



THE YOUTH PROGRAMS OF RELIGIOUS TOTALITARIANS

By Eboo Patel

He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win,
We drew a circle that took him in.

—Edward Markham

The first person I called on September 11, 2001 was my friend Roy. “Everyone we know is okay, and everyone that they know is okay.” His voice was a mixture of fury and fear and relief and resolve. Roy was a member of my Rhodes scholar class at Oxford, and somehow always managed to be the life of the party and the smartest guy in the room at the same time. He was just the kind of person I could see making a deal over breakfast at Windows on the World, the restaurant atop the World Trade Center. Roy was a devoted Jew whose best friends at Oxford were a Muslim and a Hindu. He believed pluralism was at the heart of America’s greatness, and nowhere was it on more brilliant display than the masala of cultures that is New York City. As an undergraduate at Harvard, Roy had been the head of Phillips Brooks House, Harvard’s student-run community service organization. He was a big believer in the power of service to bring people together and we had spent many hours talking about strategy for the Interfaith Youth Core. “You realize that what you’re doing is more important than ever,” he told me on the phone. I heard sirens behind him.

When the pictures of the 19 hijackers were published, I saw a deeper layer to Roy’s comment. I remember staring for a long time at the photographs of the terrorists, searching their faces for signs of dementia or marks of evil. But for the most part they looked unsettlingly normal, perhaps even a little naïve, more like high school yearbook photos than Most Wanted poster mug shots. I was surprised that only a couple had facial hair. Wouldn’t they want to be pictured with regulation-size beards so at least they could look the part of jihadis? After all, their mentors, Mohammed Haydar Zammar and Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, had a bushel of menacing-looking facial hair. And then it occurred to me: the reason that the pictures resembled a high school yearbook is because some of these murderers were barely beyond their teens. Maybe some did not have full beards because they could not grow them.

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I remembered Yigal Amir, the extremist Jew who assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin in 1995. I thought back to 1997, when a member of the Christian Identity movement named Benjamin Smith went on a shooting rampage targeting Jews, Asians, and African-Americans across the Midwest. Twenty-six and 21 years old respectively. I thought about the news reports I heard consistently about religious violence—in India, Sri Lanka, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, West Africa, wherever.

The ages of the people doing most of the fighting, killing, and dying were generally between 15 and 30. The world had recently woken up to the increasing link between religion and violence. But there was something else going on that most people seemed to be missing: the shock troops of religious extremism were young people.

I was starting the Interfaith Youth Core because I thought young people could be a major force in building religious cooperation, and I was having a hard time getting anybody to pay attention. Even people within the small interfaith movement generally treated young people’s involvement as a sideshow. But religious extremists didn’t view young people as an afterthought. Religious extremists saw a fire in young people that others were missing. They were stoking that fire and turning it into targeted assassinations and mass murder. In my mind, I was picturing a movement of young people working for religious understanding through cooperative service. In my newspapers, I kept on reading about teenagers and twenty-somethings killing other people in the name of God. Their movement was strong and growing. I began to investigate why.

Osama bin Laden started his terrorist career as a teenager at Al Thagher Academy in Saudi Arabia, where wealthy Saudis sent their children for a Western-style education in the Kingdom. Young Saudi princes and the sons of the business elite dressed in grey slacks and charcoal blazers and assembled

every morning for a military-style call to order, then gathered again to perform the ritual ablutions before the noon prayer. The teachers at Al Thagher included both Westerners and Arabs, some of whom had been exiled from Jordan, Egypt, and Syria for their involvement in political activities, particularly with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Founded in Egypt in 1928 by a 22 year old named Hassan al Banna under the slogan “Islam is the solution,” the Muslim

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Brotherhood has been called the precursor of contemporary radical Islam. Some have argued that its original intention was to be a religious revival movement that provided social services and community for the rapidly changing society of post-

colonial Egypt. But Egypt’s secular nationalist ruler Gamal Abdel Nasser, who took power in 1952, radicalized its leadership through his brutal crackdowns. The most influential of these leaders was Sayyid Qutb, who Nasser imprisoned and ultimately executed. Qutb developed the idea that true Muslims were required to wage war against impious regimes and replace them with “authentic” Muslim leadership. This notion became the rallying cry of radical Muslims, and remains one of the guiding lights of Muslim totalitarians today.

King Faisal of Saudi Arabia knew that many of the Arab exiles in his country were influenced by the Brotherhood. He let them in because he felt they had been unfairly persecuted, but he was no more tolerant of open political activity than other Arab leaders. Those that remained committed to the totalitarian vision of the Muslim Brotherhood had to organize clandestinely. They had to find ripe targets for the message of radical Islam. They were looking for people with time on their hands, a desire to make an impact, and the ability to grow the movement. The perfect targets: young people. The perfect venue: schools.

His fellow students describe the young Osama bin Laden as honest and honorable. He did not cheat, he did not steal from other

students, he kept to himself. Osama was about 14 when a physical education teacher at Al Thagher, a tall Syrian man in his late twenties, started an after-school Islamic study group. He procured the keys to the sports equipment and promised the students an opportunity to play soccer if they joined his club. The teacher was athletic and charismatic, an Arab and a Muslim like most of the students. They admired him and wanted to be around him. They joined his club in droves.

At first he had the students memorize passages of the Qur'an, and then some of the stories of the Prophet's life. Gradually, the teacher began telling other stories. "It was mesmerizing," a student in the club confessed to *The New Yorker's* Steve Coll. He described one story that the teacher told in detail. It was about a young Muslim boy who wanted to please God but found his father standing in the way. The boy located his father's gun—and here the teacher went into excruciating detail about the preparations made by the boy, from developing the plot to loading the gun—and killed the old man.

"I watched the other boys," Osama's former classmate recounted, "fourteen-year-old boys, their mouths open." He found a way to get out. But others, including Osama, only became more devoted to the sessions. They grew mullah-length beards and began telling their schoolmates that true Muslims were required to restore Islamic law across the Middle East by any means necessary.

At university, Osama fell under the spell of another radical, charismatic teacher Abdullah Azzam. A Palestinian who joined the Muslim Brotherhood as a young man and later helped found Hamas, Azzam wanted to find a way to make Sayyid Qutb's vision of the violent overthrow of corrupt regimes a reality. "Jihad and the rifle alone," he wrote. "No negotiations, no conferences, and no dialogues." He saw the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as his opportunity to bring the warrior ethic back to Islam.

Azzam traveled around the world to spread his message, raising money and recruiting young people to join the armed effort. He

opened dozens of recruitment centers, known as Services Offices, around the world. If Sayyid Qutb's innovation was that true Muslims must overthrow unjust regimes, Azzam's breakthrough was building an international network that focused on a concrete cause, Afghanistan. He is the founder of the global jihad.

Osama bin Laden was one of the first to answer Azzam's call. At the age of 23 he was financing Azzam's Peshawar Services Office. Peshawar, located in Pakistan near the Afghan border, was grand central station for young Muslims looking for action in Afghanistan. It was here that bin Laden met a bookish young doctor from a prominent Cairo family, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The two were both struck by the range, quantity, and commitment of Muslim youth pouring into Peshawar, eager to wage jihad. Like entrepreneurs, they realized the potential of this massive market of young Muslims for the product of totalitarian Islam. Zawahiri wrote:

The Muslim youths in Afghanistan waged the war to liberate Muslim land under purely Islamic slogans ... It also gave young Muslim mujahidin—Arabs, Pakistanis, Turks, and Muslims from Central and East Asia—a great opportunity to get acquainted with each other on the land of Afghan jihad through their comradeship-at-arms against the enemies of Islam.

Most of these young people, however, never saw action. Afghan commanders were justifiably wary of mixing foreign youth, some the spoiled children of wealthy donors to the jihad, in with seasoned, rugged Afghan warriors. The result was an international network of Muslim youth schooled in the ideology of totalitarian Islam, taught to hate the imperialist infidel and trained to kill them without being given the opportunity to do so. And that is who became Al Qaeda.

Osama bin Laden is, as Bruce Lawrence notes in his *Introduction to Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*,

many things to many people. Public enemy number one in the West, an anti-imperialist hero to some in the Muslim world, a polemicist extraordinaire. But there is an oft-overlooked dimension to Osama bin Laden's personality, a talent that is absolutely central to his macabre success: he is a brilliant youth organizer. He undoubtedly remembers the heat he felt when he first heard the story that the organizer of the Islamic club at Al Thagher told about a young person so pure that he was willing to do anything to please God, even kill his father. When bin Laden had his chance, he took it: went to Peshawar, put his money and later his life on the line so that the infidel Soviets would be expelled from what God meant to be Muslim land. And he was not the only one. There were so many youth who arrived, so young they could barely grow a regulation-length beard, ready to die so that Islam may live. Imagine what they could do if they were organized?

A statement that bin Laden released to al-Jazeera in December 2001 provides a textbook example of how a skilled totalitarian engages young people in religious violence. In it, he tells the story of a boy who discovers that an animal is blocking a monk's path. (It takes only a basic literary imagination to view the animal as America and the monk as the Muslim world.) The boy kills the animal with a rock. "My son, today you are better than me," the monk says to him. Bin Laden follows this story up with the following commentary:

God Almighty lit up this boy's heart with the light of faith, and he began to make sacrifices for the sake of "There is no god but God." This is a unique and valuable story which the youth of Islam are waiting for their scholars to tell them, which would show the youth that these (the 9/11 attackers) are the people who have given up everything for the sake of "There is no god but God"....

Then bin Laden tells a story of how the Prophet's uncle Hamza bin Abd al-Muttalib, who also served as the first military com-

mander of the Muslim community, killed an unjust imam. In this way, he cites a historical figure that Muslims consider a hero and claims that this man's heroism came from his violence. "He won a great victory ... God Almighty raised him up to the status of lord of the martyrs," bin Laden says of al-Muttalib.

Next, bin Laden extols the virtues of the 9/11 bombers:

God opened the way for these young men ... these heroes, these true men, these great giants who erased the shame from the forehead of our *umma* ... to tell America, the head of global unbelief, and its allies, that they are living in falsehood. They sacrificed themselves for "There is no god but God."

And then he makes the call: "The youth should strive to find the weak points of the American economy and strike the enemy there."

Just like a skilled totalitarian youth organizer convinced a young Osama to answer the call of jihad through stories of the power of youth to return the *umma* to glory, so bin Laden is doing the same for this generation. But Muslims are not the only ones lured into religious extremism by charismatic youth organizers.

"There (is) nothing holier than a terrorist underground."

So writes Yossi Klein Halevi in *Memoirs of a Jewish Extremist*, a textbook example of how a young person becomes involved with religious extremism.

Reared on his father's stories of surviving the Holocaust by living in a hole, Halevi became convinced that the world was maniacally arrayed against the Jews. The phrase "Esau the Goy hates Jacob the Jew" was the central organizing principle of his life. And everywhere he turned, there was a Jewish organization dedicated to helping him transform that idea into extremist action.

There was Betar, the youth movement of Revisionist Zionism. Yossi was first drawn in

by the uniforms that its young initiates wore, blue with a yellow patch on the upper sleeve depicting a map of Israel that included all of Jordan. He started attending Sunday meetings in the organization's basement headquarters, gathering with two dozen other pre-teen Jews to listen to lectures on the imperative to learn war. He absorbed Revisionist Zionism's alternative version of the Holocaust, which blamed mainstream Jewish leaders for essentially paving the path to Auschwitz because of their refusal to become militant. He became convinced that Jewish survival depended on his generation becoming soldiers.

Betar summer camp indoctrinated him further.

They sang songs about going to war and killing Arabs. Stories were told of young Jewish martyrs like Eliyahu bet-Zouri and Eliyahu Hakim, who went calmly to their hanging for assassinating Lord Moyne, the British colonial minister for the Middle East.

A tough junior counselor named Danny took young Yossi under his wing, handing him a gun and shouting *mazel tov*, congratulations, when the bullet he fired hit the target. The lesson in hand-to-hand combat came after Yossi confessed he had never punched anyone in the face. Danny took off his glasses and said, "Hit me." For Yossi, it was another example of the sacrifice that Betaris would make in training one of their own to become a warrior.

One of his happiest childhood moments was being initiated into the Betari. He donned the blue uniform with the yellow patch, stood at attention during a ritual where the American, Israeli, and Betar flags were lowered, and sang the Betar anthem: "From the pit of dust and decay will arise a generation, proud, generous, and fierce"

In addition to the Betar movement, Yossi imbibed a steady diet of extremist Jewish literature. In school he was assigned the children's magazine *Olameinu*—One World—where he read the story of a young Jew who gets kidnapped by a Christian

nurse and forced to become a priest. One night he hears Hebrew songs coming from a synagogue, enters to find his parents sitting inside and returns to his true self.

His family received the *Jewish Press* at home, which turned every askance glance at a Jew into a cry of potential genocide and a call for Jews to become militant. According to the *Jewish Press*, Germans were systematically

destroying Jewish memory by vandalizing the community's cemeteries, Hitler had been reincarnated in America in the guise of George Lincoln Rockwell, and a holocaust was already underway in American cities characterized not by gas chambers but by friend-

ships between Jews and non-Jews. The stories became Yossi's lens on the world. He imagined swastikas etched everywhere and became obsessed with George Lincoln Rockwell's travel schedule. He dreamed of infiltrating the American Nazi Party, destroying it from the inside and warning his people of the constant need to be vigilant and armed. He swallowed aspirin without water, practice for the time he would need to do the same with cyanide.

It was the late 1960s, and everywhere Yossi turned young people fed up with the world were taking matters into their own hands. In the Bay Area, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton started the Black Panther party, promising funerals for police officers who harassed African-Americans. Radical white youth had the Weather Underground, who set off bombs to protest America's involvement in Vietnam. Who was protecting Jews who were being beat up in Brooklyn and the Bronx? Yossi wondered. Why was the oppression of Jews in the Soviet Union consigned to the back pages?

When a dozen Jews were arrested in Russia in June 1970, mainstream Jewish organizations were anemic in their response and contemptuous towards youth involvement. "We gave two thousand dollars last year to the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry," the foreign affairs expert

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at the Anti-Defamation League told Yossi and a group of his activist friends.

“Out of your budget of how many millions?” one of them retorted.

“You kids don’t know what you want,” was the dismissive answer.

“We don’t take direction from you,” said the president of Hadassah, another mainstream Jewish organization. “Youth have no right to come here.”

The one organization that cared about the fate of Soviet Jewry and involved young people, the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ), seemed increasingly lost and powerless. The vigil they held to raise awareness about the recent arrests drew less than 50 people and almost no media.

Only Meir Kahane’s Jewish Defense League (JDL) understood the frustrated passions of young American Jews, nurtured on the horrors of the Holocaust and the heroes of Israel’s founding, longing to carve out their place in Jewish history. Brooklyn-raised and Betar-trained, delusional and messianic, Kahane was a brilliant organizer of young people. He knew that the energy building within young Jews was on the cusp of explosion. The arrests in the Soviet Union provided a convenient vehicle for Kahane to communicate his larger worldview, that Jewish survival depended on dominating others with force. Jews had suffered enormously because previous generations had ignored the message. At rallies Kahane taunted mainstream Jewish leaders for being “nice Irvings” who allowed the Holocaust to happen because they were more interested in respectability than militancy. Yossi and his generation vowed to never make that mistake. Kahane became their pied piper. They loved his carefully cultivated image of self-sacrificial militant commitment to the cause of Jewish survival, his call for “a thousand young Jews ready to go over the barricade,” and his willingness to be at the front of the line.

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While other Jewish organizations did little in response to the arrest of Soviet Jews, the JDL organized dramatic actions. Kahane and 20 others entered the Soviet trade office in Manhattan and threatened the staff with lead pipes. They disrupted concerts by Russian performers in New York, chained themselves to the wheels of a Soviet airliner at JFK airport, and destroyed property at the Soviet UN mission. JDL rallies attracted hundreds of young Jews, raising their fists and repeat-

ing after Kahane, “Two Russians for every Jew.”

When a pipe bomb exploded outside the office of the Soviet airline Aeroflot, presumably planted by JDL associates, Yossi felt a surge of pride. “I was thrilled. Nobody could dismiss

us now. We were just like the anti-Vietnam movement: *serious*.” His friends were mostly other young people involved in the JDL, several of them on a first name basis with Kahane and increasingly responsible for the organization’s acts of violence. When they heard of attacks on Jews, they drove there in numbers and stood in front of the victims’ home in military fashion. Moish, one of Yossi’s school friends, played the role of sniper, lining up across the street with a shotgun.

Yossi craved what the JDL offered: “Kahane was telling us, young American Jews, that our comfortable lives were an aberration, a meaningless interlude between times of persecution, and that by confronting New York cops and risking beating and arrest we could reenter Jewish history and experience its menacing intensity.”

Like Hasib Hussein, the 7/7 London Tube bomber who became obsessed with Muslim oppression in Britain and abroad, Yossi’s fears were partially true. The Holocaust *was* gut-wrenchingly horrible; anti-Semitism *is* a persistent strain across human history; Jewish kids *were* chased and beaten in New York’s boroughs in the 1960s and 70s. Both had immigrant parents who lived in ethnic-

religious cocoons, expressing a peculiar combination of disgust and gratitude towards their adopted homeland, unable to provide their kids with a religious identity relevant to their time and place. Hasib Hussein felt guilty that he had not experienced suffering like the Palestinians or Bosnians, that he had not been part of the mujahadeen battling the Soviets in the 1980s. Yossi felt guilty that he had not suffered through the Holocaust or battled Arab armies to help secure the state of Israel in 1948. They both craved a place in the historical drama of their tribe. They both felt mainstream religious institutions ignored their passion. They were both unremarkable, middle-class kids with no particular pathology outside of a teenager's inherent sense of urgency. In both cases, it was religious extremists who skillfully channeled teenage intensity into totalitarian identity and violent action.

If suicide bombing had been a standard tactic of religious extremism in the early 1970s, Yossi and his friends might have lined up to accept Kahane's blessing and a belt loaded with bombs.

Who does not understand violence? Who has not experienced suffering and wanted to inflict it twice over in return? Who has not felt the heat and thunder of anger rise up in them? Who has not known the total release of fury bursting forth?

I still remember the time I got burned on a fly pattern during a pick-up football game in junior high. David caught the ball, Jerry Rice style, over his left shoulder, did a dance in the end zone, said a few choice words to me and trotted across the field. Five minutes went by. Ten minutes. The sting refused to fade. David was about ten feet away. He had his back turned, talking and laughing with his teammate. Were they mocking me? I felt the rage rush up and it was almost like I couldn't help myself. I got a running start, aimed my shoulder into the small of his back, and bowled into him with all the force I could muster. His body crumpled under the weight of mine, and I felt a sense of total resolution.

A few years later, when I saw *Lawrence of Arabia*, I had a deep understanding for

the scene where Lawrence describes the first time he killed a man. The problem, he said, was not just the act. It was that he liked it.

We humans know violence well. It is a part of each of us. It is precisely the reason I was drawn to religion in the first place. Somehow, the religious people I admired overcame the human desire to hurt others. Tibetan Buddhist masters talked about their struggle to still love their Chinese tormentors. Mahatma Gandhi spent his time in a South African prison hand-making sandals for his jailer. Pope John Paul II met with the man who tried to assassinate him, and forgave him.

Dorothy Day once said that she created the Catholic Worker because she wanted a place where people could be better. It was one of the key reasons I spent so much time there as a college student. I wanted to overcome those parts of me that would tackle somebody from the blind side. I wanted to be good.

It was in Islam that I found the clearest articulation of this inner struggle. The story goes like this: A victorious Muslim army was celebrating their triumph in battle, when the Prophet Muhammad told them they had only won "the lesser jihad." Now, he said, they had to move on to "the greater jihad," the jihad al-nafs, the struggle against their lower selves. The first time I read that, I felt as if the Prophet was speaking straight to me, as if he could see the thousands of times in my life that my lower self had won, as if he was personally returning Islam to my consciousness.

There is another story in Islam that, for me, defines the religious spirit in the world, and the meaning of lasting victory. It is known as the Treaty of Hudaibiyah and the Prophet's peaceful return to Mecca. After years of defending himself and his fellow Muslims in Medina against aggressive military assaults by the Quraysh, a powerful tribe based in Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad decided to launch a religious peace offensive. In the year 628, he announced to the Muslim community in Medina that he was going to make a holy pilgrimage to the Ka'aba, the black shrine in Mecca that Abraham built to God. Refusing the advice of his closest companions, who were

convinced that the Quraysh would take this chance to murder their Prophet, Muhammad refused to carry arms. He set forth dressed in the simple, white, two-piece outfit still worn by Muslims making the *hajj* today, uttering the cry *Labbayk Allahu Labbayk*—Here I am, O God, at Your service. A thousand Muslims accompanied him, many questioning the wisdom of making a religious pilgrimage in the direction of an enemy who only wanted war.

The Quraysh sent a war party of 200 cavalry to prevent them from entering the city. Muhammad steered his companions toward Hudaibiyah, at the edge of the Sanctuary where all fighting was forbidden, sending a message to the Quraysh that he came in peace. He reminded his companions that they were on a religious quest and as such should prepare to repent and ask God's forgiveness for their sins. No doubt some of them were confused about why Muhammad was making spiritual preparations instead of war preparations. But Muhammad, guided by revelations from God, knew that ultimate victory for Islam did not mean violently defeating the enemy, but peacefully reconciling with them. Achieving this required an act of personal humility and self-effacement that shocked even his closest companions.

After being convinced that Muhammad was not going to engage them in battle, the Quraysh sent Suhayl, one of their most stridently anti-Muslim leaders, to negotiate a settlement with Muhammad. The two sat together for a long time, finally agreeing to terms that the Muslims felt were deeply unfair, but Muhammad insisted they accept. The Muslims would be allowed to do the holy pilgrimage in peace, but not now. They would have to go back to Medina and wait a whole year before returning. Also, the Muslims would have to repatriate any Meccan who had converted to Islam and immigrated to Medina without the permission of his guardian. One source writes that the Prophet's companions "felt depressed almost to the point of death" when they saw the settlement. Umar, one of the Prophet's closest associates, even said: "Why should we

agree to what is demeaning to our religion?" But the greatest shock was still to come.

When it came time to sign the papers, Suhayl, the Quraysh leader, saw that the treaty read, "This is what Muhammad, the apostle of God, has agreed with Suhayl ibn Amr." He objected to the language, saying that if he recognized Muhammad as the apostle of God, they would not be in a situation of war to begin with. "Write down your own name and the name of your father," Suhayl instructed the Prophet. To the utter despair of his companions, Muhammad agreed. He told Ali, his son-in-law who would later become the first Shia Imam, to strike the words "apostle of God" from the treaty. Ali could not bring himself to do it. So the illiterate Prophet asked Aly to point to the words on the paper, took the pen, and struck them himself.

On the journey home to Medina, with the bitter taste of humiliation still fresh in the mouths of Muhammad's companions, the Prophet received a revelation which would come to be known as the Victory Sura, Chapter 48 in the Holy Qur'an. In it, God tells the Prophet: "Surely We have given thee / a manifest victory ...". The sura states that God Himself was involved in the situation, "It is He who sent down the *sakina* / into the hearts of the believers, that / they might add faith to their faith." The Arabic term *sakina* loosely translates as "the peace and tranquility and presence of God" and is thought to be related to the Hebrew term *shekinah*. The sura closes with the following line: "God has promised / those of them who believe in and do deeds / of righteousness, forgiveness and / a mighty wage."

The following year, as promised, Muhammad returned with nearly 3,000 pilgrims to perform the pilgrimage. His enemies, keeping their end of the bargain, vacated the city and watched the Muslims do the ritual circumambulations around the Ka'ba and run seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwah. They were shocked to see Bilal, a black Abyssinian who had been a slave in Mecca before being freed by the Muslims, climbing to the top of the Ka'ba

several times a day to give the call to prayer, a position of honor in Islam. Muhammad heard that a woman had recently been widowed and offered to marry her, thus taking her into his protection. He invited his Quraysh enemies to the wedding feast. They refused, and told him his three days were up. The Muslims left with the same discipline and grace with which they entered. It was a powerful image that many Quraysh would not soon forget.

When Muhammad returned to Mecca a year later, those who once took up arms against him converted to Islam in droves. Muhammad granted a near total amnesty to the Quraysh, despite the fact that many had fought battles against him in the past, and regardless of whether or not they converted to Islam. To the surprise of some of his companions, he even gave high office to some of the people who, a short time before, were his sworn enemies. But Muhammad was not interested in punishment, he was interested in a positive future, and he knew that would only be accomplished by widening the space so that people could enter it.

During this time, God sent Muhammad a revelation about relations between different communities in a diverse society:

O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most righteous.

For me, the Treaty of Hudaibiyah and the peaceful return of Muhammad to Mecca are the defining moments of Islam. They exemplify the genius of the Prophet, the generosity of God, and the bright possibility of a common life together. It is an ancient example of how a religiously-inspired peace

movement can win a victory not by defeating the enemy, but by turning them into friends.

As I think, now, of the civil rights marchers in Selma and Birmingham, I cannot help but hear the message of *Labbayk Allahuma Labbayk*—Here I am, O God, at your service—in their songs. I cannot help but see the Prophet at Hudaibiyah as I reflect on King staring at his bombed out home in

Montgomery and calming the agitated crowd by saying, “We must meet hate with love.” I cannot help but glimpse the spirit of the Holy Qur’an’s message on pluralism in the lines that King uttered at the end of the Montgomery Bus Boycott: “We have before us the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of

our civilization ... The end is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community.” I cannot help but believe that Allah’s *sakina* is a force that has re-appeared across time and place, whenever righteous people are overcoming the tribal urges of humanity’s lower self with the religious message of transcendence.

So what of the relationship between religion and violence? Are there not people who chant the name of God while they murder others? Is it not the case that religious texts themselves sometimes call for violence?

Undoubtedly, religion is at the center of a vast array of horrible things. But it is clearly not confined only to evil use. Religion, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, is simply a tool, like a knife. When a knife is used to cut bread, it is good. When it is used to cut someone’s throat, it is bad.

A favorite explanation of people who are suspicious of religion in general, or other people’s religions in particular, is that *religious texts themselves* command violence, and so it should not surprise us when believers obey. This argument is particularly marshaled against Muslims, with

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Islamophobes and Muslim totalitarians alike circulating papers that cite only the parts of the Qur'an that deal with violence.

I concede that the bin Ladens of the world are not making everything up. There are indeed explicit statements about violence in the scripture of most major religious traditions. But to think that the statements of a religious text suddenly morph into armed reality is to have a profound misunderstanding of religion. There are several layers of meaning to any

religious text: the explicit, the contextual, and the symbolic, to name just a few. A religious text comes to life through its interpreters. Violence committed in the name of a religion is really violence emanating from the heart of a particular interpreter. As the scholar Ignaz Goldziher put it: "It could be said about the Qur'an ... everyone

searches for his view in the Holy Book." Or, as the great Muslim legal scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl writes, "The Qur'anic text assumes that readers will bring a preexisting, innate moral sense to the text. Hence, the text will morally enrich the reader, but only if the reader will morally enrich the text."

Another common theory is that religious violence is a result of oppression, largely based on the policies of the powerful. There is no doubt that far too many people in the world have their freedom restricted by repressive regimes, live in the grip of wrenching hunger, are constantly fearful of the threat of violence, or some combination of the three. My personal opinion is that my own government does far too little to help, often exacerbates the problem, and is sometimes one of the chief reasons it exists. But poverty, repression, and fear, and the policies that lead to them, do not by themselves arm people. As Jessica Stern writes in *Terror in the Name of God*, "The same variables (political, religious, social, or all of the above) that seem to have caused one person to become a terror-

ist might cause another to become a saint." What counts is how a community *responds* to their situation. Too often, that response is shaped by people aiming for violence and skilled at recruiting youth to commit it.

I believe religious violence is the product of careful design, manipulated by human hands. It is more about sociology than scripture, more about institutions than inevitability. The theology of the world's bin Ladens is influential because they have built powerful

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institutions that recruit, inspire, and train people to act in its hateful, murderous ways. When people respond to oppression by killing their enemies while whispering the name of God, it is because an organization convinced them that it was a sacred duty and then gave them everything they needed to carry it out. And so often,

their primary targets are young people. What Jessica Stern writes in *Terror in the Name of God* is true: "Holy wars take off only when there is a large supply of young men who feel humiliated and deprived; when leaders emerge who know how to capitalize on those feelings; and when a segment of society—for whatever reason—is willing to fund them."

But religious extremists do not only speak of humiliation and deprivation. They define the zeitgeist as reclaiming the historical greatness of a religious tradition and tell their target audience of teenagers that they are the only ones to achieve it. They juxtapose a people's current suffering against a mythical alternative, and tell young people *it is their destiny* to transport their people from the former to the latter. That mythical alternative has both historical and theological dimensions, like the time of the Prophet for Muslims and the Messiah's coming for Jews. And it is the responsibility of young people to realize it, whether that means driving America out of Saudi Arabia or establishing settlements in Hebron. Many mainstream religious institutions ignore young people, or

worse, think that their role should be limited to designing the annual t-shirt. Religious extremists, on the other hand, build their institutions around the desire of young people to have a clear identity and make a powerful impact.

Institutions, writes the sociologist Peter Berger, are best understood as programs for human activity. It is a truism that applies to a broad range of sectors. Consider a recent example of how a network of powerful institutions made a set of political ideas dominant. After recovering from the shock of defeat in 2000, Democrats began investigating how Republicans managed to unseat them after eight years of Clinton-era peace and prosperity. Wasn't it the case, they asked, that millions of people had voted *against their own interests* when casting their ballots for George W. Bush? Assuming no spells were cast on Kansas, how had this happened? The answer, they found, lay in the superior institution building of the Republican Party. Since the Goldwater defeat in 1964, a handful of philanthropic foundations had become very strategic about channeling money to a small number of think tanks which nurtured a core set of simple ideas that played well in parts of America that were becoming demographically significant. More recently, the "Republican message machine" (which was really just the network of these institutions) became highly effective at recruiting extremely electable candidates, provided them with lavish campaign funding, and offered professional trainings where they learned to communicate effectively in media-friendly sound bites. The Democrats were left to bleat about how their ideas were actually more popular with Americans on Sunday morning talk shows while Republicans replaced them in Congress and in the White House.

In the sphere of religion, the totalitarians have spent decades investing in their institutions and focusing like a laser on young people. Consider the institutions of Hindu extremism, led by an organization known as the National Volunteer Corps, or the RSS. The RSS was formed in 1925 with the express goal of marginalizing India's Christian, Muslim, and other minorities in the pursuit of a "pure"

Hindu nation. One of the RSS's early leaders, M.S. Golwalkar, openly expressed admiration for Nazi Germany. He wrote: "National pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by."

This ideology is spread through a sophisticated institutional structure. The core unit of the RSS is known as a shakha, or a cell, where swayamsevaks (volunteers) gather to be steeped in Hindu totalitarian ideology and engage in activities that spread it. The model was borrowed from Mussolini's National Socialist Party in Italy. The cells multiply when seasoned swayamsevaks move to a different area to start a new shakha. A friend of mine doing a graduate degree in Bombay estimated that over half of her classmates were either actively involved in a shakha or had been raised in the shakha system.

Swayamsevaks also move into positions of influence within the RSS's many different wings. These include a youth wing called the Bajrang Dal that doubles as a paramilitary group; a political party called the BJP (which held national office from 1998 to 2004); a so-called service wing known as the Sewa Vibhag; and a cultural/political mobilization wing called the VHP. These different segments work together in the most nefarious ways. For example, in the 2002 murder spree that left approximately 2,000 Muslims dead in the state of Gujarat, BJP government officials used instruments of the state including the police force to encourage the killing, the Bajrang Dal and Sewa Vibhag sent truckloads of young militants into Muslim areas to carry out the murder, and the VHP provided the political and organizational mobilization, its international working president going so far as to call the carnage a "successful experiment" that would be repeated in other parts of India.

Of course, totalitarians have always recognized the importance of building institutions that attract young people. The Nazis are a prime example. After gaining power in 1933,

Hitler began to systematically indoctrinate the next generation. He took over schools, firing teachers suspected of being opposed to the regime and forcing the remaining educators to join the National Socialist Teachers' League, which monitored teachers throughout Germany and organized sleep-away camps where they were trained in how to most effectively teach Nazi ideology to German students. Families were required to enroll their 10-18 year old children in the Hitler Youth, which grew from just over 100,000 in 1933 to nearly 9 million by 1939 organized around the motto, "Führer, command—we follow!"

Religious totalitarians have put enormous effort into two institutions where young people spend a great deal of time: schools and websites. The Christian Identity movement is particularly adept on the web. Their sites feature Web versions of coloring books with white supremacist symbols, crossword puzzles with racist clues, and 24-hour webcasts. Interested in reading Eric Rudolph's most recent musings or writing to him in jail? You can find that information, plus several flattering photographs of him, at the Army of God website.

Online Bible studies that masquerade as mainstream slowly take unsuspecting students deeper and deeper into theologies of white supremacy. The purpose statement at the King Identity website reads:

What does the A.I.T. Bible Course do for Christian Education? It brings understanding, it reveals facts. It separates man-made Doctrine from the original Holy Scriptures. It creates a sound Basis for a person's Christian Faith ... One sure way to a non-denominational Christian Education is via the American Institute of Theology Bible Course.

A few clicks later and students are reading about how white people are God's chosen race and Asians, Jews, and blacks are worthy only of subjugation, slavery, and destruction.

Schools are a major area of focus for religious totalitarians. In the mid-1990s, there

were about 6,000 schools associated with the RSS in India, employing 40,000 teachers and educating over one million students. A National Council of Educational Research and Training report concluded that the curriculum used by many of these schools was "designed to promote bigotry and religious fanaticism in the name of inculcating knowledge of culture in the younger generation." Textbooks contain a map of India which includes Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Tibet, and parts of Burma. The alphabet is taught using Hindu symbols—A is for Arjuna, B is for the *Bhagavad Gita*, and so on. Letters that do not correspond to any Hindu symbol do not get taught.

Institutions require money, and it is religious extremists who are making the most serious investments. A financial network committed to an aggressive version of salafi Islam has dramatically changed the Muslim world over the past quarter century. These salafis insist that the only true Muslims are the ones who follow a purist practice of Islam based on an imagined notion of the early Muslim community. Thus salafis actively seek to destroy any diversity within the umma and consider relations between Muslims and other communities anathema. How has this interpretation become dominant? Private foundations and wealthy individuals in the Persian Gulf have funded educational institutions that create textbooks, produce videos, and train Muslim preachers. Muslim communities around the world are provided with money to build lavish mosques, and salafi imams are sent to staff them and make sure their educational materials are widely available at low cost. One expert calls this process the single most effective use of philanthropic money in the past two decades. "They (the Salafis) have managed to shift the meaning of Islam in the global marketplace of ideas because there is no meaningful competition of any kind," he writes.

Well-run youth programs have a profound impact on the behavior of young people. This is strikingly illustrated in a summer camp experiment organized by social psychologist Muzafeer Sherif. Attempting to sow hostile-

ity between the boys at the camp, Sheriff's researchers divided them into two groups, called the Rattlers and the Eagles, and organized a series of athletic competitions designed to build intragroup solidarity and intergroup antagonism. The researchers intensified this polarization by giving preferential treatment to one group. The Eagles were invited early to a camp party and ate all the choice refreshments before the Rattlers showed up. The Rattlers were furious, name-calling ensued, and soon punches were being thrown.

The researchers then sought to reverse the hostility. The most effective approach they found was putting the kids in situations where they had to work together. They organized a camping trip where the truck broke down. Every boy had to help, either pushing or pulling the vehicle, to get it back to camp. After participating in a series of similar cooperative projects, the hostile feelings dissipated and the boys reported strong feelings of solidarity.

I recently read an Indian journalist's account of the RSS, the Hindu totalitarian organization. I was surprised at the intimacy of the article, the thick description of what life was like from inside the organization. I wondered how he knew so much about the organization. Towards the end, he confessed that he had been a member during the 1940s, when he was a teenager. It was the twilight of the colonial era, and he wanted to be part of something larger than himself. He joined the RSS because it seemed like the only option for a teenager with a growing political consciousness. He ended the article with a final detail: the more moderate Congress party did not have an active youth wing in his area.

This same dynamic defines our world today. The totalitarians have put their resources into building youth programs. The pluralists haven't.

I remember a conversation with a well-meaning Protestant in a wealthy suburb just

north of Chicago. He approached me after a talk I gave on the importance of youth programs in religious communities and made a sheepish confession: "My wife and I really enjoy the church we go to, but my daughter, she hates it. She thinks the services are boring and she complains that there's no real youth program. The pastor keeps talking about starting one, but I guess he has other priorities."

He kind of shrugged as if to say, at least we're thinking about it, and then asked me off-handedly, "What do you suggest we do?"

I didn't hesitate. "Change churches," I said.

He looked a bit taken aback. I continued: "Either that, or make sure that the

church starts a youth program that interests your daughter." In my mind, it was a question of priorities: Was he more interested in his daughter liking church or himself liking it?

Most people choose themselves over their kids. It is an entirely understandable choice, but we should not be blind to the consequences. It means that we will continue failing our religious youth. I cannot help but think of the number of teenagers I know who say that they are bored in their congregations. That their church or synagogue or mosque or temple has little going on for them. The youth minister they liked was let go because of budget cuts. The Habitat for Humanity trip they were planning got cancelled because the adult supervisor couldn't make it at the last minute. The pastor or imam or rabbi can never remember their names.

Too many adults secretly consider the absence of young people in mainline religious communities the natural flow of events, viewing them as too self-absorbed, materialistic and anti-authoritarian to be interested in religion. The result is that adults pay lip service to the importance of involving youth in faith communities, but let themselves off the hook when it comes to actually building strong, long-lasting youth programs. Youth

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activities are typically the top item in a congregation's newsletter but the last line in the budget. Youth programs are the most likely to be funded by short-term grants and youth ministers are the first to be fired when a religious community has financial problems.

Recent research by sociologist Christian Smith shows how wrongheaded this view is. In his book *Soul Searching*, Smith concludes that many young Americans want religion to play an important role in their lives, but their faith communities do a poor job of involving them. The problem, Smith observes, is that religious communities seriously under-resource youth programs. He writes, "Very many religious congregations and communities of faith in the United States are failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating their youth."

Were Yigal Amir, Hasib Hussain, and Benjamin Smith meant to be murderers? How about Osama bin Laden? They too were born with the breath of God within them. They too were made to be the servant and representative of God on Earth, to steward His creation with a sense of compassion and mercy. What happened?

Every time we read about a young person who kills in the name of God, we should recognize that an institution painstakingly recruited and trained that young person. And they are doing the same for thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands, of others like him. In other words, those religious extremists have invested in their youth programs.

If we had invested in our youth program, could we have gotten to those young people first? ❖