

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Maintaining one's identity while learning from others



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The challenge for America is to embrace an ethic that includes “respect for different identities, relationships between diverse communities and a commitment to the common good.”

This is the theme of Eboo Patel's recent book, “Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise.” In last week's Interfaith Insight, we discussed his recounting of the origins of religious freedom in America's founding. (Last week's Insight can be found, along with an archive of previous Insights, at our website, [InterfaithUnderstanding.org](http://InterfaithUnderstanding.org).) From the attitudes and statements of our founders to the provisions in our Constitution, America was founded on principles that endorsed freedom of religion and prohibited religious tests for holding public office.

The question is not only how does our nation carry forward these founding principles to make room for all religious expression, but also how does a particular religious community “embrace the nation's common life while maintaining its difference”? Patel is clear that response is not the “melting pot” image, often used to describe how we come together. That assumes we are somehow absorbed into a common mix that obliterates our differences. He prefers the image of a “potluck,” where we bring our various dishes to share and where the variety enhances our experience with mutually different experiences.

An important part of this manner of coming together is sharing our stories in ways that enable us to learn from each other as well as learn with each other. Patel shares some of his personal experiences as he learned to appreciate his own heritage while also learning from others.

He tells of when he was in junior high and very self-conscious of his minority status. When his grandmother from India attended one of his junior high functions “at my largely white suburban school, dressed in her Indian clothes and speaking with her Indian accent, I quaked with embarrassment.”

One of his teachers, sensing his situation, told him that his grandmother reminded her of her Italian grandmother. She continued, “Outside of native peoples, we all come from somewhere, and we should take pride in our heritage and customs of our family.” Patel recounts how this made him feel more fully American.

He also recounts the story of how his father came from India to America. Patel explains, “I am in this country because an institution started by French priests in the Indiana countryside in the 1840s, committed to the faith formation and economic uplift of poor Midwestern Catholic boys, somehow saw fit to admit a wayward

Ismaili Muslim student from Bombay into its MBA program, in the 1970s. That man was my father.”

Patel continues to describe his father's devotion to Notre Dame's Fighting Irish football team, leading to the occasion of what he identifies as one of his earliest interfaith memories. Frequent trips on football Saturdays from Chicago to the campus always included a stop at the Grotto, a shrine to the Virgin Mary. On one occasion, Patel quizzed his father about why he as a Muslim would pray at a shrine dedicated to a Christian figure. His father pointed to the hundreds of candles and quoted from the Qur'an that God should be seen as “Light upon Light.” He then said, “You have a choice whenever you encounter something from another tradition, Eboo. You can look for the difference, or you can find resonances. I advise you to find the resonances.”

Many years later, as Patel told of his experience, he was encouraged to share it with Father Theodore Hesburgh, who for over 50 years had served as president of Notre Dame and built the university into a major global institution “all the while maintaining its Catholic identity.” Patel and his Catholic friend Gabe later were invited to meet Father Hesburgh, then in his 90s, to hear the story. Patel noted the “growing number of Muslim, evangelical and Jewish faculty, staff, and board members at the university,” and asked Hesburgh how he dealt with the “traditionalists” who might not have been happy with the growing diversity.

Hesburgh noted the difference between Catholic with a large C, which stood for a particular institution, and catholic with the small c, which meant “universal.” He then explained, “We have to understand our Catholic tradition in a way that helps us accomplish our catholic mission, which is to lift up the well-being of all.”

As they were getting ready to leave, Patel's Catholic friend Gabe asked for a blessing. Father Hesburgh “then motioned for me to kneel and close my eyes as well. It was, for my friend, a Catholic ritual of great significance. For me, it was an American sacrament.”

Is it possible that as we learn more about, and with, those of different faith traditions, that we too can “look for the resonances”? Can we even participate in each other's special practices in ways that bring us to further understanding rather than promoting ways to confront and divide? It may not be easy, but our identities might actually be enhanced and strengthened as we relate deeply to others while working for the common good.

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