



Spiritual Ecology and COP28

Spiritual Ecology: “Fulfilling Our Qur’anic Mandate to Serve as Stewards of God’s Creation (*Khalifah fi-al-Ardh*)”

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*~ H.E. KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf
General Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board*

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — On 6 November 2023 the General Chairman of the world’s largest Muslim organization, H.E. KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf, addressed over 100 prominent religious figures who had gathered for the Global Faith Leaders Summit on Climate Action. The Summit was held three weeks prior to the 28th UN Climate Change Conference (COP28), during which over 83,000 international participants from 197 nations convened in Dubai, UAE, from 30 November to 13 December 2023.

Billed as “a global summit for faith leaders from around the world, to underscore the crucial role of faith communities in addressing climate change,” the Global Faith Leaders Summit on Climate Action was organized by the Muslim Council of Elders in partnership with the COP28 Presidency, the UN Environment Programme, and the Catholic Church under the patronage of the UAE’s President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

The Global Faith Leaders Summit and COP28 occurred against a backdrop of government efforts to replace the electricity generation and fuel distribution networks of entire nations; the rapidly accelerating deindustrialization of Germany; rising fuel poverty across Western Europe; government mandates to restrict the use of fertilizer and thereby reduce agricultural output; massive protests by farmers across Europe; systematic efforts to prevent the generation of low-cost electricity throughout the Global South; economic collapse in Sri Lanka following passage of an anti-chemical fertilizer act by its Parliament; and a hollowing-out of the West’s economic capacity to help defend and sustain the post-WWII rules-based international order, at a time when its moral authority has also been severely eroded.

In his address to the Global Faith Leaders Summit, Mr. Staquf said:

From an Islamic perspective, as I understand it, environmental stewardship is a divine obligation central to our very presence on earth. God provides humanity with everything we need to flourish but — in order to do so — we must tend to His creation and ensure that it is well-kept....

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Responsible environmental stewardship, at a global level, requires building a broad-based consensus that extends from the grassroots of society to the corridors of state and institutional power. This is the objective of the G20 Religion Forum (R20) and its Spiritual Ecology Movement, which Nahdlatul Ulama launched under the auspices of Indonesia's recent Presidency of the G20.

Forging consensus requires listening to all voices. Everyone alive on planet earth is a stakeholder. Our solutions to environmental problems will only be sustainable if they do not undermine international peace and security and genuinely serve the interests of humanity as a whole. This includes the roughly 2 billion people, or 25% of the world's population, who live in precarious circumstances characterized by poverty, instability, and often violence.

Many of the world's inhabitants depend on fossil fuels in their daily lives to ensure a minimal level of economic wellbeing. Any strategy that seeks to resolve environmental problems by harming their interests will merely precipitate the bloodshed and chaos that God warns about in the Qur'anic chapter titled *Surat al-Baqarah*. We must devise environmental strategies that are fair, benefit everyone, and give people adequate time to adjust to any changes. Radical, top-down prescriptions that do not account for the interests of those who lack wealth and power will simply destabilize societies and further jeopardize our shared environment.

The need for a broad-based consensus is why — while serving on Policy Exchange's 16-member [Indo-Pacific Commission](#) chaired by former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper — we called for the creation of a Conference on Strong Societies: a dialogue mechanism that would engage mass, grassroots organizations across the world in a process to determine the “highest common denominator” regarding shared values upon which agreement can be found.

Today, I renew that call. Let us mobilize public support for a [spiritual ecology](#) that is rooted in Qur'anic principles — following the example of the Messenger of God (saw.), of whom the Noble Qur'an says:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

“And [thus, O Prophet,] We have sent thee as [an evidence of Our] grace towards all the worlds.” ~ Qur'an, 21:107

Read the entire speech H.E. KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf delivered to the Global Faith Leaders Summit on Climate Action, titled “[Spiritual Ecology: Fulfilling Our Qur'anic Mandate to Serve as Stewards of God's Creation \(Khalifah fi-al-Ardh\)](#).”

On the evening of 6 November 2023, during a ceremony held at Abu Dhabi's state palace, Qasr al-Watan, 28 Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Sikh, Bahai, and Jewish religious leaders walked across a symbolic map of the world before signing a document known as [The Abu Dhabi Interfaith Statement for COP28](#).

Speaking “as representatives of our respective faith, Indigenous, and wisdom traditions,” signatories of *The Abu Dhabi Interfaith Statement for COP28* declared that it is “our collective duty... to accelerate the energy transition and achieve net zero by 2050, as called for in the Paris Agreement” and to align financial investments with this objective, by “beseech[ing] financial institutions, IFIs, private sector, companies, and governments to adopt responsible investments and business practices aligned with climate, environmental and social standards.”

In 2022, Nahdlatul Ulama established the G20 Religion Forum (R20) in conjunction with the Indonesian Presidency of the G20, in order to “infuse the world’s political and economic power structures with moral and spiritual values.” Long known for its opposition to the political weaponization of Islam by extremist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda, and ISIS, Nahdlatul Ulama also discourages the manipulation of religious teachings — and efforts to harness the world’s faith traditions — in service to far-reaching agendas dictated by political and economic elites.

For this reason, H.E. KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf did not sign *The Abu Dhabi Interfaith Statement for COP28*. Rather than align Islamic teachings with a political and economic agenda rooted in a largely secular analysis of the world’s ecological crisis, Mr. Staquf advises Nahdlatul Ulama’s 100 million followers to “think about these issues from an Islamic perspective,” and thus avoid being “like the tail of a four-legged animal, adopting foreign agendas conceived by ‘heaven-knows-who’ for ‘heaven-knows-what’ purpose.”

In a May 2023 speech delivered on the occasion of Nahdlatul Ulama [empowering women](#) to issue *fatwas* (religious rulings) for the first time in the organization’s history, Mr. Staquf said:

I have been extremely active in various interfaith forums since the 1980s. In the 1990s and early 2000s, a tendency began to emerge whereby agendas that did not originate from within a religious environment started to be introduced and discussed within the context of interfaith dialogue. This was so that those secular agendas could be supported in the name of religion....

We want to examine problems that confront us and respond from the perspective of our own tradition — namely, by developing insights rooted in the traditions of *ahl al-sunnah wa-al-jama‘ah* (Sunni Islam) — and not merely echo talking points or ideologies concocted somewhere else. We want to assume responsibility for finding solutions to the *real* problems facing us.

During the R20 International Summit of Religious Leaders held in Bali, Indonesia in 2022, Nahdlatul Ulama, the Muslim World League, and the Center for Shared Civilizational Values (CSCV) [launched the Spiritual Ecology Movement](#), to foster balance within nature and society. As CSCV Deputy Chairman & CEO, C. Holland Taylor, said at the launch:

At a time when environmental discourse and related policy discussions are dominated by an overwhelmingly secular perspective, it is vital that international fora such as the G20 be open to the voices of religious leaders and their communities, who constitute approximately 85% of the world’s population. This event — occurring on the eve of

the first annual R20 Summit in Bali — demonstrates that the world’s major religions have both the potential and the will to cooperate in revitalizing indigenous traditions of spiritual ecology, which can help restore balance within nature and human societies worldwide.

“The purpose of the G20 Religion Forum, or R20, is to help ensure that religion functions as a genuine and dynamic source of solutions rather than problems in the 21st century. Through the R20, we hope to facilitate the emergence of a global movement to bring the world’s geopolitical and economic power structures into alignment with the highest moral and spiritual values, for the sake of all humanity.”

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