

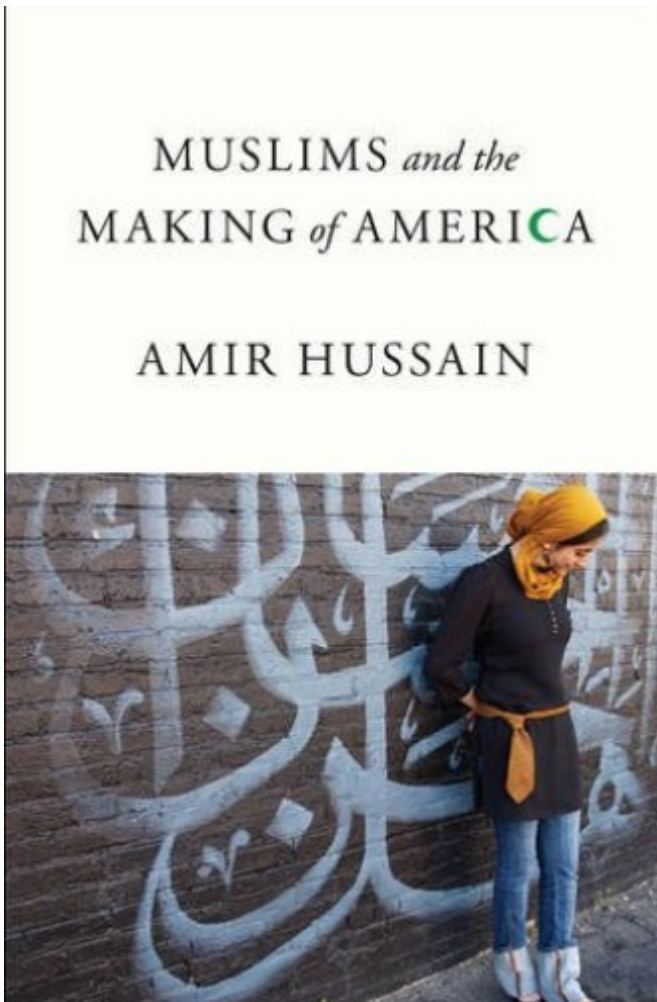
Voices of American Muslims

Both Amir Hussain and Eboo Patel model interfaith bridge-building in their writing.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

July 12, 2017

In Review



Muslims and the Making of America

by Amir Hussain
Baylor University Press

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INTER FAITH LEADERSHIP

A PRIMER

EBOO PATEL

Founder and President of
Interfaith Youth Core

"This book makes it clear why Eboo Patel is one of the most inspiring and successful interfaith leaders on the national, and even international, scene."

—PAUL F. KNITTER, author of *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*

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Interfaith Leadership

A Primer

by Eboo Patel
Beacon Press

Amir Hussain, who teaches world religions at Loyola Marymount University, [celebrates the significance of Muslims](#) in American history and culture in his brief but compelling book. He aims "to show that the fabric of America is woven, in part, with Muslim thread." And he does so admirably. Most of the Muslims profiled in the book are famous figures in music, sports, or art—Ice Cube and Busta Rhymes, Muhammed Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, comedian Dave Chappelle and Representative Keith Ellison. But the author emphasizes that these figures stand in for "many, many

others,” from the earliest Muslim slaves brought from West Africa to those Americans in our neighborhoods who vote, play sports, and share meals.

Hussain doesn't focus on theology or exposition of Muslim faith, aside from a few pages on the role of Mary and Jesus in the Qur'an. While he contrasts the Nation of Islam with "Sunni orthodoxy," he doesn't delve deeply into the details of the vast differences between the two faith traditions. Perhaps he presupposes that his readers are familiar with the basic precepts of Islam and can decide for themselves what is orthodox. Or perhaps he is simply more interested in casting the net widely, celebrating the cultural contributions Muslims have made to American society apart from nuances of faith.

I had the sense as I read this book that Hussain is preaching to the choir. The people who most need to be convinced that "Muslims, too, are America" are not likely to pick up the book and read it. Still, preaching to a choir isn't without its usefulness. I finished this book with a clearer sense of how Muslims have been interwoven into the American story from the start, and with gratitude that I had read it.

But I also felt somewhat frustrated that the lens through which Hussain examines culture is limited to wealthy, high-profile figures: music stars, artists, and sports heroes. At the beginning and end of the book, Hussain pays homage to the non-famous people who we might call *everyday Muslims*, those Americans in our neighborhoods who vote, play sports, and share meals. He acknowledges that the book is too brief to cover everyone. But in my mind, the essence of American culture is in stories of everyday people—like my neighbor Noor, who crosses the street to bring my family steaming-hot biryani every Eid.

I found stories of people like Noor in Eboo Patel's guidebook for interfaith leadership. Patel, a sociologist who founded [Interfaith Youth Core](#) and is now [well-known](#) in interfaith circles, aims to help people who are interested in engaging with people of other faiths in their own communities. The book is a primer, but it's not simplistic. Patel grounds his claims in sociological research, a theology of interfaith cooperation, and an argument for the importance of civic interfaith leadership, which he regards as essential to democracy.

The strength of Patel's book is in its stories about everyday folks: an entrepreneur who returns to his native Bangladesh to set up social programs, the evangelical Christians whose homeschooled children play with their Muslim neighbors'

grandchildren, a priest who takes a sabbatical year in India to learn more about Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist traditions.

Patel's most compelling stories are autobiographical. When an eight-year-old Eboo sneaks into the corner at a friend's birthday party to eat the beef hot dogs his mother sent, he finds a boy who is also quietly eating beef hot dogs from a plastic baggie. "Are you Muslim?" Eboo asks incredulously. "No," Chaim replies. "I'm Jewish." This awkward and endearing childhood encounter would help shape an ordinary, non-famous Muslim boy into a [nationally-respected](#) interfaith leader. "From that point on," Patel explains, "when I met a Jew, I assumed we had similarities, and I assumed those similarities had something to do with how we related to our respective religions." He continues:

A particular environment made salient a commonality in faith between Chaim and me. A different environment may have elicited different expressions of our faith, expressions that could have highlighted divisions rather than resonances. What if, for example, our parents had taken us to dueling demonstrations on the Middle East, me joining most other Muslims on the pro-Palestinian side and Chaim joining most other Jews on the pro-Israeli side? . . . An important part of what interfaith leaders do is construct environments that highlight similarities in faiths across diverse people and groups, therefore making cooperation more likely.

This kind of bridging work is, in fact, what Hussain also aims to accomplish as he celebrates Muslims and their role in American culture. Whether our culture is defined by its sports heroes or its everyday unsung heroes, it's more cohesive because of writers like Patel and Hussain.