

Diversity is Only the First Step

By ANJUM NAIM

Indian American sociologist and advisor to the Obama White House **Eboo Patel** is banking on the young generation to build relationships across religious lines for joint civic service.

On the wall of the Chicago, Illinois office of Eboo Patel, director of Interfaith Youth Core, is a well-known painting, "Freedom of Worship," by early 20th century American painter Norman Rockwell. It shows a crowd of men and women praying. Rockwell's intent was to depict people of different ethnic backgrounds and religious faiths, standing shoulder to shoulder, facing the same direction, comfortable with the presence of one another.

Patel, 33, says it is a vivid depiction of a group living in peace with its diversity, yet not exploring it. Patel, an India-born Muslim who immigrated to the United States with his father in 1975, recognizes Rockwell's desire to depict the American ideal of recognition and tolerance of diversity. But he wants to push further for what he calls "religious pluralism." He founded Youth Core to persuade young people of different faiths to respect each other, solve their problems together and change their societies for the better.

Youth service

"In an era of global religious conflict, idealism has a new face: interfaith youth cooperation," Patel told SPAN during a recent visit to India as part of a partnership between the U.S. Department of State and the Interfaith Youth Core. "The evening news features stories of young people killing each other to the soundtrack of prayer. Yet, across the country and the world, young people of many faiths are coming together around the shared value of service."

In his opinion, they are changing the toxic conversation about religion

and building the American dream of a place in which freedom for one relies on freedom for all. He also feels this is an opportune moment for such idealism: President Barack Obama has called on Americans to volunteer and give community service at even higher levels than they already do, and young people are the president's most ardent supporters. More than 61 million Americans volunteered for charitable and national service organizations in 2007, giving 8.1 billion hours of service worth more than \$158 billion to American communities, says the Corporation for National and Community Service in Washington, D.C.

Patel was recently named to the President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, and hopes to shape a task force on interfaith cooperation. "Though our work is just beginning, I see this as proof that the potential of faith-based groups to do good in this country has been recognized. I hope that my year on this council ends with the recognition that faith-based groups can do the most good when they work together," he says.

Published in 2007, Patel's book *Acts of Faith* is, in fact, a story of his own life journey and his vision in creating an interfaith youth movement to build religious pluralism.

"Religious pluralism is three things," explains Patel. "First, there must be respect for religious identity, which includes respect for secular humanist and non-believing [atheist] identities. Second, there must be mutually inspiring relationships between people of diverse faith traditions. Finally, religious pluralism must include common action for the com-

mon good. It is not enough that we identify the call to serve in different traditions; we must act upon that call together."

Most Americans, in his opinion, agree that religious pluralism is important, and he would go a step further and say that people in general tend towards pluralism. He thinks the missing link is that people need the framework, leadership skills, training and resources to build a pluralistic world.

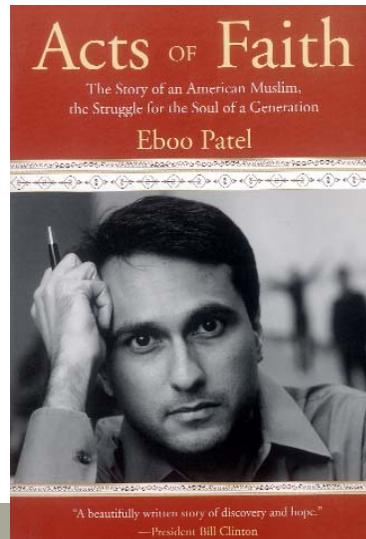
Interfaith dialogue in a multicultural society

"My organization works abroad through several channels. For example, during the last few weeks, two Interfaith Youth Core staff members, both Muslim women, embarked on a tour across Western Europe supported by the State Department," says Patel. "They will conduct training for young European interfaith leaders...with the goal of sparking an interfaith youth movement across Europe."

"In our globalized era, the world is smaller than ever before," says Patel. "The possibility of coming of age without encountering neighbors, classmates, teachers or friends of different faiths or cultures is narrowing more every year, and I think this kind of diverse, multicultural society is the ideal place to hold interfaith dialogue."

He believes that there will be no peace in the world without religious pluralism, and no religious pluralism without the leadership of the youth. Young people today are growing up in the most globalized era in human history; they are truly the first interfaith generation, he says.

"Faith formation for them is not only



going to involve the question: 'What does it mean to be a Muslim?' It is going to have to include an additional element, 'What does it mean to be a Muslim in a community/country/world of Hindus, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs, secular humanists, etc?'"

The 21st century faith line

"One hundred years ago, the great African American scholar W.E.B. DuBois famously said, 'The problem of the 20th century will be the problem of the color line.' Most people assumed that the color line divided black and white. But Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came around 60 years later and changed the paradigm," says Patel. King suggested that the real dividing line wasn't between black and white, "but between those who wanted to live together as brothers and those who wanted to perish together as fools."

Patel believes the 21st century will be dominated by the question of the faith line. "Our first and most important challenge is to recognize that the faith line does not divide Muslims and Christians, Hindus and Buddhists or secularists..." he says. Instead, he thinks the faith line separates religious totalitarians and religious pluralists. Religious totalitarians want a society where their group dominates and everyone else suffocates, he says, while religious pluralists want a society where people from different backgrounds live in equal dignity and mutual loyalty.

"The... challenge of the faith line," Patel says, "is for those of us in the majority to stand up for our pluralist vision, to tell our story, to put the extremists back in their place: on the extremes."

