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Picturing Islam: Arts and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld

Judul Buku
Picturing Islam: Arts and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld

Penulis
Kenneth M. George

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Wiley-Blackwell, 2010

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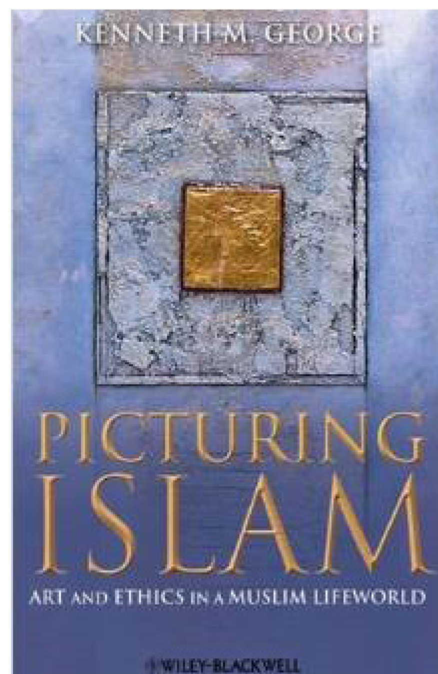

THE Indonesian painter A. D. Pirous had a revelation when he visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 1970. He had thought of himself as an international artist, yet in New York the only works from his part of the world were set aside in a section called "Islamic art." He realized that the Western audience was unimpressed by non-Western modern artists unless they represented Orientalist primitivism. He decided to pursue a kind of "ethno-aesthetics" in order to shine. This moment was, in retrospect, the moment that this Achenese-Gujarati artist decided to "picture Islam," a decision that changed his life. The trajectory of Pirous's "lifeworld" before and after this decision (pp. 5, 38) is the focus of this beautifully written ethnographic biography, Picturing Islam, by the anthropologist Kenneth M. George.

From his beginning as a humanist student of Dutch expats creating "bourgeois art" in a Bandung art institute in the 1950s (p. 28), Pirous was later accused of being a "propaganda artist" for the authoritarian "New Order" regime in the 1960s (p. 37), a "world artist" in the 1970s, and eventually a renowned "Indonesian," "Acehnese," and "Islamic" artist. Pirous's artistic positions changed in accordance with a series of inspirations, all inter-subjectively articulated with his audience. As such, the constantly shifting lifeworld of Pirous allows George to link decades of ethnographic friendship to larger questions about values, identity, and belonging across a couple of time periods.

The new artistic identity gave Pirous's life a fresh purpose and a new set of responsibilities. George describes this transformation as "a shift in moral and civic vision that led him to claim an Islamic heritage for the nation at large, a move that politically and aesthetically ties together the transcendental discourses of nation and faith" (p. 46). To picture Islam is to create fascinating visual arts that all Muslims can enjoy; even those who do not understand Arabic can potentially feel the awe of human religiosity, as delicately represented in the violet work, Meditation Toward the Enlightened Spirit (2000), that George chose to be on the cover of the book.

Pirous's colorful works hence have not only some "sensuous pull on the eye" (p. 104) but also an "ethical function" with broad appeal for an emerging Muslim art public. Central to this ethical function is the artist's sacrifice of his own artistic subjectivity for the sake of God's oneness. For Pirous, this involved learning correct Arabic calligraphy, ensuring its legibility, and amplifying its values to potential Muslim audiences. But as an artist he is still deeply modernist. He fuses the most exalted Islamic art, calligraphy, with the once most privileged form of Western modernism, abstraction (p. 79). He sometimes makes use of Jawi, the Indo-Malay language in Arabic script, making his art more "Indonesian." His art then becomes a gesture of self-surrender to God by a person who has a local identity, which serves the ethical function to let all Indonesians and Muslims experience "visual dzikir" (p. 86), mindfulness of God.

The development of Pirous's painterly identity clearly speaks to a larger negotiation between Orientalism, the market, Islamic piety, individualism, and art. This book hence challenges many presumptions about "art": What negotiations lie behind a finished work? What experiences of learning qualify the viewing of a particular kind of art? How do an artist and audience relate to expressions, oppositions, desires, pains, accusations, worldviews, boundaries, and schools?

(Sumber: *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73.1 (Feb 2014): 284-286.)

At Freedom's Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament

THIS is a work of literary criticism; Sadia Abbas selects works of art, literature, film and other media and popular culture emanating principally from Europe and the US, and South Asia and the Middle East. She presents these texts and images as the most intricate and complex evidence of 'a new "Islam"' (p. 1). According to her account this new form of Islam began around 1988 with the condemnation of Salman Rushdie ('the Rushdie affair', p. 1) and the end of the Cold War the following year.

The author posits freedom as central to this instantiation of Islam. However, it is a 'freedom' that is only such for lack of another word. The freedom it holds out is one defined by contrast with a kind of mandatory freedom—a kind of freedom both sanctioned and promoted by authorities and governments of Western countries, chiefly although not exclusively by the US and the UK. This dominant assigned form of freedom is a species of freedom that possesses a monopoly on the word 'freedom' but does not, according to the new form of Islam, grasp or capture the true sense of it. The artists and writers whose works Abbas explores and interprets seek to simultaneously resist the assignment, and salvage or appropriate (and whilst appropriating re-shape) the meaning of freedom.

The variety of approaches and expressions the book describes and re-visits are post-colonial—or perhaps more accurately (but less succinctly) aspirationally post post-colonial. They seek sometimes inchoately to transcend felt post-colonial realities. The Muslim characters in or authoring these creative works are in a predicament: they find themselves in the paradoxical position of being neither free to be free, nor free not to be free.

The most lucid articulation of this impulse is a statement made in con-

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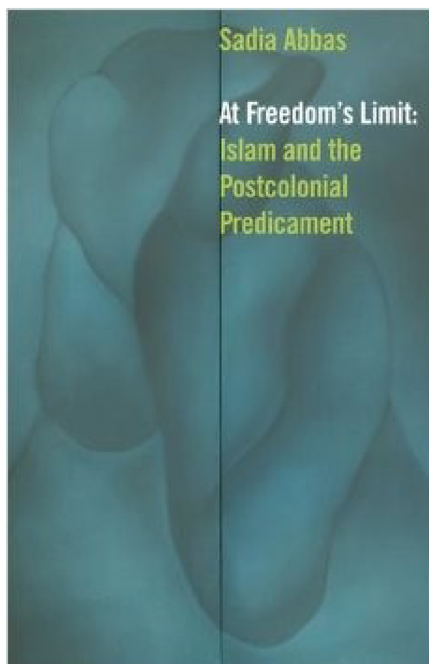
Scott Morrison



nection with veiling and a suicide (in Orhan Pamuk's Snow) and the way in which Abbas suggests that the Muslim woman is 'increasingly, the discursive site on which the central preoccupation of our time—how do you free yourself from freedom?—is worked out' (p. 48). Whilst she is not here ratifying this portrayal or figurative representation of Muslim women (which as she suggests adds one new element to the sequence of discursive roles with which they have been encumbered), when she encounters seemingly unwelcome and unexpected complexities in condemning 'honour killings' (pp. 48 and 197) the paradox crystallizes. The obvious, and in her estimation superficially attractive, option—the condemnation of such killings on liberal grounds (the invocation of a variety of freedoms and rights) appears to be beyond the pale, or so she feels. At the same time the author is uncomfortable resorting to Islamic legal doctrine against such killing even when it would provide the sought-for rulings—for the reason that Islamic law also poses a potential hegemony that ought to be resisted and interrogated before admission into the jurisdiction so to speak of the new Islam.

Chapters 1 and 2 of the book explore the theme of freedom as emerging in this new Islam by offering interpretations of current popular culture—including television (Spooks, or MI-5) and movies (Hurt Locker, Zero Dark Thirty). In ch. 2 'The Echo Chamber of Freedom' an allusion to Monty Python's Life of Brian brings the liberal or anti-liberal dilemma into relief: the order to be an individual followed by a lone dissenter who is quickly silenced (p. 41). Abbas writes: 'Who gets to be an individual in the age of individualism? Is emancipation a necessity, and if so, how can one choose it? Indeed, how does one free oneself from freedom?' (p. 43) The bind that Abbas presents and ascribes to Muslims forces a choice—whether falsely or not the reader had best decide.

(Sumber: *Oxford University Press*. Journal of Islamic Studies, July 31, 2015)

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