

WEA-Humanitarian Islam collaboration releases globally acclaimed book

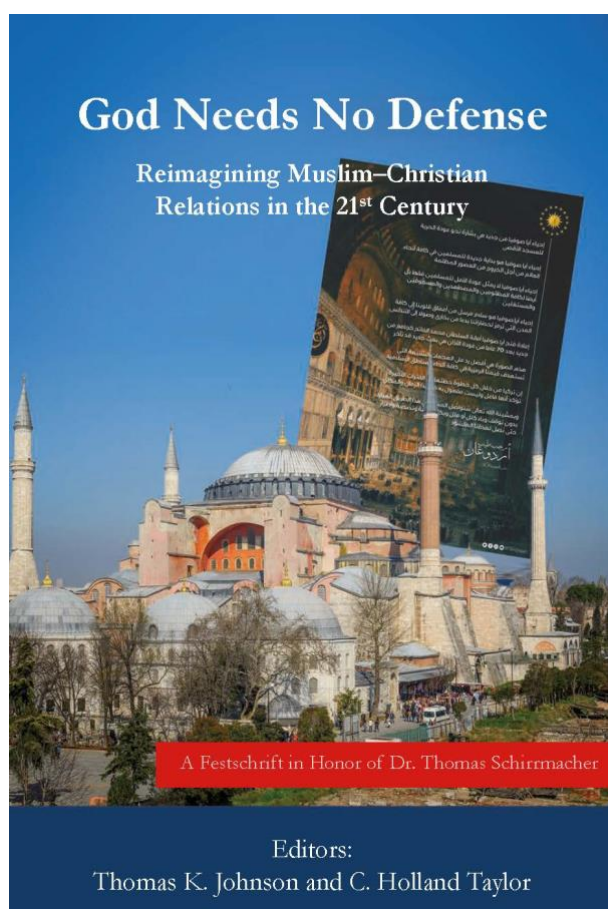
by Thomas K. Johnson, WEA senior theological advisor

Giving a speech at the Nation's Mosque in Washington, DC, was not something I was expecting to do when I graduated from a traditional Protestant seminary 40 years ago. But back then, then I did not expect to spend years on religious freedom, I did not comprehend that Muslim-Christian conflicts dating back centuries would become an issue of global importance again, and I did not imagine that the world's largest Muslim organization would want to work with the world's largest evangelical organization to set a new direction in interfaith relations.

The occasion for my speech, on 13 July, was the launch of a book I coedited with C. Holland Taylor, a Muslim counterpart. The book, called *God Needs No Defense: Reimagining Muslim-Christian Relations in the 21st Century* (available as a free download [here](#)), was introduced during the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington. It was published jointly by the Institute for Humanitarian Islam, the Center for Shared Civilizational Values, and the WEA Theological Commission.

The title phrase *God Needs No Defense* is a response to how many people in several countries think they are defending God when they engage in violent jihad, whether in Afghanistan, Nigeria or Somalia. This title was first used for an essay (famous in parts of the Muslim world) published by Abdurrahman Wahid, who was the first democratically elected president of Indonesia (1999–2001) and a leading Muslim theologian. We included that essay in our book, along with another pivotal essay by Wahid. The Muslim scholars working on the book asked me to write essays from a Protestant perspective that parallel the themes addressed by President Wahid. This group of four essays became the philosophical core of the book. In this way, our joint Muslim-Christian team is presenting a new role model to replace the less desirable pattern of jihads and corresponding crusades. Instead, we are forging a path of serious theological discussion of the ethical foundations for life together in multi-religious societies.

At dinner at the end of our first extensive meeting with this group of Muslims in 2019, I said I would be disappointed if the Muslims at the table did not try to convert me to Islam, just as we Christians desire to guide Muslims to Christianity. We are each convinced that the faith tradition we believe in is true. At the same time, we want our grandchildren of both faiths to be good neighbours to each other, and it is our job as theologians of both faiths to explain why and how Muslims and Christians can be



good neighbours and friends. Jointly we are responding to both religious extremism and secular extremism.

The book was presented as a *festschrift* to WEA Secretary General Thomas Schirmacher by Yahya Cholil Staquf, formerly President Wahid's press secretary and now one of the leaders of the Indonesia-based Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim organization. The launch event was hosted by Imam Talib Shareef, head of the Nation's Mosque, the first American mosque built by descendants of American slaves. This group of American Sunni mosques is embracing the type of Muslim theology represented by Nahdlatul Ulama.

The media coverage of this event has been fascinating and encouraging. *Christianity Today* used the title, '[Christian and Muslim Leaders Agree on Legitimacy of Evangelism](#)'. *Religion Unplugged* reported, '[The World's Largest Muslim Organization Just Honored Evangelicals](#)'. James Dorsey, an expert on religious and ethnic conflict at the Middle East Institute, [commented](#) that the 'recent unprecedented alliance between Muslims and Evangelicals takes on added significance in a world in which human rights are on the defensive'. And the prominent German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* contrasted the models of relating to Muslims used by the Vatican and by the WEA. Following is a translation of a portion of that article:

The encounters [of the Vatican with Muslim leaders] were important simply because of their symbolism. However, they have not produced a sustainable Christian-Islamic dialogue. In 2019, Pope Francis issued a declaration on the fraternity of all people with the Egyptian Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb, and in 2021 he visited the Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq. As early as 2007, the then Saudi King Abdullah was a guest of Pope Benedict XVI in the Vatican State. However, this has not led to theological cooperation.

Greater hopes are attached to the dialogue currently led by two large independent organizations: the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), whose national member organizations include several hundred million Christians, and the Indonesian Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest independent Islamic organization with more than 90 million members. A year ago, they founded a joint working group that wants to be a voice against religiously motivated violence and religious persecution.

They reaffirmed their cooperation at an event on July 13 at a mosque in Washington and with a book on Christian-Islamic dialogue published by both sides. WEA Special Envoy for Engagement [with Humanitarian Islam] and co-editor Thomas K. Johnson said that despite all the differences between the two religions that continue to exist, it is possible to live peacefully together, beyond the paths of jihad and the Crusades. That doesn't rule out proselytism from either side.

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New society inspiring Christian scholars in public universities

by Keith Campbell, Executive Committee Member, Society of Christian Scholars

Omar Montero teaches architecture and design at Buenos Aires University, Argentina's premier institution of higher learning. When he heard about the Society of Christian Scholars, he said, only somewhat facetiously, 'I thought I was the only Christian scholar in the secular academic world! I had no idea that there were so many believing academics in secular institutions.'

Omar was so encouraged by this discovery that he committed his life to fulfilling the challenge expressed by Christian historian George Marsden in 1998: 'Contemporary Christian scholarship will not realize its potential unless it can establish a strong institutional base. Isolated individuals in university culture can make impressive efforts here and there, but unless their voices are united, they will be lost in the general cacophony of the contemporary academy' (*The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, page 101).

Now there is a global organization, partnering with the World Evangelical Alliance, designed specifically to help professors, graduate students, administrators, and post-docs to be salt and light in higher education. Called the Society of Christian Scholars, it is an internationally led, interdisciplinary movement established by about two dozen scholars from 15 different countries. Philosophy professor Osam Edim Temple of Nigeria chairs the Society's Executive Committee.



Keith Campbell © private

After its first two years, the Society has about 350 members from about 60 nations. Locally led, national movements of the Society are already emerging in Anglophone Africa, Francophone Africa, Latin America, and Europe.

The Society serves its members—and enables its members to serve each other—through webinars, conferences, peer mentoring, online resources, editing of academic papers, and more. Here are a few examples:

- Marlene Hines (Jamaica), who has professional expertise in educational administration, library sciences and transformational leadership, became the Society's librarian, curating an online library of 800 relevant resources (and growing daily).
- Jean Takeuchi, a Japanese native who spent most of her career as a chemistry researcher and also holds a doctorate in Old Testament, presented one of the Society's recent monthly webinars, discussing 'An Integrated Life: The Interface of Scientific Research and Christian Commitment'.
- Elizabeth Olayiwola, a young scholar who specializes in analysing the work of Nigerian evangelical filmmakers, called on the Society's editorial services to help her prepare an essay that was accepted for publication in a forthcoming book on African film. 'The Society's editorial department has been of immense help to my career!' she remarked.

By joining the Society, you can both serve your academic brothers and sisters around the world and benefit from these services too. Full membership is limited to people serving on staff at public (or 'secular') institutions, but others are welcome to join as 'Students' or 'Friends'.

You can join now on a free 30-day trial basis at www.SocietyofChristianScholars.org. You'll immediately receive a free electronic copy of *The Outrageous Idea of the Missional Professor: International Edition* by Paul Gould (USA), with contributions from Li Ma (China), Omar Montero (Argentina), Granville Pillar (Hungary), Osam Temple (Nigeria), Bee-Lan C. Wang (Malaysia/USA), and Keith Campbell (USA).

Global Forum of Theological Educators meets virtually

by Rei Lemuel Crizaldo, coordinator, WEA Theological Commission

'The next theological education, the one needed for the future that is coming, will need to be more formational than the current version, and that formation will need to make spiritual maturity, moral integrity, and relational ability more central than they have been in the past.'

This comment by Daniel Aleshire (former executive director of the Association of Theological Schools) captured the thrust of the Global Forum of Theological Educators (GFTE), which took place fully online on September 29–October 1. With the theme of 'Conversations on Theological Education as Formation: Practices, Contexts, and Futures', leaders in theological education and ministry from every Christian tradition gathered together over a shared screen for a period of three days.

On the first day, the participants considered what practices allow formation of students to take place more fully. Ruth Padilla DeBorst shared about the 'from life, to life' model developed by the Center for Interdisciplinary Theological Studies (CETI) in Latin America. It features an innovative way of restructuring the traditional curriculum of theological education. Father Matthew Francis, in contrast, traced the premodern way of formative practices. He explained how in the Orthodox tradition, deep formation actually comes through participating in the immersive experience of the Holy Week's annual 'liturgical marathon'.

On the second day, the conversation shifted into the variety of contexts that shape formation within the context of seminary training. Myrto Theocharous of the Greek Bible College in Athens, Elie Haddad of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, and Samson Fatokun of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria discussed how they and their institutions shape curricula and pedagogy, thinking not only about preparing students in light of these specific issues but also about the impact of contextual realities on faculty and communities.

The final day was a moment of reflection focusing on possibilities, opportunities and challenges regarding a more formational approach to theological education in the next decades. Willie Jennings of Yale Divinity School, Cathy Ross of the Church Mission Society, and Amos Yong of Fuller Seminary sparked conversations on the need to address issues of politics, intentional decolonization, and increased global resource sharing among theological institutions.

Theresa Lua, the WEA's Director of Global Theology, observed that the forum provided a venue to hear 'stories and examples of contextual and innovative practices that promote holistic formation of leaders for the church's mission in the world'. Along with Lua, other leaders in the Global Theology Department including Manfred Kohl (Re-Forma) and Michael Ortiz (International Council for Evangelical Theological Education) participated in the forum. Rosalee Velloso Ewell, the WEA's global ambassador for theology, has been part of the GFTE's Executive Committee from the first global forum in Germany (2016) and continues to provide active leadership.

To shape the future of theological education, the GFTE is committed to bringing together leading theological educators from the six major church confessional (ecclesial) families—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, historic Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Independent churches. The GFTE hopes to function as 'one united forum in order to learn from each other, to build bridges and to share about the current situations of theological education and ministerial formation on a global scale'.

Introducing our new Theological Commission coordinator

Rei Lemuel Crizaldo was raised in a Baptist family and disciplined by Pentecostals. He attended a Roman Catholic school, studied theology with Reformed professors, and served in ministry alongside Wesleyans and Mennonites. He jokingly calls that combination a 'dyslexic' experience of spiritual development, but it has equipped him very well to serve the WEA as the new coordinator of its Theological Commission.

We asked Rei to share some of his colourful observations as he embarks on this new global work.

Q: So when did you come to appreciate the value of your 'dyslexic' background?

Rei: When I worked for one of the commissions of the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC), I had to be conversant with a variety of religious persuasions. The 'big tent' perspective I had gained through the years allowed me to navigate the diversity within the evangelical community, with much appreciation of its potential to enrich theological reflection.

By the time I became one of the 'Younger Leaders' in the Lausanne Movement, I was even more convinced of the importance and necessity of creating spaces where different influencers with various ideas within the evangelical community can come together and collaborate in a stronger witness to the cause of the gospel. After that, I served the theology team of Tearfund, coordinating their network of theological training organizations from diverse faith orientations across East and Southeast Asia.

Looking back, I feel as if the Lord was preparing me for a joyous passion of criss-crossing from one circle to another, connecting the dots, linking people together, and finding shared points of concern and action.



Rei Lemuel Crizaldo © private

Q: What do you expect to be doing and why are you excited about this opportunity?

Rei: What really attracted me to coordinating the work of the Theological Commission was the vision of 'internationalizing' theological frameworks that could serve the needs of a growing presence of evangelical churches in the Majority World. I look forward to creating opportunities for voices that are not usually heard to join the theological discourse. I also hope that the geographic location where theological discourses take place shall move closer to where these voices are. Content is important, but context matters too, at times even more so. I am hopeful that such shifts in theological conversations can shape the face of the evangelical community itself in positive ways.

There have been times when creating a longer table for theological discussions has deeply enriched the theological reflection of the evangelical community. The biblical reflections of Rene Padilla, Samuel Escobar, Pedro Aranas and others greatly helped evangelical mission and ministry to recover its holistic and transformative character. Such examples show me that by coming together globally, the evangelical community can only be stronger.

I am still feeling my way through the work of the Theological Commission, but I expect to contribute in at least three areas: (1) bringing together the younger voices of the evangelical community from across the globe on theological issues, and creating meaningful dialogue between the rich voices of past generations and the ongoing discourse of the present time; (2) maximizing the potential of the digital connections available today to nurture life-giving conversations (as opposed to the toxic communication that characterizes much of social media); and (3) bringing to the centre of attention theological issues and concerns faced by those on the front lines of the growing global church.

I also hope to pump fresh energy into the plan to develop an active digital hub hosted by the WEA through its World of Theology blog.

Q: What motivates you to work within the WEA?

Rei: In the years to come, there will be more and more evangelicals who live in the newly developing centres of Christianity in the Majority World. These people will not think about their faith in the English language, and they will be pressed to think about the implications of their faith for the monstrous societal problems that arise in their respective local contexts. I think the WEA provides a distinctive space for these growing communities, scattered across the most challenging of places, to be in touch with each other, praying and reflecting together as a global family of faith.

Today, churches and Christian leaders all over the world are discovering the value of being connected globally through digital platforms. Amidst the closing of church doors due to COVID-19, many experienced how easy and wonderful it is for members of the body of Christ all over the world to gather instantly in virtual spaces. It is now easy to invite a thought leader from Asia or Latin America to participate in African online gatherings and vice versa. Such exchanges of insights and perspectives would have been very costly prior to the development of the current online environment.

In both of these areas, the WEA is in a unique position to lead the way for the diversifying evangelical community towards greater inclusion and a deeper sense of unity in its conversations and actions.

Q: How have you experienced the value of the WEA?

Rei: The WEA has established itself as a credible voice in the work of 'truth-telling' and contributes to discussions of pressing public concern. At the local level, I've seen how the PCEC was able to penetrate spaces of very contentious public debate and provide a mediating perspective. At the global level, an effective evangelical voice can make a difference on issues that have a deep impact on people in the Majority World, such as religious freedom and climate change.

Q: What else should our readers know about you?

Rei: I love coffee. I believe that it is one of the wonderful things that God allowed human beings to discover and creatively harness, to make life a bit better. Indeed, it is a sign of grace amidst the gloom of a fallen world. In my experience, a good cup of coffee not only infuses a fresh spirit into theological thinking but also brings a whole stream of exciting things to reflect on. Every cup of coffee recalls the plight of coffee farmers across the globe, the culinary artistry of those who roast the beans, and the joys of a variety of brewing experiences and methodologies, among others. Before the pandemic happened, when people asked me what I do in ministry, I would often say, 'I drink coffee with people and, in between sips, talk about the next curve in theology.'

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- (3) Send a cheque to WEA Business Coalition, Achter de Weiden 47, 22869 Schenefeld, Germany

WEA provides evangelical voice at World Conservation Congress

On 4 September, WEA Secretary General Thomas Schirmmacher presented an evangelical perspective on conservation of nature and biodiversity to the global community of experts who gathered in Marseille, France for the World Conservation Congress 2021. Schirmmacher participated in a high-level panel with other faith leaders on the topic of 'The Spirituality and Nature Dialogue: Responsibility, Inspiration and Behaviour Change'. He outlined a vision of caring for the environment based on the biblical view of man as steward of God's creation.

The dialogue was organized by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Schirmmacher participated as a representative of the WEA's global network of evangelicals in 143 countries, speaking alongside Cardinal Peter Turkson, Prefect of the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development of the Roman Catholic Church. Representatives of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous religions also took part in the discussion.

Schirmmacher stated that preserving God's creation is a core element of evangelical belief, pointing out that in the first chapter of the Bible, God entrusted humans with the responsibility of taking care of the earth (Genesis 1:26, 28). 'This has been and will remain true and valid always', he said. 'Therefore, the challenges related to climate change can only underscore this duty, but they did not create it.'

Schirmmacher noted that we have acquired extensive knowledge of the earth and the environment, but that the foundational understanding of the purpose of that knowledge has been lost. He compared our situation to that of a friend of his, who as a boy was given a violin, took it apart piece by piece to see every detail of how it was made, but was then unable to put it back together again and thus never learned to play the violin. 'Never before in history have we known more about the details of nature than we know today', Schirmmacher stated. 'We have cut the world into pieces more precisely than anyone in the past. But we have lost sight of the purpose and design of creation because we do not see it as God's precious creation that was entrusted to us.'

Asked why evangelicals speak of 'sin' with regard to our relationship with nature, Schirmmacher drew a parallel to racism. 'It is more than simply bad behavior or ignorance. It is hatred coming out of the depth of our heart. Even if we could delete all racism in an instant, humans would just go on to invent some other evil out of the blue', he commented. Quoting Jesus, he stated that evil does not enter into man from the outside, but rather evil comes out of the heart of man and is then put into action (Matthew 15:17-20).

Schirmmacher stressed that humanity needs not just new rules and the correction of former mistakes, but a 'conversion' in our innermost being, which only the Creator can enable. 'This should not be seen as a cheap excuse, but an acknowledgement that changing away from envy, greed, gluttony and exploitation requires more than moral indignation against others and pointing fingers. It starts with our own critical self-reflection and repentance', he said.



Cardinal Peter Turkson, Olga Letykai Csonka, Thomas Schirmmacher and Grethel Aguilar during the panel discussion © WEA/Esther Schirmmacher

Grand opening for megachurch's new facility near Paris

WEA Secretary General Thomas Schirmmacher participated in the opening of a grand new evangelical church space on 11 September 2021 as the Martin Luther King Church, affiliated with the Assemblies of God in France, opened its striking Grand Paris facility in Créteil, south of Paris.

The megachurch's new building has attracted plenty of attention. Its main auditorium has a giant 360-degree screen, a restaurant with a rooftop terrace, a fun park, and a sports hall.

In his remarks, Schirmmacher recalled the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, twenty years earlier, and stated, 'As Christians, we carry a universal message of unity and hope to a world in which anger, rejection, and lack of mutual understanding lead people to death and war. Yet the message we bring is believable only if we have learned to display this unity amongst ourselves. ...



Thomas Schirmmacher with Senior Pastor Ivan Carluer
© WEA/Esther Schirmmacher

'Today, as we gather together at the table of brotherhood described by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the spirit of holy communion and love established for us by Christ, we must realize that before we can demonstrate the love of the Savior to the nations through humanitarian aid and social services, it is essential that these nations have the chance to see this same love at work among us. May they see in us one heart and one spirit in unity, in accordance with Jesus' command for his people.'

WEA THEOLOGICAL NEWS

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