Responding to a Fundamental Crisis Within Islam Itself

July 11, 2020 | KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf

If we are to abolish the primordial cycle of hatred, tyranny, and violence that plagues humanity, and avert civilizational disaster, people of all faiths must work together to prevent the political weaponization of fundamentalist Islam. We should learn from the unique heritage of Muslims on the Indonesian island of Java, who defeated Muslim extremists in the sixteenth century and restored freedom of religion for all citizens, two centuries before the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom and the Bill of Rights led to the separation of state and religion in the United States.

When US attorney Stephen Rasche left his practice and moved to northern Iraq to assist its long-suffering Christians, he confronted a grotesque reality that most Westerners have the luxury of ignoring. In *The Disappearing People*, Rasche paints a disturbingly vivid picture of the tragedy he witnessed in Iraq.

Rasche does not shy away from identifying the fundamental cause of Christianity's disappearance from its historic birthplace in the Middle East. The calamitous fate of Iraq's Christians—so diligently and movingly documented by Rasche's irrefutable first-hand testimony—is simply the latest chapter in a long and tragic history of religious persecution in the Muslim world. From sub-Saharan Africa to South and Southeast Asia, religious minorities often experience severe discrimination and violence inflicted by those who embrace a supremacist, ultraconservative interpretation of Islam that has been widely propagated in recent decades by Middle East states, including long-time US allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

This stark reality confronts each of us with a profound moral choice: shall we remain silent and ignore the suffering of others, so long as it does not directly affect us? Or shall we pursue the truth and obey the dictates of conscience, whatever the consequences may be?

> Shall we remain silent and ignore the suffering of others, so long as it does not directly affect us? Or shall we pursue the truth and obey the dictates of conscience, whatever the consequences may be?

The horrendous violence that has engulfed so much of the Islamic world threatens not only those who dwell in Nigeria, Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, or Pakistan, but also those of us who live in seemingly tranquil societies far away. If we wish to end this primordial cycle of hatred, tyranny, and violence—which also periodically erupts, to tragic effect, on the streets of Jakarta, Mumbai, London, Paris, and New York—we must ask a number of questions that require difficult and honest answers.

Perhaps the most burning of these questions is "Why?" Why did the killers of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), who stormed across the Nineveh plains in 2014, display such remarkable savagery towards Yazidis and Christians? Any informed and intellectually honest inquiry into this question will produce an unambiguous and profoundly disturbing answer: the doctrine, goals, and strategy of these extremists can be readily traced to specific tenets of orthodox, authoritative Islam and its historic practice, including those portions of *fiqh* (classical Islamic law, also known as *shari'ah*) that enjoin Islamic supremacy, encourage enmity towards non-Muslims and require the establishment of a universal Islamic state, or caliphate.

To prevent the further spread of violent Islamist extremism, Muslims and non-Muslims must work together, drawing on the peaceful aspects of Islamic teaching to encourage respect for religious pluralism and the fundamental dignity of every human being, regardless of creed.

The Enduring Legacy of the Ottoman Caliphate

ISIS's quest to establish an Islamic state, and the inevitable consequences of this for anyone deemed to be "non-Muslim," is not a historical aberration in the Middle East. Rather, it is the historical norm. Throughout Islamic history, until the collapse of the Ottoman empire and the formal abolition of the Caliphate in 1924, the Middle East has been dominated by caliphs

and/or those who ruled in their name, and governed according to the provisions of classical Islamic law.

There is nothing especially novel about ISIS, other than its eruption in the twenty-first century and its use of modern communications technology. Prior to the American and French Revolutions, and particularly the First World War, the political map of the world consisted primarily of competing empires, kingdoms and tribal confederations. Virtually all developed states embraced an official religion, whose orthodox tenets were shaped and/or enforced by the ruler and officials of the administrative state.

Within the Islamic world, the Ottoman Caliphate (1362 – 1924 CE) asserted its claim to embody the orthodox ideal of a unified Muslim community, led by a pious Muslim ruler who adhered to the basic tenets of Islamic (Sunni) orthodoxy. Similarly, the Safavid dynasty and its successors, in Iran, based their claim to political power on fundamental tenets of Islamic (Shi'ite) orthodoxy.

The full enjoyment of legal privileges by the subjects of these empires was predicated upon their religious identity conforming to that of the empire. For example, the Ottoman Caliphate systematically discriminated against non-Muslims by enforcing a wide range of orthodox Islamic tenets that govern the treatment of conquered non-Muslims, or *dhimmīyūn,* as did other Sunni and Shi'ite rulers throughout the Islamic world, with the exception of *Nusantara* (the Malay Archipelago) and of Java in particular.

Whilst the Ottoman Caliphate collapsed nearly a century ago, its operational assumptions and the classical corpus of Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, through which it was governed have remained deeply embedded within Muslim societies. As a result, obsolete and problematic elements of *fiqh* are still taught by most orthodox Sunni and Shi'ite institutions worldwide as authoritative and correct. These teachings, even when not enshrined in statutory law, nonetheless retain considerable religious authority and social legitimacy among Muslims, forming part of what Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama—the world's largest Islamic organization—has termed the "prevailing Muslim mindset."

A Threat to All Humanity

The fundamentalist/supremacist view of Islam that these obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy endorse may be readily harnessed to serve the interests of those with a political agenda. This is evident from history and the savage conflicts now roiling much of the Islamic world. In 2017, the young adults movement of Nahdlatul Ulama published an 8,000-word analysis of the manner in which state and non-state actors have systematically "weaponized" orthodox Islamic teachings. The *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam*—which also provides a detailed road map for recontextualizing (i.e., reforming) these obsolete tenets—explicitly states:

"The Islamic world is in the midst of a rapidly metastasizing crisis, with no apparent sign of remission. Among the most obvious manifestations of this crisis are the brutal conflicts now raging across a huge swath of territory inhabited by Muslims, from Africa and the Middle East to the borders of India; rampant social turbulence throughout the Islamic world; the unchecked spread of religious extremism and terror; and a rising tide of Islamophobia among non-Muslim populations, in direct response to these developments.

"Most of the political and military actors engaged in these conflicts pursue their competing agendas without regard to the cost in human lives and misery. This has led to an immense humanitarian crisis, while heightening the appeal and dramatically accelerating the spread of a de facto Islamist revolutionary movement that threatens the stability and security of the

entire world, by summoning Muslims to join a global insurrection against the current world order.

"In other words, the crisis that engulfs the Islamic world is not limited to armed conflicts raging in various and sundry regions. Due to the transcendent value ascribed to religious belief by the vast majority of Muslims, the competition for power in the Islamic world necessarily includes a major sectarian/ideological (i.e., religious) component.

"Various actors—including but not limited to Iran, Saudi Arabia, ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban and Pakistan—cynically manipulate religious sentiment in their struggle to maintain or acquire political, economic and military power, and to destroy their enemies. They do so by drawing upon key elements of classical Islamic law (*fiqh*), to which they ascribe divine authority, in order to mobilize support for their worldly goals."

ISIS is no exception to this rule. Its claim to notoriety lies in the fact that, for a time, it successfully filled the power vacuum left in Sunni Arab areas of Mesopotamia in the wake of the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq and the Arab Spring. This enabled ISIS to implement a program for government that, prior to its emergence, had been a mere aspiration for modern Islamist extremists, derived from *fiqh* manuals written by medieval Muslim jurists.

The Status of Religious Minorities

The consequences of these *fiqh* teachings for religious minorities in the Middle East are clear, for the conduct of ISIS towards these minorities is consistent with historical patterns and a fundamentalist reading of Islamic orthodoxy. This orthodoxy posits the existence of a supreme leader of the Muslim community (*Imām*), in whom is vested absolute political authority, and upon whom the rights of non-Muslims depend.

According to the dictates of this legal system, non-Muslims have no rights independent of those granted to them by the Imam, who is responsible for preserving order. In the absence of an Imam, "infidels" are in danger of losing their protected status. Throughout Islamic history, political chaos has often been accompanied by the murder, robbery, rape, and/or enslavement of non-Muslims. This feature of Islamic orthodoxy explains, in part, the recurrent cycles of persecution, expulsion, and/or violence to which non-Muslim populations have been subjected in Iraq and throughout the Middle East.

After the fall of Mosul to ISIS in 2014, for example, leaders of the city's Christian community were summoned to a council to "negotiate" a new *dhimmī* (literally "protection") contract, by which their rights and status would ostensibly be guaranteed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Imam of the newly proclaimed ISIS Caliphate. Naturally fearing for their safety, and rejecting the punitive conditions that would likely be imposed upon them by ISIS as part of this *dhimmī* contract, Mosul's Christians refused to attend the council. Lacking protection from the Imam, the status of Christians in and around Mosul reverted, in the view of ISIS, to that of unprotected infidels who may be killed or enslaved on sight. ISIS's subsequent treatment of Christians was in accordance with this designation and in line with a fundamentalist reading of Islamic law.

A Crisis in the Middle East

It is precisely this lack of rights for non-Muslims within classical *fiqh*—apart from those granted at the sufferance of a Muslim autocrat—to which the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil referred in a heartfelt speech titled, "The Future of Religious

" delivered at Georgetown University under the auspices of the Religious Freedom Project (the precursor organization of the Religious Freedom Institute) on February 15, 2018:

We Christians, a people who have endured persecution in patience and faith for 1,400 years, now confront an existential struggle. It is possibly the last struggle we will confront in Iraq. The most immediate cause is the ISIS attacks that led to the displacement of more than 125,000 Christians from our historical homelands and rendered us, in a single night, without shelter and refuge, without work or properties, without churches and monasteries, without the ability to participate in any of the things which give one a life of dignity: family visits, celebration of weddings and births, the sharing of sorrows. Our tormentors confiscated our present while also seeking to wipe out our history and destroy our future.

And yet we are still there. Scourged, battered, and wounded. Yet still there. And having survived thus far, to this point of near finality, we have been granted a position of clarity and courage that we have perhaps lacked, or avoided, up until this day. We can no longer ignore the fundamental cause of what has been a relentless persecution of our people for nearly a millennium and a half. Having faced for 1400 years a slow motion genocide that began long before the ongoing ISIS genocide today, the time for excusing this inhuman behavior and its causes is long since past.

When a people have nothing left to lose, in some sense it is very liberating, and from this position of clarity and new-found courage, I must speak to you honestly on behalf of my people and speak to you the truth.

The truth is that there is a fundamental crisis within Islam itself and if this crisis is not acknowledged, addressed, and fixed then there can be no future for Christians or any other form of religious plurality in the Middle East. Indeed, there is little reason to see a future for anyone in the Middle East, including within the Muslim world itself, other than in the context of continued violence, revenge, and hatred. And as we have seen too many times, this violence seeks to overtake us all, and destroy vulnerable innocent lives wherever it can find them…

Prior to the ISIS horror of 2014, we Iraqi Christians had historically endeavored to maintain a dialogue of life with Muslims. In this dialogue we refrained from speaking honestly and truthfully to our oppressors in order to simply survive and live quietly. We would not openly face the long history of violence and murder inflicted upon us. We did not push back against the constantly recurring periods of extremism that inflicted such pain and violence against the innocents, both Muslim and Christian alike. But following the horror of ISIS there is nothing left for us now but to speak plainly and unreservedly: there is a crisis of violence in Islam and for the sake of humanity, including the followers of Islam themselves, it must be addressed openly and honestly.

At the root of all of this we must be straightforward about the reality of the teachings of Jihad, which are the justification for all these acts of violence. Apologists for the history of the last 1,400 years of oppression

against Christians will point to the various periods of Muslim tolerance regarding Christians, as the possible and desired alternative to the other periods of violence and persecution. One cannot deny that such periods of relative tolerance have existed. And yet all such periods of tolerance have been a one way experience, in which the Islamic rulers decide, according to their own judgment, whether the Christians and other non-Muslims are to be tolerated in their beliefs or not. It is never, and has never, ever, been a question of equality. Fundamentally, in the eyes of Islam, we Christians and all other non-Muslims are not equal, and are not to be treated as equal, only to be tolerated or not, depending upon the intensity of the spirit of Jihad that prevails at the time.

Such is the cycle of history that has recurred in the Middle East over the past 1,400 years, and with each successive cycle the number of Christians and other non-Muslims has decreased until we have reached the point which exists in Iraq today—the point of extinction. Argue as you will, but this coming extinction will likely soon be fact, and what then will anyone be able to say? That we were made extinct by natural disaster, or gentle migration? That the ISIS attacks were unprecedented? Or in our disappearance will the truth emerge: that we were persistently and steadily eliminated over the course of 1,400 years by a belief system which allowed for regular and recurring cycles of violence against us…

The math of this equation is not complicated. One group is taught that they are superior and legally entitled to treat others as inferior human beings on the sole basis of their faith and religious practices. This teaching inevitably leads to violence against any "inferiors" who refuse to change their faith. And there you have it—the history of Christians and religious minorities in the Middle East for the last 1,400 years.

Islam in Another Context

Far from the Islamic "heartland" of the Arab, Turkish, and Persian Middle East, Indonesia has never been a part of any of that region's historic caliphates. This separation has enabled the *Nusantara* ("East Indies") civilization to develop a spiritual view of Islam that tends to view *shariʻah* as a set of universal principals that all religions recognize and acknowledge, rather than an inflexible set of rules developed by classical Muslim jurists for running a pre-modern state. This unique civilizational heritage enabled Muslims on the island of Java—which constitutes the geographic, political and economic center of Indonesia—to defeat Muslim extremists in the sixteenth century, and restore freedom of religion for all Javanese two centuries before the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom and the Bill of Rights led to the separation of state and religion in the United States.

It was this "civilizational wisdom" that inspired the creation of Indonesia as a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state in 1945. It also enabled Indonesia's first democratically elected president, H.E. KH. Abdurrahman Wahid—backed by Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama—to transform it into the world's third largest democracy following the overthrow of President Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998. In spite of these enormous advantages, however, Indonesia has continued to grapple with the tension that exists between Islamic orthodoxy and the ideals of equality of citizenship and equality before the law, which form the bedrock of both its political settlement and the modern nation state.

Obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy do in fact exist. These enjoin religious enmity, supremacy, and violence, fuelling Islamist extremism among Muslim communities throughout the world, including Indonesia.

So long as obsolete, medieval tenets within Islamic orthodoxy remain the dominant source of religious authority throughout the Muslim world, Indonesian Islamists will continue to draw power and sustenance from developments in the world at large. This is especially true so long as key state actors—including Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Pakistan—continue to weaponize problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy in pursuit of their respective geopolitical agendas.

These considerations have led key figures within the NU—including Abdurrahman Wahid in the months and years prior to his death, and former NU Chairman Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri—to conclude that it would be impossible to permanently resolve the tension that is inherent between Islamic orthodoxy and NKRI/UUD-45 (the Indonesian nation state and its constitution), so long as we confine our efforts to the domestic, or purely Indonesian, context of the perennial Islamist threat.

Preserving Indonesia's unique civilizational heritage—which gave birth to NKRI as a multi religious and pluralistic nation state—requires the successful implementation of a global strategy to develop a new Islamic orthodoxy that reflects the actual circumstances of the modern world in which Muslims must live and practice their faith.

This global effort, already launched by key elements of the Nahdlatul Ulama—including its 5-million-strong young adults organization, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor—is not just an inevitable corollary of efforts to defeat Islamist subversion of Indonesia. It is vital to the well-being and preservation of virtually every other nation in the world, whose laws are derived from modern political processes and whose people and governments do not wish to be subsumed in a universal Islamic caliphate or exhausted by the struggle to prevent its establishment.

The recontextualization and reform of Islamic orthodoxy is thus crucial to the welfare of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, for it constitutes the one indispensable prerequisite of any rational and humane solution to the multi-dimensional crisis that has plagued the Muslim world for over a century and not only shows no sign of abating—despite an ever-growing toll of human lives and misery—but rather, increasingly threatens to spill over and engulf humanity as a whole.

A Chain Reaction of Violence

ISIS's genocidal campaign in Iraq and the Levant has set off a chain reaction of violence and retaliation with profound global implications. Across a vast arc of territory stretching from the Western Sahel to the Southern Philippines, Islamist groups inspired by ISIS's "success" are pursuing their own campaigns of mass killing, displacement, and terror that threaten to break the already badly frayed bonds of trust that make a shared communal life between Muslims and non-Muslims possible.

Jihadis' highly symbolic acts of desecration and astute use of propaganda have associated Islam with terrorism in the minds of many non-Muslims, strengthened politically opportunistic elements worldwide, and fuelled an intensifying cycle of retaliatory violence that threatens all of our futures. Whether it be a white supremacist slaughtering Muslims at prayer at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand; the wholesale and systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing perpetrated against Rohingya Muslims by the government of Myanmar; the hi-tech, totalitarian repression of millions of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang; or the

weaponization of Islam for political gain in the West, innocent Muslims are suffering the consequences of this global reawakening of "tribal" identities.

The cycle of retaliatory bloodshed we are witnessing is deeply rooted in history, including ancient animosities embedded within the collective memory of entire ethnic and religious groups. It is precisely these hatreds that extremists seek to awaken through heinous and shocking acts of terror. If we are to avert disaster and stem this primordial cycle of hatred, tyranny, and violence it is imperative for people of goodwill of every faith and nation to join in building a global consensus to prevent the political weaponization of Islam, whether by Muslims or non-Muslims, and to curtail the spread of communal hatred by fostering the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order, founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being.

Dismantling the Theology that Underlies Islamist Violence

The spiritual leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama is working to ensure that the world's largest Muslim organization plays its part in this tremendous undertaking, by dismantling and replacing the theology that underlies and animates Islamist violence. In 2019, the NU Central Board published *fiqh* rulings based upon a gathering of nearly 20,000 Muslim religious scholars from across Indonesia's vast archipelago ("2019 Munas") that endorsed the concept of a nation-state rather than caliphate; recognized all citizens, irrespective of their ethnicity or religion, as having equal rights and obligations; decreed that Muslims must obey the laws of any modern nation-state in which they dwell; and affirmed that Muslims have a religious obligation to foster peace rather than automatically wage war on behalf of their co-religionists, whenever conflict erupts between Muslim and non-Muslim populations anywhere in the world.

A central feature of these 2019 Munas rulings is the abolition of the legal category of infidel (*kāfir*) within Islamic law (*fiqh*), so that non-Muslims may enjoy full equality as fellow citizens in their own right, rather than rely on protection at the sufferance of a Muslim ruler.

And so, we return to the story with which we started: *The Disappearing People*. Stephen Rasche has provided a vivid account of an entire religious community's near-extinction in the very place of its birth, the ancient Middle East. By implication, Rasche has also described an existential threat that confronts all of us, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. It simply remains to be seen whether we will heed his warning and act in time to prevent similar disasters from befalling those of us who dwell in blessed lands, seemingly distant from the horrifying chaos that engulfs so much of the Islamic world.

About the Author

Yahya Cholil Staquf

Yahya Cholil Staquf is a distinguished Muslim scholar, General Secretary of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—the world's largest Muslim organization, with over 90 million followers and 14,000 madrasahs—and co-founder of a global movement ("Humanitarian Islam") that seeks to restore rahmah (universal love and compassion) to its rightful place as the primary message of Islam.

https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2020/07/64947/