

“Progressive Religious Voices” Podcast Transcript

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Interview with Eboo Patel, Ph.D. (August 31, 2007)

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Part I: Starting Interfaith Youth Core

My name is Eboo Patel. I'm the Founder and Executive Director of the Interfaith Youth Core, which is a Chicago-based international non-profit that is building the interfaith youth movement.

I'll tell you just a little bit about why I started this. I woke up one day almost randomly and I realized that all of my heroes are people of faith. I mean, out of nowhere this kind of crashed through my consciousness. The heroes of the past hundred years have largely been people of faith, and a little bit more digging and you realize: my gosh, all of them are of different faiths. It's not like Christianity has the monopoly on generating heroes. All of these people very much animated by their religious traditions, but ultimately what they worked for is pluralism. In my mind, one of the King's greatest lines is we have inherited a world house where we have to learn to live together, Muslim and Hindu, Jew and Gentile, Easterner and Westerner, black and white, because we can never again live apart, we must somehow learn to live with each other in peace.

Second big realization: every time I turned on the television in the 1990's somebody is killing somebody else to the soundtrack of prayer, and that person is always 19 or 26 or 29. I said why is it that so many young people are so involved in religious extremism? How does this happen? And then I kind of had another stark realization. As I kind of read back in these heroes of faith of mine, how old they all were when they started. King was 26 in Montgomery in 1955. Jane Adams was in her late 20's, 28 or 29 when she starts Hull House in the late 1880's in Chicago. Dorothy Day was 33 when she founded the Catholic Worker. Gandhi was in his early 20's when he started his movement against racist pass laws in South Africa. The Dalai Lama was even younger when he started his movement, when he moved his people out of occupied Tibet into India. Our faith heroes were enormously young when they started.

So I started kind of exploring the intersection of these things and I explored them both sociologically and personally. I think that there was something about the heat of being 22 that said damn it, I'm going to start this. I am not going to forfeit what it means to be religious, and I'm not going to forfeit the world that I love to religious extremists who are exceptional at identifying, recruiting and training young people for their murderous causes.

I started going to interfaith conferences: Parliament of the World's Religions, the United Religions Initiative, etc. etc. And I started realizing: wait a second, why is it that every interfaith conference is a bunch of people over 60 drafting documents, curating ceremonies, having banquets, planning the next conference, and I was kind of 22, 23 years old at the time, my hair was on fire, I saw the world in relatively stark terms, and I basically thought to myself if religious extremism is a movement of young people taking action and interfaith cooperation is a movement of old people talking, we're going to lose, it's just that simple. So that was the animating spark of the Interfaith Youth Core.

Part II: The Faith Line, Pluralism, and America

I remember getting a random email from a high school friend in 1999 and a person saying, “What are you doing these days?” I said, “Ah, you know, I’m doing a doctorate in the Sociology of Religion and I’m becoming a more serious Muslim and I’m starting this interfaith organization.” And the person said, “Why’d you go off and join the flat earth society? Isn’t religion already dead? Didn’t it die a long time ago?” And that was a challenge that I had for several years basically until September 12, 2001, when all of a sudden religion came crashing through the sky in the most heinous, murderous way imaginable.

I think that we have a new line in the twenty-first century, and that new line is the faith line. And just like a lot of people thought the color line separated black and white and yellow and red, and it took a visionary like Martin Luther King, Jr. to say, “No, no, no. What the color line separates are people who want to live together as brothers and people who would perish together as fools.” I think of the faith line in the same way.

The faith line does not separate Muslims and Christians or Jews and Hindus. The faith line separates who I call religious pluralists and religious totalitarians. And the definitions of those two in my mind are pretty clear and straightforward. A religious totalitarian is somebody who wants their way of being, believing and belonging to dominate everything and for everyone else to suffocate. A religious pluralist is somebody who may well believe very, very deeply in their own traditions, may even be an exclusivist and believe that their own tradition is the only right tradition, but fundamentally believes in a society where people from different backgrounds have the freedom and the right to live by their own traditions and where those different groups of people can live together in equal dignity and mutual loyalty. So pluralism has three layers, in my mind. The first layer is identity, the second layer is relationship, and the third layer is common good. Identity, community, common good.

Part III: Stories and Tradition

One of my favorite quotes is by the South African Nobel winner, J.M. Coetsee, and he says we all come into the world with the memory of justice. And I wanted to know where that memory came from. I think in some ways that was a big part of my personal attraction to faith in general when I was in college and as a young adult, is that I felt really deeply that that memory comes from God.

Alistair McIntire has a great line, ‘I cannot tell you what I am going to do until I tell you what story or stories I’m a part of.’ In my mind, I’m part of the story of America, I’m part of the story of India, and I’m part of the story of Islam. It was in the Holy Qur’an, which is the book that animated my ancestors, that I found the fullest description of that and that I found language that I considered home.

The first part of that I think is why God created humans at all. In Chapter 2 of the Holy Qur’an we are told this story, that God created Adam, the first human being and the representative of all humankind with a lump of clay and his breath. And God made Adam his *abd* and *khalifa* on earth, his servant and representative, and said ‘You will be the steward of my creation.’

And then God says to Adam, ‘I want you to name the different parts of creation,’ and Adam can name them. So what does Adam have the ability to do that even the angels don’t have the ability to

do, and that is to name diversity. And so how we engage with that diversity, how we use language, how we build relationships amidst diversity, I think is a central aspect of what it means to be human. And of course Muslims believe that Adam was the first prophet, the first of God's messengers carrying God's message of monotheism and mercy, which are the core of Islam and the core of all Abrahamic faiths.

I'll tell you another story that doesn't so much come from the tradition, it comes from something that I witnessed which I try to model. I was in Australia six or eight months ago at an interfaith conference, and they had lined up this very angry Christian preacher and this very imposing looking Muslim imam in this kind of typical duke-it-out kind of thing that drives me berserk. The Christian started off and he just said slanderous, horrible, prejudicial things about Islam. About how the Prophet, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him, was a murderer and all, things that are very, very difficult to hear, how the Qur'an is a book of death and how Muslims have done nothing but pillaged and raped throughout their whole history. I run an interfaith organization, and I found myself whispering underneath my breath to the Muslim imam as I was sitting in the audience, "Tell him about all the violence that Christianity has done." And the Muslim imam listens to all of this very calmly and when the man is done, this Christian turns to the imam and the imam says, "I love Jesus, and I love the Bible and do not expect me to say negative things about your religion only because you have said negative things about mine, because there's too much love and mercy in my heart to do that." And I thought to myself, not only is that as beautiful a thing as I have ever seen in my life, but it's such a smart strategy. Why am I going to respond to your bigoted remarks by bigoted remarks of my own?

My hope is to articulate what I love about your tradition, and to teach you what you might love about mine, and to point to a space where we might work together to serve others. And in my mind, that's the example of the Prophet Muhammad. Do you know how merciful the Prophet Muhammad was? I just feel like that's the height of mercy and the height of vision, and I think that it's just it is an absolute honor to be able to have those stories and to be able to attempt in even the smallest way to live up to them.

Part IV: Pluralism as America's Gift to the World

I love America because it gives me, the child of immigrant Muslim parents from India, the chance to participate in its progress and to carve a place in its promise.

And I believe that this country was founded in large part on the idea of religious freedom and its relationship with religious pluralism. Madison says famously, taking from Voltaire, that it is the freedom of religion that allows for the multiplicity of religious communities in America, and it's the multiplicity of communities that will keep the peace between religious communities. Now think about the American achievement for a second here. We are the most religiously diverse nation in human history and the most religiously devout society in the West in a moment of global religious conflict. And Sunnis and Shias don't kill each other, and liberal Protestants and evangelical conservative Protestants don't kill each other in Boise, and Orthodox Jews and Reform Jews don't throw rocks at each other on Devon Avenue in Chicago. But they do all of that on other sides of the world. We have managed to have a relatively thick religious pluralism in this country that has respect for identity, that nurtures community, that focuses people on the common good. What I think we need to do in America is realize that this in the early twenty-first century, in the century of the faith

line, is in fact, our most precious internal resource and our most important gift to the rest of the world.

Concluding Tag:

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