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COMMENTARY

The Evils of Holocaust Denial

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BALI, Indonesia -- Today, religious leaders from many faiths and nations will gather here for a landmark conference in a unique place -- an island of tolerance, not terrorism. In a world in which religion is manipulated to justify the most horrific acts, it is our moral obligation not only to refute the claims of terrorists and their ideological enablers but also to defend the rights of others to worship differently: in freedom, security and dignity.

While there are many things that can be said and done to advance this cause, one issue in particular stands out as something we religious leaders must unite in denouncing: Holocaust denial. This denial is not a new phenomenon. Yet it is becoming an increasingly pervasive one. Long a hobbyhorse of the neo-Nazis and other figures from the fringe, it is gaining currency among millions of people who are either ignorant of history or are being misled by their media, their governments or -- sad to say -- their own religious authorities.



In recent years, we have seen that notorious 19th century Russian forgery, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," being widely disseminated in bookshops from London to Cairo. We have seen Hitler's "Mein Kampf" become a bestseller in Turkey. We have seen schools in Britain stop teaching the Holocaust for fear of offending their students. We have seen notorious academic frauds invited by the president of Iran to raise "questions" about the Holocaust -- as if this is just another controversy in which all opinions are equally valid. We have seen the Holocaust deniers use the fashions of moral relativism and historical revisionism to deny not just truth but fact, all the while casting themselves as martyrs against censorship.

Worst of all, we have seen Holocaust denial being turned to an insidious political purpose: By lying about the events of the past, the deniers are paving the way toward the crimes of the future. They are rendering that well-worn yet necessary phrase "Never Again" meaningless by seeking to erase from the pages of history the very event that all people of good faith seek never to repeat.

Let us be clear: The real purpose of Holocaust denial is to degrade and dehumanize the Jewish people. By denying or trivializing the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis and their allies, the deniers are seeking to advance their notion that the victims of the 20th century's greatest crime are, in fact, that century's greatest victimizers. By denying or trivializing the Holocaust, the

deniers are seeking to rob Jews of their history and their memory -- and what is a people without history and memory?

Indeed, by denying or trivializing the Holocaust, the deniers are perpetrating what is, in effect, a second genocide. Extinguished as they were from the ranks of the living, Hitler's Jewish victims are now, in effect, to be extinguished from the ranks of the dead. That is the essence of Holocaust denial.

Yet even as we recognize the threat that Holocaust denial poses to Jews everywhere, we must also be cognizant of the peril it represents to people of all faith traditions. Nations or governments that historically have given free rein to Jew-hatred -- whether in Medieval Europe or Inquisition-era Spain or 1930s Germany -- have invariably done lasting damage to themselves as well.

Today, the countries in which Holocaust denial is most rampant also tend to be the ones that are most economically backward and politically repressive. This should not be surprising: Dishonest when it comes to the truth of the past, these countries are hardly in a position to reckon honestly with the problems of the present. Yes, the short-term purposes of unscrupulous rulers can always be served by whipping up mass hysteria and duping their people with lurid conspiracy theories. In the long term, however, truth is the essential ingredient in all competent policy making. Those who tell big lies about the Holocaust are bound to tell smaller lies about nearly everything else.

Holocaust denial is thus the most visible symptom of an underlying disease -- partly political, partly psychological, but mainly spiritual -- which is the inability (or unwillingness) to recognize the humanity of others. In fighting this disease, religious leaders have an essential role to play. Armed with the knowledge that God created religion to serve as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, or a blessing for all creation, we must guard against efforts to demonize or belittle followers of other faiths.

Last year, Muslims from Nigeria to Lebanon to Pakistan rioted against what they saw as the demonizing of their prophet by Danish cartoonists. In a better world, those same Muslims would be the first to recognize how insulting it is to Jews to have the apocalypse that befell their fathers' generation belittled and denied.

Sadly, we do not live in such a world. Yet if radical clerics can move their assemblies to hatred and violence -- as was the case during the Danish cartoons episode -- then surely moderate and peace-loving clerics can also move theirs to rise above their prejudices and facilitate good relations between peoples of different faiths. In the words of the Holy Quran, which echo the story of creation from the book of Genesis: "Oh mankind! We created you from a single pair, male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another, and not to despise each other."

Today in Bali, we look forward to hearing different ideas from diverse voices on how to advance this divine goal. Facing up frankly to the evil of Holocaust denial will be evidence that the conferees are "living in truth" and determined to act against hatred.

Mr. Wahid is the former president of Indonesia and co-founder of the LibForAll Foundation. Mr. Lau, a survivor of the Buchenwald concentration camp, is the former Chief Rabbi of Israel. Today's conference in Bali, "Tolerance Between Religions: A Blessing for All Creation," is cosponsored by LibForAll Foundation, the Wahid Institute and the Museum of Tolerance.