

Ingrid Mattson: A Comprehensive Biography

Early Life and Education

Ingrid Mattson was born on August 24, 1963, in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, as the sixth of seven children in a Roman Catholic family ¹ ² . She attended Catholic schools during her youth and later reflected that the Catholic women who taught her provided an excellent education and nurtured her early spiritual curiosity ³ . However, by her mid-teens she had become disillusioned with organized religion – at 16 she drifted away from Catholicism and lived as an agnostic, feeling a loss of the faith that had once guided her ² . In 1982, Mattson enrolled at the University of Waterloo, where she pursued a joint honors Bachelor's degree in Philosophy and Fine Arts, immersing herself in the world of ideas and aesthetics ⁴ . She spent hours studying Western art and philosophy, searching for meaning; yet, philosophical studies led her to existentialist conclusions that felt spiritually barren, and even the beauty of art left her yearning for a deeper, more lasting sense of purpose ⁵ ⁶ .

During her undergraduate years, Mattson had a formative international experience. In the summer of 1986, as part of her studies, she went to Paris, France, where she befriended a group of West African students from a Sufi Muslim community ⁷ ⁸ . She was deeply impressed by their warmth, generosity, and sincere spirituality – qualities that stood in stark contrast to what she felt was missing in her own life ⁹ . Out of curiosity and a growing spiritual openness, Mattson began reading the Qur'an during this period. In its pages, she later recounted, she found "an awareness of God, for the first time since I was very young" ¹⁰ . This profound experience of reconnection with the divine filled the spiritual void she had felt, and set her on a new path. After returning to Canada, she completed her B.A. at Waterloo and, in 1987 at age 23, **Ingrid Mattson converted to Islam** ¹¹ ¹² . Unlike some converts, her decision was entirely self-motivated by faith – it was not prompted by marriage or family influence, but rather by an intellectual and spiritual journey that began with that encounter in Paris ¹² . This conversion would become a pivotal turning point, profoundly shaping both her personal life and professional trajectory in the years to come.

Embracing Islam and Early Experiences

Newly committed to Islam, Mattson channeled her youthful idealism into service and learning within the Muslim community. Shortly after converting, in 1987 she traveled to Pakistan to work with Afghan refugees who had fled the Soviet-Afghan war. Living in the city of Peshawar from 1987–1988, she developed and implemented a **midwife training program for Afghan refugee women**, aiming to improve healthcare for women and children in the camps ¹³ . This on-the-ground humanitarian work was Mattson's first direct exposure to the realities of Muslim societies and the challenges they faced. It was also in Pakistan that she first encountered ultra-conservative Islamist elements – **her educational classes for Afghan women drew the ire of emerging fundamentalists** (the nascent Taliban movement would later bar local women from attending her classes) ¹⁴ . Witnessing such extremism and gender oppression firsthand deeply affected Mattson and informed her later stance against religious extremism and in favor of women's empowerment in Muslim communities.

Pakistan was also significant for Mattson's personal life. During her year there, she met a young Egyptian engineer who was working on refugee relief projects; the two shared a commitment to service and Islamic faith. They eventually married, making Pakistan not only the place where Mattson put her faith into action, but also where she started her family life in Islam ¹⁵ . By the time she returned to North America, Ingrid Mattson had both a new religion and a new cross-cultural family. These experiences – from spiritual awakening in Canada and France to humanitarian work and marriage in Pakistan – cemented her identity as a Muslim and propelled her toward a career devoted to Islamic scholarship, ethical leadership, and bridge-building between communities.

Advanced Education and Academic Career

Determined to deepen her understanding of Islam, Mattson pursued graduate studies in Islamic thought. She was accepted into the University of Chicago's prestigious Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations program, where she spent most of the 1990s immersed in classical Islamic scholarship. She earned her **Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1999**, specializing in Islamic studies ¹⁶ . Her doctoral research gave her a strong foundation in Arabic, Qur'anic studies, Islamic law, and history, complementing the spiritual perspective she had gained as a convert.

Even before completing her Ph.D., Mattson began her career as an academic. In 1998, she joined the faculty of **Hartford Seminary** in Connecticut as a professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations ¹⁶ . She would serve at Hartford Seminary from 1998 until 2012, during which time she made pioneering contributions to Islamic education in North America. Notably, she **founded the first accredited graduate program for Muslim chaplains in the United States** ¹⁶ . Established in the early 2000s, this program was designed to train imams and Muslim chaplains to serve in hospitals, universities, and the military. Significantly, Dr. Mattson insisted that the chaplaincy program be open to women, ensuring female Muslim scholars had the same opportunity to train for spiritual leadership roles ¹⁷ . This insistence reflected her broader advocacy for Muslim women's public role in religion. In addition to teaching courses on Islamic law, Qur'an interpretation, and Islamic spirituality, Mattson also became Director of the **Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations** at Hartford Seminary (a leading center for interfaith understanding) ¹⁶ . She served as **Associate Editor of *The Muslim World***, a long-running academic journal on religion, further cementing her reputation as a serious scholar ¹⁸ . Through these roles, Mattson spent over a decade training both Muslim and non-Muslim students, clergy, and community leaders – all within a historically Christian seminary – exemplifying her commitment to interfaith engagement in education.

Leadership in Islamic Organizations

Alongside her academic career, Ingrid Mattson became increasingly active in Muslim community leadership at a national level. She took on a prominent role in the **Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)**, the largest umbrella organization of Muslims in the U.S. and Canada. From 2001 to 2006 she served as **Vice-President of ISNA**, and in 2006 she was elected President of ISNA ¹⁹ . Her election was a historic milestone – **Mattson was the first woman, the first revert (convert) to Islam, and the first person born in North America (non-immigrant) to lead ISNA**, breaking new ground in a role traditionally held by men of immigrant background ²⁰ ²¹ . She served as **ISNA's president from 2006 to 2010**, a period during which her leadership gained national and international attention ²⁰ . A 2010 *New York Times* profile described her as “perhaps the most noticed figure among American Muslim women,” highlighting the visibility she brought to women's leadership in Islam ²² .

During her tenure heading ISNA, Mattson focused the organization on both community development and interfaith outreach. One of her first initiatives was to establish a national **Office for Interfaith and Community Outreach** in Washington, D.C., in 2006, institutionalizing ISNA's engagement with other faith communities ²³. Mattson believed that American Muslims needed to build strong relationships with Jewish, Christian, and other religious groups to work together for the common good. In a bold move, she **invited Rabbi Eric Yoffie**, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, to address the annual ISNA convention in 2006 – the first time a Jewish leader had been given a plenary platform at that major Muslim gathering ²⁴. The following year, she herself spoke at the Union for Reform Judaism's national biennial meeting, where she received a standing ovation as she announced a partnership between ISNA and the Reform Jewish community to promote dialogue and mutual understanding ²⁵. Under Mattson's guidance, ISNA launched programs such as a **"Twinning Program" with the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding**, pairing mosques and synagogues for exchanges, and a three-year **"Jews and Muslims in America" project** in collaboration with the Jewish Theological Seminary, funded by the Carnegie Corporation ²⁶. These initiatives were pioneering in Muslim-Jewish relations in the United States ²⁷.

Mattson's interfaith vision extended beyond Judeo-Christian relations. She also fostered dialogue with other faith leaders; for example, she shared the stage with the **Dalai Lama** on multiple occasions (Seattle in 2008, Indiana in 2010, and Chicago in 2011) at events promoting peace and understanding across religious lines ²⁸. Furthermore, she became one of the original signatories of **"A Common Word" (2007)** – a global open letter by Muslim scholars to Christian leaders calling for peace and cooperation based on shared values of love of God and neighbor ²⁹. Mattson also participated in high-level interfaith conferences, including those hosted by the Jordanian Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, reflecting her standing as a respected voice in Christian-Muslim dialogue ²⁹. In recognition of her contributions to interfaith bridge-building, she has been honored by various institutions – for instance, in 2012 she received an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Chicago Theological Seminary for "her service to the faith community" ²⁹.

Advisory Roles and Public Engagement

Throughout her career, Ingrid Mattson has frequently engaged with policymakers and civic leaders to represent the Muslim perspective on critical issues. While serving as ISNA's vice-president and president, she was called upon to advise U.S. government officials, especially in the post-9/11 context ³⁰. She consulted with both the **George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations** on matters concerning American Muslims – including strategies to counter violent extremism, ways to enable Muslim Americans to serve in the military with dignity, and the protection of civil rights in an era of heightened scrutiny of Muslims ³⁰. Her credible, moderate voice was valued in these discussions. John O. Brennan, who was Deputy National Security Advisor at the White House (and later Director of the CIA), publicly thanked Dr. Mattson for her leadership and contributions at a 2010 NYU forum, underscoring the respect she garnered at the highest levels of national security circles ³¹.

Mattson has consistently and unequivocally condemned terrorism and religious extremism. She often notes that her resolve in this area stems in part from her experiences in Pakistan, where she **"first encountered the Taliban"** and saw how extremist ideologies harm communities ³². In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, she authored a notable article on Beliefnet titled *"American Muslims Have a Special Obligation."* In it, she asserted the responsibility of Muslim American leaders like herself to not only denounce acts of terror, but also to challenge those who misuse Islam to justify oppression: "I...denounce not only suicide bombers and the Taliban, but those leaders of other Muslim states who thwart democracy, repress women, use the Qur'an to justify un-Islamic behavior and encourage violence," Mattson wrote

emphatically ³³. She has since given countless lectures and media interviews reiterating that violence and hatred have no place in her faith, and urging Muslims and non-Muslims to cooperate in addressing real social problems rather than succumbing to mutual fear ³⁴ ³⁵. Indeed, she was also an original signatory of the 2005 **Amman Message**, a declaration of Islamic unity against extremism and sectarian violence, further exemplifying her commitment to a peaceful, pluralistic interpretation of Islam ³⁶.

Beyond government corridors, Dr. Mattson has served on numerous boards and councils. In 2012, she was appointed to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's **Faith-Based Advisory Council**, advising on how faith communities can cooperate with government in emergency preparedness and safeguarding civil liberties ³⁷. Internationally, she has been involved with the World Economic Forum's Council of 100 Leaders (C-100) on West-Islamic World Dialogue, and has been a **Senior Fellow of the Aal al-Bayt Institute** in Jordan since 2010 ³⁸. Whether through official roles or informal influence, Ingrid Mattson has been a key Muslim voice in North American public life, known for her balanced advocacy – defending the rights and dignity of Muslims while encouraging integration, understanding, and mutual respect across religious and cultural lines.

Writings and Intellectual Contributions

Ingrid Mattson's scholarly and literary contributions have made her a prominent interpreter of Islam for both Muslim and Western audiences. Her best-known work is ***The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life*** (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007) ³⁹. This book provides a comprehensive introduction to Islam's holy scripture, covering its revelation, compilation, and role in the spiritual and social life of Muslims. *The Story of the Qur'an* was widely praised for its accessible yet informative style, and it was later selected by the National Endowment for the Humanities for inclusion in the "Bridging Cultures" program in 2012 as a work that builds intercultural understanding ⁴⁰. A second edition of the book was published in 2013, reflecting updates and continued interest in the topic ⁴⁰. Mattson has noted that part of her motivation in writing this book was to dispel misconceptions about the Qur'an and to highlight its message of mercy, guidance, and remembrance of God – themes that had drawn her to Islam in the first place.

In addition to her Qur'an scholarship, Mattson has written and spoken extensively on Islamic law, ethics, and gender. She co-edited the book ***Islam and Democracy: Prospects and Pathways*** (2015), which explores the relationship between Islamic governance principles and democratic values ⁴¹. Her contributions in this volume and elsewhere often emphasize the compatibility of Islamic principles – such as shura (consultation), justice, and public welfare – with modern democratic ideals, while frankly discussing the challenges. She has also penned insightful essays for academic and interfaith publications. For example, Dr. Mattson contributed an essay titled **"How to Read the Qur'an"** in the acclaimed *HarperCollins Study Quran* (2015), where she provides guidance on approaching the Qur'anic text, understanding its context, and avoiding misinterpretations ⁴². Furthermore, her chapter "The World in Which We Respond to God's Word" in *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue* (2018) examines how Muslims and Christians can mutually appreciate each other's scriptures and traditions ⁴³. These writings reflect her dual concern for scholarly rigor and bridge-building between faith communities.

Mattson's bibliography spans numerous articles in journals and edited volumes on topics such as Islamic spirituality, the role of the mosque in contemporary society, and Muslim-Christian relations. She has addressed issues of **gender in Islam**, writing on subjects like adoption and fostering in Islamic law, and the spiritual status of Muslim women. In her public lectures, she frequently highlights examples of influential women in Islamic history to counter modern misconceptions that Muslim women's leadership is something

novel. As she once remarked, “Our history is a history of the empowerment of women... We’re not trying to invent something new. We’re trying to pick up where we left off” ⁴⁴ . In line with this outlook, Dr. Mattson has been actively involved in initiatives that elevate women’s voices and protect their rights in Muslim communities (for example, she has worked with the **Peaceful Families Project** to combat domestic violence, challenging any misuses of scripture that justify abuse ¹⁷). Overall, through her books, articles, and lectures, Ingrid Mattson has contributed significantly to contemporary Islamic thought – especially in articulating a vision of Islam that is intellectually robust, spiritually profound, and aligned with principles of human dignity and social justice.

Advocacy for Ethical Reform and Interfaith Dialogue

A central theme of Mattson’s career is her dedication to ethical reform within the Muslim community and constructive dialogue with others. One of her recent and notable initiatives is **The Hurma Project**, which she founded and directs. (“Hurma” in Arabic signifies sanctity or inviolability.) Launched in the late 2010s, the Hurma Project is a multi-disciplinary effort to educate Muslim communities about preventing and responding to abuse – particularly spiritual and sexual abuse – by those in positions of religious authority ⁴⁵ . Mattson was moved to start this project after observing multiple incidents where communities struggled to hold abusive religious leaders accountable. “I realized we needed something broad and interdisciplinary to examine the scope of the problem... and develop educational materials... that we can bring to the community,” she explained in an interview about the project ⁴⁵ . Through research, conferences, and training resources, the Hurma Project seeks to uphold each person’s God-given dignity and ensure that mosques and Islamic centers are safe, respectful environments. This initiative exemplifies Dr. Mattson’s proactive and compassionate approach to community leadership – tackling sensitive issues head-on with Islamic ethical principles in mind.

In the arena of **interfaith dialogue**, Mattson’s contributions have already been highlighted, but it bears emphasis how integral this work is to her legacy. She has consistently encouraged Muslims to engage with neighbors of other faiths in addressing social challenges together. At an ISNA convention in 2011, for example, she urged American Muslims not to remain on the defensive against prejudice, but instead to “turn to those who have already opened their arms and hearts to us and work with them to address the real problems of our society” ³⁴ . This philosophy of active partnership is one she has practiced repeatedly – whether by forging alliances with Jewish and Christian organizations, or by participating in multifaith forums on peace and social justice. Mattson’s interfaith work has earned her numerous accolades. Among them, she received a **“Building Bridges Award”** in 2014 from Georgetown University’s Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, recognizing her longstanding efforts to improve Muslim-Christian relations ⁴⁶ . She has also been acknowledged within the Muslim community for strengthening its image and engagement; for instance, she was named one of the world’s “500 Most Influential Muslims” in the annual publication by Georgetown and the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, and in 2007, *TIME* magazine highlighted her in its coverage of influential global leaders ⁴⁷ ⁴⁸ . Such honors underscore the impact of her work both inside and outside the Muslim world.

Later Career and Ongoing Influence

After 14 fruitful years at Hartford Seminary, Dr. Mattson returned to her native Canada in 2012 to continue her vocation in a new setting. She was appointed as the inaugural **London and Windsor Community Chair in Islamic Studies** at **Huron University College**, an affiliate of the University of Western Ontario ⁴⁹ ⁵⁰ . In this role – which she holds to the present – she teaches courses in theology and Islamic studies, mentors

students (many of whom are preparing for leadership in Muslim communities or for interfaith service), and furthers scholarship on Islam within a liberal arts context. Mattson's presence at Huron has also strengthened the bridge between academic study and community application of Islamic knowledge in Canada, much as she did in the United States.

Today, **Dr. Ingrid Mattson** is widely respected as a **trailblazing Muslim scholar, leader, and interfaith ambassador**. Over the decades, she has seamlessly woven together her personal faith journey with professional accomplishments. Her story – from a young Canadian Catholic woman searching for truth, to a convert to Islam who rose to lead one of North America's largest Islamic organizations – is often held up as an inspiring example of the diversity and dynamism of Islam in the West ²¹ ⁵¹. Mattson's journey demonstrates how embracing Islam enriched her with a sense of purpose and community, which in turn fueled her pursuit of knowledge and service. She has dedicated her career to uplifting others: whether by educating future imams and chaplains, advocating for women's rights and ethical conduct, or reaching out across faith lines to foster mutual respect. In recognition of her contributions, she has received numerous honors, including several honorary doctorates (such as from Trinity College (University of Toronto) and the University of Waterloo) and even a royal **Medal of Independence (Wisam al-Istiqlal)** from the King of Jordan in 2010 for her work in Islamic studies ⁵².

Formal and soft-spoken in demeanor yet bold in vision, Ingrid Mattson has carved out a unique legacy. She often emphasizes that Muslims in North America can be fully faithful to Islamic ideals while also positively engaging in the pluralistic society around them. Her own career exemplifies this balance: she has remained grounded in classical Islamic scholarship and devotion, even as she participates in modern academic, civic, and interfaith arenas. As a scholar, she contributes thoughtful insights on scripture and ethics; as a leader, she opens doors for inclusion and understanding. Through her writings and public speaking, Dr. Mattson continues to offer guidance on contemporary issues – from environmental stewardship to the spiritual development of Muslim youth – always highlighting compassion, justice, and the remembrance of God as keys to moving forward.

In sum, **Ingrid Mattson's biography** is one of faith-driven transformation and service. Her conversion to Islam in 1987 was the catalyst for a remarkable career spanning academia, community leadership, and global interfaith advocacy. From educating refugee women in Pakistan to advising presidents in Washington, from penning books on the Qur'an to training women and men as religious leaders, she has made a lasting impact on how Islam is understood and lived in North America. Mattson's life work continues, but already she stands as a significant figure in modern Islamic thought and an enduring bridge between Muslims and the broader society – guided by the very principles that drew her to Islam: knowledge ('ilm), faith (iman), and the imperative to serve humanity (*ihsan*). ⁵³ ⁵⁴

Sources: Mattson's life and contributions are well documented in academic and media sources, including her own curriculum vitae ⁵⁵ ⁵⁶, profiles such as the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine ²² ⁴⁸, and interviews and writings in which she recounts her journey to Islam ¹⁰ ¹². These, along with records of her leadership at ISNA ²⁰ and her scholarly publications ³⁹ ⁴¹, provide a detailed picture of a pioneering figure dedicated to faith, knowledge, and mutual understanding.

1 3 4 7 10 11 16 17 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 36 40 45 49 53 54 Ingrid Mattson

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<https://ingridmattson.org/about/cv/>