

# Column: Dilemma of religious diversity

By Eboo Patel

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The first time I heard my 3-year-old son say the Lord's Prayer, I felt like a fraud. We are, after all, Muslim.

When I speak before audiences, one of the most frequent questions I get as the founder of an interfaith youth group is, "How young is too young for children to engage with kids from other religions?"

My answer is to tell the story of how babies are delivered in an American hospital. I imagine an institution founded by Jewish philanthropists, with a Muslim doctor presiding over delivery while a Hindu anesthesiologist administers the epidural and a Catholic nurse helps the mother.

My point is that in this era, the question of age when it comes to engaging religious diversity is moot. We are literally born into a condition of interfaith interaction. Our children will be raised in an environment of religious diversity — from a [Mormon presidential hopeful](#), to Olympic athletes competing in [Islamic head scarfs](#), to the images of a Wisconsin [Sikh community](#) mourning after a terrible attack.

I thought I was being clever, but some people in the audience gave me looks of skepticism. As the Muslim parent of two young boys, I understand their concerns. These people weren't wondering about the abstract social dynamics of religious identity and child development in the modern world. They were asking about the present and complex challenges parents face when trying to raise their children in the family's chosen faith at the same time their kids are being introduced daily to religious practices and rituals different from their own.

My son is a case in point. There were plenty of places where my son could have learned the Lord's Prayer. The fact that he could say it in Spanish as well as English suggests our nanny might have had a role. But he also could have learned it at his Catholic school, which has services every Friday, prayer before meals and morning readings on saints. Zayd listens well and learns quickly. On our family holiday to Florida, we drove past a store that sold statues and Zayd pointed out the window and shouted, "Look, it's Mother Mary!"

## What should parents do?

Like those skeptical parents I spoke to, should I tell Zayd to pray in Arabic before school meals while other kids are all chanting, "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost"? Do I tell the school that Zayd needs to go somewhere else during the Easter lesson? As clear as I felt giving sociological answers on interfaith cooperation from the stage, I felt confused in nurturing my child's Muslim identity on the multifaith playground.

So why did my wife and I send our son to Catholic school?

Muslims in South Asia and the [Middle East](#) often go to such schools, as both our mothers did in India. My family immigrated to the [U.S.](#) so that my father could attend [Notre Dame University](#). And it happened to be the best educational option for my son in our north side Chicago neighborhood. But my wife and I were raised Muslim, and have remained so throughout our lives.

### **An enlightening moment**

Just when I was worried that my son was becoming a Catholic, we got invited to a party celebrating Diwali — the festival of lights that signifies victory of good over evil — at our secular Hindu neighbor's house. Zayd was uncharacteristically quiet for most of it, but when the food arrived, he looked over at his friend — the neighbor's child — and said: "Karthik, you need to say Shukrun Lillah before you eat."

I was one proud papa witnessing that moment. "He remembers a Muslim prayer of gratitude," I thought to myself.

My pride was interrupted by Zayd's rising voice. He was insisting that Karthik say Shukrun Lillah. Karthik's parents shot my wife and me a look that to me said, "We thought you weren't those kind of Muslims." My wife shot me a look that said, "You're the religion guy — handle this."

I blurted out: "Karthik doesn't have to say Shukrun Lillah, love. We say Shukrun Lillah for Karthik. I want you to go back to your plate and close your eyes and think of your food and Karthik and everything and everybody you love and say Shukrun Lillah — you're thanking God for all of it. How does that sound?"

Zayd, remarkably, thought it sounded good. My wife gave me a "not bad" look.

It wasn't until later that night — party over, kids in bed — that I realized I might have stumbled onto something important. There is a story about the prophet Mohammed debating with a Christian delegation about the differences between their respective traditions. When it came time for the Christians to pray, the prophet surprised them by inviting them to pray in his mosque, saying that just because their traditions had differences did not mean that they should not respect and show hospitality to the others' practices. In fact, in my own family's case, I have found that Catholicism and Islam have many values in common — including mercy and generosity.

In a world of many different people and prayers, perhaps the most relevant lesson we teach our children is this: a religiously diverse world makes your religion even more relevant; it marks your concern with and care for your friends from all religions.

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