The Godmother of Grammar / Inspired By Eve

CAROLINA ALUMNI REVIEW

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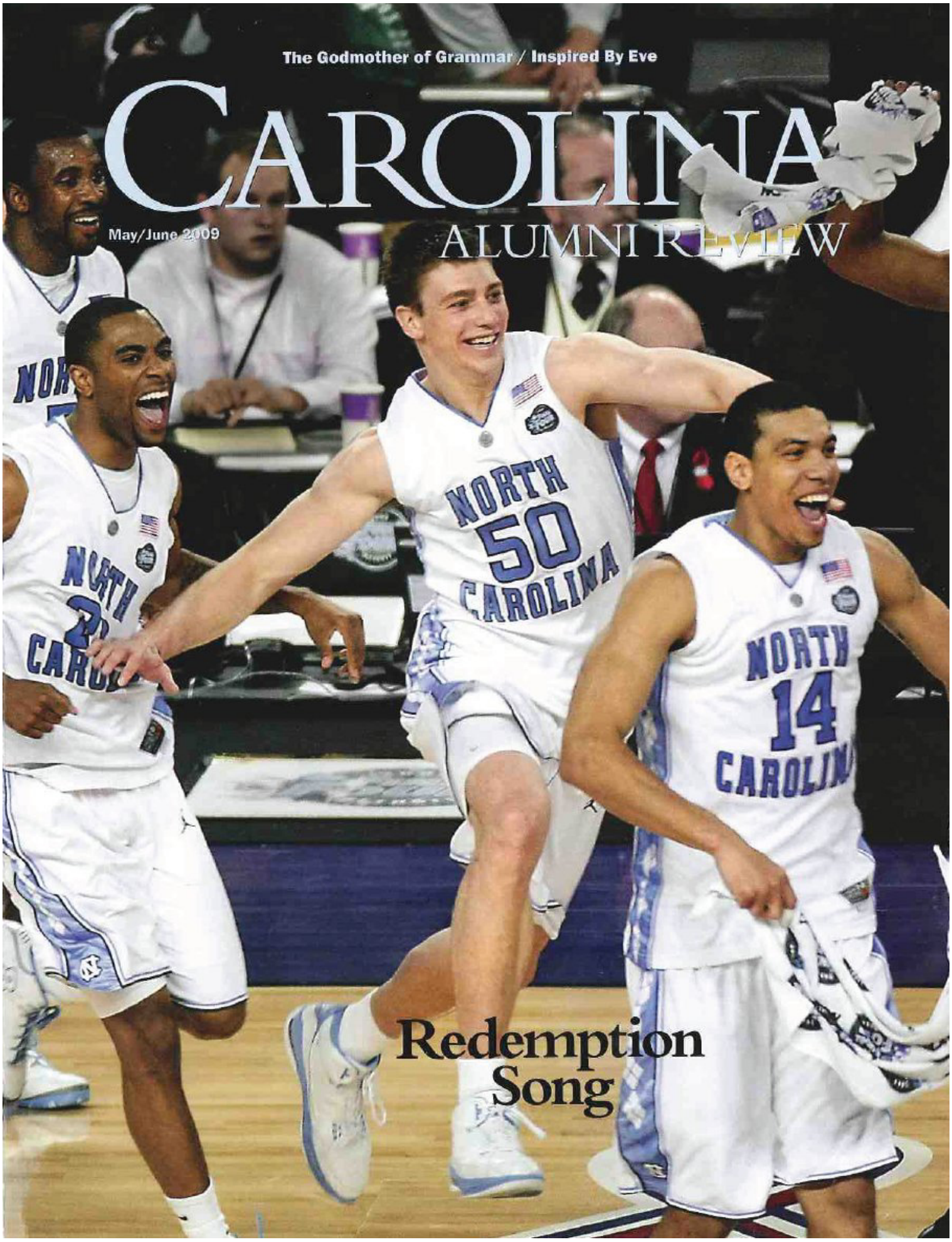

Redemption Song

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profile

Meditations on Moderate Islam

C. Holland Taylor '78 took up meditation as a freshman at UNC, and its practice is still a fundamental part of his life and closely tied to his own spiritual beliefs. It has also played a part in his fervent interest in bringing peace to the Islamic world.

Taylor, former CEO of telecommunications company USA Global Link, is director and founder of a Winston-Salem-based nonprofit called LibForAll, which combats Islamic extremism by providing support to moderate and liberal Muslim leaders around the world. "Our goal," he says, "is to help ensure the global triumph of a pluralistic and tolerant understanding of Islam, at peace with itself and the modern world."

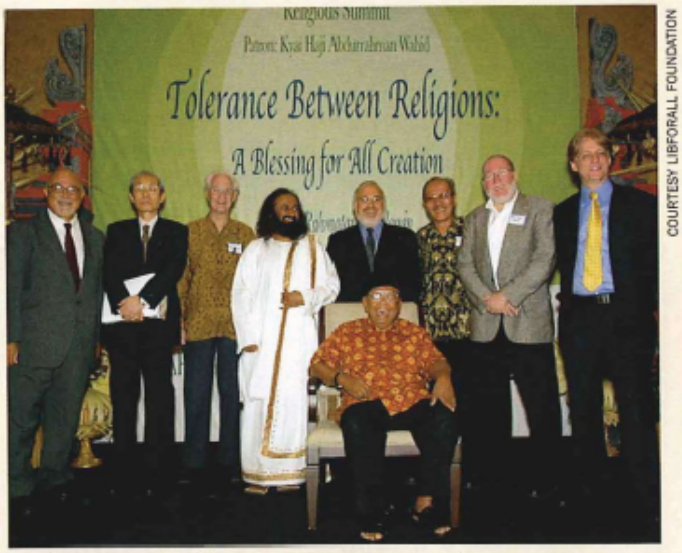
Taylor relies on what he calls a "counter-extremism" network of powerful Muslim leaders "who have theological legitimacy, credibility ... and the courage to confront radical Islam." LibForAll helps these leaders find a platform for their message in the media, popular culture, education, business, government and large religious organizations.

A LibForAll co-founder is former Indonesian president Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid. Wahid also has served as chairman of one of the world's largest Muslim organizations, the Nahdlatul Ulama; he is the founder of Indonesia's major political party, the National Awakening Party. Wahid made headlines two years ago when he denounced Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for denying that the Holocaust took place.

LibForAll also works closely with Ahmad Dhani, often referred to as the Bono of Indonesia. As lead singer for Dewa, one of his country's most popular bands, he caters to a different audience. Dewa has several hit singles, including *Laskar Cinta*, or "Warriors of Love." The song is intended to counter Laskar Jihad, or Holy War Warriors. The song is pervasive in ways that go beyond record sales and radio programs. Every time Dhani makes a television appearance, for example, its message of love, not war, plays in the background.

"We work with powerful individuals," Taylor says, "who are true spiritual leaders, and as such, cannot sit back and do nothing when they see the world endangered by the threat of radical Islam."

Taylor's work for USA Global Link ultimately led to the creation of LibForAll following 9/11. He was in Indonesia selling the company when his interest in meditation led him to explore Javanese culture and beliefs, largely rooted in mysticism and the spiritual use of meditation. In the process, Taylor became a student of a conflict that took place for much of the 16th century, when indigenous Javanese mobilized to oppose extremist forms of Islam. A network of powerful leaders used a variety of tactics, including musical poetry, to impart their vision of a just and tolerant society. Taylor is trying to replicate that approach today.



COURTESY LIBFORALL FOUNDATION

As CEO of the LibForAll Foundation, C. Holland Taylor '78, far right, works with religious, cultural and goverment leaders from around the globe, such as at this 2007 International Religious Summit on the Indonesian island of Bali, the target of terrorist bombings.

Taylor, who divides his time between Winston-Salem and his adopted home of Indonesia, traces his vagabond ways to his youth. His father was an Army lawyer, and as a child, Taylor lived in Iran and Germany. All the while, his parents considered North Carolina home, and they told him he could attend any college he wanted as long as it was in the Tar Heel state. He chose UNC, he says, because of the diversity of people in Chapel Hill and the school's egalitarian nature.

After graduating, Taylor went to Princeton University to get a doctorate in German languages and literature, but he left to embark on a business career. He has written two books on economics and finance, and he dabbled in real estate investing before becoming CEO of USA Global Link, which enabled foreign callers to bypass expensive long-distance rates.

Taylor said he chose to leave the business world and form LibForAll "because the need to develop ... an effective strategy to defeat religious extremism is far more pressing in today's world than the need for one more business." But the telecom industry gave him many of the tools he now uses to run LibForAll. Already in place is a vast network of Muslim leaders. Taylor says he helps them "flip the switch." He and a staff of 14, who work from homes and offices in North Carolina, California, the Netherlands and Indonesia, assist these leaders in their efforts "to depoliticize Islam and return it to a fundamental understanding of their faith."

They do this in myriad ways, one of which is the International Institute for Qur'anic Studies, or IIQS, run by renowned Islamic scholar Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd, declared a heretic by fundamentalists and forced to leave his native Egypt because of his progressive beliefs. As director of the IIQS, Abu-Zayd is charged with teaching others how to interpret the Qur'an with objectivity, tolerance and critical thinking skills.

To help with these efforts, LibForAll receives funding from organizations and individuals around the globe. Major contributors include the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Swedish government, the U.S. State Department, and North Carolinians Redge and F. Borden Hanes Jr. Noting that one of the Hanes brothers is a Republican and the other a Democrat, Taylor says: "We are completely apolitical."

— Lucy Hood '83