



Muslim–Christian Relations: Becoming Good Neighbors

Evangelical Podcaster John W. Morehead:

“Two of the most important religious leaders in the world, an evangelical and a Muslim, neither of whom are Americans, came together in Washington, D.C. to launch a book.”

Why?

“Because what happens on the borderline between religion and politics in the United States affects the whole world.”

SYRACUSE, Utah: In July of 2021, U.S. evangelical leader John Morehead introduced his audience to the Humanitarian Islam movement in conjunction with the launch of a book published in honor of Bishop Thomas Schirrmacher, Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance, which represents 600 million Protestants in 140 countries.

Over the course of a one-hour discussion with Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Johnson and C. Holland Taylor — who co-edited the book *[God Needs No Defense: Reimagining Muslim–Christian Relations in the 21st Century](#)* — Reverend Morehead and his guests discussed the nature and ramifications of an unprecedented alliance that has emerged between the world’s largest Protestant and Muslim organizations.

During the course of the interview, Reverend Morehead explored the genesis of the book as well as its structure and contents, asking “What can readers look forward to in this volume?”

Dr. Johnson: You have some of the seminal texts from the development of Nahdlatul Ulama, which they now present publicly as Humanitarian Islam, going back all the way to the 1920s and up through the beginning of the 21st century. You also have an [extensive excerpt from] one of the recent primary documents. So in this volume, you have the major ideas that constitute Humanitarian Islam as opposed to Islamic extremism. You can read those sources and get, directly from them, what they have to say that is so different from ISIS or al-Qaeda or Boko Haram, or any of the other extremist groups.

And that is what makes it possible for me as a Christian to say, okay, these are people who have a religious and ethical basis for being very good neighbors. And that’s extremely important in our time. What are the principles that they are following? Can I trust them? That’s why I like these Muslim documents, because they explain their foundations for life. It doesn’t tell me, as a Christian, so much about how they pray or how they celebrate Ramadan. That doesn’t worry me so much. I’m interested of course, but my interest is in whether they have a spiritual and ethical foundation for being good neighbors in society, and the answer is yes.

Later in the interview, Dr. Johnson explained that Christianity itself can either function as the primary identity of “a combatant community in a society or the source of ideas and principles and people who stand for something more.”

We make universal claims within Christianity that humans are made in the image of God, but that they are fallible and sinful. We also make universal claims that certain things are right and wrong, regardless of who we are or what religion we belong to. And so there's this universal component within Christianity that does not turn Christianity into a warring party. That's what I was looking for when I carefully investigated the documents of the Humanitarian Islam movement.

It's not the ideology of one warring party, the way ISIS has made Islam. They focus on the universal themes. I see that in President Wahid, but you see that all the way back to their founding documents. In the last five or six years, they have produced a tremendous amount of literature in response to ISIS and Boko Haram. And you see them focusing on the universal values that cause civilizations to flourish rather than self-destruct. It's an emphasis on universal human dignity — not just the dignity of members of their own religion, but the dignity of all — and the fallibility of everyone, not just the fallibility of people of other religions but also their own. So they're going to be quite self-critical. Those are some of the themes that are very important to me here.

Reverend Morehead: One of the things that struck me emotionally as I read the introduction was the section that described Humanitarian Muslims watching videos of acts of violence and murder and terror by ISIS... What was it, when you saw those kinds of things, that made you want to tap into the roots and the heart of your faith, Holland, and to do the kinds of things you do as an expression of Humanitarian Islam? And tell us a little bit about Humanitarian Islam as well.

Mr. Taylor: I was with the top leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama when we were all watching these videos, together with a colleague of ours who's not Muslim, but a professor at the University of Vienna in Austria, with whom we had a partnership for research on extremism and terrorism. We spent many hours studying the videos of the executions together with their theological justifications. [For example,] we watched a two-hour series of people being executed, one after another after another, each with a theological justification explaining it. Several things stood out to us.

One figure who was watching, a very senior figure in Nahdlatul Ulama, said, "Holland, you and I aren't going to be negatively influenced by watching this, but a lot of Muslims could be, because everything they're arguing is rooted within certain elements of Islamic orthodoxy." The General Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council was with us. And he said, three times in a steadily louder voice: "Every single thing that ISIS is doing here is consistent with elements of Islamic orthodoxy." He was exercising his religious authority to say to the other people in the room, "We've got a problem."

We have to be honest about this problem, because for us, the primary message of Islam is *rahmah*, universal love and compassion. But that's not doing any good for the Yazidis, or the Christians living in Syria and Iraq. It's not doing any good for people being attacked by Boko Haram or al-Shabaab in Nigeria or Kenya. Islam, just as I was mentioning earlier about Catholicism, historically has had different dimensions to it. It has one dimension that is spiritual and loving, and another dimension that is rooted in the historic conflict between religions. And this gets back to the title of our book, *God Needs No Defense: Reimagining Muslim-Christian*

Relations in the 21st Century. One thing about evangelicals is that they're generally not in denial about the historic conflict between Islam and Christianity. If you look at the West there are certain people who have forgotten this historic conflict, but it lasted from the birth of Islam until the 20th century and is still going on today....

Dr. Johnson: One of the things that struck me, as soon as I started reading the documents of the Humanitarian Islam movement, was the awareness that theology matters a lot. There are huge differences between types of Muslim theology, and those differences have massive effects on the way civilizations develop in the Muslim world. We could use a little more of that kind of theological self-consciousness within Christianity. There are dysfunctional types of Christian theology; there are also much better types of Christian theology. Those differences have results in terms of the way entire societies function.

This interview originally appeared on the website of [Multifaith Matters](#), whose mission statement reads: "Multifaith Matters is a support hub for Christians and churches who are seeking to fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandments [love of God and neighbor] in a multifaith world."

[View the entire podcast.](#)

[Download a complete transcript of the discussion.](#)