

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

How do we live out deep faith that leads to love and respect for all?

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How does one maintain one's faith in a religiously diverse world? Does getting involved with interfaith programs or engaging with others of different faith traditions lead to the watering down of one's own faith? Do we have to accept that all religions are true to be involved in interfaith efforts? There are some who are afraid of these questions and become threatened when contemplating involvement in any interfaith effort.

Eboo Patel, founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, in his book "Acts of Faith," argues the way to maintain faith identity in a religiously diverse world is to create a safe space where youth can talk about faith. Otherwise, he states: "They are coming into contact with kids



Kindschi

Muslims, Hindus, Evangelicals and others that they spend most of their lives around, then there's a good chance that their religious identities will atrophy."

There is no question there are mutually exclusive issues that are apparent.

"Our religious traditions have competing theological claims, and we simply have to accept these," Patel writes.

So what do we do? Just go to our private, separate places for religious discussion with those who speak only our religious language? Or can we find not only a safe space to talk about faith but

from different backgrounds all the time.

If they don't have a way of understanding how their faith relates to the Jews, Buddhists,

also a "public language of faith" as we discussed in an earlier column?

Patel suggests we approach this by looking at the shared values of various religious traditions, such as "hospitality, cooperation, compassion, mercy. ... Religions have powerful things in common, but they come to those through their own paths. Each religion has something unique to say about universal values through its particular set of scriptures, rituals and heroes. ... We believe the differences between religions are extremely important. The only route to collective survival really is to identify what is common between religions, but to create the space where each can articulate its distinct path to that place. I think of it as affirming particularity and achieving pluralism."

In his more recent book,

"Sacred Ground," Patel quotes a Christian theologian who had been a professor in a missionary college in India while it still was under British rule. Wilfred Cantwell Smith said, "The problem is for us all to learn to live together with our seriously different traditions, not only in peace, but in some sort of mutual trust and mutual loyalty ... where we can appreciate other men's values without losing allegiance to our own."

As Patel puts it, "The question was how to have a vertical relationship with one's own understanding of the divine and a horizontal relationship with the diversity of the world."

As we seek this public language of faith, we need to affirm the "other" not in spite of our own deep commitments, but because of them. Patel tells the story of an American Christian pastor who was serving a

church in Europe during World War II. His congregation wanted him to return to America to celebrate Christmas with them, so they sent him money to make the trip. But instead, he used the money to help a group of Jews escape from Hitler's death campaign. The home church was upset he had not used the money to return home and basically said, "How dare you use that money for a different purpose? And those people you helped, they weren't even Christian." The pastor wrote back with this simple response: "Yes, but I am."

How can we live our deeply felt faith commitments in ways that respect those not like us, not in spite of our beliefs, but because of what we believe? Is this what it means to follow that second great commandment, "to love your neighbor?"

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