



Towards a Reform of Islamic Teachings, and Principles, Regarding Muslim/Non-Muslim Relations

*by Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary, Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council
Prepared for the Jakarta Foreign Correspondents Club, 13 December 2016*

The politicization of Islam is readily enabled by the fact that supremacist political theories—which became fully established during the Middle Ages and continue to hold sway to the present—represent a core element of orthodox Islam. This supremacist belief structure has been continuously nurtured for over a thousand years by those who rely upon Islam as a primary source of political legitimacy and authority, and by various forms of Islamic activism.

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, many states that emerged in Muslim-majority regions of the world sought an alternate source of political legitimacy, such as nationalism and socialism. In parallel with this development, various Muslim intellectual circles attempted to harmonize Islam with these new ideologies, in order to displace the concept of Islamic supremacism. However, the edifice of orthodox Islam itself—from both a conceptual point of view, as recorded in the textual traditions of classical Islam, and as an authoritative social construct which exerts enormous influence within Muslim communities at large—has undergone virtually no significant change. As a matter of fact, the dynamics of political competition within Islamic nations often pressures Muslim communities to embrace the supremacist elements within Islam, under the guise of preserving orthodoxy and/or religious “purity.”

In contrast to the historical development of Islam in the Middle East, the supremacist elements of religion were successfully marginalized during the earliest period of Islamic proselytism in the Nusantara (East Indies) region. The pioneers of Islam within the Malay Archipelago developed a view of religion that easily harmonized with local cultures and civilization, by positioning social harmony as a primary value of religion. The early Muslim saints and their disciples—including Sunan Kalijogo and Senopati ing Alogo, founder of the Second (Islamic) Mataram dynasty—displaced the concept of religio-political supremacism and replaced it with a strong emphasis upon the spiritual aspects of religion. The establishment of Indonesia as a pluralistic, multi-religious state—founded upon the principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Oneness Amid Diversity)—directly emerged from this noble tradition of [Islam Nusantara](#).

[History demonstrates](#) that this process of marginalizing Islamic supremacism within the East Indies Archipelago was neither simple nor free of conflict. However, those who adhered to a profoundly spiritual view of Islam did ultimately attain military and political ascendancy, which they and subsequent generations have employed to preserve, and foster, the pluralistic and tolerant worldview that has been characteristic of Nusantara civilization from time immemorial.

The election of an ethnic Chinese Christian—Basuki Tjahaya Purnama (aka “Ahok”)—as Deputy Governor of Jakarta in 2012, and his subsequent elevation to the governorship to

replace Joko Widodo in 2014, without significant opposition, proves that the majority of Jakarta Muslims do not object to having a non-Muslim governor.

The problem is that [a supremacist view](#) of Islam—deeply rooted within the classical textual traditions—remains a key element of orthodox, and hence authoritative, Islam. This element may readily serve as a political “ammunition depot” for any ambitious figure to employ, at any time, to harness Islam for the purpose of achieving political victory. Rendering our current situation far more serious is the fact that recent decades have witnessed the rise of well-financed and highly coherent political movements that seek to propagate Islamic supremacism throughout the world, fostering an onslaught of religious extremism and terror.

[Integral to this dynamic](#) is the fact that a number of Muslim autocrats rely upon Islamic supremacism to justify their monopolization of power, while propagating sectarian/supremacist Islam as an instrument of soft power on a truly global scale. As we have witnessed in the streets of New York, Paris and Brussels, and the bloody conflicts now raging in the Middle East, this poses a grave threat to civilization and humanity as a whole. The reform of religious thought—specifically in regard to interfaith relations—is a non-negotiable requirement for the flourishing, and perhaps even the survival, of our global civilization in an age of mass urbanization, interdependent economies and inevitable nuclear proliferation.

Yet what we require is not merely the emergence of new intellectual concepts, reinterpreting and recontextualizing Islam. Alongside such necessary theological/academic endeavors, we must also develop a powerful social movement that encourages Muslim communities to embrace religious views that foster pluralism, tolerance and social harmony, so that Muslims (and non-Muslims) throughout the world may come to regard these as the primary values of Islam. Hand in hand with this endeavor, the international community should strive to develop a societal consensus to halt the politicization of Islam, and impel those who fuel the politics of Islamic supremacism—including Iran and Saudi Arabia—to abandon this destructive policy.