



2020_07_23_Islam and the Disappearing People

Prominent Muslim scholar acknowledges “the long and tragic history of religious persecution in the Islamic world”

PRINCETON, New Jersey, July 23, 2020: The General Secretary of Indonesia’s 90-million-strong Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has called upon Muslims to lead by example and act to end the widespread, systematic and ongoing persecution of religious minorities across the Islamic world.

“Systemic prejudice and discrimination towards others, and the weaponization of ‘tribal’ identity—whether for self-preservation or self-aggrandizement—have been characteristic of nearly all societies throughout history,” said Nahdlatul Ulama General Secretary Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, in response to recent upheavals in the U.S. and Western Europe triggered by the death of George Floyd at the hands of a U.S. policeman.

Mr. Staquf issued his remarks in conjunction with the publication of his article, “[Responding to a Fundamental Crisis Within Islam Itself](#),” in *Public Discourse*, which is the online journal of the Witherspoon Institute, a non-profit research center located in Princeton, New Jersey. The declared mission of *Public Discourse* is “to enhance public understanding of the moral foundations of free societies,” based on a “commitment to the idea that truth exists, is knowable, and should inform our politics and culture.” *Public Discourse* is widely read by an ecumenical audience of conservative-leaning intellectuals representing a variety of religious backgrounds—Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and non-believing humanist.

In his extensive essay, Mr. Staquf discusses Stephen Rasche’s newly published book, [The Disappearing People](#), “which paints a disturbingly vivid picture of the tragedy he witnessed in Iraq” and “[t]he calamitous fate of Iraq’s Christians.” Mr. Staquf—a preeminent Islamic scholar who is widely acknowledged as “one of the Muslim world’s most incisive and outspoken reformers”—writes:

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.

Acknowledging the link between obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy and Islamist terrorism, Mr. Staquf writes that medieval *fiqh* is enabling “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.” In response, Mr. Staquf forcefully argues for the 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.”

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 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 (*kafir*) 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.

Significantly, Mr. Staquf issued his remarks sixty years after an historic meeting in the Vatican between St. John XXIII and the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac, whose wife and daughter perished in the Holocaust. [Their discussion](#) set in motion a process of understanding and dialogue between Roman Catholic teachings and other faiths, particularly Judaism, that culminated in the adoption of [Nostra aetate](#) by the Second Vatican Council in 1965.

In *Nostra aetate* ("In our time"), the Catholic Church adopted a remarkable posture of self-criticism, declaring that "in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone"—a clear condemnation of historic and contemporary anti-Semitism, on the part of Catholics as well as others. More broadly, the declaration—which fundamentally shifted the theological orientation and disposition of the Catholic Church towards non-Christian religious traditions and communities—concludes by stating, "No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned."

Responding to the NU General Secretary's essay, Notre Dame professor of religion and global politics, Daniel Philpott, observed that "Staquf and the Nahdlatul Ulama are developing a doctrinal framework to produce changes in Islam much like those that took place in another religion – Catholicism" ("[A Muslim John Courtney Murray?](#)").

Murray (1904 – 1967) was an American Jesuit priest and theologian who was especially known for his efforts to reconcile Catholicism and religious pluralism, particularly focusing on the relationship between religious freedom and the institutions of a democratically structured modern state. During the Second Vatican Council, John Courtney Murray played a key role in persuading the assembled Catholic bishops to adopt the Council's ground-breaking declaration on religious liberty, [Dignitatis humanae](#).