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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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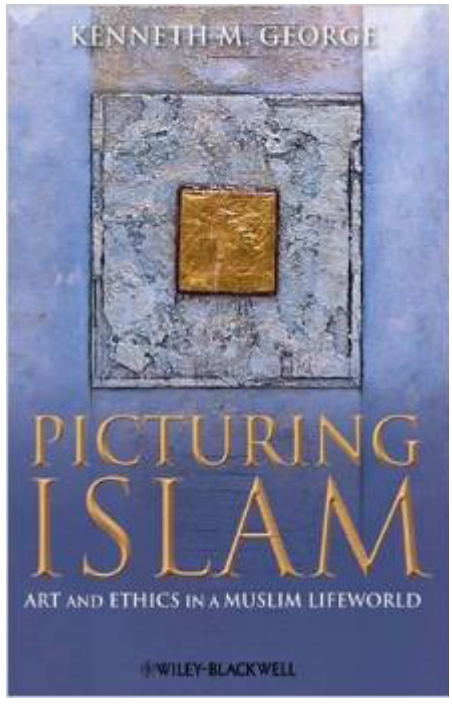

THE Indonesian painter A. D. Pirous had a revelation when he visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 1970. He had thought of himself as an international artist, yet in New York the only works from his part of the world were set aside in a section called "Islamic art." He realized that 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.)

Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam

HISTORY, it is often said, is written by the victors. The case of Islam seems to refute this: in many ways, the victors of modernity wrote Islam out of history by historicizing it. On the one hand, positivist renditions of Islam often simplified and universalized its tenets favoring textual origins over the malleability of practice. On the other hand, in many Islamic countries, twentieth-century secularist policies often relegated Islam to a private, timeless, simplified, and minimally intellectual realm. Between these forces, a void emerged in which only the most conservative interpretations of Islam have come to define and redefine the supposedly authentic religion as a practice of returning to the time of the Prophet. One of the most common tropes in which this conservatism has made itself known in the West is through the frequently repeated trope of the forbidden image in Islam. From the destruction of the giant Buddha sculptures in the Bamiyan Valley of Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2001 to the wanton destruction of archaeological heritage in Iraq by the self-described Islamic State in 2015, an aggressive iconoclasm has itself become iconic of Islam. Against a Eurocentric backdrop that presumes the image as normative, the apparent absence of the image has come to signify both the essential difference of Islam from the West, as well as its essential intransigence towards liberalism. In this climate, Jamal J. Elias's Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam provides a long-overdue, subtle yet clear exposition of how perception functions in diverse yet intertwined Islamic religious, philosophical, scientific, and mystical discourses. If I were to recommend one book to an educated person who knew nothing about Islam, this might be it: not a book that focuses either on historical origins or on anthropological practice, but instead, one that induces curiosity about the religion through an exploration of its perceptual parameters. As such, it is a rare work that engages the religion not through external definitions, but through the subjectivity of perceiving the world through the parameters of Islamic discursive culture.

Judul Buku
Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam

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Jamal J. Elias

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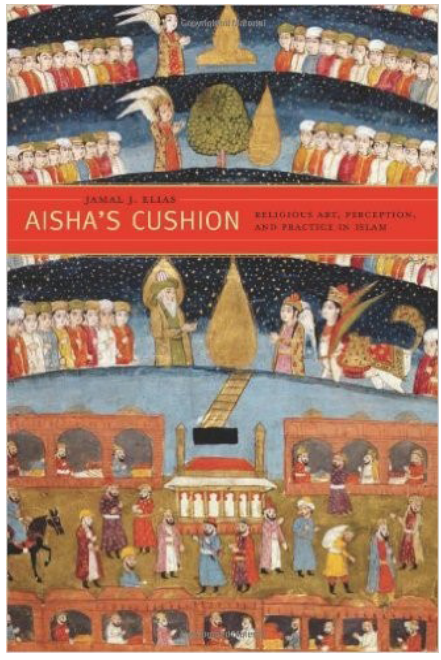

Sometimes the best tool for a nail is not a hammer: rather than spending all its energy against the predominant assumption that Islam is iconoclastic, Aisha's Cushion explores how perception functions beyond the limitations of the concept of the image and representation. Engaging with contemporary analysis of the conceptual systems that define concepts such as the image, representation, and perception, Elias examines the concepts of image and icon as expressed in contexts surrounding Islam in its early centuries. Thus, rather than looking for a static understanding of Islamic strictures about the image, he uses early Muslim writings and history to establish how early Muslims may have understood imagery in their cultural contexts. Without ignoring the Qur'n and the sayings of the Prophet (Hadith), he thus places these texts, upon which Islamic law is based, within a broader, and more historically accurate, discursive context. Within a framework that roughly moves forward in history, he analyses various discourses that touch upon issues of perception, including ideas of beauty and wonder; concepts of reality and simulacra in alchemy; and concepts of the real between dreams, visions, and lived experience. Far from relegating Sufism to the 'heterodox' opposition to orthodoxy, through which many studies of Islamic aesthetic culture marginalize it, Elias understands Sufism as a primary context in which Islamic philosophy, science and literature emerged.*

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