

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Find identity, meaning by engaging with others

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We continue our explorations in the writings of Eboo Patel, founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, who will be in West Michigan next October. In his book "Acts of Faith," he not only explains how alienation can lead to violence, but also how violence can be found in the scriptures of most major religious traditions.

Some people read scripture and find reasons to kill; others read the same scripture and find reasons to love. To think scripture in any tradition can be read apart from context or interpretation is a profound misunderstanding.

As Patel puts it: "There are

several layers of meaning to any religious text: the explicit, the contextual, and the symbolic, to name just a few. A religious text comes to life through its interpreters. Violence committed in the name of a religion is really violence emanating from the heart of a particular interpreter."

He goes on: "I believe that religious violence is the product of careful design, manipulated by human hands. ... When people respond to oppression by killing their enemies while whispering the name of God, it is because an organization convinced them doing so is a sacred duty and then gave them everything they needed to carry it out."

Quoting from the book "Terror in the Name of God" by Jessica Stern, he continues, "Holy wars

take off only when there is a large supply of young men who feel humiliated and deprived; when leaders emerge who know how to capitalize on those feelings; and when a segment of society — for whatever reason — is willing to fund them."

Eboo Patel sees that extremists prey on the alienation of young people and on their desire to have a clear identity and make an impact. He has built the Interfaith Youth Core on a similar principle but for good, not for violence. He sees that service is a commitment that can appeal to young people, and that by doing service in an interfaith setting, one is given the opportunity to make an impact and be a part of something bigger than oneself.

In America, the most religious-

ly diverse nation in the world, the challenge is to affirm our individual faith commitments and traditions while not insisting all other faiths must be eliminated from our common life together.

Traditionally, this has been done by an attitude of mere tolerance, "live and let live." Just as we separate church and state, we separate our religious commitments from the rest of our lives together. Someone has compared it to riding on an elevator: We are aware of people around us, but we do everything possible to avoid any kind of interaction.

Patel says that engaging with others about faith permits each of us to discuss our own faith understanding and thereby grow in that faith.

As we learn about the other,

we also learn more about who we are as religious people. That has certainly been my own experience as I have engaged others in our own community as well as in other countries. I have learned much about them and, at the same time, been challenged to learn more about my own faith and probe deeper into my own understanding.

Eboo Patel has provided us with new insight on how alienation can be destructive, but also how being open to interfaith understanding and service can build a better community as well as a deeper self-understanding. It is a challenge that he has taken to America's campuses, but one that all of us can learn from. Let us all be open to such new insights.

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