

Religious Passion, Pluralism and the Young

TRANSCRIPT

Broadcast Date: August 31, 2006

KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: I'm Krista Tippett. Today, "Religious Passion, Pluralism, and the Young."

M^R. E^{BOO} P^{A TEL}: Young people want to impact the world. They want their footprint on Earth, and they're going to do it somehow. So when people say to me, 'Oh, Eboo, you know, you run this sweet little organization called the Interfaith Youth Core and you do such nice things, you bring kids together,' I say, 'Yeah, you know, there's another youth organization out there. It's called al-Qaeda, and al-Qaeda's been built over the past 25 years and with lots of ideas of how you recruit young people and get them to think that this is the best way they can impact the world.'

MS. TIPPETT: Eboo Patel is a young Muslim out to create an alternative. 'We will not save ourselves and the next generation of every faith,' he says, 'by taming religious energy but by emboldening it.' This is *Speaking of Faith*. Stay with us.

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett. In Britain, 24 young people were arrested last month for conspiring to blow up passenger jets bound for the U.S. Last year young Muslims rioted across Paris. My guest today, Eboo Patel, is an ambitious, 30-year-old American Muslim and a former Rhodes Scholar.

He's working to deepen rather than tame the religious energies of the young across many traditions. His new paradigm defies the wisdom of secular society and he believes it may be our only chance for survival.

From American Public Media this is *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. Today, "Religious Passion, Pluralism, and the Young."

Eboo Patel was born in 1975 to a Muslim family of Indian heritage in a Chicago suburb. In his early 20s, he collaborated on projects around the world, including Sri Lanka, South Africa, and India. At the age of 23, after completing his doctorate in sociology at Oxford, he returned to Chicago to found the Interfaith Youth Core. Of all the differences between him and his Catholic, Mormon, Hindu, and Jewish friends in high school, he says, their personal religious beliefs were the most difficult to talk about. But Eboo Patel believes that giving young people fluency in the depths of their own religious traditions and those of others is work of extreme urgency.

M^R. P^{A TEL}: Religious people are changing our world. You can sit in a corner and whine about it, or you can be on the bus and figure out how we can all work together to build a world where people cooperate and live together in some sort of mutual loyalty.

MS. TIPPETT: Eboo Patel's Interfaith Youth Core is creating ground-level interactions based on service among adolescents and young adults of many traditions. He calls this work "track to diplomacy." In many cultures, he says, religious elders and leaders can be difficult to engage with different beliefs, but their children have an openness to meaningful interaction and the possibility of change. And as Eboo Patel himself discovered, appreciative engagement with others often deepens one's own identity.

Islam in Patel's family was important, but not fervent. At college, at the University of Illinois, he left faith behind but was drawn to social action. He wound his way back to Islam after becoming involved in projects of the Catholic Worker House movement that was founded by the 20th-century social activist and present candidate for Catholic sainthood Dorothy Day.

M^R. P^{A TEL}: I loved the songs, and I bowed my head when there was prayer. The cross, the blood of Christ, the resurrection, those key symbols didn't speak to me in the same way that they spoke to Christians.

M^S. T^{I PPETT}: Right.

M^R. P^{A TEL}: And at some point, a Catholic worker leader put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'Kid, you've got to find a way to engage in social justice mind, body, and soul!' And so I began reading in other religious traditions, and interestingly enough, kind of avoided Islam until I met my grandmother again, and this is in the summer of 1998. I went to Bombay, India, the summer before I went to graduate school in England, and I discovered that my grandmother had this 40-year history of housing battered and abused women in her apartment in south Bombay. And she brought out all these Polaroids of these women from Hyderabad and Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. And

then finally, at the end of all these stories, I wanted to hear my grandmother's story. I said, 'Why do you do this?' And she said, 'Because I'm a Muslim, and this is what Muslims do.' And it was like heaven cracked open and spilled onto me. And I realized that there was a Dorothy Dav figure in my faith, in my family. I was standing in an Indian-Muslim Catholic worker house.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Had you not known this about your grandmother, or had you just not paid attention to it, do you think?

M^R. P^{ATEL}: You know, I hadn't paid attention. I mean, my grandmother was the woman, you know, who came to America for one month of the year and kind of poked her bony finger in my chest and said, 'Are you saving your prayers?' and 'Are you, you know, giving your money to the Muslim community?' and 'Are you going to marry a Muslim girl when you grow up?' And it was like, you know, 'I'm 12. I just want to skateboard.'

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: OK, and it seems to me that you've become engaged in this field of thinking hard about religion, religion in a pluralistic culture at a young age, and that you care deeply and are quite sensitive to why young people, and something that's very much in the news, young Muslims, seem to be susceptible to extremist...

M^R. P^{ATEL}: Right.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: ...religious ideas. How do you think about that phenomenon? I think it is something that many people in our culture are puzzled by and would like to understand better.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: I think about the phenomenon of young people involved in religious violence primarily through thinking about what young people want. And I think that Gwendolyn Brooks in this beautiful line from a poem called "Boy Breaks Glass" articulates it best, and she speaks as if she were a young person. She says, "I shall create if not a note, a hole. If not an overture, a desecration." Young people want to impact the world. They want their footprint on Earth, and they're going to do it somehow. And if the only way that they get a chance to do that is by destroying things, then we shouldn't be surprised if that's the path they take. So when people say to me, 'Oh, Eboo, you know, you run this sweet little organization called the Interfaith Youth Core, and you do such nice things, you bring kids together,' I say, 'Yeah, you know, there's another youth organization out there. It's called al-Oaeda, and al-Oaeda's been built over the past 25 years with lots of money and with lots of strategy and with lots of ideas of how you recruit young people and get them to think that this is the best way they can impact the world.'

If you look at bin Laden's writing and speaking, he specifically articulates, 'And we are calling the young people of Islam.' Well, there's a reason for that, because he has a sense of the psychology of 16- to 24-year-olds. On the other hand, if you go to a lot of, quote, mainstream religious communities, you look around, and you're like, 'Where are the 16- to 24-year-olds? They're not here.' I think what we have to do is figure out how to involve them. And, unfortunately, religious extremists have just been much more effective at that.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: So as I understand it, I mean, the work you're doing now is having, rather than theological discussion as the foundation or simple social gatherings, you're actually bringing young people together to engage in projects.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: That's right. The first thing they do is have a common experience of serving someone else. They would build houses together. They would tutor children together. So you have this opportunity to see kind of the best in somebody else's tradition as you are practicing the best in your own. And then you have this opportunity to sit together afterwards and actually articulate that, say, 'This is what it is in Islam that inspires me to tutor this refugee kid: It is sura 93 that does that.' And you hear this Christian kid talking about Matthew 25, and you hear this Jewish kid talking about *tikkun olam*. And that can be a song. For many people, it's a hero. You know, most of the times when we deal with kids and religion, we sit them down and we say, 'You believe in Moses, right?' And the kid says, 'I believe in Moses.' But when you ask the kid, 'What is it about Moses that inspires you to be a leader?' Man, that kid believes in Moses in a whole different way.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: This is also about people giving each other the gift of their questions as an outsider, someone from a different tradition asking an interesting question of another, and then that question itself causing the person who's been asked it to go deeper, to think harder.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: I think that's exactly right. I mean, there're these huge parts of our lives that are entirely private. They're our religious lives. And I felt like when I was in high school like I was hiding this stuff from my other friends. I didn't want them to know about Friday prayer in Islam. I didn't want them to know about Ramadan. I was, for some reason, embarrassed about it almost. And I think perhaps the most wonderful surprise that we found in doing interfaith youth work is how excited 16-year-old religious kids are about talking about their religion with other kids.

I got a phone call from a Catholic mom, and she said, 'I don't know what you've done to my son, but after he's gone to a couple of your

programs he's starting to wake up early on Sunday and getting the whole family to go to church. And I would love to tell his grandmother about this, except I'm afraid of admitting to her that we had stopped going to church for a while.'

MS. TIPPETT: Activist and organizer Eboo Patel. Here are some voices from a discussion he led recently with a group of diverse teenagers after an afternoon of tutoring immigrant children.

(Beginning of Interfaith Youth Core discussion)

MR. PATEL: So today we were teachers, and teaching is a sacred act, a point of enormous significance across religious traditions. So what I want to begin with is talking about important teachers in our different religious traditions and what they inspire us to do as we move on in our lives and teach others.

UNIDENTIFIED YOUNG WOMAN #1: The first one is a piece I'm learning in my own Tanakh class, and it's Rambam. And he is important because we're studying about who you should give charity to. And he says that the one guy who, you know, claims to be starving should be saved, should be given money right away. But he also says you should be a light unto all nations and you should help everyone equally. And I thought that was pretty prevalent for this group. But I also felt like Rashi is a really important scholar because he, for me, personally, because he allows his daughters to take on the same obligations as men, and they learn to do many Judaic things that women are still not today allowed to do in many traditions. And so, for me, he's a very powerful teacher.

UNIDENTIFIED YOUNG MAN #1: Well, the most powerful thing I taught is just, I think, just like informing everybody about my religion, my Catholic religion, my Catholic faith, and telling them what I'm about. And the most important thing I've learned is learning about everybody else's religion, how we all have similarities and sayings about keeping peace, like inviting other people who have clothes or stuff like that, it almost matches up.

UNIDENTIFIED YOUNG WOMAN #2: Because Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon Him, was taught by the angel Gabriel, that means that every one of us needs a teacher in order to understand or learn something.

MR. PATEL: Is there something particular about one of Prophet Muhammad's, peace be upon Him, teachings that you think about?

YOUNG WOMAN #2: Yeah. Education is mandatory upon every human being, male and female. And it's mandatory, which is interesting, it's not just, like, you know, if learning something is left to, like, one part of the population, then the rest of the population will, you know, benefit from it. So everyone has to learn.

UNIDENTIFIED YOUNG MAN #2: Well, like, I've known that we all have shared values and that we all speak for peace and equality and stuff like that, but I didn't know that the sayings in the Qur'an, in the Torah, in the Bible, match up almost word for word.

MS. TIPPETT: From a discussion at the Interfaith Youth Core directed by my guest, Eboo Patel. His approach of actively engaging religious ideals and differences cuts against the grain of some Western civic instincts. These instincts, he says, are failing us as our societies grow more pluralistic.

The French, for example, have attempted to prevent religious tensions by forbidding public expressions of religious identity. By contrast, in India the political economists Ashutosh Vashney has studied why some cities remain relatively calm when Hindu-Muslim tensions rise and others explode in violence. He found that civic associations to engage people around diverse religious identity can make that difference. Eboo Patel says Americans often wrongly suppose that in order to show respect for the beliefs of others we must be discreet, even silent, about our own.

MR. PATEL: I think that that is perhaps the biggest misconception in the way we think about religion in public life. And here's an example of that. I was asked to give an address on religion and social action at Berea College, which is this small Christian college in Kentucky. And the hall where they have these speeches is their chapel. And this very sweet liberal faculty member approached me and said, 'Listen, if you want, we can cover the cross, if you feel uncomfortable as a Muslim speaking with this cross behind you.' And I said, 'You know, it's that cross that brought me here. It is your Christian conviction that asked a Muslim who believes in interfaith social action to come here, and I would not feel comfortable saying, "*Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim*", in the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful...'

MS. TIPPETT: And that's the beginning of Muslim prayers.

MR. PATEL: That's right. That's right.

MS. TIPPETT: You're also kind of countering some of the ideas that are out there about why religious extremism happens, that it's a response to modernity, and you're sort of saying, no, you don't see it that way.

MR. PATEL: That's right. I mean, if we understand modernity as people from different backgrounds living in close quarters, which is something that didn't happen as often perhaps 100 years ago. The southwest side of Chicago 100 years ago was largely Irish Catholic.

Now you'll hear the chanting of Buddhists in places, you'll smell Mexican food and Arab food. You don't have to kill the new people coming in. A lot of religious scholars say, 'Well, you know, religious fundamentalism, or extremism, is the inevitable response to modernity.' I think it's one response and, unfortunately, the people who want to respond that way to modernity have built much stronger structures than those of us who seek to respond to the existence of diversity by building cooperation. We haven't built very strong structures.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Where do you see examples of how those same energies and those same situations of pluralism, modernity, and religious energies can be channeled differently? I mean, what is different when it doesn't turn to violence?

M^R. P^{ATEL}: There are so many beautiful examples. And if one looks at any of the great freedom movements of the 20th century, whether it's the struggle in South Africa or Hind Swaraj in the subcontinent or the civil rights struggle in the United States, the leadership of those movements was not only religious, it was interfaith in character. So I think about the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. meeting the Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in 1963 in Chicago and them finding common ground on the Old Testament prophets, and then them marching together in Selma a couple years later. And Rabbi Heschel saying, "I felt like my legs were praying." And the most influential person in King's life is, of course, Jesus, but perhaps the second most influential was a half-naked Hindu from India, Mahatma Gandhi. And King credits Gandhi with taking the love ethic of the social gospel of Christianity and making it a social reform movement.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: And, you know, Martin Luther King comes up so much, Martin Luther King and Gandhi, I mean, you know, these few names we've mentioned. Are there other figures like that who we don't know as much about?

M^R. P^{ATEL}: Sure. Let me say one thing about King and Gandhi, is how young they were when they started. When King led the bus boycott, he was 26. In South Africa, Gandhi was 24 when he led the first movement against the racist pass laws. But they are far from the only examples. I mean, I think about Farid Esack, who's a great hero of Islam of mine who helped start the Muslim Youth Movement in South Africa, which played a key role in the struggle. I think about Abdul Ghaffar Khan, who was known as the Frontier Gandhi, who was a Pashtun from Afghanistan and said that the Qur'an is a document of peace and would sit with Gandhi in villages in India where there was Hindu-Muslim tension and chant alternately from the Bhagavad-Gita and from the Qur'an, saying, 'As long as the word of God is heard, that's what's important.'

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Eboo Patel. I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Today, "Religious Passion, Pluralism, and the Young." My guest, Eboo Patel, is a visionary organizer of young people across traditions. He set out to deepen their religious identities and channel their natural desire to make a difference toward service. At the age of 30, his own energy is considerable, and his goals are ambitious.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: I'll tell you a story that helped me start the Interfaith Youth Core.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: OK.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: I was at a World Council of Churches conference three years ago in Cyprus, and the keynote speaker was a Lebanese Catholic priest. And he began his speech by saying, 'I have a position of some influence in the Middle East. I am the director of religious education for all the Catholic schools of this particular Catholic order in the Middle East. And part of what I'm doing is I'm transforming the way Islam and Judaism are taught in these schools, taught not as competing religions but as kindred religions.' And he said, 'You know where I got that idea from? Right here in this room 20 years ago at a World Council of Churches conference. I was brought on a youth scholarship, and it's where I first heard the idea that Catholics and Jews and Muslims should be able to cooperate.' And that's the way that I see the work that we're doing. So we work with all these kids from different religious backgrounds. And, you know, Catholic school kids sometimes grow up to be cardinals, and Jewish girls sometimes grow up to run a Jewish federation. World Youth Day started in Rome 20 years ago, couple hundred thousand kids. A decade later in the Philippines, it had millions of kids. The pope transformed the way young people think about being Catholic.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Did you see that photo collage in *The New York Times* this year after the Catholic Youth Day? Were there four, six, or eight pictures of kids from all over the world, and it was so beautiful. They were so different and thrilling.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: That's right. You know what I find so fascinating, Krista, is people who don't deal with religion regularly have this stereotype about what religious kids look like.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Right. What would a Catholic look like?

M^R. P^{ATEL}: Exactly.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: These pictures were nothing that you would imagine.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: Nose piercings and purple hair. We see that all the time at the Interfaith Youth Core.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Now, I saw — you and I were both at the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast in Chicago, and there was a group of kids — now, they were part of your organization, right?

M^R. P^{A TEL}: That's right.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: I mean, "kids" we're saying, I think they were probably, what, 14 to 24 maybe? They weren't all very young.

M^R. P^{A TEL}: Right.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: And they did a presentation on the stage. And I'll say honestly, even I, in this line of work that I'm in, I mean, sometimes when I hear there's going to be a presentation of interfaith youth, I might think that it's going to be kind of...

M^R. P^{A TEL}: Kumbaya-ish.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Yeah. Thank you. And it was extremely moving and substantive and interesting and unpredictable. And I'm thinking also that there was in that group, and it was a range of kids from different backgrounds — religious and ethnic — and I think there was also a young woman who was atheist or not religious? Is that right?

M^R. P^{A TEL}: It's probably the case.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Yeah. I mean, in the spectrum of spirituality in our culture today, and I think young people are especially open about this, there's also the stance of struggling with religion and asking big questions, but not embracing the traditions. And that whole spectrum, I think, is represented in your work. Is that right?

M^R. P^{A TEL}: Kind of.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Kind of OK.

M^R. P^{A TEL}: Right. We deal mostly with kids who identify with a religious tradition. You know how I think about a tradition? I think about Ani DiFranco playing Woody Guthrie's "Do Re Mi."

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Say some more.

M^R. P^{A TEL}: That's the tradition of folk music. And Woody Guthrie is one of the founders of that tradition. And when Ani DiFranco gets on stage and she says, 'I'm going to play a song from my forefather,' she is saying, 'I know that I come from somewhere.' But she doesn't play that song exactly the way Woody Guthrie played it, right?

I am inspired by my grandmother in India to do Muslim social action work, but her expression of that is in this very 1950s Indian way. It's taking people into her home. My expression of Muslim social action is founding an international nonprofit organization. So the basic value is the same, but the expression changes. That's how I understand a tradition. The basic values in a tradition, compassion and mercy and social action and love, stay the same, but different generations give different expression to those things.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Talk to me about some of the problems you have and the challenges in doing interfaith work in early 21st-century America in our culture. You know, what goes wrong? What do you have to struggle against?

M^R. P^{A TEL}: I'll tell you what I used to struggle against before September 11th was people saying, 'Isn't religion dead?' I remember a high school friend of mine wrote me an e-mail and said, 'What's this? I'm hearing you're doing this thing called interfaith work? What happened to you, man? You ran off and joined the flat earth society!' And then September 11th happened, and then the election of 2004 happened. And all of a sudden we discovered that, you know, *The Passion of the Christ* is amongst the most popular movies a couple of years ago, and all of a sudden we discovered that Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* is the best-selling book in the world for two years. And we wake up and realize that 80-plus percent of our country believes in God, that over half regularly attends a religious service, and we say, 'Who are these other people?' And that's one of the things, frankly, that I find interesting about the media that I listen to — National Public Radio, *The New York Times* — is there is something about when we talk about religion, there is something of the, 'Isn't this curious?' phenomenon.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Well, weren't they dead yesterday?

M^R. P^AT^EL: Exactly. You know, there are the aardvarks and there are the religious people, you know? Watch them behave in their ecologies. And perhaps that's one of my — that's a big challenge is now that we are as a culture over the idea that religion is dead or dying, there is an increasing voice in our culture that said it should be dead or dying, that, you know, 'Why are you voting Jesus?' 'Why do you leave work on Friday at 1:00 to go pray?' This is crazy.'

And the way that I talk to my secular friends about that is, first of all, you would never say that about somebody's ethnic background, you would never say that about somebody's racial identity, you know, 'Why do you eat soul food?' You'd never ask that. You have a gut-level respect for people's identity when it comes to ethnicity, gender, class, race. Why not religion? And the second thing is religious people are changing our world. You can sit in a corner and whine about it, or you can be on the bus and figure out how we can all work together to build a world where people cooperate and live together in some sort of mutual lovaltv. I'll tell you something. Muslims are not going to stop being Muslim, Christians are not going to stop being Christian. The question is, the challenge is, how do we promote a way of being Christian and Muslim and Jewish and Buddhist and Hindu that lives in cooperation with other people?

MS. TIPPETT: Interfaith Youth Core founder and director Eboo Patel. Here's the illustration he mentioned of his definition of tradition: Woody Guthrie's "Do Re Mi," followed by Ani DiFranco's contemporary adaptation.

(Excerpts from both songs)

M^R. W^OO^DY G^UT^HR^IE (S^INGER/SONGWRITER): (*singing*) Now, the police at the port of entry say, "You're number fourteen thousand for today. Oh, if you ain't got the do re mi, folks, you ain't got the do re mi, why, you better go back to beautiful Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Georgia, Tennessee."

M^S. A^NI D^IF^RANCO (S^INGER/SONGWRITER): (*singing*) If you ain't got do re mi, then, if you ain't got do re mi, better go back to your beautiful Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Georgia, Tennessee.

MS. TIPPETT: This is *Speaking of Faith*. After a short break, more conversation with Eboo Patel, including why he loves and admires evangelical Christians who want to convert him.

At speakingoffaith.org, listen to this program again in our archive section. You can download an mp3 to your desktop or [subscribe to our free weekly podcast](#). Listen when you want wherever you want. All this and more at speakingoffaith.org.

M^S. D^IF^RANCO: (*singing*) Do, a dear and female dear. Re, a drop of golden sun. Mi, a name I call myself. Fa, a long long way to run. It's a long long way to run, a long way to run to California. I'm Krista Tippett. Stay with us. *Speaking of Faith* comes to you from American Public Media.

M^R. G^UT^HR^IE: (*singing*) You want to buy you a home or a farm, that can't deal nobody harm, or take your vacation by the mountains or sea. Don't swap your old cow for a car, you better stay right where you are, you better take this little tip from me. 'Cause I look through the want ads every day but the headlines on the papers always say: If you ain't got the do re mi, boys, you ain't got the do re mi, why, you better go back to beautiful Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Georgia, Tennessee. California is a Garden of Eden, a paradise to live in or see; but believe it or not, you won't find it so hot if you ain't got the do re mi.

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: Welcome back to *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. I'm Krista Tippett. Today we're exploring a new approach to religious passion, pluralism, and the young, the work of a young Muslim-American, activist Eboo Patel. Growing up in a Chicago suburb and later as a Rhodes Scholar, he began to question an educated assumption that religious identity among the young must be disaffected or dangerous in a pluralistic world. He founded the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago when he was 23 years old. And it now has outreach in several countries. Patel in his staff are currently launching a network of communication and exchange between youth of different faiths in Chicago and in Amman, Jordan. The Core brings together young people to work on service projects. Friendship and discussion flow out of shared experiences that involve, as Patel says, practicing the best of one's own tradition and seeing the best at work in others. He insists that this is not mere idealism; it is a pragmatic and genuinely enlightened response to the plural religious vigor of the world we now inhabit.

M^R. P^AT^EL: I've come to the point, and perhaps this is my cynicism, I say, 'Well, you know, if you want to try to leap to the moon, you can try to do that, too.' That's the parallel to waving your flag and saying religion should die. The other thing is it's, you know, it's, frankly, prejudicial, it's—Louis Lapham, in Harper's, wrote this screed about how America's recent intoxication with religion is ruining this country. And he said, 'When I was at Yale in the 1950s, the only thing we talked about was the anatomy of God's death.' And I'm thinking to myself, 'That is amongst the most insulting things that you could say to 85 percent of your country people.'

M^S. TIPPETT: Right.

M^R. P^AT^EL: So that might fly in certain spaces on the Upper East Side of New York, but let me tell you something, you are going to hurt

a lot of people in the vast swaths of this world if you go around saying that.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: I like it also that you are concerned about that because Louis Lapham, I believe, was writing mostly about America's Christian intoxication, right? But, you know, you're Muslim and you're also saying...

M^R. P^{ATEL}: Right. In fact, particularly evangelicals, right, and we work with a lot of evangelicals. And I have crazy respect for evangelicals.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: What do you mean by that?

M^R. P^{ATEL}: There's a great line in a Paul Simon song, "Faith is an island in the setting sun, proof is the bottom line for everyone." And people who can keep ideas of the transcendent in front of their face in a world dominated by the material are people that have earned my respect a hundred times over. Now, I might disagree with evangelicals on a lot of things, but I know that AIDS in Africa would not be addressed in the same way without evangelicals' concern. I know that there would be a lot of women in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia still in prostitution if not for the work of evangelicals.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Yeah.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: And I look at them and I say, 'You know, we can work together on this. My Muslim values have a profound overlap with your evangelical values, and if you feel the need to pray for my soul in your church, you go right ahead. That is your right in this country. And if you feel that's an obligation of your religion, please do that. And when we're together, let's not spend all of our time trying to convert each other, let's spend some of our time trying to help other people.'

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: When you talk about understanding or asserting that religion is not going to go away, religious passions are not going to die and therefore we have to find new ways of being religious together, it seems to me, in what I read of you and know of your work, that, you know, part of the new paradigm you're suggesting is to say, 'Yes, I'm going to be working side by side with people who would like to convert me, and that's OK.' You're not accepting some of the framework of what we've taken as acceptable civic behavior.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: That's exactly right. Interfaith work has been constructed as if it is primarily about belief. So we're trying to change the way Christians believe about Buddhists. The way that I see that is somebody's belief is their own business. It is not my right to tell you how to think about God. It is not my right to tell you how to think about heaven. But it is my right to say we live on the same block together, we live in the same city together, we've got to get this right. Can we at least wave at each other when we walk down the street? Can we coach each other's son's or daughter's little league team, can we maybe start a block club together? There's this public square aspect to religious identity, and that's what I'm committed to getting right.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: You know, I think what's a little bit different in what you're doing is you're also saying, 'I might be offended and upset by that person's belief, but as long as it's not being imposed on me, that can't be a stumbling block to my living with that person and working with that person.' I mean, here's a sentence you wrote: 'Even most of those who strongly believe that anybody other than the most righteous of their religious tribe is bound for eternal hellfire do not generally find it acceptable practice to send people there by the human hand.'

M^R. P^{ATEL}: That's exactly right. I'll tell you a story and then I'll tell you the larger dynamic that I'm very concerned about. I spend most of my time observing how religious people actually interact. I spend less of my time reading theology because I'm primarily concerned with how human beings can live together on earth, not what human beings write in books. And the Moody Bible School, which is a leading training ground for 'We should convert the Muslims' type evangelicals...

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Right. In Chicago, I believe.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: In Chicago, right down the street from my office. And Moody Bible students would work at the cafe right next door, and I'd walk in and order my morning mocha and, you know, kind of hang out with these 21-year-old kids who were, you know, training to convert Muslims. And they'd be like, 'So, man, you know, you're here every day, what do you do?' And I'm like, 'Oh, I run this interfaith organization. We bring young people from different religions together,' and they're like, 'To spread the gospel?' I'm like, 'Well, kind of. To build cooperation.' They're like, 'Oh, what are you, man?' And I'm like, 'I'm a Muslim.' And they're like, 'Oh, yeah, Muslim. Yeah. You know, we're learning about Muslims.' I'm like, 'Uh-huh, yeah, I'm a really deeply committed Muslim, and my Muslimness is what inspires me to work for cooperation.' They're like, 'Wow, I don't hear that much about that. That's really cool, though. You want whipped cream on your mocha?' So I know that they're being taught at Moody. Every time you come into contact with a Muslim, practice converting them.' Right? But in their actual everyday real life interaction, they don't do that. And that's what I'm hoping to build on.

Now, if I were to walk into Moody and say, 'You better change your curriculum and you better change the way you believe about

Muslims, forget about it, we're going to fight. But if I can find a way of interacting with this Moody Bible School kid in a way that enhances the common ground between us and says, 'You and I can have a conversation that's not about conversion. I'm not saying that you can't try to convert me. I'm just saying let's not only have that conversation.' It's the same thing I say to Muslims and Jews when they get in the same room. You know what, the conversation you've been taught to have is the Middle East. You're taught to come in here and start arguing about the Middle East. That conversation exists. But let's not make that the only conversation we can have.' And, Krista, I'll tell you who's figured this out is conservatives. Evangelicals and Catholics work very hard together on pro-life issues in America and go their separate ways on the Iraq war.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Well, and — yeah.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: Now, how come...

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: There is also this real theological divide. But you're right, they're working together very practically and effectively on issues they both care about.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: Right. And, you know, this is, in some ways, the Interfaith Youth Core's ideas of interfaith work stems out of American pragmatism, which is, 'Let's look at the ways people actually interact and live and think and work, and let's base what we do off of that.' I'll tell you the danger here; the danger is this extremely small group of people called religious totalitarians.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Now, that's your phrase that you prefer to — what do you prefer that to? What are the words we use that you don't like?

M^R. P^{ATEL}: Well, for me, it's the best word, and you can also use "extremist" or "radical," but totalitarianism means people who are committed to condemning or converting or killing everybody who does not share their interpretation of their religious tradition. That's what a totalitarian is. And it's dramatically different than an evangelical or than a conservative or than a traditionalist. You can believe that everybody except your tribe is not going to share heaven with you and still live in perfect peace and harmony and be an excellent neighbor.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Right. Right.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: And once we start getting into changing other people's beliefs, I think that we're being presumptuous. I also think we're not being strategic, because people aren't going to let you into their door if you say, 'Guess what, if you give me a seat at your dining room table. I'm going to try to change the way you think about God. I'm going to meddle with the most precious thing in your life.'

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: OK. So this makes me think about attitudes that have been adopted and accepted and what's implicit in them in the last few decades. The idea of tolerance did kind of mean that you weren't supposed to believe things that were even critical of the person who was different. And I'm wondering if there's something generational happening. I mean, is there — or maybe it's the fact that you're Muslim and not Christian. You know, what is it that allows you to be that much more generous about other people's beliefs and still want to carve out this space where you can work with them?

M^R. P^{ATEL}: I think you're giving too much credit when you say "generous." I think we are doing what works. Getting this right, getting the way religiously diverse people work with each other right is a matter of life and death. We have to do what works.

MS. TIPPETT: Interfaith Youth Core founder Eboo Patel. I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Today, "Religious Passion, Pluralism, and the Young," a conversation with Eboo Patel, who's out to change the way young people of faith relate to their own religious traditions and those of others.

On July 7th of last year, bombs went off in London's transport system killing 52 people and injuring hundreds of others during morning rush hour. The suicide bombers were four young Muslim men. Eboo Patel was deeply moved by this event and he wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*, "I cannot stop staring at a map of central London, the one with the four explosions on it. Edgware Road, Aldgate, Russell Square, Tavistock Square, it sounds like the itinerary of my regular trips to London when I was a graduate student at Oxford University a few years ago. The calm those places provided was shattered by a group of young men who traced their heritage to the region of the world where I was born, and who prayed in the same language I consider holy. A city I love was bombed by people my community could have influenced."

M^R. P^{ATEL}: The problem is the disaffection of a younger generation of Muslims from an older generation.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: Yeah, say some more about that.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: Well, in the wake of the London bombings, the smartest thing that was said was by this early twenty-something, working-class kid in Leeds in northern England. He said to a BBC reporter, 'The older generation and the younger generation don't talk the way you think they should.' The older generation who came from north Africa and south Asia and the Pacific East, their relationship to the

tradition of Islam and how it translated into the West is very different from how their kids experience being both Muslim and Briton, or Muslim and German, or Muslim and American. And the Osama bin Ladens of the world understand that profound generational religious-cultural gap, and they exploit it. So you've got these disaffected kids sitting in a mosque, and somebody stands up and says, 'Why are you participating in the permissiveness of this Western society when your brothers and sisters are getting murdered on the other side of the world?' And the older generation oftentimes has not figured out a way to translate Islam such that it makes sense in a positive constructive way.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: So that kind of statement is very compelling, you're saying, and that might be the most compelling language they've heard, using Islam.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: That's exactly right. It's the most relevant language they've heard about Islam to their lives. It gives them a sense of power and identity. And we can provide the same thing. I mean, think about what the Montgomery Improvement Association did for African-Americans in Montgomery in 1955. You know, people say, 'Oh, you know, religious violence is caused by poverty and oppression.' Well, you know, blacks in Montgomery in 1955 were poor and oppressed, and they didn't kill other people. What did they do? They were led on a path of constructive peace-building because somebody shone the light on that path. So that became their religious identity.

M^S. T^{IPPETT}: And that's what you're doing, isn't it? You're shining a light on a different path.

M^R. P^{ATEL}: We're trying to shine the light on it, and we're trying to walk it. We're trying to walk it. We're figuring out there's a lot of folks ahead of us, and there's a lot of folks with us, and we're hoping that more and more join.

I take all religious violence, particularly violence committed by Muslims upon anybody, but perhaps especially other Muslims, very personally. And I want to wake up one day and not have that be in my newspaper. Perhaps, for me, one of the most profound teachings of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon Him, is that he would go to the cave of Mount Hira every year to pray and to fast and to give alms to the poor. And, of course, one fateful day in the year 610, he was visited by the angel Gabriel. The angel gripped him and said, "Iqra, recite." And the first words of the Qur'an came pouring out of the Prophet's mouth. And he never went back to that cave. He lived the rest of his life in the world building Islam. And that's the only way that I can think of living is in the world, building interfaith cooperation from my Muslim inspiration. That's the way that I deal with religious violence is just waking up and saying, 'I'm doing something about this.' And maybe all these other people who are also doing something about this will one day end this.

MS. TIPPETT: Eboo Patel is founder and executive director of the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core. He is co-editor of the book *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement*. Here in closing is an exchange that took place during one of his projects:

(Beginning of Interfaith Youth Core conversation)

M^R. P^{ATEL}: I want to ask Aisha what you think Adina has taught in this space, and, Adina, what you think Aisha has taught in this space. And, Aisha, why don't you go first.

A^{ISHA}: It's such a huge question. I mean, I've just learned so much about Judaism in terms of the practices, the beliefs. But I think, more specifically, I've learned that Adina's just like me. I know it sounds like, really simple. But really, I mean, you know, we don't really have many differences.

A^{DINA}: You stole what I was going to say. Like, it was really powerful for me to see, like, how pervasive both the faiths are. Like, beyond the fact that we're friends and, like, that's important, that we all can relate, but that everything is interfaith, that there really isn't a way where you, like, draw the line. There's not an end. It's not like it ends when you leave this circle. It's not going to end when you leave this group. Like, everything you can possibly imagine has another faith has a component to it, and that was really profound.

MS. TIPPETT: Contact us and share your thoughts at speakingoffaith.org. Download an mp3 to your desktop or subscribe to our podcast, to listen when you want wherever you want.

As the fifth anniversary of 9/11 approaches we'll speak next week with scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr. He says we don't often see or hear from traditional Muslims in the Western media. We at *Speaking of Faith* would like to ask our listeners, especially Muslims, to reflect on the challenges of the last five years. How has this period affected you? What do you wish for Western culture and media to understand about your tradition and your faith? Please, share your perspective at speakingoffaith.org.

The senior producer of *Speaking of Faith* is Mitch Hanley with producers Colleen Scheck and Jody Abramson and editor Ken Hom. Our Web producer is Trent Gilliss with assistance from Jennifer Krause. Special thanks this week to the producers of Chicago Tonight on WTTW in Chicago. Kate Moos is the managing producer of *Speaking of Faith*. The executive producer is Bill Buzenberg, and I'm Krista Tippett.



Speaking of Faith®

with Krista Tippett

Visit speakingoffaith.org

For more information on this topic, or to sign up for a weekly e-mail newsletter or free weekly podcasts, visit speakingoffaith.org.

Speaking of Faith® is public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. It is produced and distributed by American Public Media.