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R20: the G20 Religion Forum led by Indonesia – English version

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In late 2022, the Indonesian organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim civil society movement in the world, initiated the Religion Forum (R20) in conjunction with the Indonesian presidency, from 1 December 2021 to 30 November 2022, of the Group of 20 political and economic summit (G20). The R20 convened an interfaith meeting of some 300 religious leaders in Bali, oriented towards peacemaking, two weeks before the G20 meeting last November. The NU is legally independent of government, but the forum was supported by the Indonesian state and inaugurated by the President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo. The R20 meeting attracted virtually no coverage in the Western media. This article argues that the concept underpinning the R20, and the extent of its support, are new and deserve attention from those who study the intersection of religion and geopolitics in our day[i]. It would be truly a game changer, I will suggest, if the R20 were to stimulate the world's most important religious authorities to reform their traditions from within and become forces for peace, carrying along with them the huge number of adherents that each of them could mobilize. A more modest aim, with higher chances of being successful, would be for the NU to show that Indonesian Islam, more flexible and humanistic than the interpretations emanating from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, has its own authenticity and popular backing, and hence need not defer to the Middle East.

A worldwide "interfaith movement", albeit diffuse, has been identified by scholars. Its leading historian, Thomas Albert Howard, concludes: "Achingly idealistic and well intentioned in its aims, it is also a movement confronted by fundamental challenges and potent criticisms[ii]". The idea of harmonizing apparently opposed religious doctrines may be traced back to many innovators, from the German cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) to the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great (1542–1605). But the first major event in the modern movement was the World's Parliament of Religions, which took place in the context of the city of Chicago's World Columbian Exposition

of 1893. “Today”, writes Howard, “we live in a booming heyday of interreligious dialogue” [iii]. Some initiatives are embarked on to secure limited practical goals with the support of religious leaders. A fairly successful example of this approach was the Alliance of Religion and Conservation (ARC), a spinoff from the World Wide Fund for Nature founded in 1995 by the late Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, on the basis that major religions have access to immense networks of adherents, and their office-holders generally take a longer view than that of politicians or industrialists; hence they could be mobilized for environmentalist causes[iv].

A sharply contrasting style is that of initiatives grounded in scriptural interpretation, such as the 26-page letter “A Common Word Between Us and You” addressed to Christians in 2007 by 138 Muslim scholars, and attempting to tether Islam firmly to peace building[v]. Among the reasons why many observers are sceptical about such endeavours are the fierce ideological conflicts within world religions, as well as between them, that have marked their histories; and the disjunction between the pronouncements of elite office-holders and the day-to-day conditions of life in which their ideas are socially embedded. It is understandable that gatherings of high-minded preachers, many of them colourfully costumed and hatted, do not necessarily excite journalists.

The public is now familiar with religious authorities softening their policies towards other faiths, even after long histories of disparaging them. One historical landmark — which did attract considerable media attention at the time — was Pope Paul VI’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions (*Nostra aetate*) promulgated in 1965 after a resolution of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II). This document condemned hostility to Jews, accepted the commonality of the human condition, acknowledged spiritual value in Hinduism and Buddhism, urged mutual understanding with Islam, and enjoined opposition to discrimination and violence. It did however also renew the Roman Catholic Church’s traditional assertion of the objective primacy of Jesus Christ as a person of the Trinity. Since then, the Vatican has stuck to this position, which comes with evangelizing implications that are inevitably in tension with its commitment to respectful interfaith dialogue.

In a key passage relating to Islam, by contrast with the Roman Catholic Church’s dominant tradition of hostility and rejection, *Nostra aetate* took notice of Muslims’ reverence for Jesus and Mary, and urged forgetting of the past:

“Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom[vi]”.

A prominent step forward in interfaith dialogue was the World Day of Prayer for Peace, which took place in Assisi, Italy, in 1986 under the leadership of Pope John Paul II (Karol Wojtyla). Here the Pope went so far as to apologize on behalf of his Church for not always having been faithful to the principle that “peace bears the name of Jesus Christ[vii]”. More recently, the John Templeton Foundation has sponsored an initiative, inspired by the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, to encourage all religions to reconsider and reinterpret their “hard texts … which if taken literally and applied directly lead to hatred and violence and terror and war[viii]”. The solution proposed was to devise “counternarratives” in what one of the participants called a defensive rear-guard campaign, since

"Religious violence seems to be winning the day — not only by murdering, maiming, and terrorizing, all around the globe, but also at the same time, by telling a powerful narrative[ix]".

The R20 forum in Bali was designed to present religion as a source of solutions rather than problems: specifically, to "prevent the weaponization of identity, curtail the spread of communal hatred; promote solidarity and respect among the diverse peoples, cultures and nations of the world; and foster the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order, founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being[x]". In at least three aspects, it is breaking new ground.

First, a distinctive new dimension contributed by the R20 is a reformist effort to confront openly and actively the "hard texts" of each religion rather than trying to explain them away. In his keynote address, Rabbi Professor Alan Brill, who teaches interfaith in a Catholic university in the USA, drew attention to a *teshuva* — the Jewish equivalent of the fatwa in Islam — entitled "The Status of Non-Jews in Jewish Law and Lore Today", published in 2016 by the Rabbinical Law Committee of Conservative Judaism. The *teshuva* "acknowledges that one can find exclusivist and negative passages in the [Jewish] tradition" but it "outright condemned these works and all works by exclusivist Jewish groups". Brill's conclusions are hard-hitting, and especially urgent in view of recent political developments in Israel:

"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[xi]".

In another keynote address, the chairman of NU, Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, invited the world's religious leaders to discuss candidly "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[xii]". In 2019, NU had set an example when it convened a national conference of its religious scholars in West Java, resulting in a decision that the disparagement of non-Muslims as *kafir* (infidels) should be rejected. A leading advisor to the R20, C. Holland Taylor, American co-founder of the Bayt ar-Rahmah ("house of compassion") Foundation, insists that all the religions must be recruited for this cause: unilateral declarations are not enough[xiii].

A second innovation is the location of the momentum for reform. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, yet it receives relatively little media coverage in the West, so that the neglect of the R20 by Western journalist weary of lofty declarations is no surprise. Yet with some deviations — resulting from political violence in the past and more recent Islamist penetration — Indonesia may be regarded as a heartland of moderate Islam. The NU, founded in 1926, claims a membership of 60 million in Indonesia and some 30 million overseas[xiv], and together with the even older Muhammadiyah with its estimated 25 million, they have been called "the stable centre of Indonesian Muslim community[xv]". The R20 has excited considerable attention within Indonesia, whereas the G20 is not seen there as specially favourable to the nation's political and economic interests[xvi].

Thirdly, Muslim initiatives to reach out to other faiths have hitherto been undertaken by prominent individuals, such as members of the Hashemite royal family of Jordan. The NU by contrast is a

mass movement — replete with universities, schools and seminaries, as well as medical services and agricultural groups — on a scale unprecedented in the history of interreligious projects.

The ambition of the NU is remarkable. The co-sponsor of the R20 forum was the Muslim World League. This was established since 1962 as a major vehicle for Saudi Arabia to promote versions of Islam compatible with the Salafi–Wahhabi tendency; but recently it has changed its tone towards combating violent extremism and promoting religious tolerance, and it is currently a policy instrument of the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, Prince Muhammad bin Salman. The political analyst James Dorsey has published incisive commentaries on the contrast between the NU's concept of "humanitarian Islam" — firmly accepting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — and the steps towards moderation taken by the autocratic Saudi monarchy, which has no intention of permitting freedom of expression and association[xvii]. The NU aims to shift the balance of religious authority, so that Indonesia would be on a par with Saudi Arabia and Egypt; indeed to promote the concept of an "Indosphere" uniting South Asia and Southeast Asia as a counterbalance to competing power blocs.

This has led it to reach out to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the right-wing Hindu nationalist group whose Hindutva ideology underpins India's ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). India having taken over the presidency of the G20 for one year after December 2022, the RSS may be involved in organizing a follow-up R20 forum in New Delhi in 2023. This will surprise many observers, in that the BJP is notorious for its fanning of anti-Muslim sentiment in India, albeit partly understandable as a reaction against folk memories of the Muslim conquests of many centuries ago and also against the hostility of Pakistan towards India and the recent intensification of political Islam. Here is a big risk that the NU has taken. Whereas most Western sympathizers with interfaith movements tend to have liberal, idealistic views, Nahdlatul Ulama, "The Revival of the Ulama" is basically a conservative organization. It is possible that there are productive affinities with conservative tendencies in other religions that could be properly understood only through a decentring of liberal Western assumptions.

Dorsey concludes that the cooperation between the Muslim World League and NU as co-sponsors of the Bali G20 masks a political competition for the soul of Islam. The United Arab Emirates are a third party in this intra-Islamic contention, since they also sponsor an interfaith programme. The G20 presidency for 2023 – 2024 will be held by Brazil, which has the largest Christian population in the world — in symmetry with Indonesia for Muslims and India for Hindus — and NU's current thinking includes a project for a third R20 meeting to be convened in that country. In view however of the ability of Saudi Arabia to use its financial muscle to maintain its leadership status, and of the hitherto muted enthusiasm shown by India, the odds are that as an international idea the R20 will become seriously diluted.

At least however it seems achievable that the hold over Sunni Islamic orthodoxy currently exercised in Mecca and Medina and in Cairo, linked to autocratic governments, will be challenged by NU's ideological assertiveness and popular support. As a follow-up to the R20 meeting in Bali, Islamic scholars will gather in February 2023 in Surabaya, Indonesia, to discuss "Islamic jurisprudence for a global civilization". James Dorsey writes that this initiative is designed to undercut the interpretations of Islamic law that justify human rights abuses and enjoin absolute obedience to the ruler. These interpretations, still prevailing in Mecca, Medina and Cairo, are not challenged by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which with its 57 member states

claims to be the collective voice of the Muslim world[xviii]; and they offer insufficient protections against the rogue theologies that have underpinned Al-Qa`ida and ISIS. The consequences of Nahdlatul Ulama's success could be far-reaching, although it is threatened by some political interests in Indonesia that for the last decade have set out to revert to the country's authoritarian past[xix].

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[i] For reasons of space, I omit here all reference to the history of the concept of "world religions" and to contested definitions of "religion", on both of which topics there is an extensive research literature.

[ii] Thomas Albert Howard, *The Faiths of Others: A History of Interreligious Dialogue*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2021, p.236.

[iii] *Ibid.,* p.2

[iv] In 2019 ARC closed down, holding that its aims had been achieved after acceptance of its arguments by organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme. [Online] http://www.arcworld.org/. I was a trustee between 1997 and 2004.

[v] Neil MacFarquhar, "In Open Letter, Muslims Seek Cooperation with Christians as a Step Towards Peace", *New York Times*, 12 October 2007.

[vi] [Online] https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html. Section 3.

[vii] Address of John Paul II to the Representatives of the Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the World Religions, Basilica of St Francis, 27 October 1986, Sections 4–5. [Online] https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861027_prayer-peace-assisi-final.html

[viii] Richard A. Burridge and Jonathan Sacks (eds.), *Confronting Religious Violence: A Counternarrative*, London, Baylor Press, 2018, p. x.

[ix] Guy D. Stroumsa, "Open Religion and its Enemies", in Burridge and Sacks, op. cit., p.59. Stroumsa, an emeritus professor of comparative religion, makes a distinctive contribution to the existing repertoire of calls for eirenic interpretations of exclusivist religious texts: he advocates a decentring of the experience of each faith group within a given society, and reintregration of memories of other groups. Though focused on the history of Christian–Jewish relations, Stroumsa's argument – that the boundary markers cherished by each confession need to be transgressed – could have a special pertinence in the mosaic of religious cultures found in both India and Indonesia. This could be aligned with the principle of *Pancasila*, the official philosophical foundation of the Indonesian state which embraces religious pluralism. *Ibid*., pp.72–73.

[x] "Welcome to the Indonesia Religion Forum", [Online] www.r20-indonesia.org.

[xi] Alan Brill, "Problematic Exclusivist Texts", 2022, p.4. [Online] https://baytarrahmah.org/media/speeches/r20-2022/Rabbi-Professor-Alan-Brill_Problematic-Exclusivist-Texts.pdf

[xii] Political communiqué, Plenary Session 4, [Online] https://baytarrahmah.org/2022_11_03_r20-plenary-session-4/

[xiii] C. Holland Taylor, Personal communication, 21 December 2022.

[xiv] Faried F. Saenong, "Nahdlatul Ulama (NU): A Grassroots Movement Advocating Moderate Islam", in *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements*, 2021, Brill [Online] https://brill.com/display/book/9789004435544/BP000016.xml?language=en. These membership estimates are unreliable.

[xv] Martin von Bruinessen, "Post-Suharto Muslim engagements with civil society and democratisation", In S. Hanneman and H. S. Nordholt (Eds.), *Indonesia in transition: Rethinking "civil society," "region" and "crisis*", (pp. 37–66), 2004, Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, p.61.

[xvi] C. Holland Taylor, pers. comm., *ibid.*

[xvii] James M. Dorsey, "Behind lofty declarations, major Muslim and Hindu groups compete for power", *The Times of Israel*, 22 November 2022, [Online] https://civilizationalvalues.org/media/2022/The-Times-of-Israel_behind-lofty-declarations-major-muslim-and-hindu-groups-compete-for-power_11-22-22.pdf

[xviii] With competition from post-revolutionary Shi`a Iran.

[xix] James Dorsey, "Throwing darts: Indonesian call for religious reform challenges Muslim autocracy", 18 December 2022. https://civilizationalvalues.org/media/2022/The-Turbulent-World_Throwing-darts_Indonesian-call-for-religious-reform-challenges-Muslim-autocracy_10-18-22.pdf. Dorsey accepts that NU's silence about a recently adopted new criminal code in Indonesia, which criminalizes religious proselytism, extramarital sex, and insulting the President, casts a shadow over the organization's credibility. But this appears to have been a political compromise which may be modified. See: Sana Jaffrey and Eve Warburton, "Indonesia's new criminal code turns representatives into rulers", *New Mandala*, 9 December 2022. [Online] https://civilizationalvalues.org/media/2022/new-mandala_Indonesias-new-criminal-code-turns-representatives-into-rulers_12-09-22.pdf. Moreover in such a vast organization there are bound to be divisions. See: Alexander R. Arifianto, "Practicing what it preaches? Understanding the contradictions between pluralist theology and religious intolerance within Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama", *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 55:2, 241–264. [Online] https://civilizationalvalues.org/media/2017/Al-Jamiah-Journal-of-Islamic-Studies_Practicing-What-it-Preaches_2017.pdf

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