

BOOK REVIEW

Eboo Patel (2012). *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice and the Promise of America*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Reviewed by Jon C. Dalton*

In his 2012 book, *Sacred Ground*, Eboo Patel, an American Muslim and President of the Interfaith Student Core in Chicago, Illinois, analyses the sources of contemporary interreligious conflict and offers educational, political and religious strategies for promoting more genuine and lasting interfaith cooperation. While *Sacred Ground* focuses on the United States, Patel's analysis of interreligious conflict and his prescriptions for promoting interfaith cooperation have broad relevance for international application in today's increasingly globally connected and religiously diverse world.

Patel argues that religious differences have become a major source of social and political conflict in today's world. Moreover, the types of conflicts arising out of deeply held religious beliefs and practices pose some of the most dangerous and volatile threats for today's world. Thus, he argues, there is great urgency to find ways to reduce religious conflicts and to promote greater interfaith understanding and cooperation.

Patel's book is part personal memoir, part historical analysis, and part theological exegesis. His writing style is highly personal and makes frequent use of personal stories, examples and observations that convey a compelling sense of urgency about the current state of religious hostility and interfaith conflict in domestic and international settings.

Patel has a lover's quarrel with America's historical promise of religious liberty and tolerance. America, Patel claims, is failing to deliver on that founding promise. The rise of Islamophobia, in particular, has sharply challenged America's promise of religious pluralism and Patel believes that it is important to stand up for the nation's promise of religious pluralism, especially when it is under attack.

Patel believes that one of the keys to reducing interreligious conflict and promoting interfaith cooperation can be found in the principle of religious pluralism. He wants to clearly differentiate between religious "pluralism" and religious "diversity". Although the concept of religious diversity affirms the existence of differences among religions, it does not go far enough in fostering positive understanding and cooperation across individual religions. The concept of religious diversity may thus be useful for promoting a general tolerance of religious differences but it does not, on its own, incorporate an active promotion, understanding and affirmation of these differences.

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The concept of religious pluralism, on the other hand, recognises the multiplicity of religious traditions and also encourages an active understanding and acceptance of religious differences in order to promote the common good. In short, Patel argues that religious diversity, by itself, conveys a simple recognition of differences while the concept of religious pluralism welcomes and incorporates the results or outcomes of interfaith efforts to understand and affirm religious differences. Implicit in the concept of religious pluralism is the active social engagement with individuals of other faiths in shared efforts to understand and respect each other's religious traditions.

Today, Islam and its adherents have become primary targets of religious hostility in the United States as well as in a number of other countries. This development is profoundly troubling in light of the tradition of religious liberty and freedom of religious expression in the U.S. Patel argues that one explanation for this development is that despite constitutional guarantees of religious liberty, religious identity in the U.S. is deeply rooted in personal religious faith. Consequently the entrenched nature of personal religious commitment requires committed and proactive efforts to bridge religious differences and create communities of interfaith dialogue.

Patel argues that authentic interfaith dialogue should be grounded in the genuine particularity of each different religion, and not in some watered-down version of religious identity. The heart of the matter, Patel claims, is how to articulate religious identity in a way that affirms both particularity and pluralism. Interfaith dialogue should also acknowledge reciprocity – the shared give and take of information and beliefs in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

One of the most important educational strategies employed by Patel for promoting interfaith dialogue among college students is the use of community service as a primary agent of interfaith contact and dialogue. Working together on projects that benefit the community helps participants build upon shared religious beliefs and common practices. Interfaith dialogue can thus arise in more casual and natural settings in which religious differences do not become the primary starting point for dialogue.

Patel believes that an important strategy for promoting a pluralistic view of religions is through the peer training of young people from different faiths. It was this conviction that led Patel to establish the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC). Central to Patel's view of interfaith training is the role of volunteerism and community service. Since compassion and service are common ideals in all major religious traditions volunteerism provides a powerful means of bringing young people together to practise interfaith cooperation.

Patel suggests that colleges and universities often do not take religious diversity as seriously as other student identity issues. While higher education institutions in many countries have done a great deal to recognise the importance of racial, ethnic and gender diversity, they have often devoted less attention to recognising and accommodating religious differences. Colleges and universities have done even less to actively promote the goal of religious pluralism. Consequently, interreligious conflict and misunderstanding on college campuses are likely to continue until greater efforts are made to engage students in embracing religious pluralism. Patel argues that achieving religious pluralism will require

more effort in recruiting a religiously diverse student body and creating welcoming environments for students of different faiths. Colleges and universities will need to invest more effort in programmes and policies that create and sustain ongoing interreligious contact, dialogue and understanding.

Sacred Ground provides a very persuasive critique of the importance of religious pluralism in educational efforts to help students to confront and accommodate interfaith differences. Moreover, it provides useful practical strategies for implementing religious pluralism in educational settings. This highly readable and passionate critique of the promise of religious liberty is a valuable resource in helping college students to understand and advocate for religious pluralism in our contemporary world.

