

## *A Muslim John Courtney Murray?*

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A recent [article in \*Public Discourse\*](#) decries the persecution of Christians in the Middle East at the hands of Muslims – written by a Muslim. Not just any Muslim, but rather Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary of the world’s largest movement of Muslims, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), whose ranks number 90 million. Staquf and the Nahdlatul Ulama are developing a doctrinal framework to produce changes in Islam much like those that took place in another religion – Catholicism.

In 1965, the Second Vatican Council promulgated *Dignitatis Humanae*, the landmark declaration on religious liberty. The declaration culminated a historical road along which the magisterium of the Church had remained wary of the principle because of its association with relativism, theological liberalism, and the open attacks on the Church fomented by the French Revolution and its legatees. What enabled the Council fathers to endorse religious liberty was their discovery that the principle could be grounded in teachings that were embedded in the Church’s own tradition. Certain intellectuals of the post-World War II period, including John Courtney Murray, S.J., Jacques Maritain, and Heinrich Rommen, paved the way for the declaration by showing how historic Christian commitments could be brought to bear on the case for a human right of religious freedom. When opponents of the declaration objected “error has no rights,” supporters responded, “no, but people do.” It is the dignity of the human person in her search for embrace of religious truth, which must be free, that stands at the core of the declaration: *Dignitatis Humanae*.

Today, Islam, the world’s second largest religion and the only one that rivals Christianity for the number of countries populated by its adherents, suffers a dearth of religious freedom, as I argue in my recent book, *Religious Freedom In Islam*. Out of 47 or so Muslim-majority countries, 36 are not religiously free judged by indices composed by the [Pew Research Center](#). Among Muslim religious leaders and jurists around the world, it is likely that there are far more who support severe penalties for apostasy and restrictions on the

practice of non-Muslims than those who support religious freedom. Jihadi groups like the Islamic State are brutal and global in their reach. Some 91% of religious terrorist groups are Islamic, [my own study of 2007](#) concludes.

Might there be a *Dignitatis Humanae* for Islam? Skeptics would object that Islam has no pope or magisterium who speaks for the entire religious body. True, but we might ask whether and how a religion whose leaders are skeptical of religious freedom might come to form a consensus for religious freedom.

In fact, there are some seeds of freedom in Islam that possess potential for growth. Of the 47 Muslim-majority states, 11 are religiously free, seven of them located in West Africa, where high religiosity mixes with tolerance towards small religious minorities. Several Muslim intellectuals have defended religious freedom on the basis of traditional Islamic principles, including [Abdullah An-Naim](#), a Sudanese intellectual who has called for an “Islamic Reformation,” [Mustafa Akyol](#), a Turkish journalist who argues for religious and economic freedom, and [Abdullah Saeed](#), a scholar from the Maldives who has championed the abolition of blasphemy and apostasy laws. In 2008, a coalition of 138 prominent Muslim leaders signed “[A Common Word](#),” a statement that affirmed mutual religious tolerance along with other related principles. Similarly, in 2016, 250 notable Muslim religious leaders, scholars, and even heads of state signed the [Marrakesh Declaration](#), affirming the rights of religious minorities as stipulated by Islamic law and the Charter of Medina.

All of these seeds are represented in Staquf’s piece. His organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, has a strong influence in Indonesia, the world’s most populous Muslim country. In contrast to enormous popular movements in the Middle East and South Asia such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami, NU carries a long tradition of tolerance towards people of other religions. On the island of Java, Indonesia’s largest, religious freedom was in place long before the appearance of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom and the Bill of Rights in the United States, Staquf points out. Today, Staquf is calling for a global reform of Islamic orthodoxy that would teach equal citizenship for everyone, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. As General Secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama, he vigorously opposes extremist efforts to curtail the rights of religious minorities in Indonesia and actively seeks to foster respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being worldwide.

Staquf’s and Nahdlatul Ulama’s vision for Indonesia as a country that is democratic, prosperous, and devout — but also tolerance and religiously free — stands as a model for the entire Muslim world. Might Staquf and other Muslim proponents of religious freedom be the John Courtney Murrays of Islam?

<http://arcoftheuniverse.info/a-muslim-john-courtney-murray>