



## Brill Academic Publishers: “Humanitarian Islam”

### Leading academics explore the significance of Indonesia’s Humanitarian Islam movement in a volume published by Brill

*“Humanitarian Islam can, indeed, be analyzed as a powerful discursive strategy of Indonesian foreign policy”*

*~ From the Introduction to “Humanitarian Islam”*

LEIDEN, Netherlands and VIENNA, Austria — In August 2023, one of continental Europe’s oldest and most prestigious academic publishers released an edited volume compiling analyses of Indonesia’s “Humanitarian Islam” movement by some of the world’s leading scholars of Islam in Europe and the United States.

Co-published by Brill (est. 1683) and the University of Vienna (est. 1365), *Humanitarian Islam: Reflecting on an Islamic Concept* was co-edited by Dr. Rüdiger Lohlker and Dr. Katharina Ivanyi, and appears as Volume 24 in a series titled “Religion and Transformation in Contemporary European Society.” With offices in Leiden, Boston, Paderborn, and Singapore, Brill publishes 275 journals and around 1,200 new books and reference works each year, all of which are subject to external peer review.

Rüdiger Lohlker is one of Europe’s leading experts on classical Islam, as well as contemporary [Islamist terror groups](#) such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. He advises the European Union and various EU Member States, including Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, on Islamist extremism and counter-terrorism.

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and its strategic initiatives, including Humanitarian Islam, have been a focus of Professor Lohlker’s research since 2014, when he established the [Vienna Observatory for Applied Research on Terrorism and Extremism \(VORTEX\)](#) with NU leaders KH. A. Mustofa Bisri, KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf, and C. Holland Taylor.

As Dr. Lohlker observes in his essay, [“Fiqh Reconsidered: Indigenization and Universalization of Islamic Law in Indonesia,”](#) which concludes the edited volume:

This may be understood as opening a new stage of developing a new *fiqh*, not only adapting to the circumstances of modernity but reclaiming the competence for a new *ijtihad* from movements emerging in the Middle East since the 19th century. [One] result of this ongoing process is a short statement called *Nusantara Statement* promulgated by *Ansor* at a mass rally on November 22, 2018, on the occasion of the birthday of the prophet (*mawlid*)<sup>51</sup> and attended by the Indonesian president Joko Widodo. The statement reads:

*“We call upon people of goodwill of every faith and nation to join in building a global consensus to prevent the political weaponization of Islam, whether by Muslims or*

*non-Muslims, and to curtail the spread of communal hatred by fostering the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order, founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being.*"<sup>52</sup>

Thus, we witness a seemingly technical debate on the methodology of *fiqh* in Indonesia turning into a religio-political statement with a potentially global impact. We may understand this statement as the final proof of indigenization *cum* globalization *cum* universalization of *fiqh* in Indonesia.

Hence, it is possible to understand this process of indigenization as the development of a genuine Indonesian school of thought<sup>53</sup> beginning to operate at a global level and claiming Islam as part of the universal values of humanity and not excluding other Islamic and non-Islamic parts of the global society.

In his contribution to the edited volume on Humanitarian Islam, Dr. Ahmet Kuru — a Turkish-born professor of political science, Director of the Center for Islamic and Arabic Studies at San Diego State University, and author of the highly acclaimed book, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) — writes:

NU declarations reject the notion of a global caliphate, or a political entity that would unite all Muslims. The concept of a caliphate has been accepted by both mainstream Islamic scholars, such as those in Egypt's Al-Azhar and radical groups, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. In 2014, over a hundred scholars from different countries signed an open letter to ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The scholars who led this intervention include Abdullah bin Bayyah, Hamza Yusuf, and Ali Gomaa. The letter states the following about the caliphate: "There is agreement (*ittifaq*) among scholars that a caliphate is an obligation upon the Ummah. The Ummah has lacked a caliphate since 1924 CE. However, a new caliphate requires consensus from Muslims."<sup>10</sup> So these established *ulema* agree with ISIS that creating a caliphate is a religious duty on Muslims. Their disagreement is that ISIS's caliphate is not based on consensus. This highlights the importance of NU's rejection of the idea of the caliphate.

Moreover, NU declarations emphasize the legitimacy of modern states' constitutional and legal systems, and thus reject the idea that it is a religious obligation to establish a state based on Islamic law. Additionally, NU declarations stress the importance of equal citizenship by refusing to make a distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims as legal categories. They also call for a deeper cooperation among Muslims, Christians and followers of other religions to promote world peace. NU has taken practical steps for realizing that aim. To promote intercultural solidarity and respect, it has established a working relationship with the World Evangelical Alliance, which claims to represent 600 million Protestants....

This reform movement's reception in the Middle East, the historical center of Islam, is important if it is to have a global impact. Humanitarian Islam has been mostly ignored by scholars and governments of such Middle Eastern countries as Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UAE, who generally see it as a competitor of their own attempts to influence the Muslim world. As a nongovernmental initiative, Humanitarian Islam is different from Middle Eastern efforts to shape the Muslim world, which are mostly government-led schemes.<sup>17</sup>

Other contributions to the *Humanitarian Islam* volume include:

- A presentation by Dr. Alina Isac Alak of what she calls a “humanist” Quranic hermeneutics exemplified by Humanitarian Islam;
- An essay titled “Humanitarian Islam, the State, Fundamental Rights and the Free Democratic State,” by Dr. Hüseyin I. Çiçek, which includes reflections on the possible role of Humanitarian Islam as a way out of the current Turkish predicament;
- An essay that examines the 2017 [\*Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam\*](#) from a Catholic Christian theological perspective, by Dr. Yakov Helmut Deibl;
- An analysis of “Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism and its Influence on the Humanitarian Islam Movement,” by Dr. Ghazaleh Faridzadeh;
- “Sufism as the Guarantee for Humanitarian Islam? Contemporary Sufi Interpretations of *sharī‘a* and *rahma*,” by Dr. Yunus Hentschel; and
- “Islamic Heritage in Indonesia: A Collection of Texts,” by Dr. Rüdiger Lohlker, which analyzes “Nahdlatul Ulama rhetoric within the context of current Indonesian ‘soft power,’ i.e. a strategy of Indonesian diplomacy, within which the new phenomenon of Humanitarian Islam must be understood.”

Dr. Faridzadeh’s essay provides a detailed analysis of the relationship between Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophy of *wahdat al-wujud* (the Unicity of Being) and Indonesia’s traditions of religious tolerance, as exemplified by Humanitarian Islam:

Some Western scholars refer to Indonesian Islam as the “smiling face of Islam.”<sup>1</sup> This designation is primarily intended to underscore its “moderate” and “tolerant” nature, which can be traced back to its intertwining with Islamic mysticism or Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) as the spiritual dimension and inner, or esoteric, heart of the Islamic religion.<sup>2</sup> The association of Islam with Sufism is considered by many authors to be among the most important factors shaping Islam in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago.<sup>3</sup>

Among the various Sufi schools of thought that have influenced Indonesian Islam are the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī, the school of al-Ḥallāğ and the rather “orthodox” Sufism of al-Ġunaid and al-Ġazzālī.<sup>4</sup> As far as “tolerance”, “pluralism” and acceptance of “diversity” are concerned, the school of Muḥyī d-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) has played an important role from the very start of Islam’s spread through the Malay world.<sup>5</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabī’s central tenet has been conceptualised by his commentators as *wahdat al-wuğūd* (Unity/Oneness of Being), also known as *wuğūdiyya* in the Malay-Indonesian world.<sup>6</sup> In this theosophical system, God appears as the primal source of creation, recognising and manifesting Himself in even the smallest of beings as a divine breath that blows through every creature.<sup>7</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī’s Sufism is rich in clear declarations of love for God and love for mankind, which also form the humanistic basis for accepting diversity.<sup>8</sup>

The “all-unity” teaching of Ibn ‘Arabī became particularly important for popular, devotional Sufi Islam in Southeast Asia, where it soon gained a firm footing. Its

ramifications can still be observed in Malay-Indonesian culture today. Moderation, tolerance and religious-cultural diversity, which grow from the mystical concept of *waḥdat al-wuḡūd* and the “Divine Unity,” support an open, holistic worldview oriented towards unlimited “love of the Absolute.”

This Sufi culture of tolerance and pluralism is also, as can be expected, reflected in many socio-political organisations in contemporary Indonesia. As mass organisations with tens of millions of adherents, they have played a significant role in the formation of Indonesian Islam and the Indonesian reform movement, which — unlike in Egypt or certain other Islamic countries — has always occurred through organisations.<sup>9</sup> Among these institutions, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) — Indonesia’s largest Muslim organisation, with approximately 90 million devotees — and its Humanitarian Islam movement, which emerged in 2016, are particularly known for taking a tolerant approach to different ethnic-religious groups.

Based on these considerations, this paper seeks to elaborate on some key concepts and ideas in Ibn ‘Arabī’s theosophical system of thought, such as *waḥdat al-wuḡūd* (the Unity of Being) and *al-insān al-kāmil* (the perfect human being), that laid the groundwork for the formation of tolerance and religious diversity in Islamic mysticism. This is followed by a more in-depth discussion of the impact of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Sufism on NU’s approaches and attitudes and on its newly developed Humanitarian Islam movement.