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Engineering vet finds passion with Muslim nonprofit

Non-muslim Krishnamurthy embraces fight of extremism

By Martin Desmarais

SAN FRANCISCO – All good businessmen take experience from their past professional lives and build on it for future success. Ravi Krishnamurthy is no different, but the outlet into which he poured his professional experience is not as typical.

Krishnamurthy, an engineering and startup veteran, is vice president of LibForAll Foundation. The Winston-Salem, N.C.-based nonprofit organization supports peaceful, moderate and progressive Muslims in their fight against radical Muslim extremists. Founded in 2003 by Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, former Indonesian president and long-time head of the 40-million-member Muslim group Nahdlatul Ulama, and American entrepreneur and businessman C. Holland Taylor, LibForAll's strategy involves building a global counter-extremism network of top Muslim leaders who possess the moral and theological authority to counter radicalization with their societies. This network fights Muslim extremism through religious education, pop culture, government, business and media.

Krishnamurthy

For example, the foundation has worked with various media to expose extremist activity and mobilize organizations, elite society and the general public to reject extremist political parties and activity; launched a "Musical Jihad" in the form of an album from Muslim rock star Ahmad Dhani called "Laskar Cinta" (Warriors of Love), which aimed to inspire millions of youth to say, "Yes to the Warriors of Love, no to the Warriors of Jihad"; and organized the Bali Holocaust Conference that refuted the Holocaust denial rhetoric of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Currently, LibForAll is developing a 26-episode counter-extremism video series for broadcast on television. The video will feature a combination of top theologians and commercial producers/directors. The first six episodes have been filmed in Indonesia and Egypt and will be distributed in Indonesia. The video will be translated into Arabic, Turkish and German. LibForAll is also seeking to extend this video series to South Asia.

Born Hindu in Chennai, Krishnamurthy may not be considered your typical candidate for an organization tackling Muslim extremism, but then again the same is probably true of co-founder Taylor. Though Krishnamurthy remains a Hindu and Taylor is a Christian, they define their beliefs as Universalist.

"I always had a strong interest in spirituality," said Krishnamurthy, who works for LibForAll out of San Francisco where he lives. "I always felt the world's problems could be solved with spiritual understanding."

And regardless of religious background, the root of what LibForAll does is deal with a growing world problem. Krishnamurthy said this struck him when he first encountered the organization and its quest to fight Muslim extremism.

"I could see this was a very, very serious problem," he said. "Nine-eleven brought it to the forefront, but this is a problem that has been bubbling to the surface over the last 10 years.

"It was very clear to me that this is something that has to be dealt with," he added.

Krishnamurthy joined LibForAll in 2006 not long after meeting Taylor socially. "I was very impressed with his vision and what he was trying to do," Krishnamurthy said.

In turn, Krishnamurthy met Wahid and this encounter sealed his joining of LibForAll. "He was one of the most remarkable people I have ever met," said Krishnamurthy. "People say about him: 'He is living every day to be burned alive for the truth.'"

Though his work is now in the nonprofit realm, Krishnamurthy does not look at it any differently than his time spent in the technology world. He believes he brings a "unique combination of theology, business and technical expertise" to LibForAll.

A 1987 graduate of the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, with a bachelor's degree in electronics and communication, Krishnamurthy came to the United States in 1991 to further his education. He received a doctoral degree in electrical engineering from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1997 and then spent the next four years at Sarnoff Corp. in Princeton, N.J. where he worked on video compression technology that would lead to the development of such standard video players as RealPlayer.

In 2001, he co-founded Enlite Networks, which made software to help companies develop semiconductors with teams of chip designers in different locations. Enlite was sold to CollabNet Corp. in 2002 and Krishnamurthy remained with the company for several years. He then spent some time consulting before joining LibForAll.

Krishnamurthy likens his work at Enlite with "distributed teams" to the efforts LibForAll makes in bring together Muslim leaders around the world. The end product may be different, but the process is the same – collaborating effort from around the globe.

As LibForAll vice president Krishnamurthy's main tasks include building the expertise and infrastructure of the organization, building partnerships with other organizations and fund raising. "My focus right now is development of the organization," Krishnamurthy added.

This includes expansion to other parts of the Muslim world, such as the Middle East, Turkey and South Asia.

Krishnamurthy points out a big distinction between what LibForAll does and what other organizations, governments in particular, have tried to do to deal with the Muslim extremism problem. "What we deal with is ideology. We are not catching terrorists," he said.

He believes that more effort needs to be invested in combating Muslim extremism ideology compared to chasing terrorist around the globe because LibForAll's efforts have shown that it is an approach that works to root out radical activity.

"The battle can be won, definitely," Krishnamurthy said. "It is possible for moderate Islam to organize and deemphasize radical Islam … It will be done. It has to be done.

"I am optimistic, otherwise I wouldn't do it," he added. "I believe, in the long run, extremism will be defeated."

Krishnamurthy has absolutely no regrets about leaving the technology business world behind. "It is very fulfilling to work for LibForAll," he said. "You meet a lot of remarkable people … And we are able to make a difference."

Taylor could not be happier that Krishnamurthy made the choice to leave the technology world behind and join his efforts to combat Muslim extremism.

"Ravi is a unique individual who combines intellectual brilliance with great people skills and combines idealism with practicality which allows him to be so effective in our field," Taylor said.

Taylor, who runs LibForAll out of Winston-Salem where he resides, said that Krishnamurthy's practical business skills are very valuable to the organization.

"Ravi came on board and was able to instantly expand our bandwidth in terms of our ability to expand and execute our various projects," Taylor said. "The business structure is also greatly improved."

"Ravi is also an extremely gifted communicator and that is something that is greatly needed," he added.

Taylor, who has a lifelong familiarity with Islam having lived in Iran as a child and moving to Java in Indonesia in the late 1990s and subsequently meeting Wahid, also emphasized that Krishnamurthy is very genuine, real and transparent, which is obvious to anyone he meets. "These qualities that Ravi embodies are essential to maintaining trust in the Muslim world," said Taylor. "When people look at Ravi they see his heart is full of light and love and they trust him and that is something you cannot buy."

"Ravi simply has a set of skills which are very valuable in engaging with top Muslim leaders," he added.

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