Peace, love, and understanding

By Robert K. Epstein

If the world's major religions ever learn to co-exist,
they may have C. Holland Taylor to thank.

C. Holland Taylor never learned to stand still. The North Carolina native's father was a military lawyer who continually relocated the family—as a result, Taylor spent significant amounts of his childhood in Germany, Korea, and Iran. "It exposed me to other cultures and taught me about diversity while I was still young," says Taylor, who also hitchhiked from Germany to Afghanistan and Pakistan while he was a high school student, prior to an undergraduate degree from the University of North Carolina and doctoral studies at Princeton University.

After writing several books about politics and economics, Taylor put his theories into practice: Through his travels, Taylor realized that telephone usage was severely overpriced in much of the world, particularly in underdeveloped countries that were constricted by monopolistic pricing policies.

One by one, he orchestrated the privatization of government-controlled telecom corporations. As CEO of U.S.A. Global Link, Taylor democratized telephone service for millions of people. ("In Kenya, they thought it was normal to pay $18 to facsimile a one-page document. We reduced the cost to $2," he says.)

Taylor, who is fluent in German and Bahasa Indonesia, helped start the company in 1992; by 1998, at least 100 countries were using U.S. Global Link's service, which produced annual revenues of $2.6 million.

"First, we had to deal with a number of governments that were resisting the changes," he recalls. "Then, the big companies like Sprint, AT&T, and MCI, which did not appreciate the additional competition, tried to use the Federal Communications Commission to stop us."

Although Taylor persevered, becoming wealthy beyond his childhood dreams, he nevertheless decided to leave in 1998. "After all these years, I felt the company could stand on its own. It was functioning and successful—and I had enough money to provide the freedom to do whatever I chose."

Freedom led him back to Indonesia, the destination of many business trips. "Of a population of 240 million people, 195 million are Muslims," he says of the country's religious composition. "I was intrigued by their approach to religion, which preached tolerance and diversity, rather than the more militant brand with which the world is familiar." He became enthralled with Javanese culture and established a home away from home in Yogyakarta.

"I was there in pursuit of spiritual inspiration and met Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, who had been president of the country from 1999 to 2001," recalls Taylor. "He impressed me with his pluralistic approach towards Islam, which contrasted with the exclusionary Wahhabism embraced by the Saudis."

Taylor and Wahid, who had studied Kabbalah at Baghdad University many years earlier and made it his personal mission to prevent the spread of Muslim radicalism in Indonesia, became fast friends. Together they formed the LibForAll Foundation in December 2003. A nonprofit organization dedicated to the elimination of religious extremism and its connection to terrorism, LibForAll was initially financed by Taylor.

Acknowledged as a key catalyst in the deregulation of the global telecommunications industry, he served as an adviser to the U.S. State Department and other governmental entities. In his new role, Taylor has become a highly regarded expert on international terrorism, co-delivering the keynote address at a symposium co-sponsored by the National Homeland Defense Foundation, North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), and United States Northern Command (Northcom) in October 2006. It was a select audience, including high-ranking government and military officials and a wealthy real estate and oil tycoon named Larry A. Mizel. A major supporter of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Mizel saw a potential partnership between Wiesenthal and LibForAll. "Larry promised, 'You will not regret it,'" recalls Taylor. "He was right on the money."

"I am usually very cynical about these things, but Holland was on the cutting edge in the Islamic world," recalls the Wiesenthal Center's Rabbi Abraham Cooper, who was introduced to Taylor by Mizel. "He impressed me immediately with the depth of his contacts as well as his realistic approach: This was no pie-in-the-sky person who thought he could change the world just like that. Kudos to Holland for being a man of clarity, courage, and vision. I am certain it is not easy for him to work within the Muslim world with a *kippah*-wearing Jew."

The two organizations have combined to offer several innovative programs. In June 2007, a Holocaust conference was held in Bali as a direct response to Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Holocaust denials, bringing together top religious leaders from Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism to denounce the evils of religious radicalism.

Five months later, Taylor and Cooper led a five-member peace delegation of Indonesian Muslims on a week-long mission to Israel, where they met with a variety of Israeli and Palestinian leaders, including Israeli president Shimon Peres. "The biggest problem we had was the reaction of extremist Muslims in Indonesia, following our return from Israel. But I can say it was worth the effort. The Indonesians could not believe that the Israelis allowed unlimited access to the Temple Mount, and that they maintained the grounds so carefully. There were so many highlights.

"The Indonesians came to realize they had been fed so much propaganda over the years, especially when they saw Palestinian children being treated at a Tel Aviv hospital without discrimination but with tremendous care. For me, it became clear that week that we had plenty of work to do, but it would not be with Israel."

Taylor, who was honored as the first non-governmental person to address COTER—the counterterrorism working group of the European Union—continues to knock on doors and lobby for financial support for LibForAll. To Taylor, there is no other choice. "For true believers, it is sinful to either deify individuals or denigrate other religions. It behooves us to deliver the message." LM