



2019_07_18_World Evangelical Alliance Envoy Highlights the Potentially Historic Significance of Humanitarian Islam

“A serious response to religiously motivated violence,” whose sophisticated theology “merits attention from scholars, diplomats and activists”

WASHINGTON, DC: On the morning of Thursday, July 18, 2019, Reverend Professor Thomas K. Johnson (above, speaking), Special Envoy to the Vatican and Senior Advisor on Religious Freedom for the [World Evangelical Alliance](#) (WEA)—which represents more than 600 million evangelical Christians worldwide—delivered a penetrating analysis of the Humanitarian Islam movement and its theology on the sidelines of the U.S. State Department’s Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. Hosted by the DC-based Institute on Religion & Democracy, which is affiliated with the WEA and forms part of its coalition of over 100 international organizations and churches present in 129 nations, the address was attended by a range of delegates to the Ministerial, including Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary of Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama and co-founder of the global Humanitarian Islam movement.

Professor Johnson began his presentation by sharing a heartfelt account of the martyrdom of one of his seminary students and two other Christians, who were murdered by Islamist radicals in Malatya, Turkey, in 2007. [Humanitarian Islam](#) offers a more hopeful vision, believes Professor Johnson, who lauded its representatives in both oral and written versions of his speech, for their “serious response to religiously motivated violence and thoughtful attempt to establish a better paradigm for how religions [may] relate to society.”

“Within the spectrum of Islam, the Indonesian humanitarians represent the opposite end from ISIS and Al-Qaeda, but claim to be fully orthodox Muslims, not liberal half-Muslims. And it is precisely as orthodox Muslims that they fully endorse human rights for all people, religious freedom for those of other faiths, and constitutional democracy. This merits attention from scholars, diplomats and activists.”

Professor Johnson told the audience that “drawing on several hundred years of experience within Indonesia, the theologians of Nahdlatul Ulama are publishing [a series of declarations and manifestos](#) in well-edited English for the international reading public... They employ a hermeneutic that distinguishes between eternal, unchanging moral norms and religious norms that are limited in their application to a particular time and place. The current crisis of Islam arises, they claim, from taking contingent norms from previous centuries, whether the seventh century CE or a ‘mere’ 500 years ago, and then applying them in the 21st century, as if they are eternal and unchanging norms.”

According to these Nahdlatul Ulama theologians, “the way in which the Muslim community should re-contextualize eternal norms into religious norms suitable for our era has to do with attaining defined human goods. ‘The purpose of religious norms (*maqasid al-shari’ah*) is to ensure the spiritual and material well-being of humanity.’ (*Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam*, para 1). They add, ‘The authoritative Sunni jurists,

Imam al-Ghazali and Imam al-Shatibi, identified five primary components of *maqasid al-shari'ah*, viz., the preservation of faith, life, progeny, reason and property' (ibid., para 2).

“This is a strikingly teleological way of reasoning about religious norms that is also found at times within the Christian tradition. Properly formulated religious norms preserve the [above-mentioned] five primary human goods. This hermeneutic for properly applying religious norms is related to a transcendental definition of *shari'ah*, not a concrete or specific definition of *shari'ah*. Such a definition of *shari'ah*, if followed by the global Muslim community, would undermine many reasons for Islamophobia.”