A Muslim call to end words of contempt

In the world’s most-populous Muslim country, Indonesia, the leading Muslim group asks the faithful to end the use of a religious slur – to head off tensions before a national election.

Muslims pray at the Sunda Kelepa Port in Jakarta, Indonesia. Reuters

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By the Monitor’s Editorial Board

One way to ignite violence in the Middle East is for one Muslim group to refer to either other Muslims or non-Muslims as kafir. When the word means infidel and not merely a nonbeliever, it is loaded with contempt. It can pit neighbor against neighbor, country against country. And the branding is difficult to counter.
In Indonesia, however, which is the world’s most-populous Muslim country, the meaning of kafir has taken on a stark negative tone only in the past 20 years since the return of democracy to this religiously diverse Southeast Asian nation of 260 million. Its new use as a religious slur has led to a rise in violence, the ouster of elected officials, and numerous court convictions for blasphemy. Its use by Islamic extremists also threatens to inflame political tensions before national elections set for April 17.

On March 1, the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia took a stand against the word as a weapon of discrimination. The 45-million-strong Nahdlatul Ulama (N.U.) issued a statement asking Muslims not to use kafir as a form of “theological violence.”

The group offered an alternative word, muwathinun, or citizen, to emphasize that all religious people in Indonesia have equal standing. “With the nation state model, all community groups have the same rights,” the N.U. stated.

A few other Muslim-majority nations, such as Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, have recently launched efforts to tone down the rhetoric of religious-based contempt. The N.U. has gone a step further by asking Muslims to see all others in Indonesia as sharing a common home, worthy of being treated as equals in order to maintain social harmony.

The N.U.’s stand, of course, is merely a request, not a command, affirming the view that religious understanding must come from the heart. This is the spirit of a new book, “Love Your Enemies,” by prominent American thinker Arthur C. Brooks. The book focuses on how to counter contempt in political discourse.

“Your opportunity when treated with contempt is to change at least one heart – yours,” he writes. “You may not be able to control the actions of others, but you can absolutely control your reaction. You can break the cycle of contempt.”

At the official level, the Indonesian government is trying to end Islamic extremism. In 2017, for example, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of freedom for all faiths, not just the six religions that are officially recognized (Islam, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism). And the government is also trying to prevent radical ideas from being taught at Islamic boarding schools.

The real challenge, as the N.U. statement makes clear, is persuading Indonesians to replace words of contempt with those of mutual affection, as citizens. In that word, all can be believers.