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Author addresses notion of pluralism vs. totalitarianism

By: Adam Fifield

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James Baldwin, an important black writer from the civil rights movement, was living in a remote Swiss village while finishing his book, *Stranger in the Village*, when he realized he was the first black man the villagers had ever seen. Furthermore, it seemed the villagers couldn't at first tell if Baldwin was human or not. Slowly, as they conversed and related with him, the villagers realized he was just as human as they were.

In the final essay of his book, Baldwin summarized his epiphany: "For these people, the world once white is white no more and will never be white again."

Eboo Patel, an activist, author and founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, related the story about Baldwin to a packed auditorium at the Salt Lake City Public Library on Monday night for the opening event of this year's Utah Humanities Book Festival, which runs through this weekend with multiple author readings, workshops and lectures.

Patel emphasized Baldwin's logic regarding the villagers: that it takes one person from a different background and culture to create diversity in society.

"Diversity is a fact," Patel said, and America is defined by diversity. The key term in Patel's speech Monday night was "pluralism," which he called "an achievement."

Pluralism, Patel said, is defined by three things: respect for identity, meaningful relationships between communities and a "commitment to common, good institutions." This last aspect, he said, is the idea America was founded on -- that a democracy must be participatory, and while government is necessarily separate from religion, it is nourished by the diverse experiences, faiths and cultures of its citizenry.

The opposite of a pluralist is totalitarian, who "wants only their group to dominate and all other groups to suffocate," Patel said.

W.E.B. Du Bois, a black activist, "famously said that the problem of the 20th century will be the problem of the color line," Patel said. While the problems of racism are far from over, he declared that the problem for the 21st century will be what he calls "the faith line," with one side of the line committed to a pluralist society and the other to a totalitarian one.

"Anyone who gets the line wrong in this day and age is very dangerous," Patel said.

While the worst kind of totalitarianism advocates violence, he said that many subversive forms of exclusion exist in our society.

Patel quoted the dust-bowl balladeer, Woody Guthrie, who sang, "Yes, as through this world I've wandered, I've seen lots of funny men. Some will rob you with a six-gun, and some with a fountain pen."

The deciding factor in determining the path American society will take is the youth who will also determine which side of the faith line the world will end up falling into, Patel said. On the side of pluralism, Patel cited the fact that so many civil rights activists, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., were only in their 20s when they first began campaigning for equality. Gandhi was 24 when he led his first peaceful resistance in South Africa, Patel said.

On the other side all but one of the hijackers in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks were in their 20s, he said.

"We need to make our case," Patel said. "The time of pro-activity is at hand...whether young people move toward pluralism or totalitarianism."

Patel, who quoted poets from Shakespeare to Rumi, used a line from a Gwendolyn Brooks poem to express his passion for this issue, "If not an overture, a desecration."

Patel also writes a blog on religion for both The Washington Post and Newsweek, and he was invited by the Utah Humanities Council to discuss his book, *Acts of Faith*. He also urged the audience to seek out more information on his Interfaith Youth Core, a non-profit organization that, according to its website, www.ifyc.org, seeks to "builds mutual respect and pluralism among young people from different religious traditions by empowering them to work together to serve others."

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