

Gus Mus's Monumental Step: Launching *The Illusion of an Islamic State* in Europe

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They call him Gus Mus. One thing's for sure: although he's currently in Brussels and Washington, DC, it's not on the pretext of engaging in "comparative study" abroad, like so many members of Indonesia's [corrupt] legislature. He is a profound and mature intellectual. And though he has lots of time, it's never enough, because he is constantly immersed in thought and action.

Because of his broad and open heart, he's willing to completely trust the good intentions of others. He keeps suspicion at a distance, knowing that it will only devour his energy. He lives simply in his native village in Rembang, and has never been tempted—like so many others—by the bright lights and lures of Jakarta.

He is not a blasphemer. For he maintains perfect control of himself, never giving vent to anger or cursing others. He carefully and wisely considers every step. And though he now finds himself amid the upheaval of politics [because of his responsibilities as Deputy Chairman and day-to-day head of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council], he continues to guard his thoughts and behavior. He does not remain aloof from our nation's chaos, but reflects carefully upon the steps needed to address our many problems.

And, he is taking concrete steps [to do so]. He shares his profound reflections with others, through his writings. He has collected and offered many brilliant ideas to foster peace and progress in our island nation. Then, [two years ago,] he carefully arranged and presented these thoughts in the form of a book, *Ilusi Negara Islam*. Through this book, he cast his thoughts far and wide, and inspired millions of Indonesians to refrain from inciting hatred, inflaming others' emotions, or encouraging their fellow [Muslims] to point swords.

Now he has translated this distinguished book into English, with the title, *The Illusion of an Islamic State*. His noble objective is to inspire not only Indonesians, but people throughout the world. In this way he is giving of himself, and sincerely inviting the "citizens of this earth" to know and understand each another. To recognize that all human beings are truly our brothers and sisters, in spirit. And to realize that although there will always be conflict, this very fact obliges us to invite one another to find solutions together, cooperating in a spirit of brotherhood.

Gus Mus has already written millions of words, expounding his countless ideas. And he has perfected these words in the greatness of his heart and soul, and brought them to bear in face-to-face meetings. He visits people whom it is appropriate to visit. He straightens that which is crooked, and transforms the twisted aims [of those who listen] into models of sincerity. He engages in heart-to-heart dialogue, so that there will be no room for the growth of hatred. And on Saturday, 07 May 2011, *Kompas* [Indonesia's largest newspaper] reported his latest step in an article entitled, "Gus Mus Launches Book in Europe":

Kyai Haji Achmad Mustofa Bisri, widely known as Gus Mus, a leading Indonesian religious figure, launched the English version of the book "The Illusion of an Islamic State" in the European Parliament in Brussels, an event that was attended by a number of European Union politicians. The Indonesian Ambassador in Brussels, Arif Havas Oegroseno, and Dr. Werner Langen, a German member of the European Parliament who serves as head of the Parliament's Commission for Southeast Asia and ASEAN, served as joint hosts in launching the book, which was previously launched in Indonesia and received widespread acclaim from the [Indonesian] public.

Dr. Langen, who visited Indonesia this past February, expressed his great pride at being able to sponsor the launch of this vital book, in order to expand Europeans' horizon of understanding about Islam. According to Dr. Langen, this effort to explain the tolerant nature of Indonesian Islam is consistent with one of the fundamental principles of the European Union, namely, to support and develop interfaith and intercultural dialogue within the bounds of Europe itself.

A huge, and even monumental, step. Differences of opinion, and the misunderstandings and hatred that result, will not be allowed to fester unchecked. In his profound humility, Gus Mus has chosen to visit the West, and engage in dialogue. Questions are asked, and answered. Perhaps not every question is expressed. And perhaps not every answer will prove satisfactory to all. Yet, though such face-to-face dialogue, Gus Mus has launched a process of international *silaturahmi* (sitting together in a spirit of mutual openness and respect, to learn from one another) [between Indonesian Islam and the West], which, step-by-step, will give rise to mutual understanding. That is the reality of genuine dialogue.

It is human nature that not all differences of opinion can be resolved through dialogue. Yet that should not prevent us from understanding each other. Men and women are extremely different, yet capable of living harmoniously in a single household. Churches and mosques are also truly different, yet can stand side by side, separated by no more than a wall. Nations and their people are fundamentally different, and yet they routinely assemble at the United Nations.

To repeat [more explicitly]: it is inappropriate to allow differences to rise to the level of disputes, which become a source of calamity and disaster. The linguistic differences between nations give rise to a search for understanding and verbal equivalents, which are ultimately compiled in the form of dictionaries. For example, an Indonesian—English dictionary enables Indonesians to understand that Americans mean "*makan*" when they say "eat," and vice versa. Millions of words and terms have been carefully evaluated in a search for their equivalents, so that the world's inhabitants can understand each other. Through mutual understanding of language and intent, communication flows more freely, intense and full of significance.

The same is true of governments. Numerous foreign embassies have been established in Jakarta, and Indonesian embassies abroad. This suggests an intention to be friends, and to facilitate mutual understanding. Which is exactly why Gus Mus has produced the English version of *Ilusi Negara Islam*: i.e., the book, *The Illusion of an Islamic State*. So that non-Indonesian speakers can plumb its depths of meaning, and the book achieve its global objective. Which is to prevent the misunderstandings that arise, when [Westerners] do not understand what [Islam] means [to most Muslims].

The same is true of physical or emotional sensations. The feeling of pain experienced by human beings who live in the Arctic Circle is not unlike that felt by people who live in Merauke [in Papua, Indonesia]. This explains why other nations have rushed to provide assistance, when earthquakes devastated Indonesia. They feel our pain. And the same is true in reverse. Although impoverished, we promptly dispatched aid to Japan when a recent earthquake struck the Land of the Rising Sun. Despite the fact that Japan colonized our nation for many years, and cruelly butchered our ancestors. There is ample proof of past Japanese brutality towards the people of Indonesia. And yet a feeling of humanity has overcome all that. The desire for revenge has been slowly erased through mutual exploration, explanation and a good faith effort to know and understand each other.

This kind of benevolent intention—to know and understand each other—enables Gus Mus to feel what others feel, even on the far side of the world. When the United States invaded Iraq during the Bush era, Gus Mus felt the Iraqi people's acute pain. He wrote a poem that expressed his and their suffering, and his attitude towards the violence then underway. Seated onstage during a public event, Gus Mus handed the poem to [famed Indonesian singer] Iwan Fals, to serve as the lyrics for a song. Of course Iwan could not refuse, and so he wrote a song using the lyrics from the poem, *I Love You*:

*I love you, for you are a human being
[spiritually ennobled by God].
But if you act with cruelty towards others
I shall oppose you,
For I, too, am a human being.*

*I love you, for you are a human being
[spiritually ennobled by God].
But if you shatter and crush humanity
I shall stand against you,
For I, too, am a human being.*

*Yet I shall never cease loving you,
For whatever your actions, you remain a human being
[spiritually ennobled by God].
And I, too, am a human being.*

Resolute, serious and clear. That is Gus Mus in a nutshell. He resides in Rembang, Central Java, but embraces and encompasses the entire globe, through his understanding of humanity. The spirit of pluralism pulses at the heart of his many works, whether in the form of essays, poetry or sermons. He is perfectly aware that our nation was built upon the contributions and sacrifice of countless different people. Those who fought and died for our nation's independence were obviously not all followers of a single religion [Islam].

People of many different religions and ethnicities strove together to obtain our nation's freedom. Diversity has long been characteristic of this sacred earth [of Indonesia]. Tolerance has been rooted in our soil since the days of our ancient ancestors. The fact that differences of opinion exist, or even disputes, is no reason to negate the existence of other communities, or seek to destroy them. Come, let us sit together in a spirit of humility, in order to find a common ground for the welfare of our entire nation. As a closing remark, I would like to quote a profoundly humane message from Gus Mus, that was reported in *Kompas* last Saturday, in the article "Gus Mus Launches Book in Europe":

"We must strive to become human beings who are capable of humanizing others," said Gus Mus. "This means that we should value and respect other human beings, independent of their religious background or beliefs. This is what the Prophet Muhammad—may God bless him and grant him peace—taught his followers," he said.

Gus Mus was born in Rembang, Central Java on 10 August 1944, to a family of observant Muslims. His grandfather, Kyai Mustofa Bisri, was a prominent *'alim* (religious scholar). His father, Kyai Haji Mustofa Bisri—who founded Pondok Pesantren (Madrasah) Roudlatut Thalibin in 1941—was likewise a renowned and charismatic *'alim*.

Gus Mus was carefully and strictly educated by his parents, especially in regard to the principles of religion. Yet his education may also be regarded as highly diverse. Upon completing elementary school in 1956, he enrolled in a local Islamic high school. After one year, he left that school to study at the venerable Pesantren (Madrasah) Lirboyo in Kediri for two years. He then moved again, to the equally prominent Pesantren Krapyak in Yogyakarta. In Yogya, his studies were guided by the renowned Kyai Haji Ali Maksum for nearly three years. Gus Mus then returned to Rembang in order to teach Islam, directly under the guidance of his father [before attending al-Azhar University in Cairo].

Kyai Haji Ali Maksum and his father, Kyai Haji Mustofa Bisri, were the spiritual teachers who most influenced the course of Gus Mus's life. Both religious scholars allowed their students complete freedom to develop their artistic talent.

<http://media.kompasiana.com/buku/2011/05/08/langkah-monumental-gus-mus-luncurkan-the-illusion-of-an-islamic-state-di-eropa/>