



Interview with H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid Former President of Indonesia and Long-time Head of Nahdlatul Ulama

June 4, 2005

In your opinion, what is the essence of Islam?

To be lenient towards others and understand their value systems, knowing that they are tolerated by Islam as a religion. The essence of Islam is encapsulated in the phrase, 'For you, your religion; for me, my religion.' That's the essence of tolerance.

What role can Indonesia play in the global development of a peaceful and pluralistic Islam?

First, by presenting Islam's tolerant nature; and second, by 'mining' old and new values from Islam, and sharing these interpretations worldwide.

Why did you decide to become LibForAll Foundation's patron and advisor?

It's important to support work like that. Besides, I've known Holland Taylor [LibForAll's founder and CEO] for years. He'd come to my office and we'd talk about religion and this and that, but he never tried to force his own views on me. That's what's important.

How can LibForAll Foundation help Indonesia and the Islamic world?

By disseminating our views. As I've always said to Muslim visitors from the Middle East, Islam there is a bit different from ours. How? For example, in Indonesia ladies can kiss the hands of teachers, whether they're male or female, while in Middle Eastern countries, they're not allowed. The Qur'an says that if motivated by sexuality, women should not be close to men. Here, we say that precisely because of that [Qur'anic verse], if a female kisses the hands of her teachers out of respect and not out of sexual desire, then it's ok [laughter]. Here we differentiate between Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions on the one hand, and laws and cultural practices on the other.

What can individual Americans do to help prevent another attack like that of 9/11?

That's a question that I cannot answer, you see, because the same question bedevils me.

How significant is a man like Ahmad Dhani, and his music, to Indonesia's development as a free and prosperous nation?

Well, of course he tries to present the cultural manifestation of the quote-unquote "right Islam" ... that Islam is tolerant, that Islam is democratic, that Islam looks after the welfare of people... not something rigid like 'Islam is above everything else.'"

Radical Islamist groups have attacked Ahmad Dhani and his band Dewa, and accused them of trying to “destroy” Islam. What is your opinion of their claims?

Those claims are false. Wrong. Actually those people would like to attack me, but they don't have the courage, so they try that on Dhani instead. (Laughter.)

As the long-time head of the world's largest Muslim organization, you've often sent members of the Nahdlatul Ulama to defend Christian churches and congregations from attack. Could you tell us why?

It's my belief that the majority should always protect the minority. It so happens that now Christians are the minority in Indonesia, so I have to protect them. One way [in addition to having his supporters to defend churches from physical attack] is by knowing the difference between existing laws and technical regulations. For example, whenever Christians want to build a church here, people from the extreme persuasion will say to the local government that according to regulations, permission has to be granted by the majority to build that church.

I explain to Muslims that the reason Christians would like to build so many churches, is because they're divided into a large number of denominations. Muslims—whether Shi'ites, modernists or traditionalists—can all pray in the same mosque. But Christian liturgy varies by denomination, so although they may have a congregation of only five people, they still need a separate church. So I tell people that beyond the technical regulations, we have to remember that our constitution guarantees and permits the building of churches.

What is the most effective way to overcome religious extremism in the Islamic world?

By explaining what Islam truly is, because without that explanation, people will tend to accept the [un-refuted] extremist view.

What policies should the American government pursue in order improve its image and promote a peaceful and harmonious relationship with the Islamic world?

I think two things at once. One is by trying to disseminate liberalistic ideas among Muslims, but without ever mentioning that they're liberal (laughter). The other is by helping Muslims understand that modernity is a blessing for everybody, including Muslims themselves. We can adopt modern, liberalistic values without losing our identity as Muslims. This is what's important. I myself have been exposed to Western culture, and Westernized to some extent, in my clothes for example, but I'm still a Muslim. I refrain from drinking alcohol, or eating pork. This makes me distinct from Western people.

Do you have any last words for our audience? Any final message for American viewers?

Well, I think the most important thing now is just to act on what you believe. Tolerance, yes, of course. So just make that a reality in your daily life.