



2020_01_16_Abrahamic Faiths Initiative

“Religions should serve as a basis for resolving problems, not creating them.”

Pope Francis to Visit Indonesia in 2020

ROME, Italy and VATICAN CITY: From 14 – 16 January 2020, eighteen Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders gathered to explore potential avenues of cooperation between the various Abrahamic faiths, in order to address a rapidly metastasizing global crisis that is strongly colored by animosity and violence between rival ethnic and religious groups. The two-day event, convened at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome under [Chatham House Rule](#), included prominent religious scholars and the heads of major faith communities from Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Europe and North America.

Participants included Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue; Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem and all Palestine; Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf (“Gus Yahya”), General Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Supreme Council; prominent Shi’ite scholar Sayyed Yousif al-Khoei; Shaykh Abdallah bin Bayyah, Chairman of the UAE Fatwa Council; Rabbi David Rosen of the American Jewish Committee; Reverend Thomas K. Johnson, who serves as the World Evangelical Alliance’s Special Envoy to the Vatican and to [Humanitarian Islam](#); and Sam Brownback, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom.

Coordinated and financed by the U.S. Department of State, and hosted by the Holy See, the event served to launch the newly formed Abrahamic Faiths Initiative (AFI), whose founders include Bob Roberts, Senior Pastor of Northwood Church in Keller, Texas; Mohamed Majid, Executive Imam of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society; and Rabbi David Saperstein, President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

In an article titled “Religion can be part of the solution for peace, not the problem,” [Religion News Service](#) quoted Rabbi David Rosen as saying:

that the Rome gathering ‘could potentially be historic’ by bringing together the religious, political and diplomatic realms, which so far have seen ‘some mutual alienation.’

‘Speaking about Jerusalem, I think leaders have ignored the religious dimension, which is part of the problem,’ he said. ‘If you just deal with conflicts purely on a territorial basis, as real estate—even if the issue is real estate—it’s not enough, because there are intangibles there that relate to people’s historic attachment and spiritual identities.

‘That’s something that politicians haven’t understood yet, so maybe this is a way to open the door to that understanding.’

Although largely overlooked by secular media in the West, news of the interfaith summit quickly became viral in Indonesia—sweeping through that nation’s print and internet media in successive waves, as reflected in headlines that read: “Gus Yahya to represent Indonesia at Vatican interfaith summit”; “Gus Yahya: [religion should serve as the basis for resolving](#)

[problems, not creating them](#)"; "Gus Yahya becomes a speaker at the Vatican: [this is the message he will deliver](#)"; "Gus Yahya: [‘We need to recontextualize the teachings of the Abrahamic faiths, to bring them into line with the 21st century’](#)"; "[Meeting Pope Francis, NU General Secretary discusses religious conflict](#)"; "At the Vatican, [Gus Yahya] recommends that Abrahamic religious teachings be recontextualized to reflect the reality of our current age"; "[Pope Francis: we must return to our essential nature, rooted in brotherhood](#)"; "[Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board’s \[message\] at the Vatican](#): ‘We need concrete action to overcome religious conflicts’"; "Interfaith meeting at the Vatican, NU: [‘Dialogue should not be confined to quoting \[sweet words\] from our respective scriptures’](#)"; and "Speaking at interfaith meeting in the Vatican, [Gus Yahya conveys the NU’s strategic plan.](#)"

As multiple Indonesian news outlets reported:

Yahya Cholil Staquf, the NU envoy, believes that there are indeed orthodox teachings in each of the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—which have the potential to trigger conflict. "Admittedly, there are orthodox norms which still encourage segregation, discrimination and conflict," he said at the Abrahamic Faiths Initiative Forum, as conveyed in a written statement released on Friday, January 17, 2020.

These norms, he said, do not reflect twenty-first century global reality. "Namely, that it is no longer possible to localize or confine interreligious conflict. Instead, such conflicts will automatically trigger a chaotic and universal clash [between people who hold different religious identities], undermining our entire global civilization."

Gus Yahya, who is also General Secretary of the NU Supreme Council, described his idea as "the re-contextualization of Abrahamic religions"—referring to NU's efforts to recontextualize *fiqh* (Islamic law) since 1984, when the Chairman of NU's Supreme Council, Kyai Haji Achmad Shiddiq, laid the theological framework for "*ukhuwwah basyariyyah*" (universal human fraternity).

NU drew upon this concept in February of 2019 at its National Conference of Nahdlatul Ulama Religious Scholars. One of the decisions adopted by the NU, at this Conference, states "the category of infidel is no longer legally relevant within the context of the modern nation-state. The socio-political dimension of the term 'infidel' (*kafir*) is actually related to an historical context—predicated upon the existence of a single, universal theocracy [or caliphate]—that no longer exists."

According to Yahya, a Catholic participant from the Middle East said that he was profoundly moved to hear about the steps NU has taken to recontextualize Islamic teachings. "This is the realization of my dream for over 25 years," Yahya said, quoting the prominent Catholic figure, who was ordained in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

The Monsignor said that it is not only Islamic teachings that need to be re-contextualized; all Abrahamic religions need to undergo a similar process. He explained that the Roman Catholic Church began this effort by convening the Second Vatican Council in 1962, during the time of Pope John XXIII.

"The Abrahamic religions must reflect upon the nature of their presence in the world and their role, given the context of twenty-first century reality," he said.

An ultra-orthodox Jewish participant in the AFI Forum also welcomed Yahya's invitation to work across religious lines for the recontextualization of their respective faiths' teachings..... "All this violence and killing must be stopped," said the Israeli participant, while discussing the obstacles to Middle East peace. "All that land [i.e., Judea and Samaria] is not worth spilling a single drop of human blood."

Another [report](#), published by Indonesia's largest daily newspaper, quoted Mr. Staquf as saying:

"Anyone who issues a public declaration should be ready to follow it up with concrete strategic steps." He provided an example by citing NU's work in developing [transformative strategies](#), which are implemented through social activism. Among other things, this entails providing services to the community in the broadest sense, including protecting the rights of minority groups."

On the evening of Wednesday, January 15, AFI participants visited Pope Francis at his private residence in *Domus Sanctae Marthae* in the Vatican, where they discussed a wide range of issues for over an hour. During their conversation, NU General Secretary KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf and Pope Francis discussed the possibility of His Holiness visiting the world's fourth most populous nation and its largest Muslim-majority democracy.

On January 17, *Catholic News Agency* ran a story suggesting that the NU General Secretary was acting as an intermediary between the Holy See and the President of Indonesia, informally communicating the Pope's desire to visit the world's largest Muslim-majority nation to a receptive Indonesian public and the world at large.

Pope Francis Travel 2020: Possibly Indonesia, East Timor and Papua New Guinea

VATICAN CITY, January 17, 2020 (*Catholic News Agency*). A visit from Pope Francis to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and East Timor may happen in September, according to an Indonesian Muslim leader who met with the pope this week.

Sheikh Yahya Cholil Staquf leads the 50 million member Nahdlatul Ulama movement, which calls for a reformed "humanitarian Islam" and has developed a theological framework for Islam that rejects the concepts of caliphate, Sharia law, and "kafir" (infidels).

Staquf met with the pope this week, while in Rome for a meeting of the Abrahamic Faiths Initiative, which gathers Christians, Muslim and Jewish leaders to discuss the promotion of peace and fraternity. U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback attended the meetings.

Pope Francis met with the group Jan. 15.

After that meeting, Staquf told CNA that the pope said he plans to visit Indonesia, East Timor, and New Guinea in September.

The Vatican has not yet confirmed such a trip.

Indonesia is home to the largest population of Muslims in the world. The country's 229 million Muslims make up more than 12% of the global Muslim population. Nearly all of Indonesia's Muslims are Sunni.

There are 24 million Christians living in Indonesia, 7 million of them are Catholic. Pope St. Paul VI visited the country in 1970, and Pope St. John Paul II traveled there in 1989.

Read the full article [here](#).

Click [here](#) to view KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf being interviewed on *EWTN Global Catholic Television Network*.