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Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri

Former Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council (Rais 'Aam Syuriah PBNU), Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri is often called “Sang Kyai Pembelajar”—the Great Religious Scholar Devoted to Learning—by members of the world’s largest Muslim organization.

Widely revered as a religious scholar, poet, novelist, painter and Muslim intellectual, “Gus Mus” has strongly influenced not only the 50-million-member NU, but also the social, cultural and political development of Indonesia over the past forty years—facilitating its transition from decades of authoritarian rule to an open, vibrant and successful democracy.

Descended from a long line of charismatic religious leaders, Gus Mus heads the prestigious Raudlatuth Tholibin Islamic boarding school in Rembang, Central Java, where he was born in 1944. As a child, he received a thorough education in Islamic studies, first from his parents, and then from other preeminent Muslim scholars—including the renowned Kyai Haji Ali Maksum at al-Munawwir Krapyak Islamic boarding school in Yogyakarta—all of whom encouraged artistic development and critical thought among their students.

This influence—combined with a unique set of native abilities, cultivated through a lifetime of devotion to God, humanity and the arts—has produced a distinctive fusion of spirituality and artistic expression widely admired in Indonesia, where Kyai Haji Mustofa Bisri is regarded as both a religious and a cultural icon. Often called the “President of Poets,” he is also celebrated for his courage in defending artistic and religious freedom in the face of radical onslaughts.

A graduate of al-Azhar University in Cairo, which regards him as a highly-distinguished alumnus, Mustofa Bisri's personal philosophy can be seen in the "Mata Air" ("Living Spring") interfaith community that he founded, whose membership is open to all who share its essential values: "Worship God; respect elders; treat those who are younger with loving kindness; open your heart to all humanity."

Numerous books and doctoral dissertations have been written exclusively about Gus Mus, in addition to thousands of articles that reference his achievements in fields ranging from Islamic spirituality, theology, literature and the arts, to education and social politics. Through his own profuse outpouring of books, articles, poetry and sermons, Kyai Haji Mustofa Bisri is continuing a family tradition established by his father, whose name he bears.

As one of the foremost Western experts on Indonesian Islam, Dr. Martin van Bruinessen of Utrecht University in the Netherlands, wrote in 1994: "The most prolific contemporary Javanese author is Mustofa Bisri [senior] of Rembang, who [has written] well over twenty books, including a three-volume translation of the Qur'an, his best-known work." ("Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Maintenance and Continuation of a Tradition of Religious Learning," in Wolfgang Marschall (ed.), *Text from the Islands: Oral and Written Traditions of Indonesia and the Malay World*. Berne: University of Berne, 1994.)

While still actively guiding students and Indonesian society at large, through his roles as an educator, preacher, poet, artist and theologian, Mustofa Bisri also serves as Senior Advisor to LibForAll Foundation, a nonprofit organization co-founded by his lifelong friend, the former Indonesian president and NU chairman Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid (1940 – 2009), which actively promotes the culture of liberty and tolerance worldwide. Among the various LibForAll projects designed and supervised by Gus Mus is a film series—"Ocean of Revelations: Understanding Islam as a Blessing for all Creation"—meant to amplify the voices of pluralistic and tolerant Muslim leaders from around the world, who share a profoundly spiritual understanding of Islam and wish to reclaim their faith from those who would use it as a vehicle to justify religious hatred, supremacy and violence.

A widely-read book entitled *Gus Mus: Satu Rumah Seribu Pintu* (*Gus Mus: The House With a Thousand Doors*), by Dr. Abdul Munir Mul Khan—a prominent author, professor and member of Indonesia's National Commission for Human Rights—portrays Mustofa Bisri as a spiritual visionary who combines the expertise of a religious scholar with the keen intuitions of a poet. His short stories have left their mark on the development of modern Indonesian literature, as just one of his many contributions to society. "Reading Gus Mus's stories," wrote the scholar and critic Maman S.

Mahayana, “makes me want to repent, return to the path (to God), and beg forgiveness!” Similarly, the image of Gus Mus as “the house with a thousand doors” is derived from the fact that anyone and everyone is welcome to approach Gus Mus, from any direction they desire. For Gus Mus has proven successful, again and again, at demolishing the walls that imprison the human spirit. With profound sincerity and humility, he casts aside every social and cultural convention—whether justified on the basis of tradition, or religion—that veils Reality from human awareness.

The breadth and profound depth of his knowledge has never led Gus Mus to adopt an elitist attitude. On the contrary, he socializes readily with anyone he meets, and his door is always open, at any time and to any visitor. Countless fishermen, farmers, office and factory workers, politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, artists, religious students and *ulama* make the “pilgrimage” to his home in remote Central Java. Some wish to engage in intellectual discussion; others to chat and cast aside, if only for a brief moment, their unfulfilled longings; while still others seek spiritual advice, or a solution to worldly problems, whether household, social or political in nature. For Gus Mus, meeting and serving all these visitors is a form of spiritual exercise, which helps bring him closer to God—Pure and Exalted is He!¹ For as the renowned Indonesian author, poet and journalist Goenawan Muhammad—founder of *Tempo*, the nation’s largest weekly news magazine—wrote in his book, *Gus Mus, Teks, dan Manusia (Gus Mus, Text and Human Being)*: “Fasting is easy, whether forgoing food or sleep. But dealing with human beings day in and day out—with all their varied interests and agendas—is truly difficult and demanding.”

Although Gus Mus’s use of language is clear and simple to grasp, he invariably seeks to convey “messages” that will stimulate his readers, and/or listeners, to reflect, learn and adopt an open-minded attitude towards life. He thereby invites his audience to realize that differences are a beneficial fact of existence, which Muslims and non-Muslims alike can and should accept, and that it is impossible to establish monolithic uniformity within any given society, much less the world at large. As the renowned Indonesian composer, musician and author/Sufi mystic Emha Ainun Nadjib wrote in his book *Air Zamzam di Negeri Comberan (Water from the Sacred Well of Zamzam, in a Muddy Country)*: “Gus Mus is a true *mufti* [a master of Sunni Muslim scholarship and jurisprudence]. But he is too humble [to pride himself on this fact]. Yet *al-mufti* is indeed his quality, and his [spiritual] station in life.”

During the runup to Indonesia’s general elections in 2004, a group of activists from a number Islamic political parties came to Gus Mus’s home.

¹ When Muslims speak or write the name of God, they usually follow this with the phrase *subhanahu wa-ta’ala*, which means, “Pure and Exalted is He (Allah).” The phrase is often abbreviated as “swt.”

After expressing their varied thoughts and opinions, they raised a major issue, in the form of a question, which they posed to Gus Mus as a group, accompanied by a note of criticism: “You are widely beloved and respected as an Islamic leader, so why don’t you support any of Indonesia’s Islamic political parties?” Gus Mus answered with questions of his own. “Please teach me about Islam. What do you, my brothers, understand and mean by the term “Islam?” Are you talking about a religion, or a political movement? A means to reach God—Pure and Exalted is He!—or a vehicle through which ambitious individuals, banding together, seek to acquire political power? Do Islamic parties represent Islam, or do they represent individual Muslims? Which Islam, and which Muslims, do Islamic parties represent, and which Islamic parties are they?” His guests floundered in response to these simple yet profound questions, for they never imagined that Gus Mus would compel them to reevaluate the political claims they were accustomed to voicing so loudly, and aggressively, in the public arena.

In teaching the thousands of students who attend his pesantren, or Islamic boarding school, in Rembang, Central Java, Gus Mus places a heavy emphasis upon character education. The renowned Arabic texts that form the basis of the school’s curriculum are profoundly Sufi (i.e., spiritual) in content, and assist Mustofa Bisri in teaching his students to place God—Pure and Exalted is He!—at the very center of their lives. Gus Mus employs a similar approach in the hundreds of public sermons and speeches that he delivers every year, throughout Indonesia and abroad, for he always frames the issues involved in such a way as to position God at the center of human existence. Thus, his sermons and speeches never appeal to any narrow individual, group or sectarian interest. Nor do they feed prejudice against others. Their single, overriding purpose is clear and consistent: i.e., to spiritually transform human beings, so that they may fulfill the purpose for which they were created—i.e., to become humble servants of a loving God, and help share His unconditional love, mercy and compassion with all sentient beings, everywhere on earth.

Gus Mus never tires of reminding his students, and society at large, to combine prayer with honest, diligent effort. “If you don’t wish to live in poverty, then work hard and pray that God—Pure and Exalted is He!—will provide you and your family with lawfully-earned wealth. And if you’re not interested in amassing wealth, then focus your prayers on God alone, and perform your allotted tasks in a natural and conscientious manner.” Mustofa Bisri views wealth and poverty as merely superficial, and transitory, conditions of life. Far more critical to our well-being is that each of us learn to embrace the reality of our lives; constantly strive to improve our character; and deepen our relationship with God, both through inner contemplation, and the conscientious fulfillment of whatever responsibilities life brings to us.

Among Gus Mus's foremost concerns is the need to correct widespread misunderstandings, which afflict countless Muslims, about the nature and practice of Islam. "As we know, it has been nearly fifteen centuries since the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, first delivered the message of Islam. I often compare the noble Messenger of God (saw.)² to a pure mountain spring, and our own position to that of people living far downstream, where it is extremely difficult to distinguish the pure spring water from a vast accumulation of mud and trash gathered during the course of its long journey. That is why Muslims—and all who truly wish to understand Islam—should strive to traverse the long, narrow path of spirituality that can lead us to that pure spring, high upon the mountainside." ~ Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri, writing in his introduction to the monograph *Ocean of Revelations: A New Media Strategy for Countering Religious Extremism and Bridging the Gulf Between Islam and the West*. LibForAll Foundation, Jakarta: 2010.

Gus Mus is especially concerned by the rising tide of violence committed in the name of Islam, which threatens all humanity. "Many problems facing the world today—and by this I mean, specifically, those caused by Muslims—occur because the people involved feel they have a complete and perfect understanding of Islam, when in reality they still have much to learn. In jest, we could say they stopped reading the Qur'an after the very first chapter, on anger, assuming their knowledge of Islam was complete. As a result, and as we see reflected in the news every day, such Muslims live in a state of constant anger. Yet although the Qur'an does indeed contain a chapter on anger, it is followed by chapters on humility, patience, love, mercy and compassion.

"Brutish and even violent religious behavior often results from this anger, to the point of terrorizing others. In my opinion, such behavior leads to the de facto obliteration of entire sections of the Qur'an. For although the 'expunged' verses remain physically present in the Qur'an, they become a dead letter, void of life or spirit." (*Ocean of Revelations: A New Media Strategy for Countering Religious Extremism and Bridging the Gulf Between Islam and the West*.)

According to Gus Mus, religion is indeed "the most beautiful and the most important thing in the world, as long as it is not in the hands of politicians" (Rabbi Andreas Nachama, speaking in *Ocean of Revelations* Episode 7, "State and Religion"). But whether or not this beauty has an opportunity to manifest in daily life depends on religious adherents themselves, and the

² [When Muslims say or write the name of Muhammad, they usually follow his name with the phrase *sall Allahu `alayhi wa sallam*, which means, "May God bless him and grant him peace." This is often abbreviated as "SAW." or "saw."]

governments under which they live. When governments seek to enforce religious dogma, to serve the worldly agenda of those in power—and/or when people’s understanding of religion is shallow, and devoid of spirit—religion’s innate beauty fails to manifest, and the formal institutions of religion may actually serve as a curse, rather than a blessing, to humanity. Whenever this occurs, religion has been turned on its head, and perverted from its natural course.

In a widely-reported meeting held several years ago with prominent Muslim scholars, organized by the Nahdlatul Ulama’s Majma’ Buhuth Nahdliyah (a forum to address social and cultural problems), Gus Mus asked his fellow ulama to consider the question: “Is the religion of Islam a means (*washilah*) or an end (*ghayah*)?” His question clearly disturbed many of those attending the forum, but due to Gus Mus’s seniority, they were obliged to choose an answer and reply, one by one. When Gus Mus finally stated his own opinion—that Islam is a means, not an end—a great uproar ensued. For several hours, many of the forum’s participants cited verses from the Qur’an and hadith in an attempt to rebut Gus Mus’s statement. Finally—reciting these same verses and hadith back to his listeners, but with a different interpretation—Kyai Haji Mustofa Bisri posed a simple question: “If religion is a goal, then where is God—Pure and Exalted is He!—positioned within our religiosity?” Hearing these words, members of the forum abruptly fell silent. Without further debate, the assembled ulama concluded that religion is indeed a means, to help human beings achieve the true goal of life: i.e., to experience the Presence of God—Pure and Exalted is He! Mustofa Bisri has often delivered this same message to Indonesia’s literary community, and society at large, through the vehicle of poetry:

RELIGION

Religion
is a golden carriage
prepared by God
to convey you along the path
to His Divine Presence.
Don’t become mesmerized by its beauty,
much less enchanted to the point
that you come to blows with your own brothers and sisters
over who occupies the front seat.
Depart!
He has been waiting for you
ever so long.

A. Mustofa Bisri, *Aku Manusia (I am Human)*

In addition to his countless books, articles and sermons, Gus Mus frequently employs poetry and the visual arts to deliver his messages, and critiques, to Muslim audiences in Indonesia and abroad. Among his widely-read and discussed poems addressing the issue of violence in the name of religion, is a work entitled *Allahu Akbar*:

ALLAHU AKBAR (GOD IS GREAT)

“God is Great!”
you scream and thunder,
making small creatures cringe and shudder
“Allahu Akbar!”

The veins in your neck swell
as you shriek “God is Great!”
and wage jihad with blind passion,
your hatred incinerating
anything and everything you perceive to be “evil.”

Allahu Akbar
God is indeed Most Great

If all the inhabitants of this earth,
which is no greater than a speck of dust,
were blasphemous... or pious...
it would not have the slightest effect upon His Greatness.

When I witness your savage cruelty,
I am certain that that you’ve never met
the Merciful and Compassionate One,
Whose love embraces all creation.
How do you have the nerve to use His Name,
when you arrogantly curse and destroy
those who are seeking the path to Him?

If they really are fit for hell,
why don’t you leave them to the wrath of God,
who will torment them?

When did you receive the Divine mandate
to torture and damn others?

Allahu Akbar!
Worship of false gods is the greatest sin
and the worst such idol worship
is to associate others with Him
by deifying yourselves
and proclaiming your own [primitive] understanding
to be absolute Truth.

Laa ilaaha illaLlah (There is no god but God)

As a widely-respected religious leader and social commentator skilled in the use of language, Gus Mus also employs his poetry to serve a prophetic function, addressing those who have abandoned the path of truth and justice:

IN THE NAME OF

Some, in the name of God, debase and denigrate religion
Some, in the name of “patriotism,” rob their nation blind
Some, in the name of “the people,” oppress and exploit others
Some, in the name of “humanity,” prey upon their fellow man
Some, in the name of “justice,” demolish the very pillars of justice
Some, in the name of “unity,” rend the fabric of social harmony
Some, in the name of “peace,” harass and torment others
Some, in the name of “freedom,” destroy its very foundations
So, in the name of whatever or whomever you wish
Let your curses fly
Or...
Acting in My Name
Battle the ignorant with love and compassion.

As the prize-winning Indonesian novelist Ahmad Tohari has written:

“In Gus Mus’s literary works... one discovers a profound and sublime poetic achievement expressed in simple style and language. His stature as an Islamic scholar, and spiritual giant, imbues his poetry with humanistic values that calm and refresh the spirit. His work

conveys social critique in a gentle, humble and polite voice, which envelopes the reader like an intimate greeting, rather than overwhelming him with shouts or abuse.” ~ Ahmad Tohari: *Kiai yang tidak sok Kiai (The Truly Humble Kiai)* (Muslim scholar)

In addition to his religious, educational, and literary achievements, Gus Mus is a widely respected and accomplished painter. One of his best-known works is entitled *Dzikir (Practicing the Presence of God)*. It portrays an erotic female dancer performing in the midst of a circle of *ulama*, who are repeating the name of God (*dzikir*). Gus Mus made the painting and hung it in his mosque in Central Java, at a time when Indonesia was in the grips of a nation-wide controversy over the wildly popular hip gyrations of the pop singer Inul Daratista. Although the painting’s exhibition in a mosque elicited bomb threats from Muslim extremists, Gus Mus did not back down from his defense of Inul’s artistic freedom. Rather, his widely-reported “non-verbal commentary” served to remind Indonesian Muslims of their profound spiritual and cultural heritage, while at the same time attracting international media attention:

“Ms. Daratista also has some notable defenders. Former President Abdurrahman Wahid, spiritual head of the 40-million-strong Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama, has suggested that people offended by Ms. Daratista’s televised gyrations would do better to change the channel than enact legislation. Another prominent theologian with Sufi inclinations, Mostafa Bisri [sic], went so far as to paint a dancing Ms. Daratista surrounded by religious sheikhs. In the painting, the sheikhs appear undisturbed by the sight before them, as if to say that truly devout Muslims needn’t resort to censorship to rise above earthly temptation.” ~ Bret Stephens, “Hips Don’t Lie,” published in the *Wall Street Journal* on April 3, 2007.

In other words: nothing can disturb the tranquility of one who has truly “enshrined” God at the center of his, or her, heart. Nor does such a “tranquil soul” wish to dominate others. For as the 18th century Moroccan Sufi Shaykh al-‘Arabi ad-Darqawi wrote in a letter to one of his disciples: “All men have their affairs. Our affair is God.”

Gus Mus posits an intimate connection between an open-minded enthusiasm for learning, and the devotee’s approach to God. In his words, to “learn without ceasing” is a religious duty for all Muslims, enjoined by the Prophet Muhammad (saw.) himself. For as Gus Mus wrote in his epilogue to the immensely popular and controversial book, *The Illusion of an Islamic State: The Expansion of Transnational Islamist Movements to Indonesia* (LibForAll: 2009):

“Ignorance is a hidden danger that lurks within every human being; the way to overcome it is to constantly learn and listen to other people. Because of ignorance, many people try to please the Prophet Muhammad by adopting his supposed physical appearance, while neglecting his inner nature. There are also those who wish to please God by erecting a so-called religious state, yet in the process transform religion itself from a path (*shari’a*) into the ultimate goal.

“They imagine that the noble Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, will somehow be delighted if his religious community wears clothes identical to those which he himself wore in the Arab desert fourteen centuries ago. They imagine that God will somehow be delighted if Islam becomes a formal state ideology, and His servants erect a religious state, an Islamic state. In holding these views, they completely forget that the noble Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, explained that he was sent to perfect noble morals (*innamā bu’itstu li utammima makārim al-akhilāq*). They also forget that the sole principle and goal of his having been sent as the Messenger of God was to serve as a blessing and a mercy for all sentient beings (*wa mā arsalnāka illā rahmatan lil-‘ālamīn*). Indeed, under the pretext of “establishing” that blessing, some try to railroad others to enter into whatever they consider a blessing; a perverse form of behavior which, from whatever perspective, conflicts with the spirit of blessing and mercy itself.

“If extremists wanted to continuously learn and listen to others, they would become progressively more informed and complete in their understanding of Islam, and would not seek to reduce Islam to a mere ideology or rule of state. They would understand that Islam is too great to be boxed into a narrow ideology, or confined by the limits of state laws. For that reason, the vital insight contained in this book is the struggle (*jihad*) to constantly inspire every person to learn without ceasing; to oppose ignorance; to inspire all people to open their hearts and minds to humanity; and the struggle (*jihad*) to free every man, woman and child on earth from ideological and dogmatic strictures which have long prevented them from understanding the glorious teachings of religion, and instead confined their comprehension to those elements of the message which they can squeeze into a narrow box of their own or others’ construction.

Human beings have various aptitudes and different ways of learning, but all should develop the courage, and determination, to engage in a continuous process of learning throughout life. Doing so inherently requires freedom of thought and expression, and religious freedom as well. For without freedom, it is difficult if not impossible to pursue and ascertain the truth, whether relative (i.e., scientific knowledge) or Absolute (through direct experience of

God). Gus Mus revealed much about his open-minded attitude during his acceptance speech, when awarded an honorary doctorate from Sunan Kalijaga Islamic State University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in May of 2009: “I discovered my own path many, many years ago: to live a life of continuous study, and to adopt whomever, and even whatever, as my teachers.”

As Mustofa Bisri often explains, the search for knowledge—accompanied by a strong moral compass—induces humility, derived from the awareness of how little we know, and how much we still have to learn. “Like castaways drifting upon the ocean,” he explains, “drinking salt water, the more we imbibe, the more ravenous our thirst.” A person truly devoted to the acquisition of knowledge realizes that doing so requires a humble and open-minded attitude, ready to acquire information from “whomever,” about “whatever.” Indirectly commenting upon the narrow-mindedness and intolerance characteristic of many so-called religious leaders in the contemporary Muslim world, and beyond, Dr. Amin Abdullah—the Rector of Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University—said upon awarding the honorary doctorate to Kyai Haji Mustofa Bisri: “He has a remarkable ability to think outside the box.” ~ Amin Abdullah, *Gus Mus: Potret Agama dalam Tampilan Budaya (Gus Mus: A Portrait of Religion on the Cultural Stage)*.

According to Gus Mus, a high degree of moral awareness should naturally infuse, inform and guide every human action, whether individual or social in scope. This “moral awareness” comes from making God—Pure and Exalted is He!—the center of one’s life, and the well-spring/motivation for each and every thought, feeling and action that arises within us. In this state, every breath we take—and every act we perform—naturally constitutes a search for—or expression of—the ultimate Truth and Reality of existence, which Muslims refer to as *al-Haqq*: the God of all creation.

For Gus Mus, the phenomenological world (*al-ayat al-kauniyya*) exists like waves upon a sea of metaphysical reality, which is God. As such, the world we inhabit compliments the Qur’an as a source of Divine knowledge (*al-ayât al-qauliyya*). When discussing this relationship, Gus Mus often cites the Qur’anic verse: “We shall show them Our signs in every region of the earth, and in their own souls, until the Truth is clear to them” (Qur’an 41:53).

Natural phenomena and human existence itself, with all its mysteries—which exist as phenomenological “waves” upon the metaphysical sea of Divine Being—are indeed complementary, and equal to, the verses of the Qur’an itself, for those who have eyes to see. In the Qur’an, God explains Himself and His message for humanity in the form of scripture; while through His creatures and the world they inhabit, He reveals Himself and His message for humanity in a phenomenological, and actual, manner. Thus, academic and scientific research, and discoveries, not only complement theologians’ interpretation of the Qur’an, but are its functional

equivalent, so long as these endeavors position God—Pure and Exalted is He!—as the metaphysical ground, or center, of the universe.

Gus Mus firmly believes that freedom of thought and expression are essential to human progress and the discovery of truth, even when those engaged in academic or scientific endeavor do not believe in, nor seek to encounter, ultimate Reality. For according to Gus Mus, the reality of God's infinite love, compassion and mercy are not mere objects of dogma or belief, but must be discovered, and directly encountered, to be known by individual human beings, and shared with humanity. This is the purpose not only of religion, but of all scientific—and indeed, all human—endeavor.

Given these views, it is natural that Mustofa Bisri has long used his position as a leading Muslim theologian to encourage and support research in the fields of science and technology. He often engages in deep discussion of this topic with prominent scientists, including the Republic of Indonesia's former minister of Research and Technology. Gus Mus describes these discussions with scientists as “attempts to develop a humanistic science and technology,” in which humans are understood to be spiritual, as well as material, beings. In other words, he views science and technology as vehicles not only to improve material comfort and knowledge of the world we inhabit, but also as a means to explore the Divine power, majesty and grace that underlie, and are reflected in, the worldly phenomena observed by science. Through such an approach, Gus Mus hopes that science and technology may realize their potential to complement scriptural revelation, and provide humanity with another means to know and approach God, as revealed in the Qur'anic verse, “Wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of Allah” (2:115).

By integrating faith and theological insight with a strongly scientific orientation, Gus Mus seeks to encourage the revitalization of religion itself, as a driving force for the development of civilization. In his opinion, doing so requires accepting, and adopting, not only the fruits of scientific and technological progress, but also the philosophical orientation (i.e., the embrace of reason) and freedom of thought and expression that enable scientific progress, within the context of seeking to know ultimate reality (i.e., God). In his opinion, civilizational progress itself is ideally a means to reach God, for like the medieval theologian al-Ghazali, Mustofa Bisri views this world as a stepping-stone to eternity.

As a key advisor to the International Institute of Qur'anic Studies (Jakarta, Leiden, Cairo: <http://www.libforall.org/programs-iiqs.html>), supervising its Ulama (Theological) Division, Kyai Haji Mustofa Bisri is working with an international network of top Qur'anic scholars and theologians to lay the foundation for a renaissance of Islamic pluralism, tolerance and objective thinking, which are essential to the establishment of freedom of thought and

expression in Muslim societies around the globe. In the words of IIQS co-founder, Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid:

“Among the various factors which have contributed to the long decline of Arab and Muslim civilizations in general, and greatly hindered their participation in the development of the modern world, was the triumph of normative religious constraints, which ultimately defeated the classical tradition of Islamic humanism. Absorption of ‘alien’ influences—particularly in the realm of speculative thought, and the creation of individual, rational and independent sciences not constrained by religious scholasticism—was defeated by internal control mechanisms exercised by religious and governmental authorities, thus paralyzing Muslim societies....

“The goal of the International Institute of Qur’anic Studies is to help stimulate a renaissance of Islamic pluralism, tolerance and critical thinking—enabling Muslims to embrace the universal and cosmopolitan principles that characterized Islamic civilization at its height, while adapting peacefully to the modern world.”