

## Book Review: Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity & The American Promise by Eboo Patel

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### Recommended Citation

Davis-Sowers, Regina () "Book Review: Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity & The American Promise by Eboo Patel," *International Social Science Review*. Vol. 95 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol95/iss3/13>

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**Patel, Eboo. *Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity & The American Promise*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. vii + 219 pages. Paperback: \$17.95.**

In *Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity & The American Promise*, Eboo Patel, a former faith adviser to Barack Obama and the founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core, a non-profit organization that promotes interfaith leadership on college campuses, examines the topic of religious diversity. Patel surveys what diversity in religion could accomplish in America, specifically as it pertains to Muslims in America.

Many of his arguments derive from his belief that the “American Founders set for themselves the remarkable task of building a religiously diverse democracy, an experiment never before tried at such a scale in human history” (p. 3). This book is testimony to his faith in America, the most religiously diverse country in the world, to fulfil its promises of religious freedom to all groups.

A strength of this work is Patel’s use of personal stories, his own as well as those of other Muslims, to highlight the difficulties and controversies associated with being a Muslim in America. The story in Chapter One of how he came to live in America is poignant and instructive of how the acceptance of religious pluralism found on college campuses could serve as a template for religious diversity throughout the country.

Descriptions of the diversity among Muslims in America and of the tensions that arise between Muslims of different generations, nationalities, belief systems, and ethnicities help in understanding that Muslims are certainly not a homogeneous group. However, stories of intragroup cooperation and assistance to each other and non-Muslims result in a fuller picture of Muslims in America than the stereotypes would make us believe.

Another strength is his use of historical documents and the writings of historical figures, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Also, across several chapters, Patel

scrutinizes how Jewish and Catholic immigrants, once viewed similarly to Muslims as threats to American values and nativism, found acceptance and became part of American religious diversity. His explanation of the emergence of the term *Judeo-Christian*, which seems to negate the belief that America was created as a Christian nation, adds validity to his arguments.

A third strength is Patel's strong demonstration of the power of dialogue in politics and on perceptions of difference that can limit acceptance of religious groups deemed as threats into the civil religion of a nation. He argues that "political figures have the unique ability to impact the three areas I highlighted in my section: national narrative, law and policy, and civil society" (p. 47). The examination of the anti-Muslim narrative, policy, and civil society, especially in the Trump era, contributes greatly to understanding why the American promise of religious freedom has not been fulfilled for Muslims in America.

One weakness is Patel's insistence on comparing the experiences of Jewish and Catholic immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the Muslim experience today. Patel does not examine the fact that Muslims are seen as people of color, regardless of their national origins. Without including a part on racial politics in America, Patel cannot effectively explain why Muslims have not had similar experiences of acceptance as Jews and Catholics, including Muslims who have completed some forms of assimilation to American values pertaining to economic success.

The deeply personal nature of this book represents another weakness. It appears as almost a personal cry for acceptance by America. I question the author's objectivity, particularly because as a Muslim, he demonstrates an emotional stake in the outcomes of his arguments.

Lastly, the last three chapters of commentaries on the book distracted from the ending. Using this space to critique the book and Patel's arguments, as though readers are unable to do so

themselves, is a major drawback to the book. The book should have ended with Patel words of hope and optimism for his cause.

Yet, it is a good book, one that should be read by scholars and laymen. Although Patel is not a sociologist, the book feels sociological in its description of how life in religious institutions shaped social life and is shaped by the social institutions around them. Also, Patel's arguments represent a wonderful example of W. E. B. DuBois' concept of double consciousness, the situation in which people feel both American and other because of perceived differences between them and white Americans, or, in this case, white, Christian Americans.

I would recommend this work as required reading for undergraduate and graduate students in the Sociology of Religion, Religious Studies, Communication, and Political Science. Even more, I believe this work would be great for first-year reading in colleges and universities, as it highlights how our social identities impact our acceptance or lack of acceptance in the American experiment of religious freedom.

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