Bridge work: Eboo Patel, interfaith activist

by Lawrence Wood in the February 23, 2010 issue

In 1998, when he was 22, Eboo Patel founded the Interfaith Youth Core (spelled "core" because it seeks to be the heart of a larger movement), which now has a presence on 140 college campuses. When the IFYC held its first national conference, 60 people attended. A similar event at Northwestern University this past October drew almost a thousand.

Patel, a Muslim who grew up in the Chicago area, is a sociologist with a doctorate from Oxford. He describes his own journey of interfaith encounters in his memoir, Acts of Faith. *He says the prejudice he experienced growing up could have taken him down a very different path, but some important role models helped him to escape bitterness. Martin Luther King Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and the Aga Khan represented to him the way faith could unite rather than divide. Patel is on the Advisory Council of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. He was selected as an Ashoka fellow, one of a group of social entrepreneurs whose ideas are changing the world, and he was named by* Islamica *magazine as one of ten young Muslim leaders shaping Islam in America.*

What led to the idea of an interfaith youth movement?

It was a reasonably obvious idea: religious traditions inspire service. Young people want to engage in service. The world needs service, and it certainly needs cooperation among different religious traditions. So why not use service as a way to bring young people of different faith backgrounds together to serve and to share how service changes them?

What's distinctive about IFYC is that we've focused on developing leadership. We train young people to be conversation changers in the world of religion, moving the conversation away from violence and conflict toward cooperation and service. We train young people to launch their own interfaith projects; we network with them for maximum impact. We challenge them to go beyond launching projects to changing

their environments, in the same way that the service learning movement went from sponsoring onetime projects to pervading the culture of high schools.

Isn’t IFYC becoming pretty well established on college campuses?

We hope that college campuses around the country will consider becoming sponsors of interfaith cooperation and create models in which they would nurture young people into becoming interfaith leaders. Many young people have their first interfaith experiences at college, then graduate and become leaders in the culture. We think campuses have a triple bottom line—they are recruiting young people who can 1) improve the social climate of a diverse campus; 2) spark more service and more cooperation; and 3) constitute the next generation of interfaith leaders.

What is it about young adulthood that lends itself to interfaith dialogue?

Young people are asking deep questions about their identity and how that identity directs them, and we have a message that is extremely exciting for them: your religious identity is relevant to the world around you, if you view that religion as a bridge to cooperate with others. Eighteen- and 19-year-olds want to find ways to connect more deeply with their religious identities; they want to find ways to be relevant to the world, and very often they view their religion as irrelevant to the world.

Has interfaith work changed your own religious beliefs?

One of the things it’s helped me to understand is how Islam is relevant to my life in the world. When I was growing up, Islam was what I did in the local prayer hall and in the privacy of my own home. Once I discovered dimensions of Islam that were calls to service and cooperation, I recognized that my faith had purchase for all aspects of life.

Were you religious as a boy? Did you consider a religious vocation?

I write about this a lot in my memoir, *Acts of Faith*. Islam was in the air in my home. We said *Bismillah* before meals or a trip. But the real religion of my house was the religion of American achievement.

Apart from your roots in the city, why have you chosen Chicago as headquarters?

There are many reasons. One is the city's history of interfaith cooperation—notably, of course, the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions. Chicago has a great history of religious diversity. It is also the city in which Martin Luther King Jr. met Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Many different interfaith organizations started here, such as the National Council of Christians and Jews and Interfaith Worker Justice. It's also a city in which a lot of social movements were begun—the community organizing movement; the Settlement House movement founded by Jane Addams; the Asset-Based Community Develop ment movement. So we see ourselves as part of a Chicago tradition.

As members of a majority faith here in the U.S., do Christians have a special role or responsibility in interfaith work?

Not necessarily. I would like Christians to have at the tip of their tongue the theology of positive human interaction. I think it should be preached in the pulpit and taught in Sunday school, and I think it's the same for Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and humanists. We should all be teaching the theology of human interaction. What is it in our religion that requires us to cooperate with people who hold different beliefs? I frequently ask high school and college students that question, and it's hard for them to answer.

Does IFYC hope to change theological education in this country?

We do a lot of teaching at seminaries, and we're trying to teach seminary students how to teach the theology of human interaction in churches and synagogues.

Some sparks flew at the IFYC conference when Greg Epstein, the humanist chaplain at Harvard, shared the dais with observant people of faith. How do people of faith find common ground with persons who profess no faith?

That panel may have been the single best panel I have ever encountered at one of these events. It included not only leaders in their respective movements, but orthodox believers. Maha ElGenaidi describes herself as an orthodox Muslim; Skye Jethani is the managing editor of an evangelical Christian magazine; Or Rose is not an Orthodox Jew, but he's a rabbi with influence in his tradition; Greg Epstein has just published a major book. These were people who were not afraid of being evangelical about their traditions. They were also self-critical—and comfortable with diversity.

The most important Muslim prayer is “There is no God but God.” As an orthodox Muslim, Maha disagrees with Greg’s entire ontology, yet she hands the microphone over to him without hesitation. She’s comfortable because she knows that humanists exist. That’s central to the theology of human interaction: it does not pretend that certain other people do not exist, but asks: “How do I relate to and cooperate with people who actually believe very differently than I do?”

Are you reaching out to atheists like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens?

No. We are working with folks who have very different beliefs but are positive about pluralism. I view the kind of people you’ve mentioned as somewhat intolerant.

Did you give President Obama any advice for his address in Cairo?

We wrote a memo and had several conference calls about raising the importance of interfaith cooperation, and of course that was included in his Cairo address. We were told that we had an impact.

You’ve taken on a special role as a representative of the American Muslim community. Does that role constrain you at all on political issues? Are there times when you would rather not become engaged in a topic lest it be misunderstood or appropriated by someone else?

I don’t see myself as a leader of the American Muslim community. I see myself as an interfaith leader whose Muslim identity plays a key role in inspiring and working for cooperation. I think that any public figure has a special responsibility to be a model, to be civil, to be positive. When I’m abroad, my most salient identity is as an American. I’m mindful that how I speak and what I do reflects upon the country I love. In parts of America people see me as Muslim, and I recognize that what I say and do reflects upon my faith.

IFYC has experienced tremendous growth in its first ten years. What have been your biggest frustrations?

We should be as big as the environmental movement, as big as the service learning movement. We are nowhere near that yet. We should see more stories about interfaith cooperation on the evening news than stories about religious extremism. But I look up and out and into the future. My staff probably wishes that I would

spend a little more time celebrating what we've accomplished.

One of the most exciting things about the Evanston conference is that it demonstrated that a lot of remarkable young people are coming forward. The face of the interfaith youth movement should be, for example, Jen Bailey, a young African-American Christian in Nashville who's organizing for food justice. Or the face of the movement should be Joshua Stanton, an Interfaith Fellow at Amherst who just launched the *Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue*. There are hundreds of young people like them.

IFYC hopes to reach young adults at a time when they identify themselves less and less by their religious traditions. What are you doing to swim against that tide?

I don't know that I actually believe that assessment. One of the really interesting books on this topic is *Soul Searching*, by Christian Smith, a sociologist at Notre Dame. He says that young people are actually very interested in religion—and his argument is based on empirical research. We think that our approach of interfaith dialogue and service is a great way for young people to strengthen their interest in their own faiths.

You once said that it might take 40 or 50 years to build the student interfaith movement to the point where it could make a big impact. How big is big?

Environmentalism has become a social norm—people doing everything from recycling to buying clean cars. Service learning has also become a social norm—every college campus in America has a large percentage of students engaged in volunteer efforts. Human rights are a social norm; so are civil rights.

We'd like interfaith cooperation also to be a social norm. That means that mosques, synagogues, temples, churches and humanist societies should have interfaith exchanges and service projects just as a matter of course—just like having an Easter service or a Thanksgiving service. Such efforts should just become part of what your place of worship does. We think that every Sunday school, mosque school or Hebrew school should be teaching about how its tradition inspires positive human interaction. We think that everyone should stand up against religious prejudice in the way that people stand up against racial prejudice. If college campuses would adopt a set of hallmarks for interfaith cooperation, that would go a long way toward

changing the culture.