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Journal of the world's oldest anthropological institute
recognizes Humanitarian Islam's global importance

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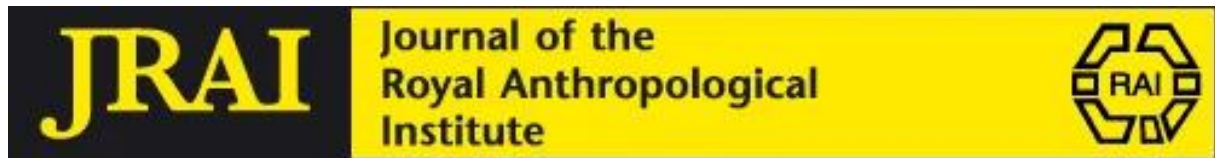


LONDON, United Kingdom, 19 February 2024 — The world's oldest scholarly association dedicated to the furtherance of anthropology — Britain's Royal Anthropological Institute (est. 1871) — has published an academic review of [Humanitarian Islam: Reflecting on an Islamic Concept](#) (Brill | Schöningh, 2023), an edited volume compiling analyses by some of the world's leading experts on the global Humanitarian Islam movement.

The review — published in Volume 30, Issue 1 of *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* — is the latest in a [series of analyses](#) by world-leading experts in the fields of anthropology, international relations, geopolitics, religious studies, and global peace and security, who recognize that Humanitarian Islam merits serious academic research.

Dr. Jonathan Benthall — an Honorary Research Associate at University College London who served as Director of the Royal Anthropological Institute for a quarter-century and is founding

editor of the academic journal *Anthropology Today* — wrote the review, which may be read in full below.



Humanitarian Islam: Reflecting on an Islamic Concept

Review by Jonathan Benthall, University College London

In *The war for Muslim minds* (2004), Gilles Kepel predicted that the most important site for this ‘war’ would be among Muslim communities in Europe. Twenty years later, battle lines coming to prominence in Asia may be more consequential, if we recognize the limits of Eurocentrism. This book is a scholarly commentary on an initiative by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, ‘Revival of the Ulama’) the world’s largest Islamic organization with a membership in Indonesia estimated at over 60 million – to promote a moderate and pluralistic interpretation of Islam, supported by the Indonesian government. The labels chosen for this variant of Islam are ‘humanitarian’ (though, as a translation of the Arabic *insānī*, ‘humanist’ would be better understood internationally) and *Nusantara* (a Javanese word for East Indies). The ambition is high: not merely to counterbalance the dominance currently exercised by Saudi and Egyptian religious authorities, tied to autocratic regimes, but also to set an example for all other scriptural religions, to renounce their ‘hard texts’, which can be cited to justify xenophobia and violence.

The editors of the book and its six other contributors, almost all associated with the University of Vienna, broadly support these religio-political aims, but have set out here to demand nuance and rigour. For instance, the editors in their introduction take gentle issue with the head of NU, the redoubtable Yahya Cholil Staquf, who has written that Islam in Indonesia developed in a spirit of openness quite distinct from the ‘Middle Eastern model’, characterized by military conquest and Muslim supremacism. ‘[T]he process of Islamization of what we now call the Middle East was a highly protracted and complex affair, much less violent than portrayed by Staquf’. Yet, they go on, ‘the point is not so much the degree to which this image conforms to actual fact [as] the consequences of these “facts” in the present, and their bearing on the future’ (p.1). If this were the principle of the whole book, it might imply acceptance of the victory of legend over historical scholarship, thus incurring a risk of blowback from opponents. The contributors’ overall thrust, however, is to go beyond political rhetoric and show that the ‘localization’ of Islam has by no means been specific to Southeast Asia.

Indonesia is widely admired for projecting the ‘smiling face of Islam’, founded on principles of love, compassion, harmony, and justice. Ghazaleh Faridzadeh traces this back to the influence of the mystical Sufi tradition, and especially to the work of the great Arab Andalusian philosopher Ibn Al-Arabi. A remarkable extract from his poem *Tarjuman al-ashwāq* (‘The interpreter of longing,’ 1201) testifies to his recognition of all faiths, including indigenous belief systems, as expressions of unity in diversity (p. 84). But his influence spread throughout

the Muslim world. Yanus Hentschel argues that terms such as ‘Sufism’, ‘Salafism’, and ‘political Islam’ are misleadingly monolithic (p. 100), and that moves to disparage ‘Arab Islam’ as a whole could alienate some potential allies of the Indonesian project (p.112). Since the nineteenth century, Sufi groups in the Middle East have been repressed under regimes that bureaucratized religious practice ‘often under the guideline of a Protestant ideal’ (p. 106) and that claimed purity and exclusiveness according to the principle of *al-walā’ wa-l-barā’* (‘loyalty and rejection of all else,’ p. 103). Rüdiger Lohlker, endorsing some discussion papers recently circulated within NU networks, emphasizes that there is no Islam that is not ‘indigenized’: even at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, it was embedded in the local cultures of Mecca and Medina, though taken as the blueprint for a universal Islam claimed to transcend time and place (pp. 155-6).

We can understand the current process of indigenization, Lohlker concludes, as ‘the development of a genuine Indonesian school of thought 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’ (p. 177). All credit to these authors for drawing attention to the snags, including some NU members’ activities in the past that fell far short of eirenic; NU’s apparent negativity with regard to Indonesia’s Shia and Ahmadi minorities (Faridzadeh p. 88); and NU’s own claims in some of its manifestos to a proprietary purity.

Anthropologists have contributed richly to Indonesian studies, and there is much to stimulate them in this book, a model of engaged scholarship. Only lacking perhaps is the acuity of a Mary Douglas to identify commonalities in forms of associational life and purity maintenance, irrespective of ideological content.

Ivanyi, Katharina & Rüdiger Lohlker (eds). *Humanitarian Islam: Reflecting on an Islamic Concept*. 194 pp., bibliogr. Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2023. €110.28 (cloth)