

FIRST THINGS



This month in Bali, Indonesia, the G20 Summit held its first annual Religion Forum, the “R20.” On November 2 and 3, over four hundred Hindu, Buddhist, Shinto, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders and scholars gathered to discuss how religion can function as a source of global solutions, rather than problems, in the twenty-first century. The G20’s decision to acknowledge the role of religion in geopolitical deliberations was refreshing, as international policy discussions tend to focus on how the world’s religions cause division rather than on how they can contribute to healthy societies.

The event showcased the host country’s distinctive model of religious pluralism and its impressive, if imperfect, progress toward an ethos of religious freedom and social harmony. In fact, the initiative for the R20 came from Indonesia’s Joko Widodo. As president of the world’s largest Muslim-majority nation and the most successful democracy in the Islamic world, he was eager to make his country’s example better known.

To that end, President Widodo entrusted the organization of the R20 to the Indonesia-based Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which promotes a pluralistic and tolerant form of Islam. With over 110 million members, NU is the world’s largest Muslim organization. Its general chairman, Yahya Cholil Staqf (known as Pak Yahya), has emphasized the need for religious traditions to clean up their own act if they are to make genuine contributions toward peace and mutual understanding. He often cites the Catholic

Church's self-examination in Vatican II and the council document *Nostra Aetate*, which formalized an attitude of respect toward non-Christian religions.

Another noteworthy aspect of the meeting: NU invited the secretary general of the Muslim World League (MWL), Shaykh Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, to co-chair the R20 with Pak Yahya. It was a somewhat risky move, but one that could have far-reaching consequences. The Saudi-based MWL has long been associated with efforts to propagate an ultraconservative version of Islam, but has moved under its current leadership toward endorsing religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation. The R20 organizers said they decided to invite Mohammad Al-Issa in recognition of “recent dramatic changes in policy” by the MWL.

I attended the R20 as a delegate. The two days of discussions began with a frank acknowledgment that religion has all too often been a source of, or a pretext for, conflict in today’s increasingly interdependent world. The main topics for deliberation: How to deal with historical grievances, how to reconcile shared principles with cultural diversity, and the sensitive matter of discerning within each tradition whether there are problematic elements that can be discarded without affecting the core. Many participants stated that religious leaders need to educate their followers to reject ideologies that manipulate religion for political purposes, and motivate them to live out their faith in ways that show how religion can contribute to the general well-being.

The meetings produced a communique that “calls upon religious and political leaders and people of goodwill of every faith and nation to join in building a global alliance founded upon shared civilizational values.” It states that the R20 seeks to “prevent the political weaponization of identity,” “curtail the spread of communal hatred,” and “promote solidarity and respect among the diverse peoples, cultures, and nations of the world.”

It is a truism that the most consequential outcome of a conference is often not something that occurs in the formal sessions. And so it may be with this year’s R20. Whatever comes of the group’s high-minded discussions, the first annual Religion Forum will be remembered for acknowledging that religion is important to the G20's goals of economic stability and development, for bringing wider attention to the growing global influence of a reformist brand of Islam virtually unknown in the West, and for bringing together representatives of two historically very different Muslim organizations.

As I listened to the proceedings and witnessed the participants interacting over meals and on visits to holy places, it was moving to observe the earnestness and palpable goodwill among that strikingly diverse collection of men and women. The body language between Mohammad Al-Issa and Pak Yahya was relaxed and friendly, giving rise to speculation about what an alliance might look like among NU and MWL and Centrist Democrat International (CDI), whose president Andres Pastrana spoke at the meeting and whose members are largely drawn from Europe and Latin America. (Formerly known as Christian Democrat International, CDI is already allied with NU.)

One hopes that the world press will pay more attention to next year's R20, which will be held in India, the nation with the world's largest Hindu population. Brazil, which has the world's largest Catholic population, will host the R20 in 2024.

As I left this year's meeting, I could not help but feel that the group's dreams were wildly ambitious. Yet, as Pope Francis said in his message to the R20, if one looks beyond "the ways in which religion is weaponized to stoke hostility and achieve political goals," one finds that the "major religious groups overwhelmingly espouse a set of values that, when widely observed, make possible civilizations marked by peaceful interaction and mutual respect." I permit myself to entertain the thought that possibly, just possibly, this little noticed meeting in Bali might have a larger effect on world stability and prosperity than any decision reached by world leaders at the G20 Summit.

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