

# Muslim Leader Yahya Cholil Staquf: Need To Address ‘Problematic Elements Of Islamic Orthodoxy’ After Christchurch Attack

by Paul Marshall, April 3, 2019



An Indonesian Muslim man prays. Photo used with Creative Commons license.

(COMMENTARY) In the U.S., most reactions to the hideous Mar. 15 massacre of Muslims at prayer in New Zealand have simply been rehashes of pre-existing attitudes and agendas—including fears of right-wing terrorism and the need for gun control. There has been little real learning from this terrible event that could shape what we do in the future.

However, on Mar. 24, there was a remarkable article in the U.K.'s *Daily Telegraph* that suggests at least one way forward.

Titled “[How can we prevent another atrocity like the one in Christchurch?](#)” it stresses the urgent need to address the “problematic elements of Islamic orthodoxy that underlie the Islamist worldview, fuelling violence on both sides” and concludes that “jihadist doctrine, goals and strategy can be traced to specific tenets of orthodox, authoritative Islam and its historic practice.”

It stresses that the problematic elements of Islamic orthodoxy include:

“...those portions of Shariah that promote Islamic supremacy, encourage enmity towards non-Muslims and require the establishment of a caliphate. It is these elements – still taught by most Sunni and Shiite institutions – that constitute a summons to perpetual conflict.”

At first glance, this might seem to be part of a purported “Islamophobic” critique. But what is perhaps most remarkable is that the author is Yahya Cholil Staquf (also known as Pak Yahya), General Secretary of the world’s largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), with, depending on how you count, 50-90 million followers.

Yahya is from one of Indonesia’s most distinguished Muslim families and is the head of Gerkan Pemuda Ansor (ANSOR), NU’s young-adult wing, which has some 5 million members. On May 31, 2018, Indonesian President Joko Widodo [appointed](#) him to a [member of the Presidential Advisory Council](#). He is among the Muslim world’s most incisive and outspoken reformers.

Pak Yahya’s statements do not come out of the blue: they build on growing Muslim initiatives in Indonesia and elsewhere. Indonesia’s massive moderate organizations, especially NU, have been advocating this reform agenda for several years, and it reflects their views over decades.

In May 2017, ANSOR [convened](#) more than 300 international religious scholars to consider the “obsolete tenets of classical Islamic law” that call for “perpetual conflict with those who do not embrace or submit to Islam.”

This gathering drafted a “[Declaration on Humanitarian Islam](#)” that built on earlier [statements](#), including from the May 16, 2016, NU-hosted [International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders \(ISOMIL\)](#).

This Declaration on Humanitarian Islam is more self-critical than the much better-known Marrakesh Declaration, arguing, as Pak Yahya does in his *Daily Telegraph* article, that elements of classical Islam must be questioned. It declares:

“If Muslims do not address the key tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that authorize and explicitly enjoin ... violence, anyone—at any time—may harness the orthodox teachings of Islam to defy what they claim to be the illegitimate laws and authority of an infidel state and butcher their fellow citizens, regardless of whether they live in the Islamic world or the West.”

At the press conference announcing the Declaration, ANSOR Chairman Yaquut Qoumas stated:

"It is false and counterproductive to claim that the actions of al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram and other such groups have nothing to do with Islam, or merely represent a perversion of Islamic teachings. They are, in fact, outgrowths of Wahhabism and other fundamentalist streams of Sunni Islam."

Yahya re-emphasized these themes in a July 18, 2017 [address](#) to the Council of the European Union Terrorism Working Party and in subsequent [media interviews](#).

Then, on Oct. 25, 2018, at the "Second Global Unity Forum" in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in which I was a participant, ANSOR released the "[Nusantara Manifesto](#)" (or "Yogyakarta Manifesto").

This manifesto incorporated the previous statements and added to them. (Full disclosure: I was asked to do some editing on it, and the final comprehensive document includes an essay by the late Abdurrahman Wahid, former President of Nahdlatul Ulama and of Indonesia, called "God Needs No Defense," which was the Forward that Wahid wrote for my and Nina Shea's book on blasphemy, *Silenced*).

But the *Telegraph* article does more than repeat the themes of these declarations: it applies them to the aftermath of the New Zealand atrocity, particularly "How can we – Muslims and non-Muslims together – prevent another atrocity like the one in Christchurch?" It focuses on the "weaponization of ethnic, religious and political identities that is going on throughout the world" and argues that:

Brenton Tarrant's "actions, which eerily resemble those of Isil and other Islamist terror groups, were calculated to intensify the hostility and suspicion that already exist towards Muslims in the West. They were also designed to elicit a response from Islamists and so encourage a cycle of retaliatory violence."

In order to resist this, he stresses that we must acknowledge the causal factors of the violence:

This attack on Muslims "comes after nearly two decades during which Islamist atrocities have been a pervasive feature of news bulletins around the world...." He cautions that the weaponizing of the term "Islamophobia" threatens "to short-circuit analysis of a complex phenomenon that threatens all humanity.... In reality, it is the spread of Islamist extremism and terror that primarily contributes to the rise of Islamophobia throughout the non-Muslim world."

Pak Yahya concludes with an appeal "to people on both sides of the political divide in the West, of all faiths and none, to renounce the practice of weaponizing Islam for partisan advantage and join us in the desperate struggle to reform obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy, rather than bequeath a tragic legacy of hatred and violence to future generations."

[Read it.](#)

*Paul Marshall is Wilson Distinguished Professor of Religious Freedom at Baylor University, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, Washington, DC, and a contributing editor of Providence.*

<https://religionunplugged.com/news/2019/4/3/muslim-leader-yahya-cholil-staqf-need-to-address-problematic-elements-of-islamic-orthodoxy-after-christchurch-attack>