



Future Relationships among Muslims and Christians

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I bring you greetings from the WEA and the hundreds of millions of Christians we seek to represent.

About two and a half years ago, I began corresponding with senior representatives of the world's largest Muslim organization, Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama. Two of the main participants in this correspondence were C. Holland Taylor and Pak Yahya Cholil Staqf. We discussed Muslim-Christian relations and considered forming a group of scholars for mutual study. Then, on Easter 2019, churches and hotels in Sri Lanka were bombed by Muslim radicals. In the following days, it became clear that my new Muslim friends were absolutely appalled that followers of their faith had done something like this. They systematically rejected the use of violence to promote Islam.

On Sunday morning a week after Easter, I read an e-mail from Holland that said, "The clock is ticking." As I prayed at church that morning, I began to hope it might be possible to turn a corner in Muslim-Christian relations in our time. From my previous studies, I knew the solution lies in how we imagine the role of religions in society and what we perceive as the moral foundation for life in a multi-religious society. I quickly contacted Professor Thomas Schirmacher, who was then head of our department in the World Evangelical Alliance. He urged me to do all I could to develop communication with the Indonesian Humanitarian Muslims. About a year and a half later he was elected to lead the WEA, partly because of his experience in substantial conversations with Muslims.

An early event that illustrates the past direction in Muslim-Christian relations occurred almost 1,400 years ago. The Battle of Yarmuk lasted for six days in August, 636 CE, in the region just east of the Sea of Galilee, as massive Muslim and Christian armies slaughtered each other. Perhaps over 50,000 soldiers died, setting a pattern of jihads and crusades that still

¹ This is a revised version of a speech given at the Nation's Mosque in Washington, DC, on July 13, 2021. The occasion was the launch of a book entitled *God Needs No Defense: Reimagining Muslim - Christian Relations in the 21st Century*, edited by Thomas K. Johnson and C. Holland Taylor, which is a Festschrift honoring the inauguration of Thomas Schirmacher as Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance. Dr. Johnson represents the WEA as senior theological advisor and special envoy for engaging Humanitarian Islam. The WEA represents and connects over 600 million Christians in 143 countries.

captures the imagination of many. Think of 9/11 or the continuing conflicts in the Sahel and West Africa. When we say, “*God Needs No Defense*,” this is what we have in mind. In place of military conflict, the book we are releasing today develops serious theological discussion of how to live together as good neighbors and how our faith communities can contribute jointly to flourishing societies. Perhaps, with the grace of God, we can figure out new ways that Muslims and Christians can live together.

The future does not need to exactly imitate the past, for the simple reason that individuals and groups can form new imaginaries. We must imagine a new future for Muslim-Christian relations. In saying this, I do not mean that we can wish away the deep differences between how Christians and Muslims understand God and relate to God. As far as I can see, neither religion can be reduced to the other; our religions have different truth claims. However, after over two years of carefully examining the texts of Humanitarian Islam, while talking with their intellectual leaders and getting reviews from Christians in Indonesia, I am convinced that it is possible for Protestant Christians and Humanitarian Muslims to cooperate substantially.

Together we expect and accept religious pluralism. Most of us at this gathering have friends who belong to the other religion. Our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will probably continue to follow different religions and live together as neighbors. Why not as good neighbors? And now we have documented that many Christians and many Muslims honestly embrace similar principles on how we should live. As a Protestant Christian, I see this similarity of ethical principles as a result of God’s common grace and general revelation, what previous generations of Protestants sometimes called the “light of nature,” which stands alongside God’s special self-revelation in Holy Scripture. Here are some examples of shared principles:

1. Together we can say, “Do unto others as you would have them do to you” and “love your neighbor as yourself.”
2. Together we recognize the dark side of human nature that sometimes wants to tyrannize and destroy others.
3. Together we recognize the God-given dignity of all people, which means there are some human rights, including freedom of religion, that cannot be given or taken by any human agency.
4. Together we recognize a universal moral law that was written into the fabric of creation as well as into the human heart and mind.
5. Together we recognize that there are vulnerable dimensions of our existence that need special protection, such as life itself, family, property, truth, learning, and faith communities.

It is striking that Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher, a conservative German theologian who heads the world’s largest Protestant organization, is being honored by a book-presentation in an historically black American mosque by the Indonesian head of the world’s largest Muslim organization. Let this set our imagination for the future!

Key texts available as free downloads:

1. [*God Needs No Defense: Reimagining Muslim-Christian Relations in the 21st Century*](#), Festschrift for Thomas Schirrmacher edited by Thomas K. Johnson and C. Holland Taylor.
2. [*Humanitarian Islam, Evangelical Christianity, and the Clash of Civilizations*](#), Thomas K. Johnson, WEA World of Theology, vol. 20.
3. [“The Case for Ethical Cooperation between Evangelical Christians and Humanitarian Islam,”](#) Thomas K. Johnson, *Evangelical Review of Theology* (2020) 44:3, 204–217.