Have faith in our youth

Eboo Patel greatly admires the Catholic tradition. He counts among his religious heroes Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement; he attended Pope Benedict XVI's meeting on dialogue during the pope's recent U.S. trip; and his family even cheers for the Fighting Irish (his father earned an M.B.A. at Notre Dame).

Yet Patel still remains a devoted Muslim. Catholics and people of other faiths, in fact, helped Patel return to his Ismaili Muslim tradition and become one of America's leading young Muslim visionaries, as named by *Islamica Magazine*.

His vision—which he says is both Muslim and American—is one in which young people share the wealth of their spiritual traditions to inspire social action. Through his organization, Interfaith Youth Core, Patel has found that dialogue actually strengthens young people's own religious identities, just as it did for him.

"Dialogue constantly shows you that your tradition is one that encourages compassion and cooperation, and it's worthwhile for you to consider and to act on it," Patel says.

Patel personally takes inspiration from the Muslim creation story. "With God's breath, we are given a great goodness," he says, "and to discover that and to express it is the human purpose on earth."

Eboo Patel
Executive Director
Interfaith Youth Core

Author, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (Beacon, 2007)

Young people can change the world, this Muslim interfaith organizer says. They just need a chance to share their traditions with each other.

The editors interview Eboo Patel.

Why should young people be part of interfaith work?
One reason is that they are living with diversity. Older generations encountered people of other religions in college or maybe in their 20s, but today young people grow up with it. My best friends in high school included a Mormon, a Cuban Jew, a South Indian Hindu, a Nigerian evangelical, a Catholic, a Lutheran. That's happening earlier and earlier for many young people today.

I think a second big issue is that so often religious extremism is carried out by young people. For me at least that means that we need to be investing in the power and the potential of young people for a very different cause, and that's the cause of religious pluralism and interfaith cooperation.

Why are young people attracted to extremism?
I think it's two big things: One is the desire to have a clear identity, and the second is a desire to make an impact on the world. Religious extremists are very good at marketing their radical product to a category of people who particularly seek clear identities and a way to make an impact.

How do religious extremists market themselves to young people?
Al Qaeda is a youth organization. There is a reason that every time you see a suicide bomber on television the person is 22 years old. It's because Al Qaeda got to them when they were 11 or 14 or 16. Al Qaeda thinks about the social psychology of 12-year-olds and has influenced a set of schools. You get to people when they're young and inject poisonous ideas in them. Al Qaeda's institution is set up to identify, recruit, train, and deploy young religious extremists.

The Christian Identity Movement is another example. Benjamin Smith, who 10 years ago in Chicago went on a shooting rampage targeting African Americans, Jews, and Asian Americans, was 21 years old. The movement has a powerful presence online, which is, of course, where young people spend a lot of time.

A lot of conferences with *interfaith* in the title are full of older people. If interfaith cooperation is about senior theologians talking and religious extremism is about young people taking action, we lose.

Would the people who were recruited to extremist groups respond to an alternative model?
What's striking about the "recruits" to a lot of these religious extremist outfits—and I'm speaking about the situation in the West, not in Pakistan or the Palestinian Territories—is that they're remarkably normal kids. It's simply the set of influences that got to them at a time in their lives when they were seeking a clear identity and a way of making a powerful impact.

This is the point of my book. I basically say that this could have been me, but not because I'm weirder than anybody else. Religious extremism is particularly prominent now, but in previous eras it could have been a violent political extremism like anarchism or violent Marxism.

I taught in the inner city of Chicago for two years, and the difference between my students who were in gangs and my students who weren't in gangs was very simple. The ones recruited into gangs got involved in them.

What alternative do you offer young people?
The Interfaith Youth Core views itself as the hub of a movement. That's why we call it the "core" rather than "corps." We have a couple of strategies. We have a training program to give people the knowledge and skills to start their own interfaith service project. We also sponsor a global program called the Days of Interfaith Youth Service, which this year will take place in dozens of cities and campuses around the world. The leaders we train bring together hundreds of people from different religious backgrounds to tutor children, to clean rivers, to visit the sick and the elderly, and to talk about how their religious traditions inspire these actions.

A Day of Interfaith Youth Service is a gateway to creating an interfaith council that does volunteer projects on a regular basis or a congregational exchange in which five congregations decide to meet and tutor the same group of children every month.

Can you give an example of how this works?
A couple of years ago at the University of Illinois, there was some significant tension between Muslims and Jews. A group of five Illinois students interned with us for a summer, and

we put them through a very intense training program. Back on campus they started Interfaith in Action, a group that met on a regular basis to talk about how different religions inspire social action.

Then they put this into practice at the end of the year in a Day of Interfaith Youth Service. Those five students got more than 100 students to come out and to embody the message campus-wide. A group of younger students volunteered to organize it the following year.

That's how the Interfaith Youth Core grows—that's how this is a movement. It's probably happened on more than 100 campuses across the country.

But how can events like this affect global issues such as terrorism and religious extremism?

So much of this is in how you frame it. There's a story about three people, each of them laying bricks. You ask each person, "What are you doing?" and the first person says, "I'm laying bricks." The second person says, "I'm building a wall." The third person says, "I'm erecting a cathedral."

I am **more of a Muslim now because of my work with, friendships with,** and admiration for Hindus, Catholics, and others.

We tell young people that they're not just engaged in a local interfaith service project, they're building religious pluralism in a very tangible way. Each brick that is laid for interfaith cooperation or religious pluralism is part of a cathedral. Young people have to imagine themselves as a part of that bigger thing.

I was just in the United Kingdom, where we have a group of people in Belfast in Northern Ireland who organized a Day of Interfaith Youth Service. They wanted to know what's happening in Boston. They wanted to know that they're part of a movement. I came back to Chicago, and I told stories of Belfast. The Interfaith Youth Core catalyzes this all over the world.

Do conflicts come up during interfaith service programs?

My view is when you're doing interfaith work, you advance the positive. You don't begin conversations with people by saying, "Here's all the things I don't like about you, now let's figure out if we can be friends." You start by saying, "Here are the things that we have in common and here's what we can work on together." Our traditions each have unique stories about a shared value, such as mercy or hospitality, and we will find a ton in common on that shared value.

There are two other levels of dialogue. One is the stuff we're never going to agree on. Ritual, worship, and doctrine are the private spaces of a religious community.

We can have a set of interesting conversations about these subjects. We can even try to mutually convert one another in polite and respectful ways, but we're just never going to agree on the nature of Jesus, for example.

As the Qur'an says, to you your way, to me mine. That's part of the nature of religion, and I don't think we should be scared of that.

Then there's going to be another set of harder, more political questions. Muslims might say, "Tell me why Catholics did this in history." Catholics might ask, "Tell me why Muslims are doing this now." We are going to struggle with parts of other people's traditions and parts of our own tradition, and that is all part of a full relationship.

That sounds good in theory, but what does that look like in practice?

Because so much of the focus of the Interfaith Youth Core is on developing the knowledge and skills to do interfaith service projects, that's probably where 90 percent of the discussion is. I would say another 10 percent or so is on harder political matters, like what do you do about the Middle East. Relatively little discussion is about matters of eternity or salvation.

Our philosophy is that we should not expect relationships with people of different religious traditions to be fully satisfying. None of our relationships are fully satisfying. We have particular relationships with our mothers and different relationships with our spouses. Similarly, we have different types of relationships with members of other religions.

It is perfectly legitimate for religious people to think that their traditions are superior and that proselytization and conversion is a part of who they are and what they do. That is not necessarily mutually exclusive with having enriching, positive relationships with people from different religious backgrounds.

You say young people seek identity, but some fear that pluralism weakens religious identity.

I frankly feel that this is false. We live out our identities in relationship with other people. The question for me is, "Who am I as a Muslim in a world of Catholics and Jews and Buddhists and Hindus?"

Experientially, what I have found most true is the more that I learn about my heritage as a Muslim and the more I make my way in a diverse world, the deeper I find myself rooted in Islam. I also find my relationships with people from different backgrounds are more authentic and powerful.

I am more of a Muslim now because of my work with, friendships with, and

admiration for Hindus, Catholics, Jews, Protestants, and others. I call that framework "affirming identity, achieving pluralism." That's a very different way of looking at the world than "the more I'm in a world of diversity, the less I'm rooted in my tradition."

Are we teaching our young people **a way of being religious that is relevant** in a world of diversity?

How can we strengthen young people's faith identities in a diverse world?

I see three basic models of how people of faith engage in the world of diversity. One is we play the isolation game, like the Amish. The second is we play the oppositional game: We decide that the definition of who we are as Catholics or Muslims is to be in opposition to anything that is different. The third is we play the pluralism game: We decide that it is our job to be rooted in our tradition and be in relationships with people from different backgrounds.

This is a challenge that I would put at the doorstep of all faith communities: Are we teaching our young people a way of being religious that is relevant in a world of diversity?

If the only thing we are teaching young people is a religious language that is relevant to the magic circle of the faith community and they're spending 95 percent of their lives outside of the faith community, then they're learning a language that is irrelevant to the vast majority of their lives.

Don't young people tend to rebel against institutions and identify as spiritual rather than religious?

The Interfaith Youth Core simply aims to highlight to young people how their tradition or family's tradition inspires social action. When I first encountered the Catholic Worker, I was blown away by how these people were inspired to live like Jesus. Many of those people told me, "Eboo, this exists in your tradition also." And it did, but I hadn't been taught this as a kid.

The funny thing is now I talk about Dorothy Day and young Catholics say, "Who?" They're like, "I'm really interested in socially engaged Buddhism," and I'm like, "You should check out the Jesuits."

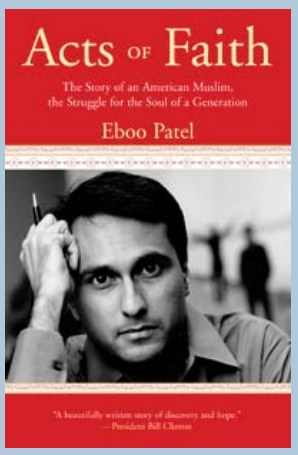
How Catholics saved me An excerpt from *Acts of Faith*

Eboo Patel discovered Dorothy Day's writings and became involved in a Catholic Worker community while studying at the University of Illinois. The group provided what Patel was seeking: "a vision of radical equality…that could be achieved through both a direct-service approach and change-the-system politics."

He never felt a desire or pressure to convert to Catholicism, but the Catholic Workers "saved me just the same," he writes. He realized this after meeting Bill Ayers, who is now a professor of education but was involved in the Weather Underground, a violent radical political group, in the 1960s:

Bill had recently published his memoir, *Fugitive Days*. The similarities between our stories were scary. We were both middle-class kids from Glen Ellyn [Illinois] who had discovered the dark side of America in college and responded with rage. We both had contempt for liberals and romanticized the violent rebellions of John Brown and Che Guevara. We were both familiar with [Thomas Jefferson's] line that the people should rebel during every era. We both fancied ourselves in the vanguard.

Sitting at the kitchen table one night in 1968, talking about the death machine that was the U.S. government, a new guy in Bill's circle, Terry Robbins, had suggested that things had gone too far and it was time to bomb the pigs into the Stone Age. At first Bill and his friends resisted. That's crazy, they said. "There's got to be a place in this revolution for a man of principled violence," Terry responded. Bill found the image intoxicating and he spent the ensuing years doing violent battle.… He lost several friends and a decade of his life in the process.



What if I had been at that kitchen table that night? What if a Terry Robbins figure had crossed my path, showed me his sketchbook full of bomb designs, encouraged me to study the *Blaster's Handbook*? At 19 I was already convinced that America understood only violence. I was just this side of believing that it was my responsibility to inflict it. I only needed a nudge.

My father couldn't make it all the way through *Fugitive Days*. "It reminds me too much of you," he said. "It scares the s--t out of me, what you could have become."

It had been chance—grace—that I had sat at the Catholic Worker table and it had been Dorothy Day's book that had fallen into my hands.

Do young people know enough about their own traditions to talk about them with people of other faiths?
Some say we need to invest young people with their own tradition before they encounter anybody else. So when a 14-year-old Catholic meets a Jew, it does not impact his world negatively. The theory goes that he would be such a scholar of Catholicism that the conversation that he'd have with that Jew, a scholar of Judaism, would be so much richer. Unfortunately that's a fiction. We need to change our framework.

I'm a new father, praise be to God, and one of my highest callings is to invest in my son the tradition of Islam. But I have to face the facts of the world, which is that from a very young age, my son is going to be in contact with Jews and Christians and Hindus and Buddhists. My son is not just a Muslim, he is a Muslim in a world of these other people.

But what it means to be a Muslim is to be in relationship with the world, not just to be in relationship with a doctrine that was handed down 1,400 years ago. I guess what I'm articulating is a theology of religious life in the real world.

Is there an age that's too young to be involved in interfaith work?
It depends on what you call interfaith work. My son is 11 months old. My wife and I have Christian and Jewish friends with children. Should we say they can't bring their children over?

So interfaith work is in everyday interactions?
The Catholic Church has been a leader on this—you call it the dialogue of life. Being religious doesn't just happen at Mass; it happens in everyday life.

I think a huge possibility for religious communities right now is passing on the tradition in a way that recognizes that their religious identities are immersed in interaction with people from other religious backgrounds.

Are parents scared of their kids participating in interfaith activities?
Early in the development of the Interfaith Youth Core, one of the senior officials at the Chicago archdiocese said to me, "Look, I think your dialogue is great, but I'll be honest with you: I think Catholicism has the banquet, and I want my Catholic kids to eat more fully from the Catholic banquet."

He thought that I was going to be offended by that. My response was, "I think Islam has the banquet, and I want my Muslim kids to eat more fully from the Muslim banquet. But neither my kids nor your kids live in the banquet hall. You're going to have to figure out a way to put it in their backpacks as they journey into the world."

Another thing we hear a lot, especially from Catholic parents, is "My kid is going to church again. I don't know what the heck your organization did for him, but now he cares about religion again."

I have a very simple answer: Our organization made him proud to be Catholic outside of Catholic spaces. Here's a space where you can share what it means for you to be religious and how it contributes positively to your life.

Do you mean that interfaith dialogue can strengthen an individual's faith?
Exactly. In fact, I'll go so far as to say I think it is an increasingly necessary component in the faith formation of a young person.

In other words, without proactive interfaith engagement programs sponsored by religious communities, kids have no idea how their religion interacts with other people. Therefore they just forget about their religion when they engage other people. We want them to remember how their religion engages positively with other people. **USC**