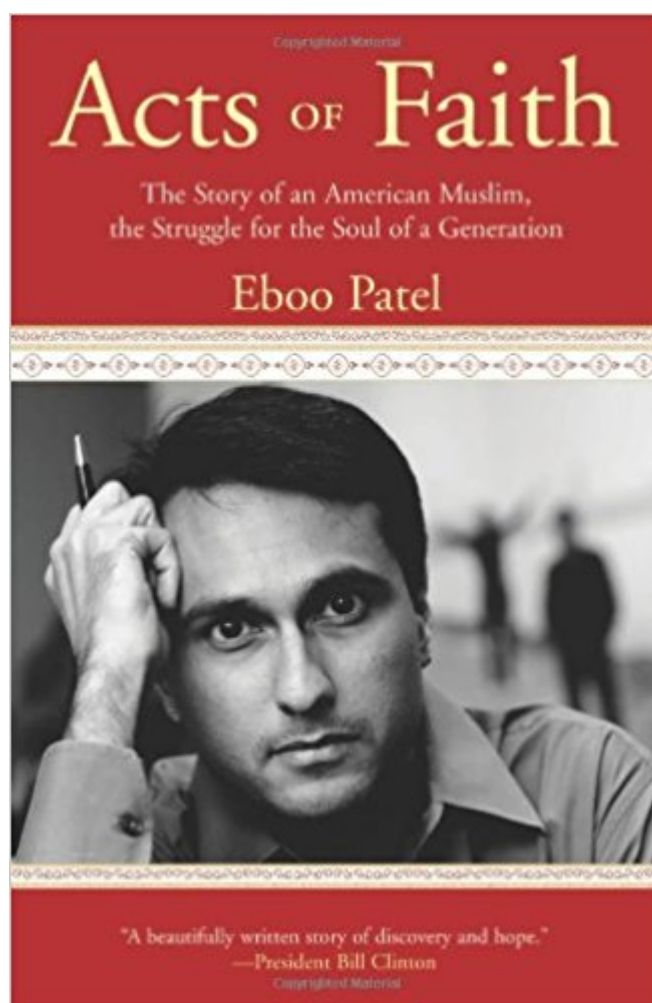


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# Acts Of Faith: The Story Of An American Muslim, In The Struggle For The Soul Of A Generation



## Synopsis

With a new afterword *Acts of Faith* is a remarkable account of growing up Muslim in America and coming to believe in religious pluralism, from one of the most prominent faith leaders in the United States. Eboo Patel's story is a hopeful and moving testament to the power and passion of young people and of the world-changing potential of an interfaith youth movement.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Patel, a former Rhodes scholar with a doctorate in the sociology of religion from Oxford, is the founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, an organization that unites young people of different religions to perform community service and explore their common values. Patel argues that such work is essential, manifesting the faith line that will define the 21st century. Patel's own story is more powerful than the exhaustive examples he provides of how mainstream faith failed to reach young people like Osama bin Laden and Yigal Amir, the assassin of Yitzhak Rabin. With honesty, Patel relates how he suffered the racist taunts of fellow youth, and, in response, alternately rebelled against and absorbed the religion of his parents' Islam but in his own way. Meanwhile, he continued to pursue interfaith work with vigor, not quite knowing his end goal but always feeling in his gut that interfaith understanding was the key. This autobiography of a young activist captures how an angry youth can be transformed by faith, by the community and, most of all, by himself into a profound leader for the cause of peace. (July) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to

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“A beautifully written story of discovery and hope.”  
•President Bill Clinton  
“[A] visionary book, part coming-of-age memoir and part call-to-action . . . A shining vision of the possibilities of interfaith cooperation and pluralistic discourse.”  
•Adam Mansbach, *The Boston Globe*  
“The best recent American statement about living one’s faith in a pluralistic society.”  
•Robin Lovin, *Christian Century*  
“Remarkable . . . A well-written, compelling testimony to how one man is trying to ensure that different religions can live side by side in peace.”  
•Paul Raushenbush, *Beliefnet.com*  
“Eboo Patel is an exciting new voice of a new America: diverse but not divisive, hopeful but not utopian. He speaks for all of us from a rising generation of bright, brown, and bold Americans who have much to offer a country embarking on a new millennium and in need of new blood.”  
•Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, executive director of the Zaytuna Institute

The most interesting point in this book comes at the beginning: Parents move to a new country and find an enclave of their own culture. Their kids are torn between two cultures. This is a perfect opportunity for extremists to take advantage of the kids. The kids don’t even have to be angry to start out with-- just like of lost between two cultures. He takes the reader through his personal story of being lost, falling into some borderline extremist ideology, and leaving extremist ideology partly due to his experience with the YMCA. The rest of the book promotes YMCA-like organizations, including his own organization, that promote religious pluralism. He makes the powerful point that churches don’t put enough focus on the youth, acting as if church is mainly of interest to older people. Kids figure prominently in the church newsletters but not in church budgets. Parents don’t give enough weight to kids’ preference in selecting a church. When we don’t make religious education a priority, extremists are eager to fill the void. My own religious background is UU / humanist. I have no desire to disrespect people’s religions, but I couldn’t help but think some of this extremism is about culture and some is about people arguing over their pretend games and imaginary friends as my 3- and 5-year-olds do. I kept thinking if people stuck to scientifically falsifiable claims, religious pluralism would be automatic. In my view we need more “I think god does X. You think god does Y. It’s a moot point, though, because we cannot devise an experiment to test the hypothesis.” I support what Eboo Patel is doing, though, because our religious background informs the way we see the world, even if we don’t accept its claims literally. We make huge

sacrifices in money and freedom to fight extremists. It makes sense to put effort into people of diverse religious backgrounds living together in harmony.

It was a wonderfully written book. What a great concept; so true, so needed in this world today. We are reading it for the one book club that I belong to and I am suggesting it for the second book club that I read with. I am also suggesting it to all my friends and family members. Thank You Eboo Patel for not only doing what you are doing , but for writing about it. May God continue to bless and help you in your future work.

For anyone wanting to better understand the power and influence of faith in modern society, this book by Eboo Patel is both important and illuminating. Patel writes this book in an attempt to answer a question he poses in the introduction: “In a world of passionate religiosity and intense interaction, how will people from different faith backgrounds engage one another?” Looking at the ways that faith and religiosity have led to both positive as well as violent and hateful ends, he wonders whether we will build bombs or bridges of understanding? Will we become a world of religious totalitarians or religious pluralists? Acts of Faith is an interesting read primarily because Eboo Patel is so willing to use his own life story as an illustration of the vision he is working toward. He talks about his childhood and youth growing up as an Indian American Muslim, the discrimination he experiences, and the greater understanding he comes to that “people with whom I shared an identity were being horribly treated elsewhere, often by people who looked like the ones who were bullying me here.” He grows up simultaneously as American and as the Other, with his own teenage freefall stopped by his involvement with the local YMCA. Chapters three and four deal with his years in college as he becomes engaged in further exploration of his racial identity but has to look hard to find places to consider religious diversity and faith-based social movements like Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement. After college he works with at-risk youth, forms an interfaith potluck group called the Stone Soup Cooperative, and begins to see the need for a social movement “that brought spirituality, diversity, and social action together in a very concrete way.” He goes to India after six years away, thinks more about class structure and religion, has an encouraging visit with the Dalai Lama, and as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford sets the foundations of the Interfaith Youth Core, with the goals of intercultural encounter, social action, and interfaith reflection - “a mobile idea that could be applied in many places.” The last two chapters of the book see Patel reflect again on religious

totalitarianism and the historical and contemporary aspects of Islam and other faiths that can counter religious violence. He helps the reader understand how the Interfaith Youth Core was built — staffing, funding, using media, shaping shared values — and gives specific examples of the types of conversations youth have in the program and how it impacts them. A new 2010 afterword in this edition gives an update on the growth of the program and how it has led to “the emergence of a genuine grassroots interfaith youth movement.” His book does a good job of contrasting the Interfaith Youth Core with adult interfaith groups which often focus on “useless theological and political disagreements” by showing the ways in which IFYC brings youth and adults back to “constructive discussion based on shared values.” An overall focus of Patel’s book is the power of youth. He starts the introduction with a discussion of how young people are intentionally nurtured, both those who are encouraged by religious extremists or those who choose the path of pluralism and interfaith understanding. He asks, “How many mainstream religious institutions ignore young people, or, worse, think that their role should be limited to designing the annual T-shirt?” Religious extremists take advantage of this need for meaningful involvement and the “desire of young people to have a clear identity and make a powerful impact.” He maintains this focus on youth throughout the book, a book that is ultimately about the power of interfaith social justice work, as well as hopeful about the power of young people to make positive changes in their communities and in the world. Acts of Faith is extremely readable. While it incorporates philosophical elements and political commentary, it never veers too far from the personal and the practical. Patel’s writing is very accessible, and very much motivated by compassion and love. This is a book that could be a powerful tool for organizers, activists, educators, faith leaders, people of faith, and people in general looking to work for a more positive version of the world.

I had heard of this book from a variety of sources, and when it was listed as one of the books to be discussed during this year’s series of interfaith book discussions, I went on .com to check it out and purchase it way ahead of time to read it before the January discussion date. I liked the Kindle sample so much I purchased the Kindle and the hard copy and another of Patel’s books. Wow! I am so impressed and delighted by his story and the organization he helped found. I expect we’ll use it as a resource in the work of our Interfaith Coalition of Washington County, Maryland.

Our book club read this book and had an interesting discussion at our meeting about how tolerant

our society is of other religions and the non-religious. Although the author hardly touches on how the non-religious are incorporated into the interfaith youth movement, it did spur conversation about how we can serve our communities apart from our religious beliefs. In fact, some of us will be volunteering together in the next few months because of this conversation. For those who are reading the book thinking that this would tell the story of how Patel came to accept his Muslim faith, the beginning of the book addresses this well, but the latter half of the book is more about organizing the interfaith youth movement. The author does not include his reactions or feelings about what he's done in terms of his religion and beliefs, rather he tells anecdotes of realizations he's made throughout his life, but the book is easy to read and I think every reader can take something from his story.

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