



Conversation with Tariq Al-Olaimy

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself, tell me a little bit about yourself and what has brought you to the work that you do today?

Tariq Al-Olaimy: First, thank you for inviting me. My name is Tariq, I'm from the Island of Bahrain, which is a tiny island in the Middle East, the only island state in the region. I came to this work from three different lenses. One is the wellbeing lens. I consider myself a social entrepreneur. I co-founded an organization called Recipes for Wellbeing alongside two incredible co-founders, Greta and Alessia.

With the Recipes for Wellbeing, we look at the concept of wellbeing from a systems perspective. We embrace what we call whole-being. A set of learnable competencies and actual practices for individuals, communities, organizations, and planetary flourishing. On the wellbeing side, we look at the systemic lens of wellbeing.

On the wellbeing economy side, my background is in degrowth and post-growth economics. I've long thought about — as a climate activist, and as someone who's been involved in different UN policy spaces and consultancies — looking at, what does it mean to really create this world of "development" beyond growth, beyond the extractive systems of which the government industry and sector is based upon in the first place? We bring that in as a consultant to the private sector, foundations, nonprofits, and the work that we do.

The other side to this is the domain of faith. I'm someone who has very much acted upon my Islamic values, but also what I believe are universal values that connect us all. I believe no real solution can be one that is devoid of grounding of ethics, morality, that sense of shared values in our humanity — both for us and the more-than human world. That has driven me to explore engaging with different faith communities.

I often say that in faith spaces, I'm often the person who's trying to bring organizational development, systems, practices, the very practical action-oriented approaches. Whether in mosques, in congregations or in larger faith-based boards. Then, it's the opposite when I'm in the corporate and UN spaces. I'm often bringing the preaching, the scripture, the values-based approaches. I find myself straddled between these two worlds. I think those are maybe the three entry points for our conversation today.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's wonderful. Since you bridge these multiple areas. What would you say is distinctive about the work you do? How would you describe it in terms of what sets it apart from other work that might be happening within the space of wellbeing?

Tariq Al-Olaimy: Within the space of wellbeing, I'll go back to what I initially shared around the concept of whole-being. Recipes for Wellbeing developed this framework that looked at whole-being as this liberatory learning structure where we have around about 12 whole-being domains, and within those it's 170 skills.

Wellbeing is a skill. It's a skill that can be practiced. It's a skill that should be cultivated. It's a skill that is not just an individual skill as we understand skills but it's a community skill. It's an organizational skill. It's an economic skill. It's a skill that also requires us to be able to engage not only amongst our human communities, but our more-than human communities.

From a human lens, we can think of these domains as domains of accomplishments. How do we actually channel our motivations and talents to strive for whole-being? That involves leaning into discomfort and preserving the resistance. That involves skills such as accountability and planning.

We can look at domains such as *discomfortability*, and the ability to be at ease with the discomfort and work through resistance rather than fighting it. This acknowledges that we have this full range of human experience, the good and the bad, when it comes to wellbeing.

Sometimes this means embracing skills such as, can we learn to grieve for the future that we once thought we could have? Do we have the skill of agency, the skill of self-regulation, the skill of community regulation? These are skills and domains that we're more familiar with in a wellbeing economy context, such as the domain of radical care, the domain of rest.

When it comes to the faith-based lens, it's the domain of ritualizing. This ability to practice wellbeing and whole-being through our daily and seasonal rituals. It's about reclaiming that sacredness in our lives.

Whether it's those domains or others, such as the domain of creating meaning, the liberatory learning of positive emotion or consciousness, we do believe within these are skills, practices, activities, systemic interventions that can and should be practiced.

We look at whole-being from this systemic lens, but also try to break it down to very actionable ways of practicing. On our website recipesforwellbeing.org we do have this library of wellbeing practices that are divided into these domains and skills.

Whether you are at this meeting that needs a bit more than a five-minute break or you are at this organization in the Global South that is receiving funding from the Global North that maybe is creating unfair systemic dynamics, how do we start to work through that? What are the skills that we need to learn together, practice, and integrate?

As a climate activist, when we see fascists being elected all around us, how do we then deal with the *discomfortability* of that? How do we actually start to move forward and be real with the conversations that we want to have? How do we have those kinds of difficult conversations? It's aspects like that, which I think set us a bit apart in terms of our understanding of what we call whole-being.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is your measure of progress in the work you do? For something that doesn't have a direct A to Z how do you determine that you're advancing?

Tariq Al-Olaimy: That's a great question. There's the spiritual bypassing answer to this, which I'll give you and then I'll try to answer in the actual way. The spiritual bypassing answer to this I think would be the great poet and Muslim scholar, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, would often reflect, "Yesterday, I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I'm wise, so I want to change myself."

In one part it is true, there is the measure of success. "Am I a better human being after the day's service that I've done and the work that I've contributed and that of my community?" It is a little cliché, but there is a lot of truth to that.

When it comes to other measures, you say when there's no A to Z, I think this is where the work of faith-based approaches really comes in. Are we able to look at different measures of success as the measures of success? Ultimately, when I talked about the whole-being framework, it is a very different measure of success. It's the kind of community organization way of being in which we would hope to strive for in our most human fullness. So it's changing that measure of success.

When we look at faith-based approaches, it's often looking at a very different concept of time. I've said this before, often with science, we have a very empirical way of looking at success and measuring success. From a faith-based perspective, science is often our attempt at translating the language of the

rest of nature. It's this attempt at understanding the mother tongue of the forests, of the oceans, of the rivers, of insects, of deserts. In that mother tongue, the more-than human world moves at the speed of pollination, it moves at the language of deep time, it moves at the pace of collaboration, of silence with the transcendent of systemic.

We have a sense of a compass that we're going in the right direction when the people that we work with, the communities or organizations start to have an understanding of that orientation, of that measure of movement, of success, of actually connecting to what that means as well and the rest of nature. Still a way of spiritually by-passing that answer but as close as I can get.

Ashley Hopkinson: What insights or teachable lessons have you learned along the way? How would you advise someone to go about doing the type of work that you're describing and is there something valuable to pass along?

Tariq Al-Olaimy: I'll connect that from the degrowth work as well to your initial framing of faith-based perspectives. The starting point of all faiths when it comes to our understanding of the financial system is very similar to a post-growth model, which is, we've built an economy where it's easier to make money off money — for example, assets and investments — than it is off real work. That's why we're seeing this explosion in financial speculation, this concentration of power in these industries, these stagnant wages.

We are seeing that the very economies that we're basing solutions of the climate crisis on, are the exact models and the economies, which are causing the climate crisis. Hundreds of years ago, or thousands of years ago, depending on the faith-based tradition that you follow, that perspective has always been there.

Many faith-based traditions offer many alternatives to things such as interest-based lending. Islamic finance prohibits the concept of *riba*, which is interest. It has partnership models and profit-sharing instead. Judaism has similarly banned charging interest to fellow Jews. Christianity has long condemned usury. Many Buddhist traditions, whilst they may not prohibit interest, emphasize ethical livelihood and avoiding exploitation. Hinduism, similarly discourages usury. All these different approaches share this common theme of protecting the vulnerable, of promoting social harmony, of encouraging ethical economic practices. In a world that professes itself, where almost 80% have a faith-based affiliation, can we say that 80% of the world lives according to those values of the economy?

I've learned that the most devout follower can completely ignore the very teachings of which they profess when it comes to their economic lives and livelihoods. I've learned to ask the question why, and to really explore — what does it mean for us to live upon those morals.

The work that I do is far more nourishing and far more full. I find I get to better answers with the communities that I work with and try to support when I take that approach than when I don't. It's an exploration for a lot of us, that 80%, who profess to be people of faith, to explore what does that mean for ourselves in our own journeys, in our own paths?

I'll give an example of this. I remember attending the Beyond Growth Conference in Brussels that was convened by the European Commission and Union and was co-convened by the Green Party. The co-lead of the Green Party at the time was a person called Philippe Lamberts. He was a member of the European Parliament, and he brought together this economic conference on exploring Beyond Growth perspectives within the EU, and it was this landmark conference. When asked, "Why is this important to you? Why was it important if you do this initiative?" I was very struck by his answer, which was, "My faith compelled me to do so."

I found it such an interesting answer because that's something I hear a lot internally. I've attended many large multilateral conferences including the World Economic Forum. I often see faith professed as something that's important to CEOs and political leaders behind the scenes, backstage or sometimes in platitudes. Very, very rarely do I see that being put into action. It's what I call taking a systemic sacred approach, where systems change is tied to the sacred in which we believe in.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think it takes to demonstrate the value of this work, the value of systemic sacred approach and faith in action? What has been helpful to you in having these conversations?

Tariq Al-Olaimy: What I found interesting, especially in multilateral spaces and engaging with the private sector on one side and what I call faith executives — so not necessarily the spiritual leaders, but those that are actually running these faith-based organizations on the ground — the narrative and messaging and approach that I find most helpful is to talk about faith infrastructure and faith as infrastructure.

What I mean by that is, many faith communities have a massive amount of infrastructure. For instance, 8% of all habitable land is stewarded or owned by a faith-based community. Almost half of all educational institutions in the world have a faith-based ownership or component to it in terms of how it was set up. Similarly, for healthcare in places like Latin America and Africa, around 40% of all

healthcare based services have this faith-based component to it. It was either set up by a religious arm, institution or foundation.

There's an immense infrastructure that is run by faith-based communities that has not turned its entire face towards a wellbeing economy. That actually hasn't turned itself fully to saying, "We're going to be dedicating this religious and faith-based infrastructure towards the climate crisis and emergency, towards land restoration, towards fulfilling the needs of a wellbeing economy fully in its educational and health potential."

Faith is an economic actor; faith is an infrastructure. It is something some faith-based organizations are starting to wake up to. We also see that much more is needed to really have these restorative faith infrastructures, because many physical buildings and lands are just there. They are dilapidated and aren't being used, aren't put to the commons or towards serving social and civic structures.

There is a potential for public-private partnerships. There is a potential for these faith-based communities to really put faith into action. This is where not just the moral imperative, but the very real economic and wellbeing economy perspective comes in. Who else, if not faith-based institutions who profess these values that are in line with the wellbeing economy, and have this infrastructure and these assets? If not them, then I don't know if I have hope for any other entity or organization else in the world.

Ashley Hopkinson: From your perspective, what is a challenge that you face in doing this work and how do you actively work to overcome it?

Tariq Al-Olaimy: The tension I often grapple with, and many do in this space who look at the systemic sacred, is the belief that these kinds of systemic challenges can only be transformed from a place of spiritual wholeness. Yet, "spiritual work" and "justice work," are often relegated to these separate arenas. The question I was asked once in a divinity school was: how might we reunite our personal spiritual path with the pursuit of collective liberation?

What if we did take this approach of saying that there is no spiritual liberation without political liberation? It's something that I very much resonate with and I find there's a lot of truth to it in the work that I do. But that is a challenge to get communities and leaders to lean into even asking or reflecting on that question and accepting that justice work and climate work is spiritual work or vice-versa. I often find myself in that loop of having that belief, but also needing to still proceed with the work with groups and communities that aren't necessarily in the space of wanting to integrate the

whole self — where it's your identity, your work, your education, your social life into one. Many people do want to have that as separate.

I find that's more of an issue in the Global North than maybe it is in the Global South or the MENA region where I'm from. I grew up in a community, in a place, in a culture where there is very little separation between your religious life and your spiritual life and your day-to-day work, where you would go into work meetings and speak in prayer and start with that and have a thousand prayers in one work meeting, but not making it sound like a prayer, it's just they're integrated.

There's an understanding of what that looks like and means to many of us in the Global South that is very foreign to my European colleagues or my colleagues in the States. I find there is that division as well when it comes to also place and culture, which is a challenge, certainly.

Ashley Hopkinson: How would you define collective wellbeing?

Tariq Al-Olaimy: I would use that one word, wholebeing. It's as close as we could get in our work. From a spiritual lens, the phrase I resonate a lot with is one that comes from the now departed Thich Nhat Hanh. He used the word "interbeing." I think that is probably as close to a word in the English language as I think we can get to, to what that really means at its core.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is missing from the conversation that we're having about faith and faith in action? What would you like to bring more into the mainstream conversation?

Tariq Al-Olaimy: The World Economic Forum's Faith in Action Report, it looked at the concept of faith fluency, which was the ability for those that are maybe non-faith actors or don't see themselves as faith-based actors to really be able to be fluent in the language of faith-based communities and organizing.

That's an essential skill in and of itself for executives, CEOs, social justice leaders and those working on a wellbeing economy to have, and to understand. And to be better at that faith-based fluency of really understanding in this immense faith-based infrastructure that exists out there, in this immense moral compass that is there in the world.

How do we engage, not for getting faith-based communities to serve the goals of the wellbeing economy, because they're doing the wellbeing economy work anyway, but how a wellbeing economy can serve the real core and deep work of faith-based communities and actually enable faith-based communities to reclaim that which is lost in some communities— the return and practice to core shared universal values of care for all human beings and more-than humans?

Ashley Hopkinson: Wonderful, 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.*