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Toward a Muslim Solzhenitsyn

An interview with Holland Taylor, co-founder of LibForAll

‘Edmund Burke and William F. Buckley were among the few people who were cognizant of the fragility of liberty — the fact that authoritarianism is the norm in human history. We in the modern, liberal — in the classical sense — West, we forget this: We’re the peculiar ones.’

C. Holland Taylor, co-founder of LibForAll, has devoted the last eight years of his life to promoting liberalization within the Muslim world. He and his organization try to do that not just by changing particular laws, but by shaping the entire zeitgeist of a civilization — which may be why Taylor speaks in sweeping historical and philosophical abstractions. You could call him a philosopher-activist. The first question he asks me when I meet him at the Grand Hyatt in New York is what political thinkers I like. The first answer he gives me cites two of them.

The goal of LibForAll, Taylor says, is to “replicate the critical success factors that led to the Enlightenment, separation of church and state, and liberalism in the West — without being anti-clerical.”

Taylor came to this cause obliquely. In the 1990s he was a successful businessman, the CEO of a telecommunications company. While trying to expand operations in Indonesia, Taylor became an acquaintance, and soon a devoted admirer, of Pres. Abdurrahman Wahid. As head of state in the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Wahid was effectively both a political and a religious leader. He was the scion of a family that, Taylor says, had long promoted a liberal, spiritual Islam in Java (one of the major islands of Indonesia). In Java, he says, a “*spiritual* understanding of Islam had earlier achieved military and political dominance,” in contrast to the “legal, supremacist understanding — Sharia,” which is now “gaining traction.”

After September 11, President Wahid became convinced that his kind of Islam — spiritual, relatively liberal — was needed more than ever. Taylor agreed, left the private sector, and enlisted in Wahid’s campaign. He now spends most of his time in Indonesia, revisiting the West occasionally to keep us posted on his efforts to replicate our experiment in liberty.

Taylor speaks of Islamic radicalism metaphorically as a health problem: “The patient is in critical condition and requires comprehensive treatment.” Roughly speaking, there are two responses to the disease. Where it is virulent, the disease must be contained, quarantined, and destroyed — through

sanctions, drones, heat-seeking missiles, daisy cutters, and Special Forces. But long-term eradication requires prevention of its spread, by strengthening vulnerable populations' immunity. The U.S. Armed Forces have the first task covered; LibForAll is trying to do the latter — through pamphlets, conferences, and debates, intended to refute Islamic extremism from within Islam. Taylor doesn't discount the importance or efficacy of the War on Terror. But in the long run, he says, "ideology is more dangerous than bombs." And by the same token, ideology is a more efficacious force for reform.

That conviction has led Taylor to a study of intellectual history — of the conception and gestation of the ideas that eventually led to the birth of the open society in the West, and its failure in the Middle East. "What happened to make the West different from all previous civilizations?" he asks. His tone suggests the question has been on his mind for a couple of decades. "There were particular turning points. We've been blessed to have certain visionaries. If you look at our religious tolerance, it's pretty modern. It's an Anglo-Saxon, relatively new phenomenon." And, "those ideas haven't been safe and secure. If we had lost the war against Hitler, the meaning of the West would have been eradicated."

The "critical success factors" began with two developments in medieval Europe: religious dissent and a revolution in information technology, i.e., Martin Luther and the printing press. The critical thing Luther did was to challenge "exclusive, political ownership of official, religious truth" — a sentiment today's papists can appreciate. The printing press enabled the dissemination of ideas and information outside of seminaries. Combine the separation of Truth and State with the wide and relatively quick dissemination of ideas, Taylor says, and you have the seed and soil for an open society.

That seed blooms into enlightenment, and into societies remaking themselves — revolutionizing — on foundations other than divine right. Here Taylor conceives a crucial division in Western intellectual history between Locke and Rousseau. Taylor attributes to Rousseau a secularist, anti-clerical chauvinism, and to Locke a philosophical pluralism and liberal Christianity. Rousseau wanted to "destroy the Church with the State," to "liberate" man from "tradition and 'superstition.'" Locke wanted to protect the Church from the State and facilitate the discovery of Christian truth through free debate. "Separation of Church and State developed in America out of *animus for the State*," he says. "For Locke, free speech was a technology for discovering religious truth through the exchange of ideas."

The revolutions and reformations based on that Lockean idea — American and Anglophone — were ultimately successful in producing truly liberal societies. Those based on an anti-clericalism inspired by Rousseau or his intellectual descendants — the Young Turks' revolution, Mao's revolution, etc. — produced closed societies. And thus the exceptional paradox of America: The most religiously conservative non-Muslim country in the world is also the most classically liberal. And the equal paradox of China, where neither Cultural Revolution nor economic explosion has undermined authoritarianism.

Maybe this all seems very abstract — but it’s why LibForAll works the way it does. It’s why Taylor thinks it’s necessary to reform Islamic tradition from within, rather than to commit aggression against Islam from without. The argument that freedom, toleration, and pluralism are social technologies for the discovery of religious truth “is an argument that can win in the Muslim world,” he says. “It just hasn’t been tried yet.”

The idea *can* win. But of course it hasn’t (in fact, as Taylor points out, a “higher percentage of the Muslim world today is fundamentalist than in 1979”). Why?

It comes back to aggression versus reform. “Muslims’ first exposure to modernization was colonization,” Taylor argues. Later, Arab modernists tried “to modernize in opposition to Islam, and with the goal of its annihilation.” Both produced backlash. So did Arab rulers’ exploitations. “The Ba’athists, Nasser, Mubarak, all authoritarians — they had very little understanding of religion, so they go to a lowest common denominator to meet up with Islamists.” In other words, authoritarians have actively nurtured anti-democratic Islam in order to preserve their authority.

American partisanship hasn’t helped, either. “The domestic politics of Islam have seeped, and prevented us from having a sound foreign policy for dealing with Islam.” While the Left thinks it would be really mean to admit that Islam has a problem, policies designed to nurture liberal Islam would, he thinks, be susceptible to tossing as a political football on some sections of the Right. Taylor is frustrated by how little coverage liberal Islamic public intellectuals and their ideas have consequently received in Western media. Our failure to pay attention to them, he says, “is like failing to recognize the significance of Solzhenitsyn, or the Solidarity movement, in the fall of the Soviet Union.”

Since President Wahid died 15 months ago, Taylor’s work has become more challenging. But LibForAll has made real progress. A few years ago Indonesia, under their auspices, hosted a conference on the Holocaust (the conference was premised on its historical reality — baby steps). Generally, LibForAll promotes the work, teaching, and madrassahs of liberal Islamic public intellectuals. Taylor highlights in particular Mustafa Bisri and Syafi’i Maarif, both of whom have strong ties to LibForAll, as possible Muslim Solzhenitsyns.

More recently, LibForAll ushered the publication of a book that has caused a sensation: *The Illusion of the Islamic State*. The book is a theological refutation of the idea of an Islamic caliphate. After beginning with a long treatise, it ends with two fatwas issued as appendices. The first bans the Muslim Brotherhood as a political party in Indonesia. The second formally declares that Islam should not be politically supremacist. Taylor describes the effect of its publication in Indonesia: “The Islamists were outraged. They said, ‘Your book has terrorized us.’” They had “no mercy on Islamist ideology,” he chuckles. *The Illusion of the Islamic State* is now being translated into several languages, for distribution in Europe,

Africa, and America. LibForAll also sponsors Ahmad Dahani, an Indonesian pop star and Muslim who sings songs against Islamic extremism — “three of his songs have been #1 on MTV Asia,” Taylor says.

Taylor has an unlikely bundle of perspectives on the hotspots of Muslim-Western relations, one that is impossible to pigeonhole politically. He warns that CAIR — the Council on American–Islamic Relations — poses as a civil-liberties organization, but it’s really for “Wahhabi apologists” and is a “Muslim Brotherhood front group, which hurts Muslims.” That’s because it “stigmatizes legitimate critics by calling people ‘Islamophobic’ all the time — and those criticisms are needed to reform the Muslim world.” CAIR, by disguising itself in the language of pluralism, has “horribly succeeded in pitting Western values against the West.” Geert Wilders, on the other hand, is someone who “plays into the Islamists’ hands.” That is, the Taliban and Wilders are in “perfect agreement” that “‘true Islam’ is political and supremacist.” Wilders has identified a “real problem,” but is factually incorrect to attribute it to Islam per se.

I press Taylor on that point with the Christopher Hitchens question. The claim that the essence of Islam is peaceful is often more wishful than descriptive — something people say to sound nice. Couldn’t it be that the jihadis, obedient to the passages in the Koran that say “Kill the Jew wherever you find him,” are the truly filial Muslims? Couldn’t it be that the extremists are the *true* believers, the liberals the distorters? Taylor disagrees, but not, he insists, out of niceness. For him, it’s about keeping perspective. History warns against abstracting from present contingencies to, to use his own word, “essences.” “There’s a lot of nasty stuff in the Old Testament,” he says. “Does that mean Judaism and Christianity are essentially nasty? Did the Old Testament destine Jews to backwardness?” The questions are, obviously, rhetorical. “Culture and scripture interact reciprocally — it’s not a one-way street. If the culture gets more humane, the things the people find in the text — whether it’s the Koran or the Bible — do the same.”

Looking forward, Taylor is worried but hopeful about the current unrest. “If the Arab Spring is to have a favorable outcome,” he warns, “Muslim countries must accept the theology of *The Illusion of the Islamic State*, for the theological establishment of civil liberties. That’s the only way to emerge from the dilemma of 1) authoritarianism or 2) Islamism.”

The essence of Islam — if there is any such thing — is, of course, untestable and debatable. But the religion certainly isn’t going away anytime soon. Nurturing its liberal, pluralistic, and non-supremacist strains may be the most important thing the West can do, for the welfare of Islam’s millions of followers and for the West’s own survival. LibForAll is leading the way.

— *Matthew Shaffer is a William F. Buckley Fellow at the National Review Institute.*

<http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/264955/toward-muslim-solzhenitsyn-matthew-shaffer?page=1>