably come across your work as well and they kind of say to themselves, "Look, I appreciate what Craig is doing, but if he had such a profound and intimate knowledge of the Qur'an, of the Prophet, if he holds to the values of the Prophet, then by God, why isn't he Muslim?" You know?

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

I get it all the time. It depends on how it's framed. You know, like if there's a cold question like, "Can you explain to me why you're not Muslim?" I don't engage in that. But if someone approaches me and says, "I'd like to understand why you consider Muhammad to be a prophet, as a Christian, and why you don't make the leap to, say, the Shahada" or something like that. I mean, to be honest, I don't find a massive difference between the faiths, and that may bother a lot of people. In many ways, I am an essentialist. I do think there's an overarching teaching and philosophy to our religious traditions that mirror each other greatly. And I'm not so caught up on rituals and practices and I know that that is controversial, but I'll tell you this, too, Abdul-Rehman. I've been spending a lot of time researching early Christianity. And the more I study early Christianity, I suppose, like, the closer I get to Muhammad's views and what might generally be considered Islam. But I don't think as a Christian, you need to kind of convert because I'm already there, if that makes sense.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

In mid-March of last year, just as America was beginning to lock down, Craig wrote an opinion piece for *Newsweek* called "Can the Power of Prayer Alone Stop a Pandemic like the Coronavirus? Even the Prophet Muhammad Thought Otherwise." In it, he looks closely to hadiths from the Prophet that apply to living with a virus like COVID-19. Such as, "Cleanliness is part of faith" or, "Make use of medical treatment, for God has not made a disease without appointing a remedy for it, with the exception of one disease — old age." The piece was quickly shared around the world.

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

Yeah, the “Hand of God” with that one. I wrote it in 15 minutes. I woke up in the morning and I saw something on social media and I didn't even open the post, but it was something like, you know, Islamic principles and COVID-19. And as someone who's been studying the life and legacy of Muhammad for years now, and especially in light of the book that I've been working on, a lot of the times something will happen in the world, and I'll think, “Well, what did Muhammad say or what did Jesus say?” And, you know, just a simple Google search real quick and I started finding these things, I'm like, these are extremely precise. Like he was forecasting the future almost. And I think what really struck me were a few things. And I related these hadiths in the *Newsweek* piece. But, you know, talking about cleanliness — cleanliness is part of faith or half of faith. He mentioned that if there's a breakout of a virus, don't leave the space, because you can spread it to other communities and don't let anyone from outside of the community in it. Because then they can get it. But the story that really, I think, impacted people was the story of Muhammad and the Bedouin. And Muhammad and the Bedouin were both on camels and they were off their camels. At this point, they had dismounted and the Bedouin had left his camel untied. And Muhammad said to him, “Aren't you going to tie your camel?” And the Bedouin man said — you know, as a means of like impressing Muhammad — he was like, “Ah, I trust in God.” And Muhammad said, “Well, tie your camel first and then place your trust in God.” And to me, you know, this is another reason why I admire him, because he was able to kind of successfully navigate a spiritual religious realm, but also the practical, logical realm. And in many ways, this phrase that he was offering — you know, tie your camel and then, you know, be religious or pray — I mean, that's common sense, you know? In this country, the United States, everyone loves to throw around, “Oh, this is common sense. No taxation without representation.” Well, yeah, common sense. Don't tie your camel and expect it to be there when you're back. And that just really resonated with people. It was so easy. The *Newsweek* article, if you just read it, it was like anyone could have written that thing. It really wasn't my words. I was just relating things that had already been said. And I think it was I just put it in a simple manner that a lot of people were able to digest it in the sharing of it.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

It was a really interesting fresh moment in sort of interreligious and interfaith sharing. And I wonder, Craig, looking at the world right now, what do you think the prognosis is for interfaith cooperation, tolerance, understanding, convergence? Do you anticipate a new season of goodwill coming out of this moment, or are we going to return to suspicion as we try to protect what we have?

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

I think it's going to be both, I think — and this kind of goes back to the nature-nurture — and as a sociologist, this is, I suppose, the safe, the safe stake in the ground that I can claim. But, yeah, I do think once the so-called “threat” of the virus kind of dissipates, I think naturally communities that may have engaged in interfaith interactions would no longer. Kind of just go back and fall back to their safe zone. But I also do at least hope, and I am an optimist, that — and I've said this in so many messages on social media, that we need to maintain these connections. You know, like interfaith events typically only occur when the situation has deteriorated or if there's like a tragedy. Right? So like Christchurch, when that awful event

happened, there was an explosion of interfaith activity. When the couple of synagogues over the last couple years had been attacked, you know, interfaith activism and intensity rises. Why aren't we doing these things all the time? You know, like how can we really develop a friendship if we are not consistently working together? Like when was the last time anyone had a true friend that they had met once or twice? Like, true friendship comes out of, you know, prolonged engagement and connection with one another. So, you know, there's so much of this happening, especially in America. Like these amazing interfaith connections are happening. Yes. But then there's also the other side. So people of conscience and people engaged in interfaith activism, I think the best thing that we can do is share the hopes and prospects of interfaith work with the younger generation. And I know so many people have said this over the course of time. We need to teach our youth that the youth are the future. We have to get to know one another because our societies, at least in this country, are increasingly diverse. And it's actually common sense for us to energetically engage with one another. It doesn't make sense to isolate and to retreat, because then the age-old stereotypes just reproduce themselves because we don't know one another.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Just on a personal note, how have you been faring through it?

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

Well, you know, for myself, I think in another life I was a monk and I've been flourishing. This is kind of the stuff that I'm in love with — just like hunkering down, can't move anywhere. I have these books, I have the ability to write, I have to be the ability to create. So, I mean, from a purely like kind of hobby, joy standpoint, I've loved it. I haven't travelled. I haven't gone anywhere. I don't have a lot of responsibilities at the moment outside of my family. And, you know, again, thanks to God, like we've been blessed, things are okay for us. My wife and I. And my wife is pregnant. So we're expecting a child. So things are a little hairy on that front. But you know.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Congratulations.

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

Thank you so much. Hopefully, God-willing. And in August, Clara Bella will be here.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Inshallah.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

My conversation with Craig feels like it happened a long time ago. We spoke in May 2020. I checked in to see how fatherhood was treating him so far. He said that he and his wife Miriam welcomed a baby girl, Clara Bella Considine, on August 30th, and that she was the light of his world. A remarkable blessing, as he put it.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Craig, what is this being human to you?

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

This being human is love. It's that feeling that each and every one of us has and it's existential, it's transcendent, it's something that makes the hair on our arms stand up. And it's not necessarily the love of, you know, passion between two people. It's a love that is a lot more basic than that, at a very elementary level. Rumi says, you know, just smile or just open the door. Be welcoming. If all of us can do a little bit more of that every single day in the small human interactions, then I think we can really start transforming, not only ourselves, but our civilization.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Craig Considine, thank you for speaking to us today and for making time for *This Being Human*.

CRAIG CONSIDINE:

Thank you so much, Abdul-Rehman. And let's stay in touch, my friend.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

This Being Human is an Antica Production. Our senior producer is Pacinthe Mattar. This episode was written by Kevin Sexton. Production and sound design by Phil Wilson. Production assistance by Sydney Bradshaw. Original music by Boombox Sound. The executive producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. And Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions.

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