

The True Heart of Indonesia's Islam

Katrin Figge | December 13, 2010



A screenshot from the TV series 'Ocean of Revelations,' produced by the LibForAll Foundation, which highlights the teachings of moderate Islamic religious leaders who espouse tolerance and respect for plurality. (Photo courtesy of Goethe-Institut)

Even though Indonesia has long been known as a country where the majority of the population practices a moderate form of Islam, its image as a bastion of religious tolerance has taken a hit in recent years. In some cases, it has seemed downright intolerant, with clashes between Muslims and Christians often escalating into ugly incidents of physical violence.

At the same time, Muslims living in Western countries have faced growing levels of prejudice, as well as more insistent claims that Islam is a radical faith.

To help overcome intolerance and promote a more pluralistic and inclusive understanding of Islam, the Goethe-Institut in Jakarta has organized "Ocean of Revelations," an interactive exhibition featuring weekly video screenings, speakers

and discussion groups, which is being held until the end of this month.

The exhibition is a collaborative effort between the LibForAll Foundation, the Friedrich-Naumann Foundation, the German Academic Exchange Service and Alumniportal Deutschland.

"Despite the spiritual title, the motivation for this is actually quite political," said Frank Werner, head of cultural programs at Goethe-Institut Jakarta.

"We can no longer ignore prejudice and intolerance that is based on a lack of knowledge, manipulated fear and an unwillingness to listen.

"The attacks on Christian priests in Jakarta and Muslim taxi drivers in Berlin are manifestations of a scary new attitude taking root in our societies."

"Ocean of Revelations" is also the title of a television series, produced by the LibForAll Foundation, which seeks to highlight Islamic religious authorities and teachings that go against hard-line views.

"Firmly grounded within the theological and spiritual traditions of Islam itself, this video series is presented by top Muslim leaders who possess the moral and theological authority to successfully adopt a bold stance against religious extremism," said Holland Taylor, co-founder and CEO of the LibForAll Foundation.

Taylor is not only an expert on Islam, but also the spreading phenomenon of Islamization in Southeast Asia.

Each episode addresses a key topic taken from Islamic theology.

Four episodes will be shown during the exhibition, and Indonesian Muslim leaders and intellectuals have been invited to lead discussions of the episodes and how they apply to people's lives.

"For decades, Islamist radicals have been propagating their virulent ideology of hatred, supremacy and violence throughout the Muslim world — fueled by a potent combination of petrodollars and missionary zeal," Taylor said.

"This flow of radical ideas includes a massive effort to translate and disseminate extremist texts and to produce extremist programming for television and the Internet.

"This type of programming has started taking up a more and more significant chunk of the public discourse in many Islamic countries, as well as among Muslim communities in the West."

It was the increasing number of incidents involving religious intolerance that made Taylor decide it was time to address and counter a situation he felt was rapidly becoming critical.

Thus, the idea for "Ocean of Revelations" was born.

"The primary challenge facing us is identifying film professionals who understand the profound theological content we wish to convey and appreciate the nuances involved so well that they can readily match our speakers' wisdom with the appropriate images," said Taylor, who also acted as the director of the series.

"This has increased our production time significantly, in order to achieve the desired result."

Six of a planned 26 episodes have been finished.

The series will be available with subtitles in Arabic, Turkish, English, German and Indonesian.

"Dissemination of the knowledge contained in 'Ocean of Revelations' to key audiences in North America and Europe may help these audiences deepen their understanding of Islam, and move beyond polarization," Taylor said.

"It would also facilitate the development of a global counter-extremism network consisting of Muslim and non-Muslim opinion leaders who share a common set of humane, universal values."

Episodes from the series have already been shown in several countries, eliciting reactions that tend to be as strong as they are varied, according to Taylor.

"In Marrakech, Morocco, at a meeting of the UN Alliance of Civilizations, the majority of viewers praised the film and called for its wide distribution. Meanwhile, the head of a major Saudi foundation screamed aloud after viewing the episode on jihad, seeking to intimidate others from backing the film," he said.

With "Ocean of Revelations," the foundation wants to address non-Muslim viewers in Western countries, but it also aims to distribute the films among Muslim communities and within the network of Islamic boarding schools.

"We have field-tested the series at a number of pesantren [Islamic boarding schools], Muhammadiyah universities and state high schools, and documented the films' ability to produce dramatic attitude changes, particularly in audiences that have adopted an extremist mind-set." Taylor said.

"Those who already have a pluralistic and tolerant view of Islam find their views reinforced."

The belief that radical Islam has to be countered and challenged from within the Muslim community was

shared by former President Abdurrahman Wahid, better known as Gus Dur, one of the co-founders of the LibForAll Foundation.

In an opinion piece published by The Wall Street Journal in December 2005, Abdurrahman wrote: “Muslims themselves can and must propagate an understanding of the ‘right’ Islam, and thereby discredit extremist ideology.

Yet to accomplish this task requires the understanding and support of like-minded individuals, organizations and governments throughout the world.

Our goal must be to illuminate the hearts and minds of humanity, and offer a compelling alternate vision of Islam, one that banishes the fanatical ideology of hatred to the darkness from which it emerged.”

In the same spirit, the Goethe-Institut was more than happy to host screenings of “Ocean of Revelations.”

“It is our firm conviction that Indonesia — the third largest democracy in the world [which practices] a secular and enlightened form of Islam — should play a much more prominent role in the struggle to defeat extremism,” said Werner, the institute’s head of cultural programs.

“We hope to achieve an atmosphere of active listening, curiosity and trust so that the complementary characters of Islam and Christianity will be undeniable and no longer capable of being overshadowed by those who use terror to hijack the news cycle, keeping it forever stuck,” he added.

The first two screenings of “Ocean of Revelations,” which took place on Dec. 1 and 8, were called a success by Werner.

“Both events attracted many visitors, mainly Indonesians,” he said, adding that he was especially happy that there were a lot of young people in the audience.

“The discussions were lively and candid — definitely a success for the freedom of opinion.”

Taylor said Indonesia — as the most populous Muslim-majority nation in the world — had a lot to lose if radical Islam spread unchecked.

It’s a high-stakes game spurred on by opportunistic politicians and political parties too willing to ignore Indonesia’s tradition of religious tolerance.

He also said Indonesia could play a key role in shaping the world’s perception of Islam.

“Indonesia possesses tremendous ‘cultural capital’ in the form of prominent Muslim leaders who have a profoundly pluralistic, tolerant and spiritual understanding of Islam, and who can help the world overcome this ‘crisis of misunderstanding’ about Islam that is growing more severe with each passing year,” he said.

‘Ocean of Revelations’

Wednesday, Dec. 15, and Monday, Dec. 20, from 7:30 p.m.

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<http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/lifeandtimes/the-true-heart-of-islam/411439>