



R20 Plenary Session 4:

What values do our respective traditions need to relinquish to ensure that religion functions as a genuine and dynamic source of solutions, rather than problems?

“Traditional religions travel heavy and do not throw texts away. They may think that they do not use a given problematic text anymore, so they lay it aside, but it returns. And in every generation, we may have to reread it again, and again.”

~ Keynote Address by Rabbi Alan Brill

BALI, Indonesia — On the morning of 3 November 2022, prominent religious leaders and scholars gathered at the R20 Summit to discuss teachings embedded within their respective religions that are, or were, incompatible with peaceful coexistence and a rules-based international order founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being.

In his keynote address delivered at the opening plenary of the G20 Religion Forum (R20), NU Chairman KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf invited the world’s religious leaders to join Nahdlatul Ulama in an open and honest discussion about “what values our respective traditions need to relinquish, to ensure that religion functions as a genuine and dynamic source of solutions, rather than problems, in the 21st century.”

We know — there is no need to deny it — that we come to this task from different value systems, and that there remain elements within our value systems that may be used to justify antagonism towards other religions. Therefore, we must consider the values that we need to share in order to live side-by-side in peace. That is, without our coexistence being overshadowed by the ever-present potential for conflict, buried within our interpretation of religious texts.

We need to conduct a thorough review of our religious teachings, and — if we find elements that can endanger coexistence and peace between our communities — then we must have the courage to consider new interpretations that grant us all the possibility of living together in peace.

The Catholic Church has already undertaken this process with the Second Vatican Council, which issued religious edicts [[Nostra aetate](#) and [Dignitatis humanae](#)] enabling Catholics to value people of different faiths and be more accepting of a shared communal life without conflict. We also know that in 2016 a community of Jews — the Masorti, or Conservative stream of Judaism — convened a forum of rabbinical scholars and issued a 29-page statement that may serve as an inspiration for all of us [[“The Status of Non-Jews in Jewish Law and Lore Today”](#)]. Their purpose was to ensure that a better and more harmonious relationship may exist between Jewish and non-Jewish communities. This document, called a teshuvah [a responsa], honestly and courageously examined Jewish law (halacha) and urged Jews throughout the world to embrace an understanding of their religion which

acknowledges the fundamental equality of all human beings in order to foster harmonious relations with others.

Likewise, in 2019 Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) convened a [National Conference of Nahdlatul Ulama Religious Scholars](#) in West Java, Indonesia. As a result of this conference, NU issued [a ruling](#) that recontextualizes our understanding of Islamic teaching. Nahdlatul Ulama ruled that the legal category of “non-Muslim,” the category of “kafir,” the category of “infidel” is no longer relevant within the context of a modern nation state. Every citizen, whatever his or her background — religious or otherwise — must be equal before the law, and their identity cannot justify discrimination of any kind.

These are all efforts that have already been undertaken by different religious communities. We want this enthusiasm to broaden, deepen, and become universal. We want religious communities across the world to join together in building a global movement to end the potential for conflict that currently exists between us.

If we are to succeed in this task, religious leaders must take a strong moral position and call the world to humanitarianism. The highest values of religion must be adopted and infuse the world’s social, political, and economic power structures with moral and spiritual values. If this is done, then all of us, humanity as a whole, may progress together towards a better and more noble future.

Plenary Session 4 began with a keynote address by Rabbi Prof. Alan Brill, titled “Problematic Exclusivist Texts.” Dr. Brill holds the Cooperman/Ross Endowed Chair for Jewish-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University. He is an expert on interfaith relations and author of many books, including *Judaism and World Religions: Christianity, Islam, and Eastern Religions* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), and *Rabbi on the Ganges: A Jewish Hindu Encounter* (Lexington Books, 2019).

In his address to the R20, Rabbi Brill analyzed the *teshuvah* that the Masorti Movement’s Rabbinical Assembly issued in 2016. Rabbi Brill stated:

The teshuvah acknowledges that one can find exclusivist and negative passages in the [Jewish] tradition. If one looks, one can justify bad acts from the tradition. But the teshuvah outright condemned these works and all works by exclusivist Jewish groups.

The document declares that:

“[A]ll rules discriminating against Gentiles in matters of a civil nature and moral actions are no longer to be considered authoritative in Judaism not only because of the harm they cause to the image of Judaism and to relations with non-Jews, but because they are intrinsically immoral and deter us from attaining the honest virtues to which we aspire as Jews.”

With some satisfaction on my part, the responsa then quotes passages from my books, in which I stated:

“Jews have barely begun to look at their attitudes toward other faiths, albeit this reluctance was forged in an era of persecution. But they do not look at their own problematic and nasty texts about gentiles; they ignore their own traditional visions of destruction of the other faiths at the end of days. They frequently stigmatize other faiths in a totalizing way and call other faiths idolatry, Amalek, or Molekh based on current political attitudes. They judge other faiths by their worst and cite Judaism at its best.

“The problem of our era is that some Jews consider Jewish extremists as aberrations and non-Jewish extremists as the norm. They cite modern sanitized Jewish approaches that show how wonderful and tolerant Judaism is toward others, and disown their own anti-gentile texts written over the millennia. At the same time, however, they assume that other faiths are shackled to their prior texts as understood in prior ages, and do not allow the possibility that other religions have modern understandings of themselves.

“If we are not to descend to the level of simple apologetics, it will be necessary to deal honestly with the sources, to admit that different attitudes existed over the course of the development of Judaism and to candidly criticize and reject certain parts of the tradition while embracing others as representing the Judaism we wish to promulgate and which we believe represent the true core of Jewish belief beginning with the Torah itself.”

The entirety of Rabbi Brill’s keynote address, “Problematic Exclusivist Texts,” may be [read](#) and [viewed](#) online.

Rabbi Brill’s address was followed by a panel discussion moderated by C. Holland Taylor, Deputy Chairman and CEO of the Center for Shared Civilizational Values. The speakers included:

- Rabbi Silvina Chemen, a member of the Masorti Movement’s Rabbinical Assembly and lecturer at Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano in Buenos Aires (Argentina). Rabbi Chemen delivered an address titled “[Interpreting Judaism to Promote Understanding and Social Peace](#)”;
- Elder Gary E. Stevenson, Member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (USA), whose speech was titled “[All Are Alike Unto God: Opening Our Hearts to Those Who Are Different](#)”;
- The Rt. Rev. Matthew Hassan Kukah, Roman Catholic Bishop of Sokoto (Nigeria), who delivered an address titled “[The Weaponization of Religious Identity: A View from Africa](#)”;
- KH. Dr. Imam Addaruqutni, MA., Muhammadiyah Central Board (Indonesia), who delivered an address titled “*Islam Berkemajuan* (Progressive Islam)”;

- KH. Ulil Abshar Abdallah, Chairman, Nahdlatul Ulama Institute for Study and Human Resource Development (Indonesia), who spoke about “Civilizational *Fiqh (fiqh al-hadara)*”; and
 - Prof. Ahmet Kuru, a leading scholar of global Islam and Professor at San Diego State University (Turkey). Professor Kuru’s address was titled “Religious Reform in the 21st Century: Defending Minority Rights”
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In her speech, Rabbi Silvina Chemen said that:

In our sacred text, in the book of Deuteronomy 6:18, it is written: “You shall do the straight and the good in the eyes of God.” To do the right and the good in every time and place requires us to adhere to the covenant and given laws, but for a covenant to continue to have binding force upon our behavior, the spirit in which it was originally written must be translated into our current era.

The Talmud (Bava Metzia 30b) cites the verse, “You should do the straight (yashar) and the good (tov) in the eyes of God,” as the source for the importance of acting “lifnim mishurat hadin,” or beyond the strict requirements of the law.

To behave beyond the letter of the law requires us to make an active commitment not to hide behind sources that enjoin us to betray the main principles of ethics and morality. Adhering to the spirit of the law inspires us to struggle against fundamentalism and extremism, which is a real threat to all human expressions in our fragile world.

It is upon this basis that we should understand the Teshuvah Torat Hamelech [“The Status of Non-Jews in Jewish Law and Lore Today”]. Scripture can become a living covenant when we fulfill God’s boundless mandate to be a “holy people” (Exodus 19:6).

This “holy people” is in reality the entire human race, which deserves to live in peace, freedom, and justice.

The entirety of Rabbi Chemen’s address, “Interpreting Judaism to Promote Understanding and Social Peace,” may be [read](#) and [viewed](#) online.

As [reported](#) by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Elder [Gary] Stevenson responded to a request from the [R20] conference organizers to speak specifically about [the 1978 revelation on priesthood](#),” which permitted LDS members of African descent to serve as priests and fully participate in temple services. Elder Stevenson said that:

Notwithstanding our past, Latter-day Saints rely on a foundational doctrine of continuing revelation wherein knowledge unfolds “line upon line, precept upon

precept” as we strive to understand and live the will of the Lord. A significant essay on this topic explains that: “As the Church grew worldwide, its overarching mission to ‘go ye therefore, and teach all nations’ seemed increasingly incompatible with the priesthood and temple restrictions.” The fact that full participation of Latter-day Saints of African descent was not possible became the focus of much prayer and fasting to understand the divine direction of the Lord. Through earnest petitioning over many years, the will of the Lord was revealed to the president of the Church in 1978, and all Church privileges were extended to every worthy man, woman and child. Members of the Church, as did I, wept and rejoiced at the coming of this long-awaited day. In 2018, to commemorate the 40-year anniversary of the revelation, President Dallin H. Oaks of our First Presidency described the significance of the change:

“Many Latter-day Saints felt joy at this news. The numbers of valiant and faithful members of African descent who had accepted the gospel despite the restrictions was then very small. Therefore, most of those who rejoiced were Anglo-Americans like me, who witnessed the pain of black brothers and sisters and longed for their relief...

“The Church reacted swiftly to the revelation on the priesthood. Ordinations and temple recommends came immediately. The reasons that had been given to try to explain the prior restrictions on members of African ancestry — even those previously voiced by revered Church leaders — were promptly and publicly disavowed...

“Changes in the hearts and practices of individual members did not come suddenly and universally. Some accepted the effects of the revelation immediately and gracefully. Some accepted gradually. But some, in their personal lives, continued the attitudes of racism that have been painful to so many throughout the world, including the past 40 years.

“One of the most important effects of the revelation on the priesthood is its divine call to abandon attitudes of prejudice against any group of God’s children. Racism is probably the most familiar source of prejudice today, and we are all called to repent of that.”

This revelation has been a great blessing to all Church members, and we have been lifted and strengthened by the full participation of all God’s children. We have strengthened our priorities towards serving others and celebrating unity in diversity. Our shared values with people of faith have compelled us to build bridges of interfaith understanding, foster relationships of racial harmony, and promote fairness for all throughout society, as well as to collaborate with global humanitarian organizations.

The entirety of Elder Stevenson’s address, “All Are Alike Unto God: Opening Our Hearts to Those Who Are Different,” may be [read](#) and [viewed](#) online.

Excerpts of the speech delivered by Bishop Matthew Kukah, edited for publication, appear below.

After well over ten years of battling Boko Haram, insurgency, banditry, and ethno-religious violence, our weary citizens are absorbed in self-doubt, their natural happiness clouded by a dark and deep despair. Every day, news of abductions, armed robberies, kidnappings for ransom, murders, and assassinations of our innocent citizens persists. Our sacred spaces have become killing grounds. Hundreds of worshippers have been murdered in mosques and churches across the country. In response, much of the world shrugs its shoulders and moves on, as if this cauldron of violence in Africa's most populated country will never reach comfortable people elsewhere.

Against this background, I applaud this conference for taking the historic step to address these issues directly. I specifically commend the goal: to prevent the weaponization of identity and combat the spread of hatred. In the reality which confronts so many of us here today, hatred feeds on the weaponization of identity, marginalizes the other, and creates the conditions for their dehumanization, and inevitably takes us down the dark road to the justification of violence and, ultimately, murder. I speak now to this theme against the backdrop of my own country.

The Nigerian story of the weaponization of religion has been characterized by the manipulation of historical narratives between Christians and Muslims and setting ethnic groups against one another. Most Muslims in northern Nigeria have continued to re-echo sentiments of the old [Sokoto] Caliphate (1804 - 1903), which view Christianity as a foreign religion — while dismissing that Islam itself originated from the Arab peninsula — and instead treating Islam, because of its relative longevity (present in some parts of Nigeria since the 11th century), as an African religion! In northern Nigeria, Muslim elites have tended to see the institutions of the modern state as an alien imposition that seeks to displace their own religion, with Western education perceived as a foreign enemy to Islam. They thus consider the present constitution and secular laws as fundamentally subordinate to Islam, and in practice ignore the written laws of the land as they see fit. Nigerian elites, even at a political level, have not been able to reach consensus on how to address key issues regarding the sanctity of the constitution.

The result amongst Christians in northern Nigeria today is that their faith is very much in danger, both physically and socially, even within developed municipalities. The teaching of Christian religious tradition and history is prohibited in most public schools, whereas Islamic religious fundamentals are everywhere required in these same schools. Therefore, except for the very poor, Christians do not send their children to public schools. Deserving Christian students are systematically denied admission to university placements. Employment and promotion for non-Muslims in the state civil services is essentially non-existent. Likewise, Christians cannot expect any type of fair or equal treatment from law enforcement or the courts. The result is that conditions are created for self-doubt, fear, and anxiety among children of diverse faiths.

Compounding this structural persecution of Christians in northern Nigeria, we have also witnessed a growing culture of overt Islamic violence spanning recent decades, a form of violence that now threatens much of Africa. This violence has been manifested in Nigeria in two distinct phases. First is the intra-religious violence such as that between the different sects in Islam, namely: Sunni, Shi'ites, Izala, Boko

Haram, ISWAP (the Islamic State’s West Africa Province), and a few others. Second is violence by Muslim extremists that directly targets Christians or their infrastructure such as churches, presbyteries, convents, schools, hospitals and even social infrastructure for public use, such as pastoral centers.

We suffered this fate most recently in my Diocese of Sokoto in the aftermath of the brutal mob-killing of Ms. Deborah, a young Christian university student accused of blasphemy and publicly murdered on campus in May this year by her Muslim fellow students for having complained of the forced introduction of religion into an academic study group. Far from universal condemnation of this horrific act, Islamist extremists throughout the north applauded the murder, claiming it was justified, and calling for additional violence against any who might ask for legal justice against the perpetrators.

The entirety of Bishop Kukah’s address, “The Weaponization of Religious Identity: A View from Africa,” may be [read](#) and [viewed](#) online.

Kyai Haji Ulil Abshar Abdallah, Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Institute for Study and Human Resource Development (Lakpesdam NU), was the penultimate speaker in Plenary Session 4. Between July of 2022 and February of 2023, Lakpesdam NU is convening 275 “study circles” (*halaqa*) with Nahdlatul Ulama scholars and cadres throughout Indonesia, to discuss the concept of “Islamic Jurisprudence for a Global Civilization” (*fiqh al-hadara*). This effort builds on the historic rulings adopted by Nahdlatul Ulama at the [2019 National Conference of Nahdlatul Ulama Religious Scholars](#), referenced by NU Chairman KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf in his keynote address at the R20’s opening plenary.

In these rulings, Nahdlatul Ulama declared that the modern nation state is theologically legitimate; that there is no legal category of infidel (*kafir*) within a modern nation state, only “fellow citizens”; that Muslims must obey the laws of any modern nation state in which they dwell; and 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.

Speakers in Plenary Session 4 cited a number of seminal works produced by Roman Catholic, Latter-day Saints, Jewish (Masorti), and Sunni Muslim (Nahdlatul Ulama) religious authorities. These documents, which may be said to “recontextualise obsolete and problematic teachings of religion,” include those linked below:

Roman Catholicism: [Nostra aetate](#) and [Dignitatis humanae](#), promulgated at the Second Vatican Council (1965).

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: [Official Declaration 2](#) (Revelation on the Priesthood) (1978).

Judaism: [*The Status of Non-Jews in Jewish Law and Lore Today*](#), adopted by the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Law and Standards (2016).

Sunni Islam: [*Nusantara Manifesto*](#) (2018); [*The Recontextualization of Fiqh \(Islamic Law\) and Transformation of the Prevailing "Muslim Mindset," for the Sake of World Peace and to Achieve a Harmonious Communal Life for All Mankind*](#) (2019); and [*Findings of Bahtsul Masa'il Maudluiyyah Regarding the Nation, Citizenship, State Law and Peace*](#) (2019).

[View Plenary Session 4.](#)