

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Moving from potential alienation to building an interfaith movement

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Last week, we looked at the interfaith understanding and acceptance demonstrated by our first president, George Washington.

Along with Jefferson and the other founders, Washington ensured our country was founded on religious freedom and religious acceptance of multiple faith commitments.

It was the beginning of what America is now, the most religiously diverse nation in the world. But in today's world, we also see frequent examples of religion-inspired violence.

How are we to understand this violence, and how can our country respond in ways that build understanding, rather than alienation?

A modern American leader in this effort is the founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, Eboo Patel.



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As a Muslim who grew up in an affluent Chicago suburb, his story helps us understand how alienation can occur, as

well as how we can find ways to build bridges of understanding.

In his autobiographical book, "Acts of Faith," he begins with these words: "I am an American Muslim from India. My adolescence was a series of rejections, one after another, of the various dimensions of my heritage, in the belief that America, India, and Islam could not coexist within the same being. If I wanted to be one, I could not be the other."

While his life story could have moved from alienation to radicalization, he instead realized that his heroes, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Mahatma Gandhi and the Dalai Lama, were people of deep religious faith and that they were from different religious traditions.

He also noted they all began their life's work while still very young, in their 20s.

Following his completion of a Ph.D. at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, Patel focused his life's work not as a professor, but as the founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, which now has programs in hundreds of colleges and universities around the country.

In a short video — [youtube.com/watch?v=D32bXAevWQs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D32bXAevWQs) — Patel discusses the challenge of combining democracy with

diversity and the character of religious violence in our day.

He points out that the 1990s, even before 9/11, was a decade of religious violence.

Unfortunately, it is this violent narrative that is featured in the media. We must do all we can to promote an alternate narrative of faith-based understanding and acceptance found in all of our religious traditions.

Patel points to what he calls the "faith line."

It is not a line dividing Christians and Muslims or Jews and Hindus, or even a line between those with religious faith and those who affirm their values in secular terms.

It is the line between religious extremists and those committed to building a society where all can flourish. It is the line between the attitude that only

my people should dominate and the attitude of loving your neighbor. The interfaith movement, indeed the world, can be thankful that Eboo Patel moved beyond a potential alienation and found his mission in seeking pluralism, and in developing a vibrant program that focuses on youth and commitment to service.

We are pleased that Eboo Patel will be coming to West Michigan on Oct. 8 and speaking in both Grand Rapids and Allendale.

The challenge is before us: Will diversity lead to conflict, alienation, and violence, or can we build on our religious commitment and our values to create a diverse society where all can flourish?

Let us take up this alternate narrative and seek understanding, acceptance and peace.

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