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Detail of "Sri Ayati's Legacy," by John van der Sterren, 2006. Attribution: Bayt ar-Rahmah.

## Muslims and Evangelicals form Joint Working Group to Counter Extremism

By [Paul Marshall](#) on April 27, 2020

On April 20, members of the world's largest Muslim organization and one of the world's largest Christian organizations announced the creation of a [joint working group](#) to counter two threats to religious freedom and to society more broadly: religious extremism and secular extremism.

The Muslim participants represent the Humanitarian Islam, or Islam Nusantara, movement, which is rooted in the [Nahdlatul Ulama \(NU\)](#), with an estimated 90 million followers, primarily in its home country of Indonesia.<sup>[i]</sup> The Christian participants are from the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), which, due to the massive global growth of evangelicalism over the last century, has become one of the world's major Christian bodies, drawing together over 600 million Christians in national alliances in 130 countries.

The working group's origins stemmed from a meeting in Jakarta, Indonesia, in November 2019 at the headquarters of Islam Nusantara.<sup>[iii]</sup> The lobby of the meeting room contains a striking and famous Indonesian painting by John van der Sterren that is described by the *New York Times* as “a potent symbol of modern Indonesian history: the country's founding father, Sukarno, cradling a dead, barefoot rebel killed by Dutch colonial forces amid rice fields and smoldering volcanoes in late-1940s Java. The fighter's bloodied shirt draws immediate attention—but so does a necklace dangling from the body: a Christian cross, worn by the independence martyr for the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation.”



*Sri Ayati's Legacy*, by John van der Sterren, 2006. Source: Bayt ar-Rahmah.

The *Times*' excellent article does not add that in the background, surrounding and equidistant from the central figure of Sukarno, are both a church and a mosque. In 2017, Alissa Wahid, the daughter of Abdurrahman Wahid, Indonesia's fourth president, and Putri Guntur Sukarno, the granddaughter of Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, gave the painting to the Humanitarian Islam movement to mark its official launch.

Leading the NU contingent was Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, general secretary of the NU Supreme Council and head of NU's youth organization, [Gerakan Pemuda Anzor \(Anzor\)](#). In 2018, Anzor released its *Nusantara Manifesto*, which argues that "certain obsolete and problematic tenets do indeed exist within Islamic orthodoxy and shape the mindset of many Muslims, due to a fundamental disconnect with the realities of our current civilization." "Islamist radicalism and terror continue to exert a strong appeal to many Muslims, because of the fact that these are directly linked to obsolete and problematic tenets within classical Islamic law (*fiqh*, often conflated with *shari'ah*), which Muslims generally regard as an authoritative source of religious guidance."

Thomas K. Johnson, who is the World Evangelical Alliance's senior advisor for theology and religious freedom, and special envoy to the Vatican, leads the WEA contingent. Other members are Thomas Schirmacher, who is WEA's associate secretary general for theological concerns and chair of its [Theological Commission](#), Christine Schirmacher, who is a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Bonn, and Kyle Wisdom, who is at the University of Sussex and currently researches Indonesian forms of Islam.

The Muslim figures in the joint working group will be led by C. Holland Taylor, "emissary for the United Nations, the Americas and Europe for Anzor and Bayt ar-Rahmah"—a US-based religious organization that helps coordinate the global expansion of Nahdlatul Ulama operations—and serves as the organizational home for the international Humanitarian Islam movement.

Taylor and Johnson emphasize:

Many thoughtful observers have expressed concern about a renewed clash between Christian and Muslim civilizations... the world needs to know that a major Christian body and a major Muslim body are not only at peace with one another, but have pledged to cooperate for the betterment of humanity. This is not the peace of shared religious beliefs; it is the peace of compatible approaches to life in society.

Though we may always understand God and relate to God in very different ways, Humanitarian Muslims and Evangelical Christians agree that human life, family, faith, reason and property are fundamental human goods essential to comprehensive well-being in this world. We know these human goods are vulnerable and require protection from various threats, including both religious extremism and forms of secular extremism that seek to marginalize or even eradicate the presence of religion in social and public life. We therefore pledge to work together to strengthen and advance those social and legal norms, including basic human rights and liberties, that are essential to safeguard these fundamental human goods.

The joint working group follows other outreach by each group—including by the National Awakening Party (PKB), a Muslim-based party close to the Humanitarian Islam movement. As I have mentioned previously in *Providence*, in 2018 the PKB joined the Centrist Democrat International, the largest grouping of political parties in the world, having 94 member parties from 73 countries. The CDI's earlier name was the Christian Democrat International, and the vast majority of its members are still in the Christian Democrat camp.

It remains to be seen how far this might develop, but it is heartening that senior evangelicals, a grouping usually depicted as most hostile to Muslims, and senior Muslims are seeking to work together.

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[i] “Islam Nusantara” literally means the Islam of the archipelago, but it overlaps with the Humanitarian Islam movement.

[ii] Full disclosure—I helped arrange the meeting and am Senior Advisor to the Joint Working Group

[https://providencemag.com/2020/04/muslims-evangelicals-form-joint-working-group-counter-extremism/?fbclid=IwAR297qEUbmFpq2p-9VJgAT6Bcmm0XoKs2IkphRHM7F7\\_CKpZPU7zjl8D8M](https://providencemag.com/2020/04/muslims-evangelicals-form-joint-working-group-counter-extremism/?fbclid=IwAR297qEUbmFpq2p-9VJgAT6Bcmm0XoKs2IkphRHM7F7_CKpZPU7zjl8D8M)