



2020_09_17_Evangelical Review of Theology

“A Case for Ethical Cooperation between Evangelical Christians and Humanitarian Islam”

BONN, Germany (August 1, 2020): The flagship theological journal of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA)—which represents 600 million Christians in 130 nations—has published an extensive analysis of the Humanitarian Islam movement that concludes: “Though we understand and relate to God in very different ways... [t]he level of philosophical agreement between evangelical Christians and Humanitarian Islam demonstrated in this paper justifies a concerted joint effort to build a world in which religious faith can flourish for the benefit of humanity.”

The 14-page essay, titled “A Case for Ethical Cooperation between Evangelical Christians and Humanitarian Islam,” was published by *Evangelical Review of Theology: the World Evangelical Alliance’s Journal of Theology and Contemporary Application*. Its author, Dr. Thomas K. Johnson, describes Humanitarian Islam as “a philosophically sophisticated response to some of the crucial questions of our era” which “fully accepts the existence of multiple religious communities within one country, with the hope that those communities and their members can flourish together.”

Dr. Johnson is the World Evangelical Alliance Special Envoy to the Vatican and Special Envoy for Engaging Humanitarian Islam. He also serves as co-chair of the Humanitarian Islam/WEA Joint Working Group, established in April of 2020, which represents “an ambitious effort to reshape how the world thinks about religion.”

A respected theologian, professor and ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church, Dr. Johnson summarized his article by stating:

Humanity’s ability to live together in peace and harmony—and the very lives of both Christians and peaceful Muslims in many parts of the world—are threatened by radical Islamic elements. The World Evangelical Alliance and a major Muslim organization have agreed to work together to combat threats to their shared values and articulate a positive alternative. This article explains why such an effort is justified and how it hopes to make a global impact.

The article begins with the author stating that he will “discuss the inadequacy of some Muslim responses to Islamic extremism, followed by an explanation of why Humanitarian Islam is a preferable alternative. I then draw some comparisons to Christian ethics and close by suggesting how we can work together effectively—including one promising new collaboration.”

What follows are excerpts from Dr. Johnson’s essay. A link to the full article may also be found below.

Some Muslim responses to extremism do not go far enough

In recent years, many Muslim theologians and jurists have been working hard to convince extremists to turn from their violent ways while explaining to the watching world why violence does not represent Islam. Three prominent responses have been the ‘Open Letter to Dr. Ibrahim Awwad Al-Badri, alias “Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi”, and to the fighters and followers of the self-declared “Islamic State”’ published by 126 Sunni leaders in September 2014; the Marrakesh Declaration of 2016; and the 2019 Human Fraternity Document (HFD) signed in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar.

These documents directly confront and condemn violence in the name of Islam; if these principles were followed, our world would be far less violent. This is significant. However, these recent Muslim statements also perpetuate some convictions that undermine their potential to reduce global conflict and local tragedies. For example, the Open Letter of 2014 (in paragraph 22) directly affirms the obligation of Muslims to form a new caliphate, even while rejecting ISIS's use of morally repugnant means to establish a caliphate. Such a perceived obligation, a central cause of conflict among Muslims as well as between Islam and others, has been perpetuated, not resolved, by the Open Letter.

Likewise, the Marrakesh Declaration of 2016, though rejecting violence in the name of Islam and calling for the development of a Muslim doctrine of citizenship that applies to people of other religions, clearly affirms the notion of 'Muslim countries'. In a Muslim country, minorities may be tolerated, and citizenship may increase their level of toleration, but non-Muslims will always be regarded and treated as something less than full stakeholders in a country that officially describes itself as Muslim. It seems as if the Marrakesh doctrine of a Muslim country is a smaller version of the same Muslim doctrine of which the Caliphate is the larger version. It does not affirm true freedom of religion...

Humanitarian Islam

One very large Muslim movement is quite different from those discussed above. It robustly affirms the UDHR (including article 18) and rejects the notion of a Muslim country or caliphate. Its theory of ethics directly and constructively addresses the reality of religiously pluralistic societies. The main voices in this movement are leaders in the world's largest Muslim organization, the Indonesia-based Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Their perspective, called 'Humanitarian Islam', has spawned many publications in English for the international community, especially since ISIS declared its caliphate in 2014.

A careful examination of the ethics of Humanitarian Islam finds that Muslims of this type, when following their own principles, support religious freedom and human rights for Christians and people of other faiths. But their ethic goes much farther. Though presented mostly as a Muslim alternative to extremist violence, Humanitarian Islam contains a serious assessment of universal moral norms, the relation between faith and reason, fundamental human goods, the laws (both civil and religious) needed to protect those human goods, and the role of religions in societies.

Within the spectrum of varieties of Islam, the Indonesian Humanitarians represent the opposite end from the violent extremists. They present themselves as fully orthodox Muslims, not secularized half-Muslims. Precisely as such, they fully endorse classical human rights, religious freedom for other religions, and constitutional democracy, while openly naming and repudiating 'obsolete and problematic tenets' of Muslim orthodoxy which, they claim, have been misused to promote extremism.

The representatives of Humanitarian Islam believe that Islamic extremists—from ISIS to the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia—have been misusing Islam for their own purposes, and that this misuse of religion has been supported by versions of Muslim doctrine which were contextualized many centuries ago in a radically different situation. In their May 2017 *Declaration on Humanitarian Islam* they write, 'Various actors—including but not limited to Iran, Saudi Arabia, ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban and Pakistan—cynically manipulate religious sentiment in their struggle to maintain or acquire political, economic and military power, and to destroy their enemies. They do so by drawing upon key elements of classical Islamic law (*fiqh*), to which they ascribe divine authority, in order to mobilize support for their worldly goals' (para 28).

Therefore, the *Declaration on Humanitarian Islam* says, ‘If Muslims do not address the key tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that authorize and explicitly enjoin such violence, anyone—at any time—may harness the orthodox teachings of Islam to defy what they claim to be the illegitimate laws and authority of an infidel state and butcher their fellow citizens, regardless of whether they live in the Islamic world or the West.’ As an alternative, NU seeks to establish a new Islamic orthodoxy that addresses the problematic tenets of medieval Islamic teaching which extremists claim to be orthodox.

Precisely as Muslims, the Humanitarians claim that the extremists do not reflect the best of Islam. The core of their argument is that Islam has a tradition of developing the application of Muslim ethics and law by means of interaction with changing cultures, but that this process stopped several centuries ago, leaving many Muslims bound to an ossified and conflict-producing version of Sharia that is not tenable in a global, pluralistic society. In contrast, truly orthodox Islam contains within itself its own proper theological and legal method that leads to a humanitarian, pro-democracy position, including promoting religious freedom for all and signalling the end of religiously defined countries. Humanitarian Islam seeks to reactivate this authentically Muslim theological method to develop a truly new and more fully orthodox Islam, thereby displacing the outdated version of Islam that is fuelling many conflicts and possibly a global clash of civilizations.

As Humanitarian Islam explains, ‘Islamic orthodoxy contains internal mechanisms, including the science of *uṣūl al-fiqh*—the methodology of independent legal reasoning employed to create Islamic law, or *fiqh* (often conflated with *sharī‘ah*)—that allow Muslim scholars to adjust the temporal elements of religious orthodoxy in response to the ever-changing circumstances of life. These internal mechanisms entail a process of independent legal reasoning known as *ijtihād*, which fell into disuse among Sunni Muslim scholars approximately five centuries ago’ (*Nusantara Manifesto* para 106). As they see it, for some five hundred years the proper Muslim theological method, the ‘internal mechanism’ for the unfolding of Muslim orthodoxy, has not been properly implemented, leading to the debacle of the role of Islam on the global stage, and leaving their thought leaders with a lot of unfinished homework.

The theological method of Humanitarian Islam

Several notable themes characterize the distinctive theological method used by Humanitarian Islam in its systematic effort to define a new Islamic ethics and theory of law. I will highlight four of them here.

1. *Humanitarian Islam sharply distinguishes eternal, unchanging ethical and legal norms from contingent norms that are limited in their relevance to a particular time and situation...*
2. *This hermeneutic for properly applying religious norms is related to a transcendental definition of the sharia, not a concrete or specific definition of the sharia...*
3. *In its social doctrine, Humanitarian Islam has appropriated and approved selected principles of Indonesian civilization which it views as predating the arrival of Islam...*
4. *Humanitarian Islam accepts the moral legitimacy of selected socio-political developments of the last two centuries...*

A Christian response to Humanitarian Islam

Our Muslim friends have set a very high goal, that of a new and truly orthodox Islam; I hope they can freely pursue their dreams. It is a philosophically sophisticated response to some of the crucial questions of our era.

Theologically, Christian ethics claim to differ in a crucial way from Islam. As the apostle John said, 'For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (Jn 1:17). This relationship between law and grace underlies everything we do as Christians. Law is God's command about what to do or not do; grace is his provision of undeserved acceptance and forgiveness in Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the gospel. In contrast, Islam is generally seen as containing a much heavier emphasis on law than on grace, although hints of the need for grace occur occasionally, such as in the well-known saying attributed to Mohammed that God's throne bears the inscription, 'My mercy precedes my wrath.' This is obviously an all-important issue for Christians, who believe that the grace that came through Jesus Christ is our only hope of salvation and that we cannot be saved by any amount of obedience to law.

Despite this central theological difference, a comparison of Humanitarian Islam with Christian social ethics and philosophy of law reveals that, amidst today's great global threats, we are ideological allies and should treat each other as such. Even though the theological differences between Christians and Muslims may never be resolved, our level of agreement in the spheres of ethics and law calls for global cooperation in the public square. Rather than taking opposite sides, evangelical Christians and Humanitarian Muslims should help to protect each other's religious communities and to articulate and embody a global moral compass.

Moreover, reflecting on the themes expressed by Humanitarian Islam can help us understand more clearly key aspects of Christian ethics and how they relate to Muslim thinking. I will mention three points.

1. *A Christian hermeneutic on the law distinguishes among God's moral, ceremonial and judicial laws, all of which are found in the Bible. This distinction has both similarities to and differences from the distinction made by Humanitarian Islam between eternal norms and contingent norms...*
2. *The whole undertaking of Humanitarian Islam entails an appeal to a universal moral norm which they expect both Muslims and non-Muslims to recognize, even if the source and nature of this norm are not yet always fully articulated. This is what Christians call the 'natural moral law'...*
3. *Within Christian ethics, there is a developing discussion of the relation between moral laws and human goods which has significant parallels in the philosophy of Humanitarian Islam...*

So what can we do?

Though we understand and relate to God in very different ways, Humanitarian Muslims and evangelical Christians see life, family, rationality, a faith community, and an orderly socio-economic life as fundamental human goods that lead to comprehensive well-being in this world. We know that these deep human goods are vulnerable, needing protection from various threats. We have similar convictions regarding universal moral standards that should influence religious and legal norms, all of which should protect basic human goods. This must be demonstrated intellectually, politically, in education, and in shared humanitarian efforts.

When the fundamental principles of Humanitarian Islam are brought into interaction with corresponding principles of Christian ethics, one obtains an ethical–jurisprudential method to respond to religious extremism, and to efforts to maintain religiously defined states which require a particular religious identity to be full stakeholders in the society. In other words, Christians and Muslims have a clear way to explain the moral wrongness of both religious extremism and religiously defined states—one that does not depend on a prior commitment to any religious view—on the basis of which we can then engage in principled discourse with those who hold other views and seek to eliminate religious-based terrorism and persecution. Our influence could be much greater if presented by official representatives of two major religious traditions that are widely perceived as in conflict with each other.

How can Christians around the world foster such cooperation?

- We could hold joint events at which scholars or civic leaders from both religious communities discuss how we talk about each other and how we address questions regarding religion’s role in society.
- We could produce joint publications.
- We could bring together political leaders from both faith communities to talk about how they can develop civil laws, based on their shared understanding of the universal moral law, that will protect all people’s basic human goods.
- We could work together to provide information for the business, government and education sectors on how to promote harmonious interaction among people from multiple cultures and religions.
- We could cooperate in delivering humanitarian aid or in addressing other problems that government alone cannot readily solve, such as homelessness, human trafficking, drug addiction and environmental problems.

The World Evangelical Alliance is currently taking on this challenge at a global level. In November 2019, while in Indonesia for the WEA’s General Assembly, several of us spent most of a day with leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama. After further correspondence and discussion, in April 2020 we announced a joint project to respond to threats to religious freedom arising from both religious extremism and secular extremism. At our June meeting, we decided to pursue cooperative efforts in three main areas: opposing ‘tyranny’ (i.e. governments and movements that threaten basic human rights and freedoms); articulating shared messages in the areas of jurisprudence, ethics and human rights; and public communications.

The expansion of secularism, atheism and moral relativism in the modern West have been partly fuelled by the widespread, though generally false, perception that organized religions are a cause of war and oppression. The level of philosophical agreement between evangelical Christians and Humanitarian Islam demonstrated in this paper justifies a concerted joint effort to build a world in which religious faith can flourish for the benefit of humanity.

[Read the complete article.](#)