THE "ASHOKA APPROACH" AND INDONESIAN LEADERSHIP IN THE MOVEMENT FOR PLURALIST RE-AWAKENING IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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In order to strengthen the existing rules-based international order and facilitate its acceptance by Muslims worldwide, Indonesia's 90-million-member Nahdlatul Ulama has established a theological framework "to address obsolete and problematic tenets within Islamic orthodoxy" (Bayt ar-Rahmah 2018). As a central component of this effort, NU spiritual leaders are developing an "Islamic jurisprudence for a global civilization, whose constituent elements retain their distinctive characteristics" (*fiqh al-hadārah al-ʿālamīyah al-mutasahirah*). These spiritual leaders, who guide the world's largest Muslim organization, seek to "address the need for social harmony at a global level and in each of the world's regions where Muslims actually live and work, through a process of recontextualizing and 'indigenizing' Islam, as historically occurred in Nusantara (the Malay Archipelago)" (Gerakan Pemuda Ansor and Bayt ar-Rahmah 2018, 7 and 37-39; also published in Nahdlatul Ulama 2019).

These Nahdlatul Ulama leaders have established multiple vehicles to further this objective. One of these, Humanitarian Islam, is a global movement that seeks to restore *rahmah* (universal love and

Abstract: Leaders of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim organization, are working to consolidate South and Southeast Asia as an alternate pillar of support for a rules-based international order founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being. Integral to this effort is a regional strategy called the "Ashoka Approach," which seeks to reawaken the ancient spiritual, cultural, and socio-political heritage of the Indianized cultural sphere, or "Indosphere"—a civilizational zone that pioneered, long before the West, key concepts and practices of religious pluralism and tolerance.

Keywords: Ashoka; India; Indonesia; Indosphere; Islam; Nahdlatul Ulama; religious freedom

compassion) to its rightful place as the primary message of Islam, in part by addressing interpretations of Islamic orthodoxy that lend themselves to tyranny. Another, the Movement for Shared Civilizational Values, emerged from the 2018 Second Global Unity Forum held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. At this event, NU leaders promulgated *The Nusantara Manifesto*, which states:

> In a spirit of humility and respect for the wisdom that resides—all too often neglected—at the heart of every culture and religion, we invite people of goodwill of every faith and nation to join Indonesia in rejecting any and all forms of tyranny, and in fostering the emergence of a global civilization endowed with nobility of character. (Gerakan Pemuda Ansor and Bayt ar-Rahmah 2018, 18-19; emphasis in the original text).

Leaders of Humanitarian Islam and the Movement for Shared Civilizational Values are working to consolidate South and Southeast Asia as an alternate pillar of support for a rules-based international order that respects human rights and robust pluralism, in conjunction with partners that include: Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, NU's 5-million-member young adults movement; Bayt ar-Rahmah, which serves as a hub for the global expansion of NU activities; the Center for Shared Civilizational Values; the Institute for Humanitarian Islam; Centrist Democrat International/European People's Party (CDI/EPP), the world's largest political network; and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA).[1]

Integral to this effort is a regional strategy called the "Ashoka Approach." This strategy seeks to reawaken the ancient spiritual, cultural, and socio-political heritage associated with Ashoka, Emperor of the Maurya Dynasty on the Indian subcontinent from 268 to 232 BCE. During the course of his reign the Buddhist Ashoka came to renounce armed conquest and thereafter championed compassion, extensive dialogue and interchange among followers of diverse spiritual paths, inter-faith tolerance, mutual understanding, and respect for the dignity inherent in others. These ideas contributed to the

Figure 1: The Indosphere: The Ancient "Ashokan" Zone. Color key: *Dark orange*, Indian subcontinent. *Light orange*, the Indianized states of Southeast Asia. Yellow, peripheral regions subject to considerable Indian influence.
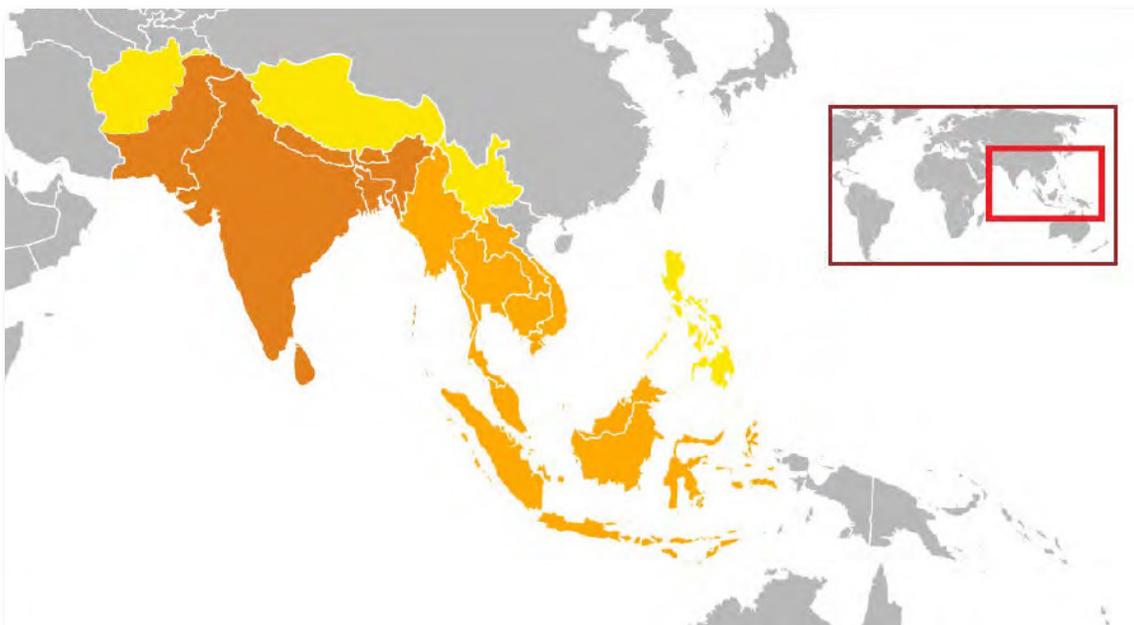
emergence of a civilizational worldview that came to be shared by peoples and cultures throughout much of South and Southeast Asia, thereby fostering an "Indianized" civilizational sphere that overlaps with a geographical region that some scholars have referred to as the "Indosphere." An alternative label for this region (one less conventional but perhaps also less likely to be misinterpreted) might be the "Ashoka-sphere." This region is a civilizational zone that pioneered, long before the West, key concepts and practices of religious pluralism.

Today the "Ashoka-sphere" contains over 2.5 billion people, or more than one-third of the earth's population. It is home to two emerging global powers, India and Indonesia, which are also two of the world's most remarkable experiments in multicultural, multi-religious democracy. It boasts the world's greatest religious diversity, with far more Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists than any other region. In fact, all the world's Hindu-majority countries and Buddhist-majority countries (save one, Mongolia), and the four nations with the world's largest Muslim populations (Indonesia, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) are located within this region.

The Ashoka Approach reflects the NU leaders' keen awareness of major threats to religious harmony and to social and political stability in the region. Throughout this region and the world at large, state and non-state actors are increasingly weaponizing ethnic, religious and cultural identities to maintain or acquire political power. Their actions pose a significant threat to the post-World War II international order, which is built upon a philosophical and moral framework that regards every human being as "born free and equal in dignity and rights" (Preamble, Universal Declaration of Human Rights). This global authoritarian resurgence threatens to recreate in the 21ˢᵗ century the horrors of the past. For amidst an increasingly multi-polar world, Western power and Western culture alone are insufficient to sustain, much less strengthen and enhance, a rules-based international order dedicated to safeguarding national sovereignty and fundamental human rights.

In response to this crisis, leaders of the Movement for Shared Civilizational Values have developed—and begun to implement—the Ashoka Approach: a strategy to foster, among regional actors, an awareness of their shared civilizational heritage and their common interest in shaping the future of humanity. This entails examining the nature of the historic engagement between Indian civilization and indigenous cultures throughout the region. It also requires building a de facto alliance among the peoples and nations of the Indosphere/"Ashoka-sphere," enabling them to cope more effectively with a wide range of challenges to their sovereignty, and their respective cultures, in the 21ˢᵗ century. These complex, interlocking challenges include:

(1) the political weaponization of ethnic, cultural and religious identity, which privileges majority populations while pushing minorities to the margins of national life, often with savage force;

(2) the continuing spread of transnational Islamist ideologies and movements that threaten virtually every country in the region, and have notably undermined Indonesia's own traditions of religious pluralism and tolerance;

(3) the diffusion of Western ideologies that ostensibly respect the region's indigenous cultures and peoples, while disdaining their actual values and acting counter to their interests;

(4) "the emergence of authoritarian, civilizationist states that do not accept the rules-based post-WWII [international] order, whether in terms of human rights, rule of law, democracy or respect for international borders and the sovereignty of other nations" (Centrist Democrat International 2020);

(5) socio-cultural disruptions triggered by

communications technology, including rapidly expanding internet penetration and the widespread use of social media.

As these mutually reinforcing trends continue to unfold and accelerate, the prospects for harmonious and respectful intercommunal relations are experiencing a correspondingly steep decline. The result is an anti-pluralist maelstrom that is sucking much of South and Southeast Asia into a downward spiral or black hole of zero-sum conflicts. This maelstrom threatens to annihilate any prospect for the region to develop principled and robust societies built upon a foundation of religious pluralism and tolerance, and thus prevent the Indosphere from re-emerging as a coherent civilizational zone inspired by these values. In short, the Ashoka Approach aims to reclaim and revitalize indigenous sources of cultural resilience against a rising tide of illiberalism.

To foster awareness of the region's shared history and common interests, NU leaders are posing a simple question to key interlocutors from government and civil society institutions: "Should we simply yield and submit to cultural, ideological, economic and political domination of our respective societies by external actors, including China, Middle East governments, transnational Islamist movements, and the West? Or shall we stand together to voice our perspectives and defend our interests from a position of dignity, as independent cultures and nations acting upon the world stage?"[2]

NU leaders are uniquely positioned to ask such questions, as NU's cultural heartland lies within the heavily populated island of Java, which constitutes the geographic, political, and economic center of Indonesia, and boasts ancient ties to both Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic civilizations. A majority of Javanese Muslims continue to cherish their pre-

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Islamic heritage as an intrinsic part of their identity, giving rise to the uniquely pluralistic and tolerant expression of Islamic teachings known as Islam Nusantara ("East Indies Islam").

The 2018 *Nusantara Manifesto* observes that a distinguishing feature of Islam Nusantara's "ancient 'civilizational wisdom' is the ability not only to grasp but also prioritize, individually and collectively, the spiritual essence of religion, rather than purely formal and dogmatic elements that readily lend themselves to weaponization and, in the wrong hands, foster conflict rather than social unity" (Gerakan Pemuda Ansor and Bayt ar-Rahmah 2018, 18). Islam Nusantara remains a vibrant, powerful, and—as demonstrated in the 2014 and 2019 national elections—politically decisive force within Indonesia (Shah et al. 2020).[3]

Humanitarian Islam leaders—including NU General Secretary KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf and Indonesia's Minister of Religious Affairs, H. Yaqut Cholil Qoumas—maintain that in order to engage in political, economic, and civilizational dialogue on the basis of equality, the nations of South and Southeast Asia must rediscover their shared civilizational legacy, whose cultural and spiritual heritage is equal to those of the "Sinosphere," Europe, and the Middle East. By re-enlivening the region's own spiritually informed and benevolent narratives regarding the nature of religious and cultural identity and inter-faith respect—as enshrined in Ashoka's Major Rock Edicts and the teachings of Islam Nusantara—Humanitarian Islam and the Ashoka Approach seek to strengthen the region and enable it to resist both internal and external disruptive influences.

Building on their transformative work in support of religious pluralism in Indonesia, NU spiritual leaders are seeking to mobilize like-minded religious and political figures throughout South and Southeast Asia to foster a renewed appreciation for

the spirituality and respect for pluralism that were once defining features of the Indianized (or perhaps, "Ashoka-ized") cultural sphere, and forge concrete avenues of cooperation between profoundly spiritual and humanitarian expressions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Their explicit goal is for South and Southeast Asia to re-emerge as a cohesive, vital, and proactive civilizational sphere, which functions as a powerful, independent pillar of support for a rules-based international order founded upon shared civilizational values (Shah and Dinham 2020, 17).[4]

Leaders of the Humanitarian Islam movement are acutely aware of the last time Indonesia played a prominent role upon the world stage: viz., when President Soekarno joined India's Jawaharlal Nehru, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito in establishing the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1950s. However, the Humanitarian Islam agenda is expressly spiritual, and seeks to unite all of humanity rather than simply steer a neutral course between the world's great powers. The global Humanitarian Islam movement represents one aspect of the transformational legacy of Indonesia's first democratically elected president and long-time NU Chairman H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid (1940 – 2009). In fact, the Humanitarian Islam movement was directly inspired by President Wahid, and its leadership consists of close friends and disciples of a man widely revered by Indonesian Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists, and regarded as a saint by many of the NU's 90 million followers (Shah and Dinham 2020, 17).

Humanitarian Islam and the Movement for Shared Civilizational Values seek to "abolish the primordial cycle of hatred, tyranny and violence that has plagued humanity since time immemorial" (Centrist Democrat International 2019); derail the juggernaut of "tribal" politics, whether rooted in ethnic, religious, or secular/ideological identities; shift the focal point of authority in the Islamic world from the Middle East to South and Southeast Asia, where a majority of the world's Muslims reside; and re-enliven the profound ("Ashoka-ized")

civilizational values of the Indosphere, in order to buttress the rules-based post-WWII international order as the world's geopolitical center of gravity shifts from the North Atlantic axis into the heart of Eurasia.

As Bernard Adenay Risakotta writes in Living in a Sacred Cosmos: Indonesia and the Future of Islam:

> The center of Islamicate civilization in the world today is neither Saudi Arabia nor the Middle East. Rather it is Indonesia. Indonesia is the most important country in the world about which most people know practically nothing. Just as the center of Christianity is no longer in Europe or North America but has shifted to the Southern Hemisphere (Jenkins 2012), so the center of Islamicate civilization has shifted from the Middle East to Asia (Risakotta 2019, 17).

The Ashoka Edicts and the "Ashokan" Spiritual and Civilizational Legacy

The worldview that historically lay at the heart of the Indianized cultural sphere was profoundly shaped by the complex interaction of various streams of spirituality that emerged in northern India during the first millennium BCE, against the backdrop of orthodox Brahmanism, including the Upanishads, Jainism, and Buddhism. This worldview posited that every human being has access within him or herself to a transcendent "ground of being," and that different spiritual paths all lead to the same goal, which Hindus often describe as *jiwa mukti* (liberation of the self from spiritual ignorance) and Buddhists as the state of *nirvana*. In terms more familiar to contemporary Westerners, the cosmologies embraced by Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism revolve around the concept of spiritual liberation or "enlightenment."

From this perspective, it is but a short step to acknowledge and respect the existence of other faith traditions, as well as a wide variety of religious rituals and practices. This spiritual vision found concrete socio-cultural and political expression in the 3rd century BCE Mauryan Empire. The Emperor Ashoka erected dozens of Rock Edicts and Pillar Edicts around the perimeter of his vast empire, from Kandahar in modern-day Afghanistan and the Himalayan mountains in the north, to the Deccan Plateau in the south, and upon the shores of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal.

The overarching theme of these edicts is *dhamma*, the Magadhi Prakrit[5] form of the Sanskrit term *dharma*. *Dharma* is a key concept within Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. In the *Rig Veda* it refers to that which, like a pillar, supports or upholds *rta*, the principle of natural order which regulates and coordinates the operation of the universe and everything in it. In Hinduism, the term thus encompasses and is often used to signify human behavior that is aligned with *rta*, including one's spiritual, moral, familial and vocational responsibilities. Within Buddhism, the term means "cosmic law and order" and is applied to the teachings of Gautama Buddha, whose path to spiritual liberation is described as the *Dhamma*. For this reason, the term *dhamma*/*dharma* also came to signify the truth, essence, and/or ultimate reality, as well as the path to the realization of truth.

Like the Arabic term *shari'ah* in its etymological and spiritual sense[6], *dharma* thus refers to the path which leads the individual soul towards union with the transcendent ground of being. The concept of *dhamma*/*dharma* also corresponds to the Chinese word *tao*, which signifies "the way," "path" or "route," as well as the natural order of the universe, which is why C.S. Lewis uses the term "the *Tao*" in his book *The Abolition of Man* (Lewis 1947).

Ashoka's Twelfth Major Rock Edict is of particular significance, for it describes the implications of this worldview for religious pluralism and tolerance:

Raja Devānampriya Priyadarśin ("Beloved of the Gods, Who Looks Upon All Things with the Eye of Compassion," an epithet that denotes Emperor Ashoka) is honoring all religious paths: both ascetics and householders; both with gifts and with honors of various kinds he is honoring them. Yet Devānampriya does not value either gifts or honors so [highly] as [this, namely] that a flourishing of the essence ("*saravadi*") of all religious paths ("*pāsamdā*"—i.e., schools of religious thought and practice, such as Jainism, Buddhism, Brahmanism, etc.) should take place. Yet a flourishing of the essence [of all religious paths is possible] in many ways. But its root is this: guarding [one's] speech to avoid extolling one's own path and disparaging other paths on inappropriate occasions, and to be moderate in this regard on every occasion. Other religious paths should always be duly honored.

If one is acting thus, he is both ensuring that his own religious path flourishes and benefiting other paths. If one is acting otherwise, then one is both diminishing the influence of one's own religious path and wronging other paths. For whosoever praises his own religious path or blames other paths—all [this] out of devotion to his own path, [i.e.,] with the intention of glorifying his own path—if he is acting thus, in fact he severely injures his own religious path.

Therefore concord (*samavàyo, the "power of unity"*) alone is meritorious, [i.e.,] that they [who follow different religious paths] should both hear and observe each other's *dhamma* ("truth/path/moral principles which lead the individual soul to union with the transcendent ground of being"). For this is the desire of Devānampriya: that

all religious paths should be full of learning, and of teachings that are pure and true.

And those who are attached to their respective [religious paths] ought to be spoken to [as follows]: Devānampriya does not value either gifts or honors so [highly] as [this, namely,] that a flourishing of the essence of all religious paths should take place.

And many [officers of the Maurya Empire] are assigned to tasks bearing upon this purpose: the *mahāmātras* [senior officials] responsible for promoting *dhamma*; *mahāmātras* responsible for women in the royal household; *mahāmātras* for cattle and pasturelands; and other classes [of officials]. And this is the fruit of these actions: the flourishing (*vadhī*) of each person's religious path and the glorification of *dhamma*.[7]

The primary message of the Twelfth Rock Edict is that profound spiritual dialogue between those who follow different religious paths—pursued in a spirit of mutual respect and humility, for the purpose of learning from one another—will naturally lead to the flourishing of all. In other words, the spiritual dialogue that Ashoka enjoins is intended to enhance the ability of each religious path to help its followers attain the ultimate purpose or "essence" of religion, which is personal union with the transcendent ground of being. Conversely, the "weaponization" of one's own religious path and disparagement of others' is self-defeating, for such behavior not only reflects a failure to grasp the very nature and purpose of religion, but directly obstructs its fulfillment and thereby nullifies its beneficial influence in society.

Ashoka's Seventh Rock Edict discusses the societal benefits—both moral and spiritual—of not only permitting, but actually encouraging, religious pluralism throughout a kingdom:

Raja Devānāmpriya Priyadarśin desires [that people of] all religious paths should dwell in all places; [for] all these [religious paths] encourage [their adherents to develop] self-control (*sayamam,* in Sanskrit "*samyama*") and pure consciousness (*bhava-sudhim,* in Sanskrit "*bhava-sudhi*"). But men are of various inclinations and of various passions. They may thus perform the whole or a part [of their duties]. But even one who is generous, [but] does not possess self-control, pure consciousness, gratitude and firm devotion, is base and ignoble (University of Oslo n.d.).

Ashoka's Rock Edicts express, in written form, the essence of a spiritual and, indeed, civilizational worldview that gradually spread throughout Southeast Asia during the subsequent millennia to create an "Ashoka-ized" cultural sphere. Crucially, as the preeminent French expert on Southeast Asian archaeology and history, George Cœdès, emphasized, this process occurred via peaceful diffusion rather than forceful conquest and annexation (Cœdès 1971, 34 – 35).[8] Also significant is the fact that the "Indianized" cultures of Southeast Asia did not import or adopt the rigid caste system that is characteristic of Brahmanical orthodoxy. In the absence of a rigid caste system, Indianized courts throughout much of Southeast Asia gradually embraced syncretic forms of Hinduism and Buddhism—rooted in a shared apprehension regarding the nature of ultimate reality—which also found expression in the great Mahayana Buddhist university of Nalanda in present-day Bihar, India.

Collapse of the Indianized Cultural Sphere and the Javanese Exception: "Ashokan" Resilience and Narrative Power

Between the tenth and sixteenth centuries C.E., a complex array of forces undermined and ultimately

brought about a collapse of the de facto civilizational unity of the "Indosphere." These included the Muslim conquest of much of the Indian subcontinent; invasions by Mongol, Thai, and Vietnamese forces that destroyed the Indianized states of peninsular Southeast Asia (e.g., the Khmer, Mon and Champa kingdoms); and Chinese naval expeditions in the early 15th century, when the Ming dynasty adopted an aggressive foreign policy designed to "fragment the barbarians of the Western Seas" (i.e., inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago) and encourage local rulers to establish a direct tributary relationship with China. As B. R. Ambedkar, author of India's constitution, wrote of the decline of Buddhism:

> There can be no doubt that the fall of Buddhism in India was due to the invasions of the Musalmans.... [I]n the Moslem mind idol worship had come to be identified with the Religion of the Buddha. To the Muslims, they were one and the same thing. The mission to break the idols thus became the mission to destroy Buddhism. Islam destroyed Buddhism not only in India but wherever it went. Before Islam came into being Buddhism was the religion of Bactria, Parthia, Afghanistan, Gandhar, and Chinese Turkestan, as it was of the whole of Asia. In all these countries Islam destroyed Buddhism (Ambedkar 1987, 229 – 230).

Islam became politically dominant in the Malay Archipelago through different means, including a long, circuitous route via China.[9] Its maritime— and, hence, economic—lifeline severed by Chinese intervention, the Majapahit Empire (the last great Indianized empire in the Malay Archipelago) fell into an advanced state of decay, enabling the spread of Muslim city-states along the coasts of Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, Borneo, Sulawesi and the Malukus, which promptly declared independence from their Hindu/Buddhist overlords. The tide of political Islam reached Java in 1478, when a Chinese Muslim harbor master named Jin Bun murdered an aristocratic Javanese governor (*adipati*), assumed the title "Raden Patah" and established the Islamic sultanate of Demak.

Closely allied with Chinese and Arab Muslims who lived in maritime ports along the north coast of Java, Demak drew upon familiar Islamic narratives to legitimize waging war (i.e., *jihad*) upon the severely weakened Majapahit Empire. These narratives were largely identical to those employed by Muslim conquerors throughout Islamic history and may be readily traced to specific elements of orthodox, authoritative Islam and its historic practice, including those portions of *fiqh* (classical Islamic law, a.k.a. *shari'ah*) that enjoin Islamic supremacy, encourage enmity toward non-Muslims, and require the establishment of an Islamic state, whose ruler unifies and leads the community of Muslims in what amounts to a perpetual state of war, which may be periodically interrupted by truce, against any who refuse to submit to Islam.

After decades of intermittent warfare, in approximately 1517 the Demak army, led by Raden Patah's son, Sultan Trenggono, finally sacked the infidels' (i.e., Majapahit) capital, torched the sacred Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and scattered the indigenous Javanese nobility, priests, and court followers across the mountainous landscape of southern Java, from whence many fled to Bali. For nearly 25 years, Sultan Trenggono waged annual *jihad* campaigns in southern and eastern Java, in order to break the resistance of the local Javanese aristocracy and landed gentry, known as *kyais*, who rejected his ultimatum to embrace Islam and refused to abandon their ancestral homes, land, and followers to live in impoverished exile.

It was during this formative period of Islamic conquest that the first Javanese narratives about Islam began to take shape. Many of these concern the role of Muslim saints in adapting and propagating the essence of Islamic teachings within the context of Javanese culture, and contrast the saints' behavior with that of Arab and Chinese militants who weaponized specific elements of classical Islamic

orthodoxy in order to justify their quest for military, political, and economic supremacy.

Among the more famous, and controversial, of these narratives concerns the life, teachings and death of Seh Siti Jenar, whom Javanese historical narratives describe as "His Highness"; the "Prince of Gnostics"; the "Shaykh"; "Seh Sunyata Jatimurti," or "He Who Has Attained the Absolute Void as Reality Incarnate"; the "Susunan of Lemah Abang"; "a humble peasant risen to become a saint"; and "a worm, transformed by sacred knowledge into the self-aware manifestation of God Himself."[10]

Among Siti Jenar's disciples were the members of a Sufi (i.e., Islamic spiritual) brotherhood of *kyais*, or local lords, numbering some 40 men, who led a network of mystical Islamic communities spread across rural central Java. Although all had pronounced the *shahada* (Muslim confession of faith) and converted to Islam, they remained steeped in the ancient Javanese tradition of religious pluralism and tolerance, and thus chose to embrace a mystical, rather than supremacist, interpretation and practice of Islam. Mapped out, their locations composed a web that skirted and nearly encircled Raden Patah's court-city of Demak. While Siti Jenar's network of disciples threatened Demak's temporal authority, his teachings were perceived as an even greater threat by orthodox religious leaders affiliated with the kingdom of Demak.

Siti Jenar dared to reveal the inner sanctum of truth (*haqiqa* and *ma'rifa* in Arabic), without requiring that his followers observe even the most basic tenets of Islamic law, such as ritual prayer and fasting during the month of Ramadan. Instead, he set about organizing the countryside along the lines of a great spiritual community, in which *kyais* ruled the local population with a gentle hand and left everyone free to worship according to their own conscience. Siti Jenar's example, and that of his disciples, was enough to attract a large following—and to incur a death sentence from the orthodox religious and political leaders in Demak.

Sunan Kudus, head of the militant Islamic faction in north-central Java, eventually executed Siti Jenar as a heretic, in Demak's great public square, before a crowd of thousands. Eyewitnesses later described how Siti Jenar had laughed in the face of death and went, ecstatic, to his apotheosis. As Javanese tradition tells the story, at the slash of Sunan Kudus's sword, blood spat from Siti Jenar's severed neck to spell "*la illaha ilallah*" ("there is no God but Allah") in the dirt, and word quickly spread throughout the land of Java that this was a message from God Himself—a divine symbol, indisputably proving that Siti Jenar, and not his executioner, was the true and faithful Muslim.

The late Indonesian president and longtime NU chairman, Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, once remarked[11] that Siti Jenar was condemned for publicly teaching the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* ("the unicity of being") and for revealing spiritual practices that lead to the union of the individual soul with God (*manunggaling kawula gusti*), which undermined the authority of religious fundamentalists. To this day in Java, the narrative of Siti Jenar provides a clear demarcation between Muslim supremacists and those who are committed to religious pluralism and tolerance. Extremists often denounce Siti Jenar as an infidel and apostate, while spiritual luminaries, such as President Wahid, generally regard his mystical teachings as an expression of the highest truth of Islam and of reality itself.

For more than 100 years, from 1478 to 1586, these opposing forces struggled for the soul of Java—and, ultimately, for that of Islam—in a war whose decisive engagements occurred not only on the field of battle, but upon the *narrative* terrain: i.e., in the hearts and minds of countless individuals scattered across the lush, tropical landscape of Java. For in this conflict between fundamentalist *jihadists* and Sufi (mystically inclined) Muslims, the Sufis' profound spiritual ideology, popularized among the masses by storytellers and musicians, played a role even more vital than that of economics or pure military force in defeating religious extremism in Java.

One such figure, Sunan Kalijogo, who to this day remains the pre-eminent patron saint of Nahdlatul Ulama, taught his disciples a mystical brand of Islam that readily harmonized with pre-existing elements of traditional Javanese culture. Revered by Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims alike, Kalijogo's teachings formed a stark contrast to the militant brand of Islam espoused by Sunan Kudus and were in fact aligned with the *wahdat al-wujud* doctrine of Seh Siti Jenar, which represents the core teaching of the great Sufi mystic Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1234 in Damascus, Syria) and his respected line of disciples, including Abd al-Karim al-Jili (1366-1424).

At the end of this multigenerational conflict (in 1586), a new dynasty arose, founded on the principle of "the throne for the people," which established religious tolerance as a fundamental governing norm and restored freedom of conscience to all Javanese. This was 200 years *before* similar ideas took firm political root in the West, through passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The founder of that dynasty was a Javanese Sufi Muslim and disciple of Sunan Kalijogo named Senopati ing Alogo. The basis of his victory was the popular appeal of Senopati's message of religious freedom, justice, respect for Javanese cultural identity, and profound inner spirituality, in contrast to the fanaticism and tyranny of his political opponents.

Mataram, the name Sunan Kalijogo's disciples gave to the region of south-central Java now known as Yogyakarta, and to the Islamic dynasty they founded, was loaded with symbolism. In addition to evoking the 9th century Mataram kingdom, which centered nearby, was the first Javanese dynasty to adopt a syncretic form of Hinduism/Buddhism, the name explicitly combined the Sanskrit terms for "mother" (*matr*) and "*Ram*," the seventh avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, who came to earth to destroy the demon-king Ravana. Within the context of 16th century Javanese culture, the narrative was clear: Senopati ing Alogo was like Rama, the incarnation of Vishnu; his guru, Sunan Kalijogo, a contemporary

rishi, or "seer of ultimate Reality"; his followers, the devout Hanoman and his army of *varanas* (forest-dwellers); and Demak, the equivalent of Lanka, the demon kingdom from which Ravana and his followers (i.e., Arab and Chinese fanatics) had issued forth to massacre, rape, and enslave human beings—thereby disrupting the harmony of nature and the tranquil worship of God by religious devotees.

The Javanese victory over Demak gave birth to a set of narratives that have continued to evolve to the present day. These narratives initially assumed the form of oral and written histories such as the *Babad Tanah Jawi* (*History of the Land of Java*), which were composed by highly skilled poets retained by the court of Mataram. Over time, these narratives found expression in virtually every mode of Javanese art, education, and culture, and were both deliberately and spontaneously inculcated, from generation to generation, at every level of Javanese society, from the palace to remote villages.[12]

MANEUVERING WITHIN ISLAM'S NARRATIVE SPACE

The NU leaders who founded Humanitarian Islam and the Movement for Shared Civilizational Values are contemporary heirs to an ancient, vibrant, and continuous cultural and religious tradition that includes Islam Nusantara. For more than 500 years, the spiritual authorities who developed and sustained Islam Nusantara have successfully "maneuvered in the narrative space," to produce one of the most pluralistic and tolerant Muslim-majority societies in the world today.

In 2018, *Strategic Review: The Indonesian Journal of Leadership, Policy, and World Affairs* published a cover story featuring twin essays that examined the strategic framework within which these NU leaders operate. In an article titled "Maneuvering within Islam's narrative space," Lt. Col. Brian Steed—an

assistant professor of military history at the United States Army Command and General Staff College and Iraq veteran with direct experience countering ISIS and al-Qaeda in the field—analyzed the key elements of this framework (Steed 2018).[13]

In his article, Lt. Col. Steed explains that war is a contest for influence, which comes through a variety of means. He remarks that "the best kind of influence is that which lasts absent the influencer" (Steed 2018, 17). Enduring influence, in turn, requires shaping the "narrative space" or "cognitive landscape" inhabited by those one seeks to influence. Although Steed's essay examines maneuver in the narrative space through the lens of America's conflict with ISIS, his analysis is equally relevant to understanding and addressing the complex, interlocking challenges that face the Indosphere. As he explains,

> According to contemporary US military thought and doctrine, there is one aspect toward which maneuver should be directed, and that is the center of gravity. This is explained first and best by the 19th-century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, as he describes it as "the hub of all power" and "the point at which all our energies should be directed"....
>
> A center of gravity is that thing which, if threatened, will cause a change in the behavior of the opponent. It is the thing which the opponent cannot dare risk and will cause adjustments in the opponent's behavior to protect. (Steed 2018, 19)

For example, Islamist terror movements' center of gravity lies in the realm of theological and historical narratives. As Steed notes, their "center of gravity does not exist in the physical space; rather it exists in the narrative space." Hence:

> Understanding narrative space morphology is not simply academic—it is crucial to achieving effective maneuver in the narrative

space. ISIS achieves this effectiveness through a near-intuitive grasp of the narrative space morphology in which they operate. They understand the religious, cultural, linguistic and historical narratives present in their areas of operation. They know what motivates their followers, because it is their narrative. It is intuitive. (Steed 2018, 34)

Preeminent spiritual leaders from Indonesia have long been—and continue to be—adept at maneuvering within the narrative terrain of Southeast Asia. Occupying the spiritual and moral high ground, they are well-positioned to elicit support from a widening circle of Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist leaders, while marginalizing opponents by targeting their center of gravity.

Indonesia's founding fathers were steeped in the history of Islam Nusantara and recognized the threat posed by religious supremacism, which influenced their decision to establish Indonesia as a multireligious and pluralistic state. Their wisdom and ability to maneuver in the narrative space also inspired Indonesia's founding president, Soekarno, and members of his cabinet to adopt Vishnu's mount, the eagle Garuda, tightly gripping a banner emblazoned with the phrase *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Oneness Amid Diversity) between its extended claws as the symbol of their new nation. When confronted by the Darul Islam rebellion (1949 – 1962), which sought to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state, Soekarno, leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama and other Indonesian nationalists drew upon the legacy of Islam Nusantara to delegitimize and crush the armed rebellion, whose adherents routinely beheaded their opponents, much like ISIS today.

In the 1950s, when Islamists sought to implement *fiqh* (classical Islamic law) and transform Indonesia into an Islamic state through political means, Kyai Wahab Chasbullah, co-founder of Nahdlatul Ulama and chairman of its Supreme Council, withdrew NU from the Islamist-dominated political party Masyumi, aligned NU with Soekarno, and orchestrated the

defeat of Masyumi's agenda at the polls. The relative success of Indonesia's democracy after the fall of Soekarno's successor, Soeharto, in contrast to the stark failure of the Arab Spring and the sociopolitical train wreck unfolding throughout the Middle East, may be attributed to Indonesian Muslims' heritage and their ability to maneuver in the narrative space. Yet Indonesia is not immune to the threat posed by religious extremism, which Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Pakistan and other state and nonstate actors have deliberately nurtured and exported worldwide for decades, in their struggle to maintain or acquire political, economic, and military power.

Spirituality as an Engine of Civilizational Progress

The nearly 2,400-year-old Ashokan spiritual and civilizational legacy represents an indigenous cultural basis for human dignity, religious freedom, pluralism, and a competitive yet peaceful marketplace of ideas throughout the "Ashoka-sphere." Many associate such ideas with the West in general and with the North Atlantic axis in particular. However, while the West developed these ideas over many centuries, through painful struggle and in the face of much resistance, their institutionalization via the creation of stable constitutional democracies and robust market economies occurred only very late in the history of the West.

One crucial though often overlooked proximate cause of this "late leap forward" in the economic and political realm was, in fact, a succession of revolutions in the spiritual realm from the 17th to the 19th centuries, including Quakerism, Deism, and the First and Second Great Awakenings. These movements proved instrumental in promoting a spiritually grounded vision of human equality, individual dignity, and freedom in both the religious and political spheres.[14] Above all, this spiritual vision

respected every human being's God-given right to seek and find ultimate truth without interference from others. These movements transformed Britain and America into freer, more pluralistic, more dynamic, and more egalitarian societies. Among numerous other reforms, this radical spiritual and social transformation led to the end of slavery in the British Empire and fueled the abolitionist movement in the United States.

Similarly, Western humanism and Christian democracy played a vital role in the emergence of the post-World War II rules-based international order and creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). These developments did not emerge merely from traditional balance-of-power diplomacy or geopolitical calculations. Central to these political achievements was a profound philosophical and spiritual vision of human beings as possessing "dignity and worth," as "born free and equal in dignity and rights," and as "endowed with reason and conscience" (Preamble, UDHR).

Recognizing the West's vital role in enshrining human dignity and spiritual autonomy as foundational principles of the post-WWII international order, NU leaders are working systematically and institutionally to "re-awaken" a kindred set of values rooted in the ancient spiritual traditions of South and Southeast Asia. On October 11, 2019 in Rome, a resolution drafted by spiritual leaders of the NU was unanimously adopted by the Executive Committee of the world's largest political network, Centrist Democrat International (CDI). Submitted by the largest Islamic political party in Indonesia, the NU-based PKB (National Awakening Party), the resolution acknowledges "the central role of the humanist tradition, and of Christian Democratic political movements" in "inspir[ing] and secur[ing] the adoption of UDHR." The resolution also affirms that "this humanitarian agenda and the universal norms associated therewith represent a uniquely valuable effort to abolish the primordial cycle of hatred, tyranny and violence that has

plagued humanity since time immemorial" (Centrist Democrat International 2019).

At a subsequent gathering of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist religious and political leaders held in Indonesia, CDI adopted another resolution submitted by PKB, which affirmed that "Western humanism, Christian democracy, and Humanitarian Islam are kindred traditions," whose "values and aspirations ... have long been articulated and embraced by the world's great cultural, religious, and ethical traditions." The resolution concludes:

The CDI states the following:

- As the world's economic center of gravity shifts towards Eurasia—and geopolitical competition threatens to undermine peace and security throughout this vast landmass—widespread acknowledgment of, and adherence to, universal ethics and humanitarian values may help ensure that this transition can be navigated more peacefully;
- CDI and its member parties are in a unique position to facilitate this process, for they embrace a common set of humane and universal values, rooted in their respective religious and cultural traditions;
- These traditions—which include but are not limited to Western humanism, Christian democracy, and Humanitarian Islam—may serve as the foundation for a 21st century alliance to promote a rules-based international order founded upon universal ethics and humanitarian values;
- Centrist Democrat International invites people of good will of every faith and nation, as well as political parties and governments worldwide, to join in this alliance to safeguard human dignity and foster the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world or-

der, founded upon the equal rights and dignity of every human being. (Centrist Democrat International 2020)

This resolution—unanimously adopted by the CDI Executive Committee on January 23, 2020 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia—established a concrete mechanism for cooperation between the global Humanitarian Islam movement, the Ashoka Approach, and CDI and its member parties worldwide, including those that govern many European nations and EU institutions, such as Germany and the Presidency of the European Commission (Shah and Dinham 2020, 15). Humanitarian Islam and the Ashoka Approach are thus crucial elements of a global effort—inspired by NU spiritual leaders—to build a civilizational alliance between the Indosphere and the West.

Conclusion: Indonesia at the Vanguard of the Ashoka Approach

The 14th-century Javanese court poet Mpu Tantular—a nephew of King Rajasanagara of the syncretic Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit Empire—composed the epic poem *Sutasoma*, from which the Republic of Indonesia's national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, "Oneness Amid Diversity," is derived. This ancient Javanese *kakawin* (book of poetry) promotes mutual understanding and tolerance between Buddhists and Hindu followers of Shiva. The phrase *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* appears in chapter 139, verse 5:

Rwāneka dhātu winuwus Buddha Wiswa,
Bhinnêki rakwa ring apan kena parwanosen,
Mangka ng Jinatwa kalawan Śiwatatwa tunggal,
Bhinnêka tunggal ika tan hana dharma mangrwa.

It is said that Buddha and Shiva are two distinct substances (or entities).
They are indeed different, yet it is impossible to regard them as fundamentally different [when one apprehends the underlying Unity of existence].
For the Essence (Truth) of Buddha and the Essence of Shiva is One (tunggal).
[The diverse forms of the universe] are indeed different, yet simultaneously One (bhinneka tunggal ika), For Truth (dharma) is indivisible.[15]

Figure 2: Republic of Indonesia National Emblem

The underlying message of Ashoka's Rock Edicts and Mpu Tantular's *Sutasoma* is identical, although they were composed nearly 1600 years apart. This demonstrates the remarkably coherent civilizational worldview that pervaded the Indianized cultural sphere, rooted in a shared perception regarding the ultimate nature of reality—the transcendent ground of being. This profoundly spiritual worldview produced a high degree of religious tolerance and respect for religious pluralism, for it was rooted in the conviction that all genuine religious paths converge upon an ultimate "essence."

One of the things that makes Islam in Indonesia (Islam Nusantara) distinctive is that it did not and does not despise, reject, or seek to destroy the preexisting civilizational heritage of the Indianized cultural sphere. Rather, the *Wali Songo* (Muslim saints who proselytized Islam in Java 500 years ago) and their spiritual heirs have consciously and deliberately built upon the region's millennia-old traditions of rich spiritual and theological insight.

In his article "How Islam Learned to Adapt in 'Nusantara,'" Nahdlatul Ulama General Secretary Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf states that Indonesian Muslim scholars have traditionally "position[ed] Islam as an equal citizen within a highly pluralistic society, rather than as the beneficiary or carrier of a violent, supremacist ideology." He further observes that "In Nusantara, Islam arrived as a guest and was later adopted into the family. In turn, Nusantara Islam developed a distinct character, which is quite different from that manifested by Islam in other regions of the Muslim world" (Staquf 2015, 22 and 24).

As H. Yaqut Qoumas, a senior NU leader and Indonesia's current Minister of Religious Affairs, has stated: "By adopting the *Nusantara Manifesto*, Ansor and Bayt ar-Rahmah are moving systematically, and institutionally, to address obsolete and problematic elements within Islamic orthodoxy that lend themselves to tyranny, while positioning these efforts within a much broader initiative to reject any and all forms of tyranny, and foster the emergence of a global civilization endowed with nobility of character. This call to nobility reflects the primary message of Islam, and of President Wahid, as demonstrated by the *Manifesto*" (Bayt ar-Rahmah 2018).

The decline and ultimate collapse of the historic Indianized cultural sphere—due to military incursions from the Middle East and the Sinosphere—was followed by centuries of European colonialism, which perpetuated the de facto "atomization" of what was once a civilizationally unified and largely peaceful region that is home to over one-third of the world's population.

The key to revitalizing religious pluralism and tolerance in South and Southeast Asia lies in re-awakening the ancient spiritual heritage of the "Ashokan" civilizational sphere, without prejudice towards either modernity or the adherents of more recent religions, including Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity. Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama—the world's largest Muslim organization—is uniquely positioned to accomplish this objective, for it is rooted in the traditions of Islam Nusantara and, hence, of the ancient "Ashoka-sphere" itself.

About the Authors

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Endnotes

1   European political parties affiliated with CDI (previously known as Christian Democrat International) played a key role in establishing the rules-based international order and the European Union. NU leaders have also established the "Humanitarian Islam/World Evangelical Alliance Joint Working Group." The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) is one of the most prominent world-wide Christian bodies, representing over 600 million Evangelical Protestants in some 140 countries. See Bayt ar-Rahmah 2020.

2   Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council, as conveyed to C. Holland Taylor.

3   The *Indonesia Religious Freedom Landscape Report* by Shah et al (Shah et al 2020) was produced under the auspices of a three-and-a-half-year (2017-2020) project—funded by Templeton Religion Trust and led by Timothy Shah and Rebecca Shah—designed to analyze and advance religious freedom in South and Southeast Asia.

4   Holland Taylor contributed significantly to the drafting of this article.

5   Magadhi Prakrit (Māgadhī) or Magadhan was a vernacular Middle Indo-Aryan language, replacing earlier Vedic Sanskrit in parts of the Indian subcontinent. It was spoken in present-day Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. It is believed to be the language spoken by Gautama Buddha and was also the language of the Maurya Empire. Many of the Edicts of Ashoka were composed in Magadhi.

6   "The literal meaning of *shari'a* is 'water path,' or river. Water flows in a spontaneous manner along this path in keeping with its nature, and will continue flowing until it reaches the sea, which is both its source and destination. According to this fundamental understanding of *shari'a*, all who follow a path correctly will reach their Source and Destination (*al-Awal wal-Akhir*), although not everyone is aware of their Origin and Divinely-intended Goal" (Wahid 2011, 128). The volume's first Indonesian edition, *Ilusi Negara Islam*, appeared in 2009.

7   Translation by Timothy S. Shah and C. Holland Taylor, drawing heavily upon the transliterated original text and word-by-word translation available through the University of Oslo's *Bibliotheca Polyglotta* website, which includes Ashoka's Major Rock Edicts. See University of Oslo n.d.

8   The original French edition was published in 1964 by Editions de Boccard, Paris. The first English edition was published by East-West Center Press in 1968.

9   To understand China's pivotal role in the Islamization of the Malay Archipelago—including Kublai Khan's punitive expedition to Java and the Ming dynasty's foreign policy—see Taylor 2018, 36-51. From 1999 – 2003, Holland Taylor conducted extensive research into the Islamization of Java in the 15th and 16th centuries, consulting primary sources including the 17th century Javanese epic *Babad Tanah Jawi* (*History of the Land of Java*). This research led to the establishment in 2003 of LibForAll Foundation by Holland Taylor and H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, former Indonesian president and long-time chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama. LibForAll and its sister organizations—Bayt ar-Rahmah, the Institute for Humanitarian Islam and the Center for Shared Civilizational Values—are directly linked to the 500-year-old traditions of Islam Nusantara, and draw extensively upon strategies developed within that tradition to block the political weaponization of Islam. See also Sen 2009.

10   Some, but not all, of these epithets appear in Florida 1995, 176 – 177.

11   He made this remark to the second author of this article, C. Holland Taylor.

12   Some of these cultural narratives and motifs may be seen in the film *Rahmat Islam Nusantara/The Divine Grace of East Indies Islam* (© 2015 LibForAll Foundation), which was a direct output of a 3-year project funded by Templeton Religion Trust. A November 26, 2015 story in the *New York Times*—"From Indonesia, a Muslim Challenge to the Ideology of the Islamic State"—described the film as "a relentless, religious repudiation of the Islamic State and the opening salvo in a global campaign by the world's largest Muslim group to challenge its ideology head-on" (Cochrane 2015).

13   A companion piece authored by C. Holland Taylor appeared in the same issue of *Strategic Review* (Taylor 2018). Portions of the present article, particularly our account of historical developments in Java, draw heavily upon Taylor's piece.

14   This was a central finding of a two-year research project undertaken by the Templeton-funded Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown University, culminating in several volumes, including Shah and Hertzke 2016 and Wilken 2019.

15   Mpu Tantular here employs the Sanskrit term *dharma* in the sense of Absolute Truth, while also stating that different religious paths lead to the same goal.

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