

When 300 Muslims Defended Christians but Few Noticed

Something notable occurred in May in Indonesia: Muslims came to the defense of persecuted Christians.

As reported in [Christianity Today](#) and [CNN](#), 300 Islamic leaders from 30 countries came together to denounce religious extremism within Islam, which has led not only to violence between Sunni and Shia Muslims but also to the persecution of Christians within predominantly Muslim countries.

This group, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), is not some fringe movement within Islam; it is the largest Muslim organization in the world, with estimates of its members being between 30 million and 50 million members, mostly in Indonesia.

This meeting comes on the heels of a January convocation that resulted in the [Marrakesh Declaration](#), which calls for the protection of religious minorities, including Christians, in majority-Muslim countries.

NU is engaged in an ideological campaign against ISIS and those countries that exacerbate tensions between the Sunni and Shia factions.

This is counter to the narrative that we often hear in the United States, which asserts that moderate Muslims don't denounce violent radical Muslims.

Even though the NU meeting was reported in these two major news media, as well as others, it didn't get much attention, perhaps because it does run counter to the narrative.

It's natural to tune out data that doesn't fit our understanding of the world, but it's also dangerous.

Rather than adapting our understanding to fit the data, we filter it out. We defend our narrative, sometimes unconsciously, but often quite consciously.

Minds are hard to change; hearts, even harder.

We ignore this kind of thing at our own peril because we end up afraid of or angry

at a caricature of the world rather than the real thing.

It's also hypocritical, especially for Christians. Islam is not the only religion with warring factions.

In the U.S., Christian abolitionists fought against Christian slaveholders, both quoting Scripture in defense of their purity. Jim Crow existed in a very devout Christian culture that resisted every call for desegregation and equal rights for the descendants of slaves.

Jesus called us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and then took the radical step of defining "neighbor" as anyone and everyone, including our enemies - especially our enemies.

Yet we have Christians who will quote Jesus on Sunday and then advocate against enemy-love on Monday.

Ironically, in calling for ending persecution against Christians and opposing religious extremism, these Muslim leaders are closer to the position of Jesus than many of his own followers are.

Religious extremism and the violence that seems to inevitably flow out of it is not limited to one religion, nor is any religion void of such extremism.

Our church hosts a small Burmese congregation of Christians who are refugees escaping persecution from Buddhists in their home country.

I sometimes wonder if it's the religion that leads to the violence, or if violent people use religion to justify their wars.

There's no doubt that the latter happens. To justify war, we have to appeal to some higher, nobler cause; few people will support a war in which the justification is, "We want what they have," whether it be oil, land, money, power and so on.

But there is also no doubt that there are many who believe a distorted view of their religion that compels them to conquer and, if need be, kill their enemies in the name of God.

Jesus faced this in first-century Israel, and he opposed it. He didn't permit his

followers to take up the sword, rather commanding them to take up the cross.

It seems to me that this is the dividing line that has always challenged the world. In every religion there are cross-bearers and there are sword-bearers.

And it's clear with whom Jesus stands.

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