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# THE ILLUSION OF AN ISLAMIC STATE

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## *Epilogue*

### NEVER CEASE LEARNING

By *Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri*

This book, *The Illusion of an Islamic State*, may be read from the perspective of both politics and religion. In terms of politics, it constitutes a reminder to the Indonesian nation concerning the hidden dangers of attempts to transform our country into a theocratic state. This danger threatens not only the inhabitants of Indonesia, but Islam itself. For the people of Indonesia, such a change would inevitably diminish cultural richness and religious freedom—not only for non-Muslims, but also for Muslims—and grossly distort Islam itself. For non-Muslims, this change would likely cause them to experience psychological and social alienation from a country whose official belief system differed from their own. While for Muslims, this change would lead to narrow restrictions and the vanished opportunity to interpret religious teachings in accord with the social and cultural context of Indonesia. Every reading that differs from the official state interpretation of Islam will be declared subversive and forbidden.

Formalization will transform Islam itself from a religion into an ideology, whose boundaries are determined by political interests. Islam, which was broad and open-minded at the outset, and lives like an organism that is communicative and directly interactive with the situation and condition of its followers, will be stuffed into an ideological box and transformed into a lifeless monument, which is praised without reference to the true and supreme pur-

poses of religion itself. Ultimately, religion will become viewed as *ghāyah*, or the final goal, rather than the path to God (*shari'a*) as originally revealed. God's blessing, which (accompanies a state of self-transcendent awareness and) represents the final goal, will lie increasingly far in the distance.

Efforts to transform Islam into an ideology, and to create an Islamic state, are generally prompted by an excess of religious enthusiasm unsupported by sufficient knowledge of Islam itself. Excessive enthusiasm may lead a person to "absolutize" the knowledge that he or she has attained, despite its being quite limited and partial. As a result, he or she brands other forms of knowledge as erroneous and rejects them. It is interesting to compare this partial understanding of religion with the Sufi parable conveyed by Jalaluddin Rumi, "Touching an Elephant in the Dark."

It concerns five people who argue about the nature of elephants, because they have each rubbed a different part of the giant beast in the dark, thus obtaining partial knowledge in the absence of light (*hidāyah*, or Divine guidance).

Anyone who has a full understanding of elephants' physiognomy may find it hilarious to hear the five men argue violently, as each tries to compel the others to accept his definition of an elephant, which is based on having explored, by touch, just a small fraction of the animal's body. The situation grows more unfortunate when, lacking confidence in the knowledge they have achieved, some of the men try to formalize their concept of the elephant into official schools of law (*madzhab*), while proclaiming that their comrades' divergent perceptions—which represent a threat to the newly "official" view—are subversive and must be silenced.

The mischief doesn't stop there. Swept away by enthusiasm and convinced that they're implementing the Prophet's saying, "Convey my words, even if only a single verse," there are those who—to return once again to the parable of the elephant—perpetrate acts of violence, and coerce others into admitting that an elephant is like a tree, or a pendulum, or a wall, or a whip, or a fan. Which is to say that in the real world of socio-religious interaction, Islam is reduced to an ideology and a mere set of legal conclusions, which represent only a tiny aspect of Islamic teachings as a whole.

Too great an enthusiasm often results in people misunderstanding or twisting the afore-mentioned saying of the Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace, as if it were “Convey *only* a single verse from me.” And this situation becomes even more serious when the person in question regards the single verse that he possesses as the One and Only Truth—which must be conveyed anywhere and everywhere—while demonizing all other verses.

Assuming that people constantly learn, and listen to others, their knowledge will of course become more beneficial, accurate and complete. Because in fact, what we regard today as truth may be false; while the manifest “error” of others may indeed be the truth. Whoever has shut the eye of his heart—convinced that he is more intelligent, and correct, than anyone else—will not be able to grasp views that differ from his own. The natural result of such an attitude is arrogance (*takabbur*) and rejection of other people. When arrogance begins; when listening to others and learning ends; then ignorance and stupidity begin—a state that is extremely dangerous not only for the person or people in question, but for humanity at large.

Ignorance is a hidden danger that lurks within every human being; the way to overcome it is to constantly learn and listen to other people. Because of ignorance, many people try to please the Prophet Muhammad by adopting his supposed physical appearance, while neglecting his inner nature. There are also those who wish to please God by erecting a so-called religious state, yet in the process transform religion itself from a path (*shari’a*) into the ultimate goal.

They imagine that the noble Prophet Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, will somehow be delighted if his religious community wears clothes identical to those which he himself wore in the Arab desert fourteen centuries ago. They imagine that God will somehow be delighted if Islam becomes a formal state ideology, and His servants erect a religious state, an Islamic state. In holding these views, they completely forget that the noble Prophet Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, explained that he was sent to perfect noble morals (*innamâ bu’itstu li utammima makârim al-akhlâq*). They also forget that the sole prin-

ciple and goal of his having been sent as the Messenger of God was to serve as a blessing and a mercy for all sentient beings (*wa mā arsalnāka illā rahmatan lil-‘ālamīn*). Indeed, under the pretext of “establishing” that blessing, some try to terrorize and compel others to enter into whatever they personally consider to be a blessing; a perverse form of behavior which, from whatever perspective, conflicts with the spirit of blessing and mercy itself.

In the context of education, and of the supreme values of this primary message of Islam (as a blessing for all creation), this book *The Illusion of an Islamic State* conveys an extremely firm and clear educational message. The hidden danger that lies at the heart of extremist attempts to establish an Islamic state consists of the unconscious juxtaposition of profound ignorance regarding Islam’s true nature, and a false conviction that they possess perfect knowledge of the same.

If Muslims were all driven by a passion to learn, and to listen to others, their understanding of Islam would become progressively more wise and complete. As a consequence, they would not seek to reduce Islam to a mere ideology or rule of state. They would realize that Islam is too great to be boxed into a narrow ideology, or confined by the limits of state laws. For that reason, the vital insight contained in this book is the struggle (*jihad*) to constantly inspire every person to learn without ceasing; to oppose ignorance; to inspire all people to open their hearts and minds to humanity; and the struggle (*jihad*) to free every man, woman and child on earth from ideological and dogmatic strictures which have long prevented them from understanding the glorious teachings of religion, and instead confined their comprehension to those elements of the message that they can squeeze into a narrow box of their own or others’ construction.

To repeat: we may overcome our ignorance by seeing, listening and paying close attention; that is, by constantly learning. What halts this process dead in its tracks, and poses a threat to oneself and others, is when people feel that their knowledge is already perfect, and consider themselves to be in possession of the absolute Truth, and thus no longer in need of learning, or seeking the truth. Perhaps all would agree that ignorance is highly dangerous. Yet not

everyone is aware of the hidden dangers of ignorance, which dwell within.

*WaLLâhu A'lam.* God alone knows the truth of all things.

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