

In Speech to Jewish Group, Leader of World's Largest Muslim Organization Calls for Compassion



By Benjamin Kerstein | JUNE 10, 2018 7:46 PM



Indonesian cleric Pak Yahya, leader of the Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim organization in the world. Photo: Screenshot via YouTube.

The leader of the world's largest Muslim organization told a leading Jewish group on Sunday that religious people must seek to solve today's violent conflicts and embrace "rachma" — compassion and caring for people.

Appearing at the American Jewish Committee's Global Forum in Jerusalem, Pak Yahya, the General-Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Supreme Council in Indonesia, spoke eloquently about current tensions between Islam and Judaism, which he believes are neither inevitable nor insurmountable.

In conversation with Rabbi David Rosen, the AJC's Director of Interreligious Affairs, Yahya said of the relationship between Judaism and Islam, "Sometimes it's a good, close relationship, in other parts of history there are conflicts and tensions. It depends on the history."

"But overall," he continued, "we have to acknowledge there are problems in the relationship between Islam and Judaism [today]. And some of the problems live within the teachings of the religion itself. In our current context of reality, people of religion — including Islam and Judaism — need to find new ways of ... finding a new moral interpretation of religion."

Asked whether this would include reinterpreting texts that attack other religions, such as anti-Jewish statements in the Quran and Hadith, Yahya replied, "It is not just possible, but it is a must. Because every verse of Quran was revealed in connection with a certain particular context of reality of the time. ... So the Quran and the Hadith are first basically a historical document. When the situation, when the reality changed, then the interpretation of the spirit of Quran needs to be changed also."

Asked about the problem of religious extremism in today's world, Yahya said that it is the responsibility of religious people themselves to find a solution to the problem. There are many conflicts in the world, he noted, in which "religion is used as a justification or weapon. Now we are then facing the question: do we want this to continue, or do we want another future? And if these conflicts continue, the consequences are obvious: no one will survive it. ... We people of religion should ask ourselves: is it really the true function of religion — what people are doing now? Or is there a way that religion can function to provide inspiration for a solution to all these conflicts?"

Yahya emphasized that this solution must be spiritual in nature. He compared it to attempting to cure diabetes or heart disease without the patient changing their lifestyle, and quoted a Quranic verse saying, "Verily, Allah will not change the society of a people until they change what is in their heart."

This change, he asserted, can come about through the embrace of a basic sense of religious compassion and empathy.

"I say to you now, what is left to us is simply the choice," he said. "We believe it is a choice of what in the Islamic term is called 'rachma.' Meaning compassion and caring for others. We need to choose rachma. If we choose rachma, then we can begin to talk of justice. Because justice is not just about demanding, but it's also about willingness to provide justice for others. If people do not have rachma, don't have compassion and caring for others, these people will never be willing to provide justice for others. So if I had to make a call to the world, I want to tell the world: 'Let us choose rachma.'"

Yahya's call was met with a standing ovation from the audience at the Global Forum, which is being attended by over 2,000 delegates from around the world.

The NU is the largest Muslim organization on earth with over 50 million members. It runs over 14,000 religious schools in Indonesia alone.

Based in Indonesia, the group seeks to emphasize the aspects of Islam that preach peace, compassion, and tolerance. It is staunchly opposed to Islamic and other forms of extremism.

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