

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Religious identity and the American experiment

Do our faith traditions divide or unite us?



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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks pointed out that the 21st century has led to a polarization driven by the politics of identity. This is in contrast, he argues, to the 20th century dominated by the politics of ideology, specifically the battle between two ideologies: communism vs. capitalism.

Political and religious identities have led to division and a tribalism that has fractured our society, isolating us into separate echo chambers. Technology has allowed us to relate primarily with those with whom we identify, those who are like us and with whom we already agree. At the same time, at the personal level, our identities are becoming more hyphenated. We are not just American, but we struggle with what it means to be Muslim-American or Jewish-American. It can no longer be assumed that being American means being Christian.

Will religious communities contribute to this division, or do we have the resources in our traditions and texts that can bring us together to find a shared commitment to the common good? Can we be faithful to our religious identities and also be committed to an interfaith vision that builds bridges rather than barriers?

This is the challenge we face: Will our religious identities lead to further division, or to a unity that respects and learns from our religious differences and commitments? These are the themes being discussed at the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue held every three years in our community. In many ways, it goes back to the very question of what it means to be an American.

Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue

When: Nov. 14 and 15

More information and free registration:
InterfaithUnderstanding.org

ited a national or established religion, much of our nation's story builds on religious symbols and imagery. Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove notes that students of American history see the nation's identity as founded on the stories of the Hebrew Bible. In one of his published sermons, he writes: "Beginning in 1630, when Puritans fled England in search of religious freedom, they compared their journey ... to that of the ancient Israelites led out of Egypt, through the Red Sea and into the Promised Land. ... The American Revolution co-opted scriptural themes to energize its mission."

When directed to design a seal for our new country, Cosgrove writes, Benjamin Franklin "proposed a portrayal of Moses lifting his hand and the Red Sea dividing" and a motto "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God." Thomas Jefferson "suggested a representation of the children of Israel in the wilderness led by a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night."

More recently, Martin Luther King Jr. described the civil rights movement as a journey to the "Promised Land." Our country, while not establishing a state religion, does draw on religious themes as it tells its story and sets forth its hopes for the future. Furthermore, religious institutions have contributed much to our nation's social cap-

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Eboo Patel, founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core

In the early migration to this continent, many came to more faithfully practice their religion, but our nation's founders saw the importance of recognizing all religious commitments as welcome. The Constitution prohibits any religious test for holding national office, and the First Amendment clearly states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Eboo Patel, founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, begins his latest book by referring to Michael Walzer, prominent political philosopher and professor emeritus at the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton. Patel writes, "In his book, 'What It Means to Be an American,' Michael Walzer observes that political theorists since the time of the Greeks have generally assumed that diversity and democracy do not mix well together. A state works best when it is made up of human beings who view themselves, as a consequence of certain bonds of identity, as a single people." But Walzer goes on to state that the United States is "the great exception to this rule."

Patel continues by noting that, "The American Founders set for themselves the remarkable task of building a religiously diverse democracy, an experiment never before tried at such a scale in human history." The challenge today is how this great experiment will survive the nation's current expanding diversity and division. Patel asks, "Will the United States leverage the current diversity explosion to promote the common good, or will it blow up in our faces in forms such as open prejudice, rampant discrimination, deeper disunity, further inequality, and identity conflict?"

While the American experiment prohib-

ital through the establishment or sponsorship of many important institutions, such as universities, hospitals and various social service organizations.

Cosgrove describes his Jewish identity not in terms of either/or, but a both/and, "a creative dialectical interaction between the two." It is, yes, a "hyphenated identity," but one that affirms both his American and his Jewish identities. His faith does not exclude his commitment to the common good and recognizes that other faith commitments must not be excluded. His is "a faith that strives not for perfection, but for honesty, filled with both passion and integrity, with the ongoing desire to exist in the presence of God."

This is the attitude that describes the premise of interfaith work. We each bring our faith commitments "filled with both passion and integrity" while recognizing that we are not perfect in our understanding, and that we honestly seek to understand and accept those whose faith commitments differ from our own.

We are pleased that both Eboo Patel and Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove will join Andover Newton professor Jennifer Howe Peace at next month's Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue at the Eberhard Center in Grand Rapids on Nov. 15. A pre-conference the previous evening will be at the Allendale campus of Grand Valley State University.

Will our religious identities lead to further division of our fractured society? Or, can we find the resources and commitment for unity?

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