

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## Eboo Patel went from alienation to leadership



**Doug Kindschi**  
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"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."

So wrote Eboo Patel in the story of his life as recounted in his first book, "Acts of Faith." Patel is today one of the major leaders of the interfaith movement, founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, and author of five other books, including his latest, "Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise."

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. 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 — [bit.ly/Eboo-video](http://bit.ly/Eboo-video) — Patel discusses the challenge of combining democracy with diversity and warns against the threat of religious violence.

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.

Patel 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."

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 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 religiously 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 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



**Eboo Patel, founder of Interfaith Youth Core, speaks in 2008 in Culver City, California. Patel, an American Muslim of India descent, is an author and leader of the interfaith movement. Stephen Shugerman, Getty Images**

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 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.

Patel reconnected to Islam and became an interfaith leader to help "write the next chapter in the inspiring story of American religious pluralism." He challenges us to do what he did, educate ourselves about different belief systems, find what we can admire about those traditions and then learn how to work together to improve our communities and our world.

He gives us the image of a potluck dinner, not the melting pot. "The melting pot says we're going to eliminate distinctiveness, but a potluck says we should bring something to the big, open table that welcomes different contributions from communities, and that's the way the nation feasts."

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 Nov. 14 and 15, speaking in both Allendale and Grand Rapids. He is one of the featured speakers at our triennial Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue.

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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### IF YOU GO

#### Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue

**When:** Nov. 14 and 15

**Where:** Kirkhof Center, 10670 S. Campus Drive, Allendale (first day); and Eberhard Center, 301 Fulton St. W., Grand Rapids (second day)