

Solving Religious Intolerance with the Young and Wise

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, March 15, 2005

The foot soldiers of religious extremism are largely in their teens and twenties. Sixty-four percent of Palestinian suicide bombers in Israel are between 18 and 23—most of the rest are under 30. Radical Jews in the Middle East also take pains to recruit young people; Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin's assassin was only 25 years old. In our own country, preachers in the racist "Christian Identity" movement pay special attention to adolescents. In 1999, 21 year-old Benjamin Smith went on a shooting rampage targeting Jews, Asians, and African Americans, taking two lives before killing himself. He was a follower of white supremacist Reverend Matthew Hale, who is now in jail for seeking the murder of Chicago federal judge Joan Humphrey Lefkow.

Those who recruit these teenage killers invoke God as justification for heinous acts that leave innocent civilians dead. Leaders of extremist religious groups focus on youth programs because they understand that young people are at once powerful and fragile. It's a combustible combination. Across cultures, young people consider themselves invincible but also remain susceptible to fringe ideologies.

Of course, history is replete with young people taking on extraordinary leadership challenges. Martin Luther King, Jr. was 26 during the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. At 17, Joan of Arc commanded French troops to a victory over the English at the battle of Orleans. The Dalai Lama was 24 when he led his people out of Tibet to exile in India.

Another young religious hero is not quite as well known but soon will be: Eboo Patel, not yet 30 years old. With a handsome, boyish face, he bounds into a room to deliver his hopeful but cautionary view of the future. His energy is infectious. A Rhodes Scholar and Muslim whose parents immigrated from India, Eboo has the potential to shape the way future generations think of and act on their religious traditions.

Eboo's work is the product of his conviction that young people impact the world in profound ways. The question is how—with violent intolerance or inclusive appreciation? Those of us who believe in ethnic, religious, and cultural pluralism should take it personally, as Eboo does, when a young man blows himself up in the name of God. Our challenge is to get to that 20 year-old first. Every violent militant acting in the name of God is someone we failed to reach.

Eboo Patel is onto something big. He wants to counteract forces of bias, hatred, and violence. His answer to this religious crisis is the Interfaith Youth Core (www.ifyc.org), an organization that engages young people of different faiths and backgrounds in the service of others. Groups of adolescents share their diverse religious traditions and values while building new houses and feeding the hungry. The Interfaith Youth Core emphasizes shared values between the world's religions and provides a forum in which young people can discuss their faiths in an atmosphere of tolerance, curiosity, and appreciation of differences.

Eboo Patel has built a model of interfaith youth cooperation in his hometown of Chicago, and he'll share it with the rest of the country on the second annual National Days of Interfaith Youth Service on April 9th and 10th. The events, in 50 cities around the country, will bring thousands of young people together to serve their communities while working toward better cross-cultural understanding.

My guess is that we'll look back on the early years of the 21st century as a watershed in human history. Never has there been so much interaction between people of different faiths, but with so much of it based on conflict and so little on pluralism. Eboo Patel will be a significant change agent in this century, his ideas weaving into the fabric of our global community. Young and foolish can, indeed, become young and wise. "Kids have the opportunity to create or destroy," Eboo says, reflecting on his work. Our job is to partner with religious leaders like Eboo Patel and ensure that the opportunities for young people to create far outnumber the opportunities to destroy.