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*Contemporary Islamic Discourse in the Malay-Indonesian World: Critical Perspectives*. By Azhar Ibrahim. Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2014. 315 pp.

This book critically investigates how dominant Muslim groups in Southeast Asia think and appropriate Islam in response to contemporary challenges of social and political change. Its approach and perspective, based on the sociology of knowledge, provide a refreshing departure from the pervasive culturalist frameworks that have marked publications on Islam and Muslims in the region in recent years. The author does a fine job in giving conceptual coherence to the vast amount of materials that he harnesses in making sense of Muslims' thought and its ramifications for the wider plural societies in which they live.

Comprising six chapters, the author identifies and meticulously analyses dominant modes of group thought, namely religious traditionalism and *dakwah* revivalism, and their impact. He critically evaluates these against the marginal yet highly significant progressive ideas and orientations of selected Muslim groups and individuals. The salient traits of the spectrum of these modes of thought and their interplay are carefully delineated, as are their differences and commonalities. The socio-historical factors conditioning each and how they in turn condition their adherents' sense of relevant issues

are thoroughly explored. How every point of view is particular to the groups' perspective and situation, even if assertions take on the language of religious absolutes, is clearly demonstrated.

The central motifs of religious traditionalism are problematized in Chapter One. Of these, the insignificance of man, the limitations of reason, a scepticism towards humanism, a preoccupation with mysticism, an overemphasis on rituals and personal piety as ideals of spiritual perfection, the hierarchy of knowledge, reverence for savants of the past at the expense of contemporary thinkers, and dogmatic reliance on selective traditions as absolute and immutable are analysed. The author evaluates the relevance of thinking on these themes to the demands of the modern world and unravels its limitations in providing intellectual and moral guidance for Muslims in the face of rapid change. The contrast between religious traditionalism and *dakwah* revivalism in terms of socio-historical origins and sense of issues are further explored in Chapter Two. The author provides a strong critique of fundamentalism in revivalist discourse, as it is manifest in constructions of Islamic identity, the Islamic state and system, attitude towards secularism and the West, the clamour for *hudud* and other rhetoric. Its failure in addressing concrete socio-economic problems confronting the community is well explicated.

The predominance and adverse impact of these two modes of thought in religious discourse are further examined in Chapter Three, which focuses on Singapore. Against the backdrop of the state's management of religion in the public sphere and its implications for intra-community contestations for leadership, the author examines the strong imprints of these modes of thought and their weaknesses in contributing to genuine pluralism. However, he sees hope in the growing yet marginal strand of critical voices of Muslim intellectuals struggling to develop a more inclusive and humane society under the impact of modernity and social change.

The succeeding two chapters on the themes of democracy and pluralism unravel more thoroughly the impact of these dominant

orientations. The author reveals the strong exclusivist tendencies, parochialism and bigoted fanaticism of ultra-traditionalists and fundamentalists as they indulge in pejorative labelling, book banning, and demonizing adversaries as infidels and hypocrites and in their reactions towards the faiths and religious practices of others. He evaluates these against Muslim discourse that positively sanctions individualism, freedom of conscience and thought and acceptance of diverse varieties of religious beliefs as equal pathways to truth. The predominance of apologetic strands and of those who pay lip service to democracy and pluralism or trivialize it amidst the violation of basic rights and social justice are also discussed.

The book ends with a rich analysis and evaluation of the contributions and limitations of “liberal Islam” in Indonesia. The author delves into the significance of this discourse for the development of Muslim societies. Its intellectual depth in harnessing religious ideas, values and teachings towards the goal of affirming democracy and pluralism and paving the way for greater social justice and equality through social solidarity and respect for differences are thoroughly explored.

In substance and approach, this work is commendable in providing profound perspective on the potential role of religion in the reform and remaking of society and on factors inimical to this development. While religion is not the only factor responsible for society’s progress and well-being, the author has succeeded in showing that it can provide a strong ballast for a more humane and just society. The vital role of planning for religion in a democratic sense, to which he alludes to in almost every chapter but did not — given the focus of the work — develop, should spark further deliberation. The work is a service to scholarship and should be read by all concerned with the well-being and development of plural societies.

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