THE HUFFINGTON POST

**Kabir Helminski, Contributor**
Sufi teacher, author, activist

# Stirrings of a Humanitarian Islam

05/29/2017 08:08 pm ET

AUSTRALASIA MUSLIM TIMES

Indonesian Muslims reach out

On May 21-22, a gathering of several hundred Islamic scholars (ulama) took place in East Java under the title “Towards the Re-contextualization of Islamic Teachings, for the Sake of World Peace and Harmony Between Civilizations.” It is of great significance that a major movement for the re-contextualization and reform of Islamic law is being birthed here in Java within the largest Sunni Muslim organization in the world, the Nahdlatul (Awakened) Ulama, which numbers 100 million sympathizers, and its youth wing the Ansor, with 5 million members. It was a great honor to be invited to be part of the opening panel with Pak Yahya Staquf, Secretary General of the Nahdlatul

Ulama, and the leader of Ansor, Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, and I will attempt to convey some of the insights and principles on which this movement is based.

For a non-Asian Westerner, Indonesian culture, architecture, and aesthetics are as different from my own sensibilities as any on earth. In fact there is a hint of something not of this world, as if another planet had successfully colonized this archipelago. They tend to elaborately decorate their mosques with colors no one would call subtle: lime green, purple, orange, royal blue, and red. Islam Nusantara, or East Indies Islam, is also a far cry from the Islam of the Arab Middle East. Merging seamlessly with the indigenous nature mysticism that preceded it, it gracefully adapts itself to customs and supernatural nuances that more "Orthodox" minds would dogmatically reject. It is a friendly, easy-going, live and let live Islam. Indonesians themselves with their features, both striking and delicate, easily break into broad smiles of such genuineness that you're taken aback, and their soft voices cause you to lean toward them just to hear.

The Nahdlatul Ulama have existed in Indonesia since before the founding of the Republic in 1945. Their leader, Abdurrahman Wahid, the nearly-blind Sufi, was elected President of Indonesia 1999-2001 and went on to become a Mandela-like figure and a sort of national treasure. The NU consider the purpose of Islamic law to be the attainment of spiritual and material well-being for humanity—significant in light of the recent conviction of the former mayor of Jakarta for blasphemy, or the canings of homosexuals in Aceh. The NU recognize that religious and moral norms exist within ever-changing historical and cultural circumstances. While certain moral principles are unchanging and universal — truthfulness, non-harming, charity, as well as the immorality of lying, killing, exploitation — others are contingent on circumstances — matters of personal behavior, appropriate dress, conduct within civil society, international relations.

When contemporary Muslims seek guidance from what are considered the most authoritative sources, they access a body of Islamic thought and jurisprudence (fiqh) that remains virtually unchanged from the Middle Ages. The disconnection between time-conditioned and often inflexible religious formulations and the realities of our contemporary era can lead to confusion, awkwardness, irrelevancy, hypocrisy, and even physical, moral, and spiritual danger.

Many complex issues arise having to do with relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Muslim majority countries, as well as where Muslims are in the minority. The problems are greatly magnified in the relations between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds—matters about the proper aims and conduct of warfare, for instance. Muslims face immediate and complex problems concerning how to deal with injustices and grievances in moral and effective ways. Certain ultraconservative Muslims have

attempted to implement what they believe to be justifiable strategies, often rationalizing that the end justifies any means. To the extent that there are elements within Islamic law that potentially serve as justifications for violence and cruelty, no matter how far-fetched and strained, these elements need to be decisively clarified and corrected. Those claiming the right under Islamic law for the bloody events that have been seen in so many parts of the world are guilty of violating the most fundamental principles of universal morality and cannot be allowed the cover of a religious justification.

The problem is not limited only to terrorist cells and networks, but nation states pursuing their own sectarian and ideological goals are also guilty of adding to the humanity's misery. Various state and non-state actors—including but not limited to Iran, Saudi Arabia, ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban and Pakistan—manipulate people using religion to achieve political, economic and military power, and to destroy their enemies. They do so by drawing upon elements of an Islamic code of law (*fiqh*), to which they ascribe divine authority in order to justify their political goals.

The net effect of all this not only creates havoc among Muslim populations, which become fractured and destabilized by hatred and violence, but also induces an Islamophobic response from non-Muslim populations, and gives the political justification for further violence in the form of preemptive wars, stealth operations, and drone warfare.

One of the primary tensions animating violence and proxy wars is the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which became intensified after the Iranian revolution of 1978. Saudi Arabia has sought to mobilize Sunni Muslim opposition to Iran, precipitating a conflict of global proportions. In recent decades Saudi Arabia funded the greatest propaganda efforts in human history dedicating approximately $100 billion to spread the message of Wahhabism, indoctrinating Muslims in the hatred of Shias and intolerance toward "nonbelievers" in general.

The aberration of Wahhabism has come to be perceived by many as synonymous with Islam itself, giving rise to further Islamophobia. This extremist mentality has cast a pall over a religion whose primary message is universal love and compassion (rahmah). Ironically, the regime in Saudi Arabia has as its major backers the United Kingdom and United States.

Former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid

As former Indonesian president and Nahdlatul Ulama Chairman H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid warned the U.S. in 2008: “Moderate Islam will have a greater chance of triumphing over Islamic radicalism, once Western leaders stop trying to accommodate Islamic extremists. The Saudis are playing a deceptive game: they finance the spread of fundamentalist Islam, while in the West they try to show the ‘humanist’ side of Islam. These things cannot be reconciled.”

It is essential that Western leaders and opinion makers recognize that Islamist extremism and terror arise from the web of complex factors — historical, religious, economic, and political — and that Islam is not a monolithic belief system. Despite the prevalence of the recently promoted Wahhabist mentality, traditional Islam has a long history of humane and tolerant values, and that the great majority of Muslims deserve to be viewed as allies in creating a humane and just world.

As H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid wrote in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed published in 2005: “Only by recognizing the problem, putting an end to the bickering within and between nation-states, and adopting a coherent, long-term plan (executed with international leadership and commitment) can we begin to apply the brakes to the rampant spread of extremist ideas and hope to resolve the world’s crisis…before the

global economy and modern civilization itself begin to crumble in the face of truly devastating attacks.

“Muslims themselves can and must propagate an understanding of the ‘right’ Islam, and thereby discredit extremist ideology. Yet to accomplish this task requires the understanding and support of like-minded individuals, organizations and governments throughout the world. Our goal must be to illuminate the hearts and minds of humanity, and offer a compelling alternate vision of Islam, one that banishes the fanatical ideology of hatred to the darkness from which it emerged.”

In the current narrative known as the “clash of civilizations” each side claims its own grievances. One narrative suggests that the West and other non-Muslim powers are at war with Islam, and that Muslims must take up arms to defend their faith. Another narrative proposes that the 9/11 attacks were an unprovoked assault on the cherished values of Western civilization: freedom and democracy. A “War on Terror” was launched with no end in sight.

These times require a universal commitment to conflict resolution as a collective interfaith and international effort toward peace and reconciliation. Fortunately, the Qur’an advises Muslims, and in fact all people of faith: “Oh you who have attained to faith! Be ever steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity; and never let hatred of anyone lead you into the sin of deviating from justice. Be just: this is closest to being God-conscious. And remain conscious of God: verily, God is aware of all that you do.” (Qur’an. al-Ma’idah, 8)

We must face the fact that contrary to the beautiful sentiments expressed in this surah, distortions of the compassionate Quranic message are propagated in extremist madrasahs, and in the curricula of state financed education. Such an education conditions young minds toward an intolerant and aggressive attitude vis-à-vis beliefs and ways of life other than those sanctioned by the rigid dogmas of the extremists.

The corruption of Quranic thought and traditional Islamic values needs to be met with a new spiritual sensibility rooted in the most fundamental value of Islam—Beneficence (rahmah). It is time for Islamic scholars (ulama) to collaborate in the clarification of Islamic values, leading to the formulation of a Humanitarian Islam, a holistic orthodoxy which is harmonious with the original Revelation and the character of Muhammad. Not until this re-contextualized “orthodoxy” is clarified can we hope to reduce the tragic consequences of the misunderstandings that abound.

The Nahdlatul Ulama is in a unique position to be the catalyst for such a recontextualization. Islam Nusantara (East Indies Islam) has a cultural history different

from much of the Islamic world in that it represents the harmonious merging of Islam and an indigenous spirituality. It provides a model for an Islam that is accepting of differences, that profoundly honors nature, and that cooperates with the best of non-Islamic cultures. It is an Islam that does not create enemies, that is self-assured but not aggressive, that lets virtue speak for itself.

The escalating crisis within the Islamic world and beyond is inevitably tied to political agendas which are often inhumane and unjust. The recontextualization of Islamic law can at least remove the religious justification used to manipulate people toward conflict and violence.

By developing and applying a global strategy to recontextualize the teachings of orthodox, authoritative Islam, the Nahdlatul Ulama and Ansor hope to reconcile certain problematic elements of *fiqh* (classical Islamic law) with the reality of contemporary civilization, whose context and conditions differ significantly from those in which classical Islamic law emerged.

What may have been a practical necessity 1000 years ago in the conduct of Jihad, the management of slaves, the rights of captives, the roles of women, are not based on some immutable ethical necessity, but rather on the opinions of men in the light of their understanding of the primary Islamic sources. The scale of human weaponry today should make war itself haram in almost all cases.

The “Humanitarian Islam” movement is dedicated to facilitating the emergence of societal consensus, among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, to depoliticize the issue of Islam, and prevent the abuse of religion to promote sectarian hatred, supremacism and violence. We await the publication of Ansor’s final declaration on “Humanitarian Islam.” Let us hope that the Nahdlatul Ulama and Ansor will be the beginning of an awakening within Islamic civilization that will allow Muslims to assume their proper role in contributing to the well-being of humanity.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/stirrings-of-a-humanitarian-islam_us_592cb6e0e4b08861ed0ccb7d