

INTER FAITH LEADERSHIP

A PRIMER

EBOO PATEL

Founder and President of
Interfaith Youth Core

"This book makes it clear why Eboo Patel is one of the most inspiring and successful
interfaith leaders on the national, and even international, scene."
—PAUL F. KNITTER, author of *Without Borders I Could Not Be a Christian*

Interfaith Leadership: A Primer

Patel, Eboo
Beacon Press, 2016

Book Review

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To date, one thousand colleges and universities have engaged the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) to catalyze interfaith cooperation, educate interfaith leaders, and build knowledge of faith traditions. Authored by the founder of IFYC, *Interfaith Leadership* contributes to a key IFYC goal: to train seven thousand interfaith leaders by 2020.

Sharing his journey to interfaith leadership (Chapter 1), Patel discusses his theory of interfaith understanding (Chapters 2-3), shares his leadership vision (Chapter 4), and identifies leaders' knowledge, skills, and personal qualities (Chapters 5-7). "Inter" in "interfaith" references "interaction between people who orient around religion differently"; "faith" stands for "how people relate to their religious and ethical traditions." With the term interfaith, Patel highlights reciprocal influences: interactions with others impact how we relate to "our" religious and ethical traditions as well as to "theirs." Interfaith leaders guide persons across a "landscape of religious diversity" toward "interfaith cooperation."

Can religious studies programs play a role in campus interfaith leadership training? Patel's understanding of religious studies is informed by Wilfred Cantwell Smith. As Patel understands Smith, the academic study of religion errs because it looks at "systems" divorced from religious practice. For Patel, "religious system" means faith viewed through a religious studies lens. By contrast, interfaith explorations engage personal practices.

Patel identifies two potential models of interfaith leadership: Stephen Prothero and Karen Armstrong. While Prothero focuses on systems (doctrines, texts, and rituals), neglecting the diversity and specificity of lived faith, Armstrong attends to "human-heartedness," generalizing about spiritual traditions in ways that make these traditions unrecognizable to their adherents.

Interfaith leaders, by contrast, support embedded dialogue. Patel illustrates: when the lone Muslim student in a world religions class declares he has never before heard the terms “Shia” and “Sunni,” his professor’s “abstract” approach to Islam is shown irrelevant to other students’ who comprehend “real world” Muslim faith.

Eschewing “deficits, problems, and ugliness,” interfaith perspectives “appreciate” the “beautiful, life-giving, and admirable” in religion, building relationships through story-telling. For example, Patel attributes changes in the US between 1928 and 1955 in attitudes about Jews to the NCCJ (originally the National Conference of Christians and Jews. It currently refers to the National Conference for Community and Justice), an interfaith entity, not to the scholarly study of anti-Semitism. Patel also highlights a case study. Doctors trained in Western medicine identify symptoms of epilepsy in a Hmong child. Her parents, believing she is becoming a shaman, do not comply with treatment plans. A seizure puts the child in a vegetative state. Patel ponders whether an “appreciative understanding” of Hmong faith by the doctors could have led to a different outcome.

IFYC does valuable work on campuses, promoting conversations about religion that make it safer for students of diverse traditions to express faith without fear. On some campuses, religious studies departments have been included in IFYC initiatives. However, participants in campus IFYC initiatives whose knowledge of the academic study of religion is drawn only from *Interfaith Leadership* will benefit from outreach by religious studies faculty. We can foster an informed understanding of our field as a vital resource for students seeking the knowledge, skills, and personal qualities needed by leaders in a religiously diverse world.

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