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Award-winning journalist Richard Ostling:

Nahdlatul Ulama's "[c]ampaign for thorough reform of Muslim law deserves mainstream coverage – now"

Nahdlatul Ulama leaders pray at a gathering of almost two million followers in Sidoarjo, East Java on 7 February 2023

NEW YORK, United States, 11 April 2023 — One of America's leading religious affairs commentators — a veteran journalist who produced 23 cover stories for *Time Magazine* over the course of his decades-long career — has called on Western media to take note of Nahdlatul Ulama's campaign for "thorough worldwide reform of how to understand [Islam's] religious law (Sharia)," and give it the serious coverage it deserves.

"Far from some esoteric intellectual discourse," Richard Ostling writes, "such a philosophical change could potentially affect the future of the world's second-largest faith regarding democracy, blasphemy laws, human rights, education, the role of women, treatment of other religions, warfare, extremism, terrorism and crime and punishment."

Mr. Ostling is a Pulitzer-Prize nominee, broadcaster, and religion writer who has interviewed many of the world's most influential religious leaders over the past fifty years — including Billy Graham, the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, and Pope Benedict XVI.

Titled “Campaign for thorough reform of Muslim law deserves mainstream coverage – now,” Mr. Ostling published his article in *GetReligion*, a global platform that features articles by some of the world’s foremost experts on religion, analyzing how Western media covers religious trends in politics, entertainment, business, and sports.

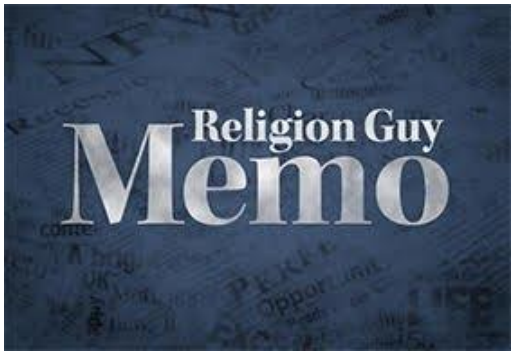
Mr. Ostling’s full analysis may be read below.

Campaign for thorough reform of Muslim law deserves mainstream coverage – now

by Richard Ostling | April 11, 2023

The world’s largest organization of Muslims is campaigning for thorough worldwide reform of how to understand the faith’s religious law (Sharia) and applied jurisprudence (Fiqh).

Such an ambitious goal may seem unlikely and, to date, western media have given the effort minimal coverage. It’s time for that trend to change.



Far from some esoteric intellectual discourse, such a philosophical change could potentially affect the future of the world's second-largest faith regarding democracy, blasphemy laws, human rights, education, the role of women, treatment of other religions, warfare, extremism, terrorism and crime and punishment.

The organization in question is Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, meaning Revival of Islamic Scholars) in Indonesia, the nation with the largest Muslim population. Consider these numbers from James M. Dorsey, a freelance writer and adjunct senior fellow in international studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University: NU encompasses an estimated 90 million lay followers, tens of thousands of religious scholars, 44 universities and 18,000 lower schools.

NU upholds Sunni orthodoxy, but with a more tolerant tone than is customary in the Mideast. Its legal reform program was prominent during the massive February celebration of its 100th anniversary, analyzed in Dorsey's March 31 Substack column. His article is a good starting point for journalists, but its opinionated viewpoint warrants careful follow-up interviewing. Also note this 2021 NU backgrounder by political scientist Ahmet T. Kuru (akuru@sdsu.edu).

Moderate Muslim thinkers have long favored some sort of move away from rigid legal traditionalism. Dorsey depicts a two-sided struggle among them, pitting allies of NU's fully democratic and tolerant outlook against religious leaders beholden to rulers in the Mideast, as in Saudi Arabia, where certain social liberation is being allowed without fundamentally rethinking Islamic law or politics.

Muhammad Abu Al-Fadl, who covered NU's centennial events for Egypt's Al Ahram newspaper, commented (.pdf here), "If the leadership of religious institutions in the Arab world continues to insist on burying heads in the sand, then Arab states may require another 100 years to absorb the Nahdlatul Ulama project."

NU issued a centennial declaration (.pdf here) that especially targets the traditional belief that all Muslims have an obligation to create a worldwide religious empire known as the caliphate. (Turkey abolished a weak remnant of the once-mighty caliphates of the past in 1924.) Even authorities who in 2014 issued an "Open Letter" denouncing oppression under the Islamic State's supposed caliphate said Muslim scholars agree that restoration of the authentic caliphate remains "an obligation upon the Ummah" (the global community of Muslim believers).

But the NU declaration insists "it is neither feasible nor desirable to re-establish a universal caliphate that would unite Muslims throughout the world in opposition to non-Muslims." NU

says this would "inevitably be disastrous and contrary to the purposes of Sharia, i.e., the protection of religion, human life, sound reasoning, family and property."

Instead, NU calls for a "new vision" of Fiqh designed to curtail "communal hatred" and promote respect for all the world's diverse peoples, in accord with the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The 57 nations in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation embrace the 1990 Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (.pdf here), which subjects interpretation of all claimed human rights to Islam's legal traditions.

CONTACTS:

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*** A Boston University press release** said one of the eight non-Muslim experts NU invited to observe its centennial was anthropologist Robert Hefner, director of the Asia center at its School of Global Studies (rhefner@bu.edu and 617–353–2194).

*** NU has a U.S. offshoot** working against extremism, Bayt ar-Rahmah, based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (336–922–1278 or info@baytarrahmah.org).

*** Prominent American Muslims** are among 126 endorsers of the 2014 "Open Letter" who embraced a future authentic caliphate — listed here.

FIRST IMAGE: Illustration with this feature — "What is Sharia? A View from the West" — on the IE University "Insights" website.