



Conversation with Gopal Patel

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Please introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about your background and what brings you to the work that you're doing today.

Gopal Patel: I was born and raised in England—Indian ancestry with a bit of Africa thrown in there. Studied computer science at college. After graduating university in England, I took a deep dive into my faith, because I didn't know much about it. I went to study and live in Hindu ashrams in India and London. An ashram is like a monastery. I did two years as a monastic in the Hindu tradition. Coming out of that, an opportunity was presented to me where I was asked to lead a global Hindu Climate Program that was just getting started. That was at the Oxford Center for Hindu Studies in partnership with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation. The Alliance was started by Prince Philip, and there was a connection to the UN at that time as well.

I was asked in 2009 to start this Hindu Climate Program, which I did without knowing anything about climate change at that time, but just needing a job. It was an internship, and that six-month part-time internship has led to a full-time career at the intersection of faith and sustainability. There are many understandings I have about how I got into this. There's a spiritual understanding, but in a material sense, it very much fell in my lap.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is distinctive about what you do?

Gopal Patel: It's a good question. I started this work in 2009, when climate change wasn't in the zeitgeist as it is now. What was needed at that time was to mobilize faith-based organizations to align their practices with their teachings when it came to environmental care. Greening places of worship, greening pilgrimage, greening assets and investments, trying to get congregants to take the

environment seriously, raising the moral crisis that climate change is. All of that is right and good and was definitely the entry point I needed to understand why this intersection was important.

As I've done the work over the last number of years, having seen the successes and the shortcomings of the space and the state of the world, there are a few things that are interesting about it now. Firstly, the crisis is much more acute than it was in 2009/2010, in terms of the science, the understanding, the impact. Therefore, the acuteness of the crisis requires a different approach at this intersection of faith and climate.

What's interesting about it now and looking at what's happened in the past with this work is that the faiths can't do it alone. Previously, there was this understanding that we could just get all the faith institutions to be net zero. My sense of it now is that faith groups can't do it alone, because they don't have the resources, they don't have the technical capacity—but also what we need now is for things to move at speed and at scale.

Faith groups don't move at speed; they move very slowly. Let me sit with this for 100 years before I actually do anything. It doesn't move at speed. It has scale, but it takes a long time to reach the scale, and sometimes the scale can't be realized. It can't move at speed and scale, but there are sectors that do move at speed and scale, which is primarily the private sector. Which other sectors can faith groups work with in order to capitalize on their potential, which they're not fully realizing? That's an interesting part of the space right now.

Given where we are in terms of the environmental crisis and the economic and geopolitical challenges we're facing, people are reexamining value systems for countries or economies in ways that they haven't really looked at before. As part of that investigation, I think people are increasingly looking at the faiths for answers. What is it about faith that's mobilizing people in good ways and bad ways? I think faith is having a moment now in the public consciousness. This wasn't the case when I started this work 15 years ago. I think those two things make it very interesting for me to be working at this intersection right now.

Ashley Hopkinson: What's an insight or a teachable lesson from the work that you're doing? Is there something that has stayed with you that you think would be valuable to pass along?

Gopal Patel: There's so many things. One thing I'm really trying to live now — which I struggled with a lot when I started this work — is that when people ask me where I'm from, I'm like, "Well, my dad is Indian, but he was born in East Africa and then moved to England in his late teens. My mom is Indian, born in India, but also moved to England in her late teens. I was born in England, but now I'm living in

the US." So I have these connections to many different parts of the world, the Global South and the Global North.

I'm a Hindu as well, so I have connection to one of the oldest faith traditions in the world. I grew up in England, and I call myself very much an Anglican Hindu. I'm very British in my Hinduness. To the point where my Anglican colleagues tell me, "Oh, yes, I forget that you are a Hindu sometimes," because I'm just Anglican in my mannerisms, I feel sometimes. I think that those intersections of faith and geography have given me some insights.

One of the biggest things I've learned, which I'm trying to model right now, is that so much interfaith climate work — and also secular climate work — is so grounded in Western, Judeo-Christian norms in terms of methodologies and language and framings and worldviews.

I didn't really understand why it didn't sit comfortably with me. It made me interrogate my own background and my own understandings of things. I was seeing Western-led interfaith climate movements trying to do things in the Global South, in Africa or Asia, and I was like, "No, this doesn't work in the Asian context, it doesn't work in the African context." I knew that because I have roots in those parts of the world. One of my Hindu scholar friends would say the challenge with Christians is that they think the whole world thinks like Christians. And the whole world doesn't think like Christians. That's part of that, the Christian frame.

How do you bring a diversity of world views and cosmologies into a multi-faith context and give space for all? That, coupled with the geopolitical shifts that we're seeing right now, with the rise of Asia, the rise of Africa, which are largely going to suffer the most or lead the most when it comes to climate.

The Global North and Western Europe and North America is largely Christian, and largely not religious in the way that other parts of the world are. There's all these things coming together. I'm just trying to navigate that. A lot of the work I do now is convening international multi-faith coalitions that are a little bit more representative of the world as it is, or the world that is emerging, rather than the world that was.

Most interfaith coalitions that come out of the Global North or Europe or America have been born out of Christians doing it, and usually Protestant Christians. It's fine, but they're bringing their own Protestant biases, which they're not fully aware of. They want to create an interfaith coalition that's national or global, but it's still framed with a Protestant lens and a Protestant methodology, which won't work for Muslim groups, Hindu groups, Buddhist groups. Whereas when all the faiths are on an equal footing, it's much more balanced.

Something like two-thirds of the world lives in Asia. Africa is very devout. South America is very devout. Interfaith coalitions that are more representative of the world that's emerging, especially when it comes to climate change, is really important.

Ashley Hopkinson: What's something else you would like to see more of?

Gopal Patel: The other gap, which I mentioned earlier, is the collaboration with different sectors. I'm focused right now on private sector engagement and faith because I think those are two worlds that haven't really found a way to work together. Last year, I co-authored a report for the World Economic Forum called Faith in Action, which looks at faith and private-sector collaboration for climate and other social challenges. I'm looking at it as an opportunity. I do believe that faith and business are the two strongest forces in the world, and if we can find a way for them to work together for good, that could be quite powerful.

Ashley Hopkinson: What stays with you as the evidence that you're making progress?

Gopal Patel: Good question. A very recent example is that I oversee the engagement of religious organizations within the CBD COPs. That's the Convention on Biological Diversity. I've been doing that since 2020, since the pandemic.

At the CBD COP that happened in Montreal in '22 in December, we had a thirty-fold increase in the number of faith delegates there compared to the previous CBD COP. Then just two weeks ago, we just finished the CBD COP in Cali, Colombia. There we had even more faith delegates than we had in Montreal. In Montreal, we had maybe 40 faith groups; in Cali, we had 60 to 70 faith groups and leaders.

For me, that's a real marker of success. In a UN multilateral space focused on biodiversity, we have a record number of faith engagement, because of the concerted effort me and others have been putting into it. That's now being appreciated and encouraged by the CBD Secretariat and other constituencies within the CBD space.

As I'm helping faith show up in stronger ways in these multilateral spaces, other organizations and other spaces are taking that engagement more seriously. Just the fact that we're having this conversation is a signal of that. That's definitely a marker of success, that faiths are showing up because they feel like this is a space to be in and they're being welcomed and encouraged by other non-faith actors as well.

The fact that the World Economic Forum revived its faith programming a couple of years ago is another signal that faith is increasingly showing up, and they need to be taken a bit more seriously. In a lot of other secular spaces — World Resources Institute, WWF International, UNEP — we're seeing new programs and new departments that are engaging faith groups on climate and sustainability. That's a sign of progress, that non-faith organizations want to work with faith groups, because they're seeing there's a potential there, and because their faiths are showing up.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some of the challenges in doing this work?

Gopal Patel: A few things. On the faith and business intersection, what's been challenging is that when we talk about it with people, they think we're talking about faith inclusion in the workplace. We're like, no, that's established. We're not talking about making sure you can have a prayer room or celebrate Diwali. That's certainly a challenge, getting faith folks and business folks to recognize we're not talking about that. We're talking about actual collaboration.

I think another challenge is what we call the instrumentalization of faith. We're going to work with faith just because they can reach so many people, but we don't really want to hear what they have to say. We want all the imams and the rabbis and the priests just to say that the SDGs are the best thing in the world. Not that anyone says that, but that mentality is often there. We need to push back against that and say, yes, faiths can do that, but it has to be a relationship where the development sector also needs to listen to the faith groups about their worldviews and what their solutions are. It's not a one-way street.

Another challenge is that some of the larger faith organizations and traditions, for historical and other reasons, dominate a lot of conversations. If you have a secular development organization that wants to work with faiths, their understanding of faith may just be Christian, and that's it. If they have a Protestant and an evangelical and a Catholic, and then I may be a Jew, for them that's interfaith — not recognizing that there's a world beyond the Abrahamic faiths. That's certainly a challenge.

Within that, oftentimes what happens is the larger faith positions, usually Christian — because they are so outsized in their influence at the global level — oftentimes dominate the space in the conversation, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and then that presents a challenge for other faith traditions to have a seat at the table.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders and decision-makers can do to improve collaboration when it comes to faith and sustainability?

Gopal Patel: The way I try to approach it is to help business leaders and non-faith actors demystify faith, and help them understand that it's just a sector like any other sector.

I think the faiths have done a bad job of presenting themselves as holier than thou, as this mystical, airy, direct line to God. Oftentimes that's done because it's clergy that's representing faith to these other sectors, but when it's people like me and Tariq, we're just brown guys working in the world. We're not anything special. I think when business leaders and others meet regular people who are rooted in the faith space, it helps them understand how to work with faiths. It doesn't mean you have to give up all your profits or start going to church every Sunday or something like that. Demystifying and normalizing faith as just another sector helps with that collaboration.

Ashley Hopkinson: What does it take to demonstrate the value of this work? What has worked for you in showing the value of this intersection?

Gopal Patel: Faith traditions are very broad. When it comes to mobilizing faith around climate, or any kind of social engagement or social challenges, people in the faith sector are much more open to collaboration because they're not there to evangelize or to promote their faith — they're there actually to make their faith relevant and apply their faith and their teachings to the challenges of the world. They recognize that they need to partner with subject-matter experts.

It's about finding the right people in the faith institutions and traditions who are maybe a little bit more entrepreneurial. If the Church of England wants to do a major program on tree restoration — which it currently has right now, the Anglican Communion Forest — it doesn't make sense for them to become experts in tree planting. It's just about making those connections with the secular organizations and about finding the champions within the traditions.

Business is harder, because there's more animosity between faiths and business, especially big business, and rightly so in many cases. There are champions in every tradition that would see the importance of building those bridges and those connections. It's about finding those champions on both sides, from the business side and also from the faith side.

Ashley Hopkinson: In these times when people attach so much negativity towards having a faith or spirituality, how do you reckon with that?

Gopal Patel: How are you putting your faith into action, and how are you aligning that action with these global frameworks or treaties? The more we can showcase that, the more funders and governments and businesses and other actors understand that these are groups of people we can work with, because we're in alignment, with the same goals.

Ashley Hopkinson: What was your goal in establishing Bhumi Global? How do you feel the work you did and the work you're doing now connects to the idea of wellbeing?

Gopal Patel: Bhumi Global, which we wrapped up a couple of months ago, came out of this sense that all faith traditions have something to offer when it comes to addressing the environmental crisis, and that within Hinduism, there are certain things that can be used to motivate Hindus and maybe other people to take the environmental crisis seriously.

We were very intentional about making sure our methodologies and our language were grounded in Hindu ideas — Hindu ideas of wellbeing, Hindu ideas of environmental care and harmony. Our programming tried to reflect that as much as possible. We did most of the work in India but some work in the US, Africa, and parts of Europe as well, mobilizing Hindu communities for climate work.

The reason we felt like its time was done was that we recognize that there are so many non-profits that continue existing just for the sake of existing. We felt that it's a very Hindu thing that things are born and things die off. We did it for about 15 years. We should step aside so that others can step up, because as long as we're around, we can be seen to dominate the space and gatekeep. That was a very intentional thing for us. We could carry on, but we could step aside and support others coming up from the Hindu space. We felt like our work was done. Let's let a new generation step in.

In terms of the new work I'm doing, it's with a number of other individual faith actors and consultants, and we're trying to build bridges between faith, governments, business, and other sectors around a whole range of social and global challenges.

We're looking at the role of faith in cities. We're looking at the role of faith in climate and nature, faith in food systems, faith in the well-being economy. We're trying to bring faith into new spaces and help those new spaces, which are largely non-faith spaces, understand how to work better with faith-based organizations.

It's bridge-building work, recognizing that all our systems are rooted in values. Oftentimes we don't really understand what those values are, or we take them for granted. Faith has values that can help us unpack what our current value systems are. Are they working for us? Where do they need to be adapted for the new world, which is emerging politically and economically and from a climate perspective?

We're seeing the desire from non-faith spaces to engage with faith actors. We're seeing that faith actors want to be engaging more substantially, but oftentimes don't know how to step out of the faith space and into more secular spaces to have a conversation.

Ashley Hopkinson: How would you define wellbeing?

Gopal Patel: Oh, God. I don't know. I think that's why I'm interested in this journey of working with the Wellbeing Economy Alliance — I'm trying to learn for myself. I'm a Krishna devotee, if you know that about Hinduism. I have a picture of Krishna right in front of me here.

As a Krishna devotee, coming from the Hindu tradition, wellbeing is aligning my thoughts, actions, and deeds in alignment to God and what God wants for the world and for every individual. That's my religious and spiritual theory of change. Wellbeing is contingent on aligning with a higher power, a higher sense of identity and meaning. That's what my faith teaches.

That's my working definition. It needs to be unpacked a bit more, but I'll go with that for now.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*