

Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise. Eboo Patel. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2018, 215 pp. ISBN: 9780691182728. \$27.95, hardcover.

Against a backdrop of unprecedented religious disaffiliation, a sharp rise in Islamophobia, and the loss of majority status for white Protestant Christians, Eboo Patel provides his aspirational vision for a pluralistic America in *Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise*. Patel observes in the opening chapter that in establishing the United States, the founders embarked on something truly unheard of at the time: inaugurating a democracy in which religious diversity was (at least in theory) encouraged. In light of this and the aforementioned tensions, Patel asks: “What will it take for the American experiment to thrive in the twenty-first century?” (3). For him, the prerequisite for a highly functioning democracy is a vibrant “civic life” among all its citizens (15). And given that participation in a religious tradition figures prominently into the civic lives of many Americans, he argues that we should include the contributions of *all* religious people in the democratic process, including—most notably—Muslim Americans, a group of which he is a member (15). Patel thus exhorts us to move beyond simply celebrating diversity—or demographic variation in close quarters—and instead work toward democratic pluralism, which he defines as “energetic engagement of difference toward a positive end” (20).

Pluralism here is conceived of as a verb rather than an adjective. To achieve it, Patel incites citizens to respect all identities, foster relationships among diverse communities, and work toward the common good, by harmonizing particular beliefs to national ideals (20). And while he suggests these tasks should be undertaken in three realms—law and policy; civil society; and civil religion—Patel’s central argument is that America must expand its religious narrative to be more inclusive (22). Grounded in the findings of sociologist Robert Bellah, who coined the term “civil religion,” Patel’s grandiose vision is clear: to update the narrative “we listen to new voices, we add some symbols and deemphasize others, elevate these stories and demote those, and interpret the whole narrative . . . so that we can become a better America” (24). He then offers a case study of how civil religion might change by exploring the experience of Muslim Americans.

Patel begins (chapter two) by demonstrating how the founding of Cordoba House—a Muslim cultural center in lower Manhattan—was a precursor to the vitriolic spike in Islamophobia during the 2016 election cycle and throughout the presidency of Donald Trump (chapter three). Specifically, he makes the case that politicians and strategists rely on cognitive bias in order to exclude Muslims on the basis of religion. But armed with hope, Patel argues that the national religious narrative can be updated to *include* Islam and other religions as was the case with the advent of the term “Judeo-Christianity” in the twentieth century (chapter four). In this case, groups who were historically discriminated against, namely Jews and Roman Catholics, were offered a role in the otherwise Protestant Christian narrative, and thus deemed to be “American.” Patel acknowledges the complexity of incorporating a new religion into the civil religion in that the American *ummah* (Muslim community) is highly diverse and seemingly divided between what he calls “traditional” and “social” Muslims (chapter five). To counter this, he highlights the work of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN), a pluralistic service organization that works across different traditions to better local communities and redefine what it means to be “Muslim American” (chapter six).

Patel closes with a cloying metaphor for updating the civil religion by comparing America to a potluck dinner (chapter seven). He says:

For the larger community to eat, everybody needs to bring a dish. Certain guidelines are given, but nobody is expected to follow a certain recipe. As the demographics . . . shift, so will the flavors of the food on the table. Along the way, conversation happens, palates widen, fusions emerge. There are tensions, and there is feasting (108).

Although it is a compelling and almost delectable vision, the shortcoming of this statement is that it does not take into consideration the identity and power of the host. As Robert P. Jones mentions in his commentary (chapter eight), the term “Judeo-Christian” relied on a “melting pot” mentality in which “assimilation was the expectation” (115). To be more explicit, the civic religious narrative was more easily updated because the new admits looked like and were closely related to the “strong reference group,” namely, white Protestant Christians. Given the loss of majority status—and therefore the gradual loss of power—enjoyed by the latter group, Jones is correct when he asserts that it is not “diversity” that is causing “anxieties and resistance” to a new civil religion, but rather fear of “displacement” (120). Thus, I fear that Patel’s vision—although well reasoned—does not take into account that, at least for the moment, many white Protestant Christians are uninterested in a new national narrative.

Another shortcoming of the all-too-tidy civil religion narrative is that it risks alienating an emerging subgroup within the population: the so-called religious nones—including atheists, agnostics, and those who are not affiliated (for example, individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious). Having tripled in size over the last two decades, the religious nones likely do not see themselves represented in the extant Judeo-Christian civil religion language; that being the case, it is difficult to imagine they will feel better about an expanded version that might include, for instance, other religions such as Islam, while omitting them.

This, of course, leads to a more underlying concern with Patel’s promotion of a new narrative: one of the stated assumptions is that we must all work toward the “common good.” As John Inazu notes in his commentary (chapter nine), it is too much to expect that everyone can agree on a definition of the common good. In his words, “[W]e disagree about the purposes and ends of our shared political experiment. We disagree about the meaning of life, the nature of a human being, the definition of equality, and the role of happiness” (140). And Patel should know this: by contrasting Aziz Ansari and Linda Sarsour to Shaykh Hamza Yusuf he demonstrates that even members of the American *ummah* can hardly agree what it means to be Muslim.

All this is to say that while the idea of establishing a more inclusive national civil religious narrative is tempting, rhetoric is not action (which is ironic given Patel’s definition of pluralism) and it would have been useful to see more practical suggestions for effecting change. Here I offer two suggestions. Patel makes a case in his opening chapter that colleges and universities are “key sites for building pluralism” (28). Despite the fact that many universities indeed boast a diverse population of students, it is often the case that campus programming tends to focus on racial and socioeconomic differences among students while avoiding meaningful engagement of religious identity. For instance, at Harvard College, diversity-related orientation programming for first-year

students barely includes meaningful discussion of religion.¹ This is a missed opportunity: universities should absolutely consider platforms for interfaith dialogue so that when students leave campus they are equipped to be models for change.

Furthermore, to effectively foster pluralism, we need to expose people who live in homogenous communities to different ways of living, being, and thinking. For instance, across the rural South, many white Protestant Christians live in relative isolation from the kind of diversity that exists in urban areas. This can be addressed both through K-12 religious literacy education and again in the nation's institutions of higher education. In her commentary, Laurie Patton (chapter ten) suggests rightly that “pluralism needs myths”—everyday stories and narratives that not only show people what it means to work across lines of religious difference, but in which they can see themselves. But this is not enough; instead, K-12 students must be exposed to religion in a way that accurately takes its sociohistorical background into account, and then invited to dialogue. Likewise, universities and colleges also need to solve the problem of “brain drain.” A kind of human capital flight, “brain drain” occurs when students from—for instance—rural or inner-city backgrounds enter lucrative positions in affluent urban centers as opposed to returning home. This is problematic both because it means our nation's cities collect the most pluralistic citizens, but also because the communities left behind tend to remain homogenized in that there is no influx of people who espouse and promote the kind of change necessary.

Despite the lack of practical applications, Eboo Patel's vision for America laid out in *Out of Many Faiths* is compelling and, in many ways, echoes the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “We live in a nation that offers [equality] to all peoples” (109). Patel points out that “when the terms of equality and dignity are not freely given, they have been taken” (109). By advocating for a new and bold civil religious narrative, he has offered one means of incorporating *most* people into the American family—an important undertaking for ensuring that the United States lives up to its calling: *e pluribus unum*.

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¹ I am referring here to Harvard's “Community Conversations” program, which—despite its good intentions—falls short of engaging students on the topic of religious identity.