

# Contemporary Islam & Intellectual History

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The recent ISIM Conference on Modern Islamic Intellectual History in Comparative Perspective (Utrecht, 29-30 September 2005) brought together scholars working on developments in a diverse range of Muslim societies to discuss the production, transformation, and reception of Islam in the modern period. It was also a much-welcomed opportunity to raise issues of methodological and theoretical relevance for scholars working on Muslim intellectualism of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This is an extremely complex field that requires not only high levels of linguistic expertise and area-specific knowledge, but also a careful attention to the broader political and epistemological contexts of globalization. The truly trans-regional nature of developments affecting contemporary Muslim societies pose new challenges to scholars of Islamic Studies in which traditional "Area Studies"-type training will continue to be valuable in preparing for scholarship in this field, but it is no longer sufficient in itself to deal with the global dimensions of regional developments.

Attempts at understanding contemporary Islam through its intellectual history demand new analytical frameworks to be brought to bear on both Muslim religious thought and the academic study of religion. The established Islamic Studies methodologies developed to deal with the medieval period, such as philological analyses of texts and the documentation of chains of teacher/student transmissions of knowledge, are simply inadequate for dealing with the intricacies of the modern period. What is needed are new approaches to modern Muslim intellectualism that build upon the traditional strengths of Islamic Studies while also taking into account contemporary realities, which add new dimensions to the processes of producing and transmitting knowledge.

The problematics of conceptualizing such a project, however, are considerable, for beyond the boundaries of Islamic Studies the very field of "Intellectual History" itself has experienced a rather tumultuous time in modern scholarship. Both internal debates and critiques from outside have characterized the historiographies of ideas and intellectual history since the early twentieth century. Much can be gained from a critical and selective engagement with recent developments in the field. However in doing so students of modern Islam must negotiate several significant obstacles, including that posed by the fact that intellectual history has been heretofore almost exclusively focused on ideas and texts produced in the "West." Recognizing this fact and facing this challenge can, in fact, provide opportunities to reconsider the ways in which various "voices" in modern discourses are presented and placed in conversation with each other.

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## Modernity, media, and Muslim thought

One of the central issues in debates on intellectual historiography is that of "contextualization" and the problematizing of the selection of particular contexts within which to situate our discussions of specific texts. This becomes an especially complex question for studies of modern Muslim writings; should, for example, modern Islamist elaborations of *Sunnatullah* as a "natural law" concept be read against the background of medieval *falsafah*, twentieth-century Neo-Thomism, or

the works of Leo Strauss? In selecting specific texts to be subjected to such contextual analyses, the historian must devote careful attention to the identification of texts that might be considered as particularly illuminating examples of the intersection of established traditions and contemporary concerns and insights situated in concrete historical moments.

Striking a balance in scholarly attention between a focus on the particularities of a given text and a work's embodiment of broader trends within the cultural contexts of its creation requires considerable efforts to resist the pulls of polar methodological orientations toward either an over-emphasis on idiosyncratic attributes or a tendency toward some form of contextual reductionism. A nuanced treatment of both a book's unique qualities and the general cultural background against which they are elaborated can make it possible to open up new discussions of the ideas presented and the processes by which they are symbolized, thus facilitating the recognition of connections between various facets of the broader cultural histories of Muslim societies and the diverse social functions of ideas and rhetorical formulations in changing historical contexts. What is called for then is not the dogmatic adherence to the abstracted ideals of any one school of historiography, but rather a theoretically aware—as opposed to conceptually oblivious—methodological flexibility that self-consciously moves back and forth between text-specific and broader cultural dimensions of analysis.

Interpreting modern Muslim thought and its public impact also requires a nuanced appreciation of the media through which ideas are developed and distributed. Thus approaches need to be developed that can address issues of both the production of knowledge and its reception by diverse publics. This will require thinking through new ways of situating the works of prominent writers in relation to readers in the creation of contemporary discourses on Islam. Here there are rich developments in other academic fields including the History of the Book and Media Studies that can be drawn upon to construct models for contextualizing the production, distribution, and

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reception of texts in modern Muslim intellectual history. An acknowledgement of the significance of media and communications technologies in the modern period should not, however, be taken as implying any totalizing role for technological determinism in the development of new forms of discourse. Rather these technologies should be regarded as important factors that present new possibilities for, as well as new restrictions on, the production and dissemination of knowledge. Such an approach, for example, could help us to better understand the diverse impacts that “media muftis” and celebrity preachers such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Amr Khalid, or A.A. Gym are having upon Muslims in diverse societies all across the contemporary world. *Pace* McLuhan, modern media, while important in its own right, still conveys messages that need to be carefully parsed.

## Insiders, outsiders, and the production of knowledge

In the modern period definitive lines between “Muslim” and “Western,” as well as “academic” and “confessional,” conversations on Islam have often been obscured in the permutations of public discourses of identity and power politics. Given this historical reality, any rethinking of the field of modern Muslim intellectual history must start with a frank recognition of the fact that for well over a century now the blending of emic and etic discourses on Islam has been a complex and creative dynamic in Muslim thought. Perhaps the most high-profile individual example of the politicized intellectual interactions of Western and Muslim scholars can be found in the late nineteenth-century polemics between Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Ernst Renan over the relation between “Islam” and the complex of “science” and “progress” that was considered to comprise “modernity” at that time.

All across the Muslim world during the modern period, Western scholarship came to exercise complex influences on the development of internal Muslim conversations—sometimes with very specific connections. One thinks, for example of the impact of modern Orientalist “discoveries” of Ibn Khaldun on Muslim social scientists in North Africa, and the impact of Geertz’ work on conversations among Indonesian Muslims. Such works held prominent place within a rather eclectic set of canons formed out of some rather odd combinations of Western authors frequently cited in modern Muslim literatures—with colonial classics such as Carlyle’s portrait of Muhammad in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* and Lothrop Stoddard’s *New World of Islam* gradually giving way to works like Maurice Bucaille’s *La Bible, Le Coran, et la science*, and Samuel Huntington’s *Foreign Affairs* article on “The Clash of Civilizations” in more recent years.

Beyond this, however, over the latter decades of the twentieth century, there developed in the work of some Muslim scholars and authors trends toward an increasing openness to and influence of “Western” thinkers beyond those dealing with issues of Islam and Muslim societies. The first influences were most commonly from the social sciences, as seen for example in the impact of modern social sciences theories on the work of Ziya Gökalp, Ali Shariati, and Nurcholish Madjid in modern Turkey, Iran, and Indonesia, respectively. More recently, however, international developments in hermeneutics and other fields of the Humanities have also come to be both reflected and further developed in the writings of such thinkers as Muhammad Arkoun and Nasr Abu-Zayd. Over the course of the twentieth century, the works of various “Western” authors on Islam began to serve as major points of reference in the rhetoric of modern Muslim authors across a diverse range of African, Middle Eastern, and Asian societies, producing a rich range of modern Muslim thinkers.

## Post-“Orientalism” and globalization

In assessing the impact of “Western” academic writings on the scholarly and public discourses of twentieth century Islam, particular attention must be directed toward interpreting the legacies of “Orientalist” scholarship in modern understandings of Islam among particular Muslim communities—the nature and history of which have been both more profound and more nuanced than may be apparent in the treatments of the subject developed in circles of literary critics. To cite just a few examples from mid twentieth century Indonesia: In his oft-republished history of Sufism, the popular preacher and novelist Hamka praised Louis Massignon as “the great pillar of all Orientalists” and cited approvingly his work on Hallaj, as well as the Frenchman’s speculations on the relevance of this tenth century figure for the later development of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago.<sup>1</sup> Well outside of Sufi Studies, H.A.R. Gibb’s observation on the totalizing, holistic nature of Islam became a



**Ziya Gökalp, *Hilafet ve milli hakimiyet*. Ankara, 1921; Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, *al-Urwa al-wuthqa*. Reprint, Cairo 1928; Ali Shariati, *Ummat wa Imamah*. [S.I.], 1972; and Muhammad Arkoun, *al-Fikr al-islami: qira'a 'ilmiyya*. Bayrut, 1987.**

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dominant trope in the public speeches and published writings of the prominent Islamist politician M. Natsir during the middle decades of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the impact of essentialized conceptions of Islam that were originally developed in Western scholarship upon the formulation of modern “fundamentalist” understandings of Islam as a system and a “total way of life” is something that must be more widely recognized and understood in any future analysis of modern Muslim intellectualism.

This situation, it is important to recognize, has not been a result of disembodied developments on a purely theoretical level, but rather one that arose within a specific set of historical circumstances within contexts of colonialism and its accompanying asymmetrical systems of knowledge and power—contexts about which modern Muslim thinkers have been acutely aware and critical. Likewise, for historians of these modern developments, such political, economic, and social realities must be kept in mind when examining the use of religious and cultural symbolism as analytical tools for rethinking and re-conceptualizing modern religious thought and practices in Muslim societies. Attention to the complex social locations of those producing and distributing ideas and texts, and the networks within which they interact, thus becomes another important aspect of formulating an interdisciplinary approach to Islamic thought. Such a development requires moving beyond simply critiquing the power dynamics of early scholarship in attempts to come to terms with the diverse and complex ways in which earlier European works on Islam and Muslim societies have become a part of conversations not only between “Muslims” and “non-believers” but among Muslims themselves in various ways over the past century. The convergence of such conversations in the era of globalization has been a major aspect of the development of modern Muslim thought, and for contemporary researchers in Islamic Studies interpreting these developments now demands that our usual philological proclivities now share more time in our studies with theoretical modes of reflection.

## Notes

1. Hamka, *Perkembangan Tasawuf dari Abad ke-Abad* (Jakarta: Pustaka Keluarga, 1952), 116.
2. “Islam is much more than a system of theology; it is a complete civilization.” (*Whither Islam?*, 12), was repeatedly quoted by Natsir and other prominent Islamists in the twentieth century. See, for example: M. Natsir, *Islam Sebagai Ideologie* (Jakarta: Penjiaran Ilmu, 1950), 7.

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