

THE TELL

‘No desire for deification’

Economist and activist Raj Patel says he would prefer to talk about abolishing economic injustices in the world rather than the fact that some people think he’s the Messiah. **Tavia Grant** wonders if he’s protesting too much

For a man who says he is sick to death of “the Messiah thing,” Raj Patel is still perfectly willing to field questions about it.

The economist, activist and academic was in Toronto last week to speak at a conference and discuss his book, *The Value of Nothing*, a New York Times bestseller on how prices don’t reflect the hidden social and environmental costs of producing things.

But his fame over the past year has grown from far odder phenomena in which he has played a starring role. After an appearance to promote his book on *The Colbert Report* in January of last year, his inbox started to fill with “a trickle, and then a flood” from apparent followers of Share International, a fringe religious group in Britain, asking if he was the Maitreya – a spiritual leader also known as the World Teacher, Messiah or Buddha.

It turns out, a few days after Mr. Patel’s TV appearance, the leader of the religious movement, Benjamin Creme, who had been waiting 35 years for this moment, proclaimed that the Maitreya had just appeared on American television. It was left to interested parties to figure out who that was. Some zoomed in on Mr. Patel.

He could, presumably, have deleted the e-mails, ignored the Facebook comments and YouTube videos. Instead, he blogged about it, pasting a clip of Monty Python’s *The Life of Brian*. And a month later, his story appeared in a column syndicated by The

New York Times penned by a friend, Scott James. “He has no desire for deification,” he wrote. “But he may not have a choice.”

A reluctant god Mr. Patel may seem, but the story has kept him in the headlines. Devotees have made pilgrimages, a YouTube video, posted by MarLA13 titled “Was this the first Maitreya Interview?” has garnered 71,000 hits and some have called him the Antichrist. It landed him back on Stephen Colbert’s comedy spoof in March while The New Yorker ran a seven-page article entitled “Are You the Messiah?” in late November.

Though apparently frustrated with the whole issue, he remains willing to talk to the media about it. Has it helped to publicize his ideas? “Maybe,” he says.

‘I’m a mutt of globalization’

The Messiah chatter, some might argue, is what most differentiates Raj Patel from the left-leaning, anti-globalization crowd. His ideas seem familiar: We should place more value on forests, pay people a fair wage for picking our produce. But a few other things set him apart.

First, the packaging. He looks like a movie star. His slick YouTube video has garnered nearly 100,000 clicks. He speaks in clear BBC diction, animated, funny and articulate. He’s 38 and looks younger, active on both Facebook and his blog.

He also mirrors this globalized age. “I am a mutt of globaliza-

tion,” he says over coffee – born in London to a father from Fiji and mother from Kenya, he has lived in Switzerland, France, Germany, Poland, India, Zimbabwe and South Africa. He now lives in San Francisco, where he is a visiting scholar at the University of

California, Berkeley, with his wife and one-year-old son when he’s not traipsing around the world.

He was educated at Oxford, the London School of Economics and Cornell University, and, as his biography says, “has worked at the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, and protested against them both.”

His origins are humble. Born in 1972, he helped out in his parents’ convenience store in central London. One of his favourite activities was using the price gun “like a Glock for junior capitalists” to slap stickers on Mars bars and one-pence tags on his little brother.

It’s an anecdote in his latest book, which argues for shifting today’s market culture toward more sustainable economies. It begins with an Oscar Wilde quote: “Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing.”

Bits of his thinking are predictable: Big business is bad, free markets are evil. But he draws on conversations with ordinary people around the world, from farmers in Chiapas to shack-dwellers



in South Africa and tomato pickers in Immokalee, Fla., to ground his argument that local democracies should be strengthened.

He also has the luck of timing. The world has emerged from the financial crisis on shaky ground. People are looking for new models, be they offered by the Tea Party or would-be saviours, and much of what Mr. Patel talks about – imbalances in global food systems, the dangers of unfettered markets – happens to be in areas where people are looking for answers.

His global views are what brought Mr. Patel to Toronto last week. It wasn't his usual speech to the converted. It was a gathering of human-resources professionals. At 8:30 a.m. on a snowy Friday, about 1,800 of them turned up.

For an hour, he paced the stage, brow furrowed, speaking without notes, draped in a green scarf with a black blazer and jeans.

"I feel a little out of place here," he joked at the outset. "I'm self-employed."

The economy fails to properly value resources, Mr. Patel told them. Hamburgers, for example, should cost around \$200 when the full toll of environmental destruction, low wages and health-care costs are factored in. Food protests around the world reflect how broken the market system is. On just what the human-resources profession should do *about it*, he fell a little short.

If it seemed a little incongruous – the man who helped to orchestrate anti-globalization protests in Seattle is invited by corporate Canada to preach his own gospel – the audience seemed attentive.

His basic message, to share, be generous, co-operate, protect public spaces, buy local, resonated with some in the crowd. "Raj Patel was amazing!" one attendee tweeted. "Impactful and thought-provoking," tweeted another.

Bill Greenhalgh, chief executive of the Human Resources Professionals Association, which hosted the conference, said he asked Mr. Patel to speak because his members need to have a global perspective. "It's a borderless world and trends that are occurring in other countries have a major impact on what's happening in Canada," he said. "The one thing Raj was pointing out is we are very interconnected – what happens in Beijing one day impacts Berlin the next day."

The making of a Messiah

Which brings us back to the stranger-than-fiction year he has had. Mr. Creme's proclamation last year that the Messiah had appeared on U.S. TV sent people scurrying to identify who it might be.

Mr. Patel seemed to fit for several reasons. According to Mr. Creme, the saviour flew from India to London in 1977. He is part of the South Asian community. He possesses a sense of humour. He's male. He speaks "earnestly of the need for peace, achievable only through the creation of justice and the sharing of the world's resources" – issues that Mr. Patel happens to be quite fond of.

Share International has taken pains to distance itself from the outing of Mr. Patel. Todd Lorentz, who lives in Edmonton and is the

group's Canadian spokesman, emphasizes that Share has never officially identified Mr. Patel as the Maitreya. "Anyone who has carefully read the information put out by Share International over the years would not make that mistake."

If it is a mistake, the group hasn't done itself any favours by refusing to directly deny that he is the Messiah.

Mr. Patel responded to the Messiah questions with a blog post titled "Call Me Brian" last year, which had the effect of egging them on. "As it happens, I do think that sharing, fraternity, justice and co-operation are terrific things," he wrote. "I also think that prioritizing the needs of the poor, hungry and oppressed is a non-negotiable part of a sustainable future."

He is not the Messiah, he says, before quoting the Monty Python scene in which a man is mistaken for Jesus. "I'm just a very naughty boy."

Tavia Grant is a reporter with Report on Business.

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Raj Patel

A hamburger should cost \$200, if you consider the toll of environmental destruction, low wages and health-care expenses, according to Raj Patel. MOE DOIRON/THE

GLOBE AND MAIL

