

# America's Best Leaders 2009

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## young people

By *Bill George*

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Eboo Patel, founder of a national movement promoting interfaith religious cooperation and one of President Barack Obama's advisers on faith, is tackling what he considers the "color line" of the 21st century: the faith line. While Patel's soft-spoken charm may hide his Rhodes scholar intellect, there is nothing understated about his strikingly ambitious vision for global religious pluralism.

**Corrected on 10/26/09:** An earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to the Interfaith Youth Core. It is the IFYC.



Eboo Patel, Founder, Director, Interfaith Youth Core

Patel's goal is to make interfaith cooperation a social norm within just one generation.

"Women's rights are a social norm today," he says. "Everyone in America should challenge religious prejudice just like we challenge racial and gender prejudice."

His passion for interfaith cooperation was shaped by childhood experiences that were anything but cooperative. A Muslim born in India, Patel grew up in Chicago. When he ran for seventh-grade student council, a white classmate told him, "Nobody would vote for people like you." Locker-room humiliation and peer taunts of "curry maker"—and worse—marked his adolescence. In his searching memoir *Acts of Faith*, he recalls the elements in his own background that might have led him to religious violence: "a gut-wrenching feeling of being excluded from mainstream society . . . a vague sense of being Muslim . . . a growing consciousness that people with whom I shared an identity were being horribly treated elsewhere, often by people who looked just like the ones who were bullying me

here." He still feels the shame of not defending a Jewish friend by confronting a group of thugs who scrawled anti-Semitic slurs on classroom desks.

While studying at the University of Illinois, he recognized that his heroes—leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Aga Khan—led through common principles of faith, although they practiced different faiths. These early experiences with racism, religious prejudice, and rejection caused Patel to question why religion causes such violence around the world. Why do some champion religious pluralism while others become suicide bombers?

By digging deeply into his own life story, Patel recognized that the people and programs he had encountered shaped his identity and that of other young people as well. He concluded that the only way to overcome destructive religious fanaticism is to create communities where human connection transcends differences of race, religion, and culture. "I recognize now that believing in pluralism means having the courage to act on it," he says. "Action is what separates belief from merely an opinion."

His personal transformation infused Patel with the passion to seek a new generation of advocates for cooperation. In 1998, he founded the Interfaith Youth Core, designed to inspire and train college students to build understanding. Patel says college campuses should be "models of interfaith cooperation."

**Empowered.** In a decade, IFYC has grown into a national movement with a presence at 140 universities. It trains students on college campuses to become empowered advocates for religious pluralism. Instead of setting up service projects, IFYC encourages students to do so themselves.

In the past year, Patel, 33, has become a leading voice for embracing religious pluralism. He writes "The Faith Divide," a featured column for the *Washington Post*. In February, Obama appointed him to the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, giving him the platform to push the president to discuss interfaith issues more prominently (as he gently chides Obama for not acknowledging his Muslim heritage). The president appears to be listening. In his Cairo speech in June, Obama addressed the common principles of America and Islam: "justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings."

Patel recognizes that it is no small task to move America to a place of religious tolerance. Yet he is undeterred.

Patel's insightful writing shows him to be one of America's deepest thinkers on religion and the

human condition. And his relentless efforts to organize and train the next generation of interfaith champions—students committed to fighting inequality—make him a true leader.

*Bill George, professor of management practice at Harvard Business School, is author of 7 Lessons for Leading in Crisis.*

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