**God Needs No Defense:**
**Reimagining Muslim–Christian Relations in the 21st Century**

**Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri:**
**"We wish to submit to the dictates of conscience"**

WASHINGTON, DC, July 13, 2021: Spiritual leaders of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) have published a *Festschrift*, or collection of essays, honoring Bishop Thomas Schirrmacher, the newly appointed Secretary General & CEO of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA).

"We hope this book will mark the beginning of a long and important journey of these two religions [Islam and Christianity] towards a more harmonious relationship, characterized by peaceful co-existence," NU General Secretary KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf told an audience of nearly 1,000 religious freedom activists and government leaders gathered at the Omni Shoreham Hotel in Washington, DC, for the 2021 International Religious Freedom Summit.

Titled *God Needs No Defense: Reimagining Muslim–Christian Relations in the 21st Century*, the 228-page anthology was jointly published by the Institute for Humanitarian Islam, the Center for Shared Civilizational Values and the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission.

The book's cover depicts the 6th-century basilica of Hagia Sophia (the Cathedral of Holy Wisdom) in Istanbul, Turkey, which Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II converted into a mosque in 1453 after the fall of Constantinople. The smaller image depicts the Hagia Sophia's interior during the late Ottoman era, with superimposed Arabic-language remarks by Turkish President Erdogan on re-converting Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

On July 22, 2020, members of the largest political networks in the world, and Europe, set aside long-standing differences to join Indonesia's National Awakening Party, PKB, in a call for "Muslims and people of good will of every faith and nation to prevent the political weaponization of religion." PKB is deeply rooted within Nahdlatul Ulama and is Indonesia's largest Islamic political party. Through its membership in Centrist Democrat International, PKB is actively promoting NU's Humanitarian Islam agenda worldwide.

PKB's full statement — issued in response to inflammatory remarks by President Erdogan of Turkey — appears in the opening pages of *God Needs No Defense: Reimagining Muslim–Christian Relations in the 21st Century*.

Dr. Thomas K. Johnson and C. Holland Taylor, who co-chair the Humanitarian Islam/World Evangelical Alliance Joint Working Group, co-edited the *Festschrift*. Dr. Johnson is WEA's Special Envoy to the Vatican and its Special Envoy for Engaging with Humanitarian Islam. Mr. Taylor has served as Special Emissary to the UN, Americas and Europe for Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, the NU's 5-million-member young adults movement, since NU and Ansor leaders established the Humanitarian Islam movement in 2017.

In their introduction to *God Needs No Defense*, Dr. Johnson and Mr. Taylor describe how:

> In August of 2014, leaders of the world's largest Muslim organization, Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, watched in stunned silence as members of ISIS marched Iraqi Shiites one by one to the edge of a dock, shot them in the head and toppled their lifeless bodies into the Tigris River. Rather than avert their gaze, for nearly two hours these spiritual leaders watched — with mounting shock, moral revulsion and sorrow — a series of ISIS videos that employed classical Islamic law to justify the brutal slaughter and destruction they depicted.
>
> In a front-page story titled, "From Indonesia, a Muslim Challenge to the Ideology of the Islamic State," *The New York Times* reported on what these NU leaders did next.

After providing an overview of the Humanitarian Islam movement, the WEA and Bishop Schirrmacher's career, Dr. Johnson and Mr. Taylor proceed to discuss "shared principles for human flourishing" identified by the Humanitarian Islam/WEA Joint Working Group's Subcommittee on Jurisprudence, Human Rights and Ethics:

> We believe that there is order to God's creation and that certain fundamental principles are woven into the very fabric of nature. Divinely ordained, these principles — which Muslims associate with the "Beautiful Names of God"; Western philosophers and theologians (both Roman Catholic and Protestant) have termed "natural law" or "universal moral law"; and C. S. Lewis described as "the Tao" — reflect God's infinite love, compassion, wisdom and justice.
>
> When apprehended by human conscience, these "first principles" give rise to universal values that have long been articulated and embraced by the world's great cultural, religious and ethical traditions.
>
> By understanding and acting in accord with these principles, one may develop noble character, or virtue, which the Catechism of the Catholic Church defines as "a habitual and firm disposition to do the good." This includes a duty to:
>
> - Seek truth;
> - Develop the self-discipline, and summon the courage, required to obey the dictates of conscience; and
> - Choose to act justly and with compassion towards others.

Dr. Johnson's and Mr. Taylor's introduction concludes with the full text of a resolution — drafted by leaders of Indonesia's Humanitarian Islam movement — that was unanimously adopted by the Executive Committee of Centrist Democrat International on October 1, 2020. The resolution, explicitly premised upon the existence of "universal ethics and humanitarian values" (i.e., first principles), acknowledged that "virtue and noble character represent the only secure foundation upon which to build a peaceful and prosperous global civilization."

The volume's title essay, "God Needs No Defense," was authored by long-time Nahdlatul Ulama Chairman and Indonesia's first democratically elected president, H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, who inspired the birth of the Humanitarian Islam movement. This widely acclaimed essay, which presents an Islamic theological rationale for freedom of conscience, originally appeared as the foreword to *Silenced: How Apostacy and Blasphemy Codes are Choking Freedom Worldwide* (Oxford University Press, 2011) by Nina Shea and Paul Marshall.

A companion essay by President Wahid — "*Rahmah* (Universal Love and Compassion)" — was written prior to his death on December 30, 2009, but never before published until now. President Wahid is widely regarded as a saint by Nahdlatul Ulama followers, and each year millions of pilgrims visit his grave in Jombang, East Java.

Dr. Thomas K. Johnson authored a pair of essays that appear alongside those of President Wahid in Part I of the *Festschrift*. These are titled: "A Case for Ethical Cooperation Between Protestants and Humanitarian Muslims" and "God's Universal Grace in Protestant Theology."

Part II of the anthology features an historic speech by NU co-founder KH. Hasyim Asy'ari (*Introduction to the Fundamental Principles of Nahdlatul Ulama*) alongside contributions by Dr. Christine Schirrmacher, a Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn, Germany ("Christianity and the Essential Characteristics of Democracy"); Kyle Wisdom, Deputy Chair of the Humanitarian Islam/WEA Joint Working Group ("Indonesian Islam and a Tradition of Pluralism"); KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council ("How Islam Learned to Adapt in 'Nusantara'"); and KH. Hodri Ariev, Deputy Chair of the Humanitarian Islam/WEA Joint Working Group ("The Primary Message of Islam: *Rahmah*").

In her essay, Professor Schirrmacher explains the "Böckenförde Dictum," which posits that shared moral values are the essential bedrock of a liberal secular state. By implication, the ordered liberty of Western democratic societies is unlikely to survive the disappearance of these shared values:

> A religiously neutral, democratic state does not face religious communities indifferently. Rather, in a multifaceted manner, such a state is dependent upon cooperation with religious communities. The state theorist and expert in constitutional law, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, in his famous "Böckenförde Dictum," formulated it as follows: "The liberal, secular state lives on preconditions which it cannot itself guarantee." This means that the state can pass laws imposing sanctions against murder and theft, but the state cannot ensure that the majority of the citizens will continue to judge murder and theft to be wrong. That is to say, the state cannot ensure that people will agree with a canon of values upon which state legislation is based.

Part III opens with an essay titled "Theology Matters: the Case of Jihadi Islam" by Professor Rüdiger Lohlker of the University of Vienna. In this essay, Dr. Lohlker refutes the widely held view that Western governments, scholars and media outlets should neither critically examine, nor address, the religious dimensions of Islamist terrorism. Dr. Lohlker writes that, "[W]ithout deconstructing the theology of violence inherent in jihadi communications and practice, these religious ideas will continue to inspire others to act, long after any given organized force, such as the Islamic State, may be destroyed on the ground."

A companion piece by KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf ("Responding to a Fundamental Crisis Within Islam Itself") explains, in detail, those elements of classical Islamic law that precipitated the near-eradication of Iraq's ancient Christian and Yazidi communities at the hands of ISIS and other extremist groups.

These essays are followed by the 2017 *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam*; an analysis of the Humanitarian Islam movement by global affairs expert Dr. James M.

Dorsey, titled "The Battle for the Soul of Islam"; an evaluation of Humanitarian Islam and the Movement for Shared Civilizational Values by Dr. Timothy S. Shah and Thomas G. Dinham; the conclusion of Dr. Shah's *Indonesia Religious Freedom Landscape Report 2020*, titled "'Positive Deviance' Within the Indosphere and the Muslim World"; and an essay by Nahdlatul Ulama spiritual leader KH. A. Mustofa Bisri, titled "The Universal Values of Indonesian Islamic Civilization."

The *Festschrift* closes with an invitation by KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf and Reverend Dr. Frank Hinkelmann, Vice Chair of the World Evangelical Alliance, which reads:

*Leaders*
*of the World Evangelical Alliance*
*and the Humanitarian Islam Movement*
*cordially invite you*
*to join in building a global alliance*
*founded upon shared civilizational values.*

*This alliance seeks to prevent the political*
*weaponization of identity;*
*curtail the spread of communal hatred;*
*promote solidarity and respect among the diverse*
*people, cultures and nations of the world;*
*and foster the emergence of a*
*truly just and harmonious world order,*
*founded upon respect for the equal rights*
*and dignity of every human being.*

"I regard the work of Humanitarian Islam and the Movement for Shared Civilizational Values as one of the most pathbreaking and important developments in world politics and cross-civilizational ethics in our generation. No event that I know of is more timely, urgent, or well conceived."

~ Dr. Robert Hefner, Professor of Anthropology and International Relations at Boston University and President of the American Institute for Indonesian Studies