

## **Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam**

*Carool Kersten*

*New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 288 pages.*

It is a rare treat to find an English-language work of intellectual history by a scholar who is proficient in Arabic, Indonesian, and French – and thus capable of bringing together the Indonesian Islamicist Nurcholish Madjid (1939-2005), the Egyptian philosopher Hasan Hanafi (1935-), and the French-Algerian Islamicist Mohamed Arkoun (1928-2010). Carool Kersten offers the first systematic treatment in English of these three figures' thought and convincing arguments for why they not only deserve consideration together, but also why, when taken together, they represent a significant development in Islamic thought.

Kersten argues that these three Islamic thinkers form part of “the first generation of Muslim thinkers reaching intellectual maturity in the postcolonial age” and are “representative of a new type of Muslim intellectual emerging in the 1960s” (p. xiv). Despite the enthusiastic language he associates with these “pioneers” and “trailblazers” (p. xvi), the author wisely takes care to draw attention to what these figures owe to earlier scholars and thinkers at many points. He also avoids overstated claims about how they either exemplify or hold great influence over their generation as a whole.

As the author notes, not only have Hanafi and Arkoun been understudied by scholars of Islam working in English, but they have also largely been overlooked and ignored by Muslims in general and even in their own countries of origin. The more receptive audience that Hanafi and Arkoun have found in Indonesia, as well as the author's compelling contextualization of that reception amidst Madjid's growing influence and Indonesia's increasing assertiveness in Islamic discourses, are two of the book's most compelling aspects.

The status of these thinkers as "first" and "new" seems predicated primarily on their postcoloniality. Kersten takes pains to distinguish his approach to these figures from earlier treatments of contemporary Islamic thought, which link the emergence of this generation as such to various political events. Kersten argues that such events as the 1967 or 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, the oil crisis, and the resurgence of political Islam have been given deterministic roles in the course of Arab and Islamic politics. The author seems to overstate the character of the connection being made in the work of Ibrahim Abu Rabi' and Armando Salvatore to the crisis of political thought in the post-1967 period. While he is right to note that such events can be no more than catalysts, Kersten's own analysis seems to suggest postcoloniality as a more general, if not immediate, cause of the "oppositional postcoloniality" (p. 234) of Madjid, Hanafi, and Arkoun.

Among the features shared by these "new Muslim intellectuals" are a "propensity to creatively apply [their] acquaintance with recent achievements of western scholarship in the human sciences in their engagement with Islam's civilizational heritage" (p. 12), an "acceptance of cultural hybridity rather than a misleading essentialist or unsubstantiated purist understanding of authenticity" (p. 234), and a "double critique of both Muslim and Western discourses on Islam" (p. 10). All of these factors mark these figures, in his assessment, as "cosmopolitan and progressive" (p. xvi).

Kersten intends this book to be both an addition to our knowledge of the history of Muslim intellectuals as well as a contribution to the "refashioning of Islamic studies as a field of academic investigation and its position vis-à-vis both the study of religions as a generic field and area studies" (p. 6). His treatment of Madjid, Hanafi, and Arkoun as Islamicists who have something substantive to say about how religions are studied is valuable. Using a taxonomy created by Russell McCutcheon, a Canadian-American religious scholar who has been engaged in controversy for his views on method, Kersten argues that each of the three intellectuals he analyzes generally reflect each of McCutcheon's three general categories of scholars of religion: theologians, phenomenologists or liberal humanists, and critics (p. 18).

While one might question the value of this particular scheme for capturing the variety of scholarship in religious studies, it does enable Kersten to highlight some very important differences among the three thinkers. Madjid represents the “theologian” in his attempt to act as “caretaker” of Islamic traditions and “custodian” of a renewed discussion of religious thought. Hanafi, a self-confessed phenomenologist, occupies McCutcheon’s second category by virtue of his search for a philosophical method that can uncover religion in a way that is meaningful for humanity. Arkoun, as “critic, not custodian,” goes further than either of them by not only calling into question modern studies of Islam for their inattention to the historically grounded character of human reason, but also for his attempts to deconstruct Islamic textual sources themselves as sources of religious knowledge.

The book is a challenging read. This is, in part, because the author draws upon his impressive comprehension of various theories (*viz.*, postmodernism, postcolonial theory, philosophical hermeneutics, phenomenology, and structuralism) and similarly touches upon a breathtaking number of themes. However, many topics and arguments are dealt with a bit too passingly. This is most frustrating when he identifies a particular notion as central but then fails to fully articulate it or fully explain its significance. For example, a quote from Madjid that opens the book speaks of a “‘smuggling method’ for introducing new ideas” (p. xi). In the book’s final pages, Kersten asserts that this “method” “resembles Hanafi’s detours via Spinoza, Lessing, Sartre, Feuerback and Bultmann,” as well as Leo Strauss’ “tactic” in “Persecution and the Art of Writing” (p. 216). But neither the method nor the detour are fully explicated within the intervening pages.

The use of the very phrase “smuggling method,” which suggests something forbidden, as a translation of “penetration pacifique” (it seems Madjid himself used both terms) is highly provocative and would seem to call out for further analysis. This is particularly true in light of the title’s reference to these thinkers as heretics. Is this merely a tactic? After all, in the unquoted sentence prior to this phrase Majdid does refer to it as such, as a way to evade censure. Or is it truly a method of sorts, one comparable to Hanafi’s philosophical method, for a thinker whom Kersten states elsewhere singles out for a lack of attention to method? And, just what are the implications of the comparison with Strauss?

In a similar fashion, although the book contains a fairly rigorous discussion of cosmopolitanism, the title’s reference to “heretics” seems more suggestive, or even provocative, than analytical. The author never really goes much beyond mentioning that all three of these intellectuals have found themselves embroiled in controversies at various points. In the book, Kersten better relates Majdid’s “heresy” to Indonesian politics than to the substance of his

religious thought. Amidst changing political circumstances, Madjid returns to Indonesia from Canada in 1984 to play a central role in education reform, as his ideas “shifted from being considered deviant or heretical to becoming the dominant discourse in the country’s Muslim circles” (p. 95).

Kersten seems to relate what he deems to be Hanafi’s heresy to his anthropological approach, which grounds the study of religion in everyday human experiences and needs. However, this reader was left unclear as to the connections existing between this approach and the vilifications Hanafi suffered in Egypt and his subsequent self-imposed exile. Rather, we are told both that he found it “impossible to use the methodologies of Western philosophical and religious studies” and had to “ventilate his ‘ideas via a detour, through Spinoza, Feuerback and Bultmann”” (p. 168). The concept of heresy and the content and context of these thinkers’ presumed heresies – and one would not wish to throw around such terms lightly – are not given any systematic explanation here.

Despite these challenges, in the end the book is worth the effort for scholars and advanced students with an interest in the contemporary history of Muslim intellectuals and in the cosmopolitan and humanistic study of religions more generally. Kersten convincingly places all three thinkers within the context of a continuous narrative about Islam’s civilizational legacy and offers a nuanced account of the particular course and development of each individual thinker. One hopes to see more books of this nature from this and other scholars who, hopefully, will be inspired by this work.

Michaëlle Browsers  
Associate Professor of Political Science  
Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC