BOOKS BY EBOO PATEL

*Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*

*Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*

*Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action* (edited with Patrice Brodeur)
Democracy, in its essence and genius, is imaginative love for and identification with a community with which, much of the time and in many ways, one may be in profound disagreement.

—Marilynne Robinson,
“Imagination and Community”
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INTRODUCTION

What Is Interfaith Leadership?

Ruth Messinger, the former president of the American Jewish World Service, has a powerful story of interfaith leadership. She grew up in an observant Jewish home in New York City, attended Radcliffe College in the early 1960s, married, and started seeking a way for her (then) husband to avoid the Vietnam War. His best option was finding work as a doctor in a government facility. They tried getting a position in a major city on one of the coasts, but somehow wound up being assigned to a small town in Oklahoma. Ruth decided to make the most of an unfamiliar situation and enrolled in the master’s program in social work at the University of Oklahoma.

After completing her degree in 1964, Ruth took a job as the director of child welfare programs for two counties in western Oklahoma. She quickly discovered that what passed for children’s services in the area was an ugly collusion between the sheriff and Ms. Lucy, a woman who ran a ramshackle orphanage. Children and teenagers caught running away from home or committing minor crimes were thrown into jail and then sent to Ms. Lucy’s orphanage. Ruth’s first order of business was to inform the sheriff that putting a minor into jail was illegal. Moreover, Ms. Lucy’s “facility” was totally unfit for children. If the minor’s family was indeed unsuitable, the state had to provide an appropriate foster home for the child.
The sheriff’s quick retort was that there were no foster homes in the area, and thus his was the only game in town. Then he lit into Ruth. She was clearly not from around here, she was a woman, and—to top it all off—she was Jewish. She could go take a hike.

Ruth knew that part of what the sheriff was saying was true; there were no foster homes in the area for the youth who needed them. Her job was not just to end the terrible current practice; it was to create a better alternative. She started going for walks around various neighborhoods in her town to get to know the area better, pushing a stroller with her newborn baby inside. She noticed that many of the private residences were marked with religious signs like “The Church of Jesus Christ Who Died for Our Sins.”

Ruth knocked on doors and began conversations with the people who answered. She introduced herself and explained that her job was to help vulnerable children in western Oklahoma. She detailed the challenges facing troubled youth in the area and expressed that her highest hope was to help those kids find loving homes. Based on the religious sign she had seen outside the house, it looked like the residence doubled as a place for worship and community gathering. Might they help?

The most common response went something like this: “Come back on Wednesday morning for our praise service and speak to the group.”

There seemed to be some kind of religious gathering taking place at one house-church or another just about every day of the week and just about every hour of the day. Ruth sat through countless sermons, praise songs, and altar calls. As promised, the preacher would give her a chance to speak. Ruth would rise and tell stories of local children and teenagers in need. When she was done, the preacher would quote scripture and say to the gathered worshippers, “Who here will answer the call of God and serve as loving families for these young people?”

“People would literally line up to help,” Ruth said. “It was amazing to witness. Those evangelical house-churches built the child welfare network in western Oklahoma.”

I found one particular story that Ruth told especially moving. Every few weeks or so, Ruth would get a call from the sheriff in the middle of the night. As the number of foster families in the area grew, he had
grudgingly stopped his practice of throwing troubled youth in jail and carting them off to Ms. Lucy’s facility. Instead, when he caught a runaway in the middle of the night, he phoned Ruth. “If you can’t find a home for this kid within the hour, she’s going to jail,” he would say in his gruff voice. Without getting out of bed, Ruth would phone her friend Stacy, a devout evangelical who had told Ruth that she felt called by God to do whatever she could to help youth in need. Ruth would explain the situation, and Stacy would say, “Have the sheriff drop the girl off at my house.” Ruth relayed the message to the sheriff. Stacy would meet the child at the door with a cup of hot cocoa, make her feel comfortable, and give her a bed for the night. Ruth would show up the next morning to work out a long-term solution.

Even as things got better, they were far from easy. Part of this had to do with Ruth’s being Jewish in a time and place rife with anti-Semitism. Ruth recalls riding in a car with a group of older women when one of them said that she was off to do her shopping and aimed to “Jew down” the prices. She also remembers the day her colleagues at work found out that she was Jewish. She was met with surprised looks and a comment from her boss: “Well, you don’t look Jewish.” Many of the things that she heard in local churches contradicted her faith; some even offended her. One time, she was invited to a Sunday morning service at one of the fancier churches in town. It turned out to be Palm Sunday, and the pastor gave a fiery sermon on the killing of Jesus—by Jews.

Ruth was deeply offended and resolved to use the moment as an opportunity for education. She invited the pastor over to her home for tea and what we would now call an interfaith conversation. Ruth shared that not only was the pastor factually wrong about his claim that Jews killed Jesus, but that she was Jewish and felt hurt and insulted by his sermon. Moreover, America was growing increasingly religiously diverse. Sermons like the one he just gave were sure to cause division. And then Ruth pointed out a powerful area of commonality between her faith and his: Jesus was Jewish. Instead of preaching insulting and divisive falsehoods, why not focus on how the actions of Jesus inspired both Jews and Christians to serve others?
Just as Ruth helped the Christians she worked with understand Judaism, so she developed a deeper appreciation for evangelical Christianity during her time in western Oklahoma. She was especially struck by the ethic of service in the community: “They preached that God meant for us to serve others, and they practiced what they preached. When the pastor asked for volunteers and quoted scripture, people lined up to help.”

The 1960s were a tumultuous time—the women’s movement, the counterculture, the protests against the Vietnam War. Ruth Messinger and those evangelicals in western Oklahoma lined up on different sides of most of those major issues. Ruth was a graduate school–educated liberal Jewish feminist from New York who found herself in Oklahoma because her husband was fleeing the Vietnam War. The evangelicals she was working with helped make Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee,” with its lyrics celebrating a traditional understanding of American patriotism (against draft-dodging; for waving the flag on Main Street), one of the most popular songs of the era. Suffice it to say there were significant differences between Ruth and the majority of her evangelical partners on most of the issues of the time.

Yet Ruth identified a powerful point of intersection between their evangelical Christian values and her Jewish values. At the heart of that intersection was the welfare of young people from troubled family situations in western Oklahoma. There are hundreds in western Oklahoma who lived in loving homes rather than a derelict orphanage because of Ruth.

Ruth’s story exemplifies the kind of interfaith leadership I focus on in this book. Interfaith leaders are people who have the ability to lead individuals and communities that orient around religion differently toward understanding and cooperation. This book makes a case for why this work is important and provides a guide for how to do it effectively. To that end, it is useful to say a few more words about how Ruth’s story illustrates this kind of interfaith leadership.

Ruth sought connection rather than division. When she saw Christian signs outside of people’s homes, her instinct was not “I disagree
with that understanding of Jesus, therefore I am staying away from that house.” Instead, she thought to herself, “That is clearly a place where a leader lives and people gather. I will certainly have differences and disagreements with them, but we will also likely have some deeply held values in common. I will work to find those shared values and highlight them in a way that inspires all of us to create a foster-care network for youth.”

It is one thing to seek connection; it is another thing to have the skills to successfully connect. Ruth found ways to speak to and mobilize a different religious community for a common cause. She learned to build trust with the pastor. She learned to earn goodwill by paying personal visits to house-churches and spending time with the people who gathered there. She even learned that being a new mother with a little baby provided an initial point of positive contact.

Ruth had significant disagreements with her evangelical partners. She did not agree with them about their doctrine of Jesus as Lord and Savior, or their support for the Vietnam War, or their dim view of feminism. Ruth did not attempt to erase those disagreements, nor did she let the disagreements prevent her from partnering with them on finding foster homes. When the disagreement crossed the line into insult, she addressed the situation head-on, as with the Palm Sunday sermon on Jews killing Jesus. Crucially, she used the situation as an opportunity to educate her interlocutor, not simply scold him. Her method of education was to highlight something shared between their different traditions, namely, that Jesus was Jewish.

Even as Ruth was educating those around her about Judaism, her own knowledge about and appreciation for evangelical Christians grew. She admired their strong sense of community and their deep belief in God and, most of all, that they preached the importance of service and practiced what they preached.

CIVIC INTERFAITH LEADERSHIP

Ruth’s story illustrates the central focus of this book, what I am calling “civic interfaith leadership in a religiously diverse democracy.” The
term “interfaith leader” typically conjures up images of old men dressed in official regalia, invested with formal religious authority, debating doctrine in fancy cathedrals. Ruth was not a theologian, a pastor, or an elderly man. She was a young, female social worker who had the ability to engage house-churches and government agencies, pastors and sheriffs, religious doctrine and federal laws, to benefit the lives of a vulnerable youth population. The where, who, and what of civic interfaith leadership certainly includes churches, clergy, and doctrine, but that is a relatively narrow slice of the broader landscape that I intend the word “civic” to convey.

When I use the term “civic interfaith landscape,” I mean the various spaces (schools, parks, college campuses, companies, organizations, libraries, sports leagues, hospitals) where people who orient around religion differently interact with one another with varying degrees of ignorance and understanding, tension and connection, division and cooperation, when their faith identities are implicated by that interaction. When I say “civic interfaith work,” I mean the kinds of activities and conversations that, through addressing diverse faith identities in interaction, strengthen a religiously diverse democracy. An interfaith leader is someone expert in organizing these.

Sometimes an interfaith leader has to respond to interfaith dynamics that emerge somewhat surprisingly in a civic space. Take, for example, the funeral arrangements that followed the tragic killing of Officer Wenjian Liu, believed to be the first Chinese American in the New York Police Department to be killed in the line of duty. NYPD officials are accustomed to organizing Roman Catholic funerals involving thousands of uniformed officers and solemn eulogies by dignitaries. Officer Liu was part of a Buddhist tradition that commemorates death very differently. An auspicious day must be chosen for the event, rather than simply a day that is convenient for the public officials who wish to speak. There is generally no eulogy celebrating the life of the departed. In fact, a Chinese Buddhist funeral is typically not a public affair at all. Relatives and close friends gather in a private setting with Buddhist monks and wail, sob, and fall to the ground throughout the somber prayer ceremony. They burn objects signifying affluence in front of a
picture of the deceased so that he may be comfortable in the afterlife. This approach, favored by the family, made little room for the many police officers who understandably wanted to pay tribute to their fallen brother in a manner ritually meaningful for them. Whoever it was at the NYPD who actually organized the funeral must have had some interfaith leadership skills.

Other times, an interfaith leader will seek to enrich a civic space by proactively mobilizing interfaith networks. If you are an active citizen and a community volunteer in an American suburb and the mayor asks you to pull together a thousand people for a major blood drive, you will no doubt want to tap into the social capital of local faith communities. And once you’ve got them together at an event they feel is an expression of their various faith commitments to serve others, you might want to use the opportunity to organize an interfaith discussion and have them share stories about how their faith inspires them to help others. You will need to figure out how to be inclusive of Jehovah’s Witnesses and other faith communities who are religiously opposed to blood transfusions. Such a scenario highlights one of the great challenges of interfaith leadership—how to navigate the many areas in which people who orient around religion differently disagree.

**RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE DEMOCRACY**

The different ways that people express religious and secular identities are especially important in a democracy, where people are free to bring their personal convictions into public life. In a democracy, people have the power of speech, association, and election. You can build institutions that gather people of like beliefs and, through these, amplify your voice. You can make that voice heard in politics by voting for particular candidates or running for office yourself. In this way, you can influence budgets and write laws. And if you come across a law that you feel infringes on your religious identity, you can file a case in court.

American democracy affords a special place to religious identity. It is not for nothing that the British writer G. K. Chesterton said that “America is a nation with the soul of a church.” The Puritans who
arrived in Massachusetts Bay in the seventeenth century came seeking religious freedom. The founders had much to say about this freedom, including what they wrote in the First Amendment. Subsequent generations have strengthened this notion of special privilege for religion, most notably in the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 and the Supreme Court’s decision in the *Hobby Lobby* case. Moreover, American society is far more religious in just about every respect than other industrialized nations.

Given all this, it should come as no surprise that the place of religion in a diverse democracy has been a central topic of discussion among political philosophers. Some, like John Rawls, saw the thriving of religious diversity in democratic cultures as a significant challenge. His term for religion was “comprehensive doctrine.” He was concerned that a religious person has a comprehensive doctrine very different from the comprehensive doctrine that Rawls believes ought to underpin a liberal democracy. How can we be sure that said religious person will give his allegiance to the underlying arrangements of a liberal democracy, for example, to the president rather than the pope? How are we to know that if a particular religious group gains power, it will not attempt to force its religiously based positions through the mechanisms of government, thus imposing its comprehensive doctrine on others?

Religious diversity complicates matters further because it means there are multiple comprehensive doctrines in a single society. How can we be sure that people from those diverse communities will be intelligible to one another? After all, they do not share the same views with regard to creation, salvation, religious authority, and so on. For Rawls, the problem of potential tribalism only compounded the initial problem of misplaced loyalty. Religious diversity in a democracy may well give rise to conflict between religious groups that collectively have no regard for the authority of the government or the legitimacy of its basic political arrangements.

Rawls’s famous solution to the problem is to suggest religious discourse be limited to the private sphere and kept out of political discourse. Citizens, especially those acting in political roles, are free to practice their faith at home, but they ought not bring it into the public
square. They should not, for example, offer religious reasons for their political positions. Their views on civil rights, antipoverty efforts, abortion, foreign aid, and so on should be expressed in the terms of what Rawls calls “public reason,” which is rooted in the social contract of a liberal democracy and is by definition devoid of religious language. Rawls allows for religious reasons only if they are quickly followed by justifications consistent with his notion of public reason.

Not surprisingly, religious philosophers have taken issue with this position. Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, writes:

It belongs to the religious convictions of a good many religious people in our society that they ought to base their decisions concerning fundamental issues of justice on their religious convictions. They do not view as an option whether or not to do so. It is their conviction that they ought to strive for wholeness, integrity, integration, in their lives: that they ought to allow the Word of God, the teachings of the Torah, the command and example of Jesus, or whatever, to shape their existence as a whole, including, then, their social and political existence. Their religion is not, for them, about something other than their social and political existence; it is also about their social and political existence. Accordingly, to require of them that they not base their decisions and discussions concerning political issues on their religion is to infringe, inequitably, on the free exercise of religion.6

Wolterstorff is making a basic point not just about religion, but also about democracy. Citizens of a democracy are free to base their views on whatever they want and express them (within broad limits) however they wish. If this gives rise to tension between those groups or calls for political change, that is part of the process of democracy. Moreover, American democracy has benefited greatly from precisely this dynamic. Consider how both the abolitionist and civil rights movements involved a public religiosity that caused tension with other groups and sought fundamental political change.

Still, Wolterstorff gives short shrift to Rawlsian concerns about what Justice Felix Frankfurter called “cohesive sentiment.”7 Isn’t it possible
that encouraging people with very different religious convictions to express those identities in public might lead to protracted violent conflict, or at least a society where people are living in separate and mutually unintelligible religious universes?

The Princeton philosopher Jeffrey Stout offers a solution. Stout agrees with Wolterstorff that people have a right to express themselves, but he takes seriously Rawls’s concern with the cohesive whole and the arrangements that underlie it. Yes, people ought to express themselves, but they should express themselves with the hope of being intelligible and convincing to one another, and they should direct significant energy to the health of the whole. Such practices strengthen what Stout calls the “civic nation.”

Stout sees this civic nation as sacred, defined as the American people rather than the American government. He believes that the ties that bind a cacophonous country of 320 million into a civic nation with a collective destiny are energetic civic activities, activities he refers to as “thick democratic practices.” Only by playing soccer and baseball, forming block clubs and PTAs, and most importantly, by listening and talking to one another with candor and sympathy, can we have any hope of building understanding and cooperation across diverse identities. Above all, a democratic people, a civic nation, is a community of citizens who can offer intelligible reasons to one another for their political views and public positions. Stout writes: “[Democracy] takes for granted that reasonable people will differ in their conceptions of piety, in their grounds for hope, in their ultimate concerns, and in their speculations about salvation. Yet it holds that people who differ on such matters can still exchange reasons with one another intelligibly, cooperate in crafting political arrangements that promote justice and decency in their relations with one another, and do both of these things without compromising their integrity.”

Religion is about fundamental things. Diversity is about people with different identities and deep disagreements interacting with great frequency and intensity. Democracy is about the freedom to advance your deepest personal convictions in public life. In a religiously diverse democracy, especially one that accords a special place to faith,
disagreements on fundamental matters are to be expected. A healthy religiously diverse democracy is a society where people who disagree on some fundamental things do so without violence and in a manner where they are still able to work together on other fundamental things.

An interfaith leader is someone who can create the spaces, organize the social processes, and craft the conversations such that people who orient around religion differently can have a common life together.

**WHY LEADERSHIP?**

In a classic article for *Harvard Business Review* titled “What Leaders Really Do,” John Kotter writes, “Change is the function of leadership.” But in the Internet era, why do we need leaders to effect change? Doesn’t change happen at the click of a button or the move of a mouse or the speed of a tweet? Actually, recent research shows that the most important driver of certain types of change is an effective leader. A story told by Atul Gawande in the *New Yorker* illustrates.

In the late 1960s, medical researchers discovered a simple solution for combating diarrheal diseases like cholera: drink ten to twenty liters a day of a fluid with a particular mixture of sugar and salt. A few years later, this solution was found to dramatically reduce deaths related to cholera during an outbreak in Bangladesh. Some public health officials assumed that the next steps were easy—simply publicize the beneficial effects of the mixture and advertise them in a public education campaign. The recipe was simple, the materials were readily available, and the stakes could not be higher.

For all its easy logic, the public education campaign failed. Turns out there was no great demand for a simple, lifesaving cholera solution, even after publicizing how well it worked. Death rates due to diarrheal disease remained stubbornly high in Bangladesh.

A decade later, a Bangladeshi organization called BRAC attempted an alternative approach. BRAC hired teams of people, trained them to teach those caught in the grip of cholera how to make and use the lifesaving solution, and then sent them out to affected villages across Bangladesh. In the course of their work, the teams learned the art of
convincing desperate mothers that the best thing to do for a wailing baby emitting streams of fluid from both ends of his body was to keep giving him this nasty-tasting solution. The teams went through four thousand villages, taught the process to twelve million families, and saved a stunning number of lives.

In a digital age, it is tempting to think that technical fixes are all that are needed to spur social change, especially in situations where the problem is dire and the solution is fairly straightforward. But, as the Bangladesh cholera story illustrates, there’s frequently an old-school dynamic to social change. It’s not a cool website or a sexy public relations campaign that ultimately bends the arc; it’s a person. As Gawande puts it: “In the era of the iPhone, Facebook and Twitter, we’ve become enamored of ideas that spread as effortlessly as ether. We want frictionless, ‘turnkey’ solutions to the major difficulties of the world—hunger, disease, poverty. We prefer instructional videos to teachers, drones to troops, incentives to institutions. People and institutions can feel messy and anachronistic.”

Gawande reminds us that there are actually many areas where real people are the key drivers of social change. We rely on teachers in our schools to teach our kids. The US government has sent out hundreds of thousands of agricultural extension agents to help farmers learn the most effective methods for improving crop yields. Theoretically, those things could have been left to ad campaigns, books, and websites. But the fact is, in many areas, people learn best from other people.

Social change is essentially a process of getting people to do things differently, something scholars call “creating new norms.” As Everett Rogers, the social change guru and author of the highly influential book, Diffusion of Innovations, writes, “Diffusion is essentially a social process through which people talking to people spread an innovation.”

Gawande, building on Rogers’s statement, concludes, “People follow the lead of other people they know and trust when they decide whether to take up [something new]. Every change requires effort, and the decision to make that effort is a social process.”

People change when they are taught by other people whom they find relatable and inspiring. The people who do the teaching, the relating,
and the inspiring we call leaders. Interfaith leaders are people who cause other people to change their attitudes and actions with respect to religious diversity.

**LOCATING MYSELF**

The personal identities and commitments each of us brings to interfaith leadership will most certainly color our work. That is as it should be. An interfaith leader need not check her identity at the door, but does need to be aware of how her various views and positions might affect her engagement in any particular situation.

Let me take myself as an example. As I was writing the story about Ruth Messinger, I realized that I couldn’t name a single evangelical pastor who runs a house-church in Oklahoma, but I have dozens of friends like Ruth. My own position as a Chicago-based, broadly progressive, Oxford-educated Ismaili Muslim who leads a nonprofit organization puts me in circles where I am far more likely to be in relationship with highly educated, city-dwelling, liberal Jews who run civil society organizations than with evangelical pastors leading house-churches in western Oklahoma. I know how Ruth tells the story of working with those evangelicals to build a foster-care network, but I don’t know how those evangelicals tell it.

My identity shapes my world and my worldview—my network of relationships, the stories I am likely to hear, and the manner in which I am likely to filter them. Therefore, it most certainly shapes this book. One obvious way is the examples I use. Most of the illustrations in this book come from the religious traditions with which I am familiar, the world of higher education (based both on my experience speaking at over one hundred campuses and on my familiarity with the writings of certain scholars) and my regular diet of reading (the *New York Times*, *New Yorker*, *Atlantic*). The frameworks I present here emerge out of these experiences. My hope is that you are able to place your own experience within the categories I articulate. In other words, when I illustrate the theology of interfaith cooperation with Muslim stories, I hope that you are able to place your own stories coming from your
own Catholic or Hindu or humanist identity within the framework that I present. If you find that your world and worldview lead you to articulate substantially different frameworks on any of the questions that I address here, I hope you write your own book. That is precisely how the process of defining the field of research, teaching, and practice that is interfaith leadership will progress.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

As a primer, the book is meant to be a relatively clear and quick read. It is intended for faculty who teach classes that deal with religious diversity, and students open to a meaningful twenty-first-century vocation; for participants in the growing number of interfaith groups across the nation and the world; for citizens of small towns, suburbs, and cities who are watching their patch of earth grow ever more diverse and are committed to making the most of an opportunity both civic and sacred; and for members of faith or philosophical communities with an increasingly wide array of friends and family members who orient around religion differently and who want to both articulate their perspective on ultimate concerns and have good relationships with those who have other views.

This book has seven chapters, corresponding to the six categories that I think are essential for interfaith leadership: identity, theory (this category has two chapters), vision, knowledge base, skill set, and intangible qualities.

Chapter 1, “The Identity of an Interfaith Leader,” explores how people can mine personal experience to create a narrative identity as an interfaith leader.

Chapters 2 and 3 are about the theory of interfaith. I break the term “interfaith” into its component parts, “inter” and “faith.” “Inter” is defined as the relationships between people who orient around religion differently. “Faith” is defined as the relationship between an individual and what we commonly understand as a religious or
philosophical tradition (such as Christianity, Hinduism, or humanism). The term “interfaith,” therefore, has two profound implications: how do our relationships with those who are different affect our relationships with our religious or philosophical traditions, and how do relationships with our traditions affect how we interact with people who are different from us?

Chapter 4, “The Vision of Interfaith Leadership,” presents frameworks that flesh out what interfaith leaders hope their efforts will achieve.

Chapter 5 is on the knowledge base required for interfaith leadership.

Chapter 6 enumerates the skill set needed to be an effective interfaith leader.

Chapter 7 highlights the intangible qualities that separate truly exceptional interfaith leaders from merely good ones.

The conclusion summarizes the main themes of the book in the context of a concrete example.

Interfaith work is often referred to as “bridge building.” My favorite bridge is a literary one, from Italo Calvino’s beautiful book *Invisible Cities*. In one chapter, the traveler Marco Polo describes to the emperor Kublai Khan a particular bridge in his kingdom. The emperor grows impatient and asks Polo to get to the point. He wants to know about the stone that holds the bridge together.

The bridge is not held together by a stone, says Polo, it is held together by an arch.

So tell me about the arch, says the Emperor.

Without stones, retorts the traveler, there is no arch.15

Polo’s bridge is the guiding metaphor for this book. As you read through, I hope you come to view yourself as a bridge builder (identity),
develop an understanding of the complex landscape you are building on (theory), get a clear image of the destination you are building toward (vision), acquire the stones that are the main materials of the bridge (knowledge base), build the aptitude to connect the stones into an arch strong enough to hold a diverse community (skill set), and cultivate the intangibles that give people enough confidence in your leadership to risk the journey (qualities).