

RELIGION AND NATIONAL SECURITY: Strengthening Pluralism, Defeating Totalitarianism

Eboo Patel with Erin Williams

I love America not because I am under the illusion that it is perfect, but because it allows me – the child of Muslim immigrants from India – to participate in its progress, to carve a place in its promise, to play a role in its potential.

John Winthrop, one of the earliest European settlers in America, gave voice to this sense of possibility. He told his compatriots that their society would be like a city upon a hill, a beacon for the world. It was a hope rooted in Christian faith, and no doubt Winthrop imagined his city on a hill with a steeple in the center.

Throughout the centuries, America has remained a deeply religious country while simultaneously becoming a remarkably plural one. Indeed, we are the most religiously devout nation in the west and the most religiously diverse country in the world. The steeple at the center of the city on a hill is now surrounded by the Hebrew script of Jewish synagogues, the chanting of Buddhist sanghas, and the statues of Hindu temples. In fact, there are now more Muslims in America than Episcopalians, the church attended by some of the country's Founding Fathers.

One hundred years ago, W.E.B. DuBois warned that the problem of the 20th Century would be the color line. The 21st Century might well be dominated by a different line – the faith line. From Northern Ireland to South Asia, West Africa to the Middle East, people are condemning, coercing, and killing in the name of God. The most pressing questions for the world's citizens may well be these: How will people who have different ideas of heaven interact together on Earth? Will the steeple, the synagogue, the temple, the sangha, and the minaret learn to share space in a new city on a hill?

The faith line does not divide civilizations. The faith line divides religious totalitarians and religious pluralists. On one side, we find religious totalitarians. Their conviction is that only one interpretation of one religion is a legitimate way of being, believing,

and belonging on Earth. Everyone else needs to be converted, condemned, or killed. On the other side of the faith line are religious pluralists. They hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities should come together

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to serve the common good. Religious pluralism is neither bland coexistence nor forced consensus. Rather, it is a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the

constituent communities while emphasizing that the well-being of all depends on the health of the whole.

The outcome of the question of the faith line depends on which side young people choose. Too often for young Muslims, the side of religious totalitarianism is chosen. The problem, however, is not that Islam is a violent religion. Islam, in fact, commands moderation and compassion. The problem is also not that the moderate majority of Muslims refuses to condemn violence. Muslim civic leaders spend a large part of their time denouncing terrorism, and the Qur'an informs Muslims to be "a people in the middle." The problem is that some second-generation Muslims in the West are experiencing an identity crisis that is addressed most clearly by the radical fringe.

The immigrant generation of Muslims, whose identity was formed in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia a half-century ago, have dramatically different reference points from young Muslims growing up in 21st Century Western societies. They teach with good intentions, but the second generation soon discovers that it is impossible to be a 1950's-era Pakistani, Egyptian, or Moroccan Muslim in 21st Century Chicago, London, or Madrid.

Raised in traditional Muslim homes, occasionally participating in the permissive aspects of West-

ern culture, these young Muslims come to believe that their two worlds are necessarily antagonistic. As they grow older and feel the need for a unified Muslim way of being, it is Muslim extremists who meet them at the crossroads of their identity crisis.

They say, "Look how Muslims are being oppressed all over the world. You, who are living sinfully in the belly of the beast, have only one way to purify yourself: to become death and kill."

The logic is twisted and the conclusion perverse. But for some young Muslims, this is the first time they are hearing Islam applied to the world in which they live. And so they listen.

And young Muslims are not the only ones seduced by the siren song of religious extremism. Across traditions, extremism is a movement of young people taking action. Hindu nationalists, hate-filled rabbis, Christian Identity preachers, and Muslim totalitarians prey on young peoples' desire to have a clear identity and make a powerful impact.

In contrast, religious pluralism too often takes the shape of senior religious leaders issuing declarations from hotel conference rooms. These leaders certainly play a crucial role in religious bridge-building by breaking important theological ground and articulating interfaith frameworks, but while they debate, young people are at home posting blogs and spending time in internet chat rooms with their peers. Totalitarians are meeting them there.

Young people want to be engaged, to feel that they hold some sort of transcendent purpose. If, nine times out of ten, they are told they are too young to participate in the world around them, they will devote themselves wholeheartedly to the first person who opens a door. Unfortunately, that door often leads to destruction. So when people say to me, 'Oh, Eboo, you know, you run this sweet little organization called the Interfaith Youth Core, and you do such nice work by bringing kids together,' I say, 'Yeah, you know, there's another organization that's really good at recruiting young people for their cause. You may have heard of it? It's called al-Qa-

eda.'

Al Qaeda's ideology is deeply participatory, and it's not without strategy. They recognize young peoples' desire to be authentic, to contribute. They embrace young people's potential to latch onto a conviction in the form of explosives.

When we look back upon the lives of young religious terrorists, we find a web of individuals and organizations that shaped them. Every time we see a teenager kill someone in the name of God, we should ask: why weren't the hands of pluralists shaping that kid instead of the hands of religious extremists?

The single most important effort in the American Muslim community is youth work anchored in the American context. Across the country, people like Shaykh Hamza Yusef, Dr. Omar Abd-Allah and Imam Zaid Shakir are increasingly putting young people at the center of their attention. These individuals and their organizations are helping a generation of young American Muslims articulate what it means to be both authentically Muslim and proudly American. They emphasize that, as a tradition that seeks to be relevant for all time and every place, the expression of Islam must adapt even while the essence remains the same. They are teaching young Muslims that they were meant to live in pluralist societies, and providing them with an understanding of Islam that encourages cooperation with people from all backgrounds in order to serve the common good. They emphasize that Muslims should seek to be citizens: participating in our pluralist society, contributing something of their story to our culture, and learning through interaction with others.

My organization, the Interfaith Youth Core, creates programs that illuminate the religious diversity of humankind through strengthening and celebrating young people's existing religious identities, building understanding between religious communities, and encouraging cooperation to serve the common good. Through a service-learning methodology, we create service projects that highlight the shared social justice values of our religious traditions, such as hospitality, justice, service, compassion, peace, and pluralism. This type of work introduces students to the social justice teachings of different religions and allows them to participate in the social justice projects of different religious communities in an engag-

ing, interesting way. You can read more at www.ifyc.org.

It is tempting to view these efforts as just youth programs, but that is thinking dangerously small. The populations of the most religiously volatile countries in the world are strikingly young. Seventy-five percent of India's one billion plus are under age 25. Eighty-five percent of the population of the Palestinian territories is under age 33. Over two-thirds of Iran is under age 30. The median age in Iraq is 19 1/2.

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Young people are standing on the faith line. Whose message are they hearing? Who is telling them they can contribute? Who is teaching them what it means to be religious in the modern world? If we do not help our young people develop a positive religious identity relevant for their time and place, we forfeit them into the hands of people who will make human bombs of them.

In the words of Gwendolyn Brooks in her poem, "Boy Breaking Glass,"

I shall create!
 If not a note, a hole
 If not a symphony, a desecration. •

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