

Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia. Edited by Greg Fealy and Sally White. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008. 295 pp.

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Indonesia has been observed and understood from a variety of angles. Dutch colonial scholars constructed a model of the Archipelago dominated by the Indic civilization of Majapahit, with Islam seen as a recent intrusion. Such sentiments were taken up by post-Independence scholars who emphasized a “religion of Java” (and a larger Indonesian culture) that might not even be classified as Islam at all.¹ The Islam that prevailed in Indonesia was, in any event, understood as fundamentally different than that practiced in the wider Islamic world, more tolerant and open to the softening influence of local custom and belief.² In recent decades, there has been an increased understanding of the historical characteristics of “Islamic” (however that is defined) Indonesia, with the varieties of Islam practiced across the Archipelago fitting comfortably within a descriptive framework comparable to that which defines the larger Islamic world.³ There has also been a recognition of how Indonesian society has taken on a more Islamic tone from at least the early 1990s (relative to earlier periods). Although this latter development began during the final years of the New Order, it became more evident at the start of the *reformasi* era with the founding of explicitly Islamic political parties, the calls by some for *sharia* to become the law of the land, and the proliferation of militant groups, some of which have been involved in sectarian violence and terrorist attacks. Bombings in Bali and Jakarta, specifically targeting foreigners, have led scholars and others to question the benign reputation of Indonesian Islam, and have spawned an industry of academic writings by foreign scholars on security issues.⁴ Indonesia is now seen as not just another Islamic country, but as a potentially radical one, and possibly a new front in the West’s “war on terror.” Seen from this angle, Indonesia is a very fragile democracy, threatened by anti-Western forces that plan to impose a harsh, Middle Eastern, Islamic identity on the nation. Any

¹ See Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960).

² In their introduction, Fealy and White even note that some observers have looked with approval on the supposed “laxness” of Indonesian Islam. See Greg Fealy and Sally White, “Introduction,” in *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Greg Fealy and Sally White (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), p. 1.

³ See Mark Woodward, *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1989).

⁴ In their introduction, page 2, Fealy and White note these: Zachary Abuza, *Political Islam and Violence in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2007); Sadanand Dhume, *My Friend the Fanatic: Travel with an Indonesian Islamist* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2008); Angel M. Rabasa, *Political Islam in Southeast Asia: Moderates, Radicals, and Terrorists* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Bilveer Singh, *The Talibanization of Southeast Asia: Losing the War on Terror to Islamist Extremists* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007). One might also mention Greg Barton’s recent book on the Jemaah Islamiyah, a rather thoughtful assessment of whether sympathetic observers should, indeed, be concerned about increasing religious radicalism in Indonesia (the answer is perhaps), and the work done on mapping the landscape of extremism in Indonesia by the International Crisis Group. See Greg Barton, *Indonesia’s Struggle: Jemaah Islamiyah and the Soul of Islam* (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2004) and www.crisisgroup.org.

evidence that Islam is gaining a more visible role in Indonesia is greeted with some degree of concern. All of these perspectives might, in fact, obscure deeper and more interesting changes in how Islam actually plays itself out in the daily lives of Indonesians, as the country rapidly modernizes, develops a democratic system, and becomes increasingly exposed to the forces of globalization. *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia* aims to examine Indonesian Islam as a living religion, where increasing piety is reflected in a wide variety of common activities. It is not the first study to do so, but previous works have described an Indonesia at a very different level of development, as a more rural, much less “wired” society.⁵ *Expressing Islam* looks at how Islam functions in the Indonesia of today.

This book came out of the twenty-fifth annual Indonesia Update Conference held at the Australian National University on September 7–8, 2007. The Update Conferences are the largest annual gatherings on Indonesian studies held outside of Indonesia. The proceedings of this conference have generally consisted of examinations of specific themes, such as law, democracy, or technology. *Expressing Islam* follows a similar format, although I would argue that its topic is not an obscure niche; an examination of how Islam, adhered to by about 90 percent of Indonesia’s population, is reflected in Indonesia society is, in fact, an examination of current conditions in Indonesia itself. The book contains fifteen articles by Indonesian, Australian, and American writers, such as the noted historian of Java and Indonesia, M. C. Ricklefs. Some of the authors are participants in the phenomena they describe: Muhammad Syafii Antonio and Umar Juoro, for example, are both involved in the financial sector in Indonesia, and Islamic banking in particular, while Maria Ulfah Anshor has a leadership role in the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, Association of Muslim Scholars) and is a member of parliament for the NU’s Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB, National Awakening Party). The articles are uniformly of high quality in terms of writing and research. Of particular note are the many interviews obtained from a diverse set of local informants, including television preachers, jailed militants, and Jakarta gangsters.

Expressing Islam covers three broad topics: expressions of Islamic piety; political, social, and legal aspects of Islam in Indonesia; and the Islamic economy. These three subjects are very much interrelated, and there is much value in reading the book as a single entity, despite the wide variety of opinions expressed. Greg Fealy starts the first section by looking at the manner in which Islam meets the needs of various sectors of the Indonesian consumer public.⁶ This concept—that religious piety is something that can be purchased and fitted into a busy modern lifestyle—is notable in several other articles, including a fascinating description by George Quinn of the modern pilgrimage industry.⁷ It is important to note that no one argues that this makes Indonesian participants in an easily obtained, commodified Islam less pious than other Muslims, or that the form of Islam practiced is in some way less authentic. Rather, we should be reminded that Indonesia is a globalizing society with a strong market economy and yet also a very Islamic one, with a need for *convenient* access to religious guidance. We may

⁵ See, for example, Ruth McVey, ed., *Indonesia* (New Haven, CT: Southeast Asia Studies, Yale University, 1963).

⁶ Greg Fealy, “Consuming Islam: Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietism in Contemporary Indonesia,” in *Expressing Islam*, pp. 15–39.

⁷ George Quinn, “Throwing Money at the Holy Door: Commercial Aspects of Popular Pilgrimage in Java,” in *Expressing Islam*, pp. 63–79.

also wish to remember that the religious devotions described are traditional ones, although Aa Gym, whose rocky career is described by James B. Hoesterey, may seem rather “New Age” in relating Islam to modern problems of love and finance, he does draw on rather standard religious interpretations.⁸ Aa Gym is further described in a separate article by Julia Day Howell as promoting a type of Indonesian *sufisme*, aimed at meeting modern goals, a style of religious activism engaged in by a plethora of Indonesian televangelists. In methodology, they are perhaps inspired by American evangelical Christian preachers and “personal power” gurus. In pushing an apolitical message, they model themselves after Egyptian television preachers, who operated in the wake of the suppression by the Mubarak government of the armed struggle to establish an Islamic state in the 1990s (in a brief foray outside Indonesia, Howell gives short descriptions of the latter).⁹ Aa Gym and his colleagues, such as Arifian Ilham, use modern tools (and not so-modern methods, such as *dakwah* (missionary) oratory, long valued for its beauty and religious potency in rural Java) to propagate traditional Islamic ideas.¹⁰ What may be most innovative (beyond the use of television, cell phones, and the Internet) is the way Indonesian audiences react to these tools, how they pick and choose among a menu of options for religious fulfillment, and how they come to these options with very specific needs and expectations. Hoesterey notes that Aa Gym, whose message was marketed with very specific connections to his image as an ideal husband, plummeted in popularity when he took a second wife (as is permitted in many interpretations of Islam). His many female followers took this as a major betrayal (other preachers, whose appeal was different, would probably not have suffered a similar loss).¹¹ The shrines visited by the pilgrims described by George Quinn are centuries old, connected to the *wali songo* (nine saints), who are held to have brought Islam to Java in the fifteenth century, although these sites are now visited by means of packaged tours in air-conditioned buses.¹² They are not new ones created by recent visionaries (and it would be interesting to compare the popularity of Islamic holy places with secular ones, connected to, for example, the Indonesian Revolution or the still-controversial events of September 30–October 1, 1965).¹³

⁸ James B. Hoesterey, “Marketing Morality: The Rise, Fall and Rebranding of Aa Gym,” in *Expressing Islam*, pp. 95–114.

⁹ Julia Day Howell, “Modulations of Active Piety: Professors and Televangelists as Promoters of Indonesian ‘Sufisme,’” in *Expressing Islam*, pp. 63–79.

¹⁰ Julian Millie, “‘Spiritual Meal’ or Ongoing Project? The Dilemma of *Dakwah* Oratory,” in *Expressing Islam*, pp. 80–94.

¹¹ Hoesterey, “Marketing Morality,” pp. 103–5.

¹² For an elaboration of this contrast, see previous descriptions from the rather recent past of Islamic pilgrimage sites in Henri Chambert-Loir, “Saints and Ancestors: The Cult of Muslim Saints in Java,” in *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints, and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Henri Chambert-Loir and Anthony Reid (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), pp. 132–140; and Michael Wood, “The Historical Past as a Tool for Nation Building in New Order Indonesia: A Preliminary Examination,” in *Good Governance and Conflict Resolution in Indonesia: From Authoritarian Government to Civil Society*, ed. Andi Faisal Bakti (Jakarta: Logos, 2000), pp. 81–83.

¹³ See, for example, Klaus H. Schreiner, “National Ancestors: The Ritual Construction of Nationhood,” in *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints, and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia*, pp. 183–204; Katherine McGregor, “Representing the Indonesian Past: The National Monument History Museum from Guided Democracy to the New Order,” *Indonesia* 78 (October 2003): 91–122; and Michael Wood, *Official History in Modern Indonesia: New Order Perceptions and Counterinterviews* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 2005).

The second part of the book is the one most likely to address the questions of those scholars with an interest in security issues, those who worry that, with the emergence of more Islamist groups (armed or otherwise) and *sharia* by-laws in many local jurisdictions, Indonesia is becoming a more radical and more illiberal place, at the expense of women, non-Muslims, and Indonesia's relationship with the outside world. The reality may be more complex than this ominous scenario, as Ricklefs points out in a good historical overview of the various strains of Indonesian Islam from the nineteenth century until the present day. Ricklefs sees the history of Islam in Java, although it certainly does have implications for Indonesia as a whole, as the slow break up of a consensus over what it meant to be an Indonesian Muslim (which he terms the "mystic synthesis") in favor of a more varied pattern, with sharp disputes emerging (perhaps even polarization) over belief, practice, and the place of Islam in society. This fragmentation is still very much evident today in any survey of the religious and political landscape.¹⁴ Sally White and Maria Ulfah Ansor describe both positive and negative developments with regard to women's rights (but within an Islamic framework, as opposed to a purely secular one).¹⁵ Their article notes the surprising role, to those unaware of the strong feminist voices from within such Islamic institutions as the State Islamic Institute system (Institut Agama Islam Negara, IAIN), played by *pesantren* (traditional Islamic boarding schools) in fostering new ways of looking at gender issues.¹⁶ Along similar lines, they note the push, from within certain segments of the NU and the Muhammadiyah, for women to take up a more visible role in the political process. Other Islamic voices, however, have been championing measures such as local *sharia* regulations and a sweeping anti-pornography bill (in reality, a thinly veiled attempt to regulate personal behavior) that might be seen as counter to the interests of Indonesian women. More conservative impulses, and the feeling that Indonesian Muslims should perhaps try to distance themselves from their fellow non-Muslim citizens and, in fact, reject a pluralist society, can, argues Nadirsyah Hosen, be fostered by new technology. Indonesian Muslims can now "google" a *kiai* (religious scholar) and shop the Internet for the *fatwa* that confirms their own interpretations of Islam, and these may very well be conservative or even radical ones. (The process, incidentally, is not that different from how liberal and conservative Americans can choose exclusively to watch cable news networks, listen to radio talk shows, and read newspapers and blogs that always and inevitably validate their previously held points of view.) On the other hand, such new media, in which literally anyone can issue a religious pronouncement (there being really no way of checking credentials on line), could foster a more tolerant worldview and encourage new voices

¹⁴ M. C. Ricklefs, "Religion, Politics and Social Dynamics in Java: Historical and Contemporary Rhymes," in *Expressing Islam*, pp. 115–36. Ricklefs's piece was the Update Conference's keynote speech and was based on two of his recent works, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamisation from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2006) and *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions, c. 1830–1930* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Sally White and Maria Ulfah Ansor, "Islam and Gender in Contemporary Indonesia: Public Discourses on Duties, Rights, and Morality," in *Expressing Islam*, pp. 137–59.

¹⁶ See, for example, Inayah Rohmaniyah, "Disputing Polygamy and Woman's Status in Indonesia: Between Islamist Feminists and Islamic Modernists," in *Towards an Inclusive Indonesian Society: Bridging the Gap between State Uniformity and Multicultural Identity Patterns*, ed. Frank Dhont, Kevin W. Fogg, and Mason C. Hoadley (Yogyakarta: Yale Indonesia Forum and Atma Jaya Yogyakarta University, 2009), pp. 381–411; and Susan Blackburn, Bianca J. Smith, and Siti Syamsiyatun, eds., *Indonesian Islam in a New Era: How Women Negotiate their Muslim Identities* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Press, 2008).

in Islamic discourse.¹⁷ In his article-length study, Robin Bush tries to explain what motivates attempts to implement *sharia* bylaws (with the push to do so apparently starting to run out of steam at the time of this book's 2008 publication).¹⁸ Surprisingly, these regulations are not always proposed by Islamist parties, but sometimes by partisans of Golkar and even the Partai Demokrasi Indonesia–Perjuangan (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, PDI-P). In one of the most well-argued pieces in the book, Bush clearly identifies a series of factors that make *sharia* regulations popular with politicians (but not always with the public itself), including the regulations' usefulness as a way to avoid public accusations of corruption, the intricacies of local politics, a lack of good local governance, and, most interestingly the historical and cultural background of a particular region. Bush makes the fascinating observation that many of the regions where *sharia* regulations have been implemented, such as parts of West Java, were once strongholds of the Darul Islam movement in the 1940s until the 1960s.¹⁹

Ian Douglas Wilson describes something that the average visitor to Indonesia, perhaps eating an inexpensive meal on Jakarta's Jalan Jaksa, would be unaware of, namely, the activities of the "gangs of Jakarta."²⁰ The activities of the Front Pembela Islam (FPI, the Islamic Defenders Front) and the Forum Betawi Rempug (FBR, Betawi Brotherhood Forum) are, of course, quite well known to the residents of the city (the latter group has some sixty thousand members). These groups are the direct descendants of bands, long part of the urban landscape, that once grew rich through vice rackets (such as prostitution and gambling) and as semi-official enforcers for the New Order. Presently, they profit from the suppression of vice, through extorting money from bars, restaurants, and cafes, in the name of defending Islam, although the FBR is not above letting such "un-Islamic" enterprises function, or from making alliances with non-Muslim gangs (Papuan and Ambonese) if doing so builds up the power and influence of the organization. Meanwhile, the FPI has tried to gain respectability through alliances with the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, Indonesian Council of Ulama). Ken Ward examines the apparent durability of the notorious militant group, the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).²¹ He predicts that it will be around for the foreseeable future, although it will probably be engaged in non-violent *dakwah* rather than *jihadi* activity (and he argues there is perhaps a fine line between the two). This is a good contribution to the many studies of the group, many of which come to similar conclusions about this persistent problem for Indonesia, both in terms of security and in terms of the negative (and, for the most part, erroneous) perceptions of Indonesian Islam that this group's activities foster abroad.

Expressing Islam concludes with three articles describing how Islam interacts with the economy.²² Taken as a whole, they are an excellent tie-in with some of the earlier

¹⁷ Nadirsyah Hosen, "Online Fatwa in Indonesia: From Fatwa Shopping to Googling a *Kiai*," in *Expressing Islam*, pp. 159–73.

¹⁸ Robin Bush, "Regional Sharia Regulations in Indonesia: Anomaly or Symptom?," in *Expressing Islam*, pp. 174–91.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 183–86.

²⁰ Ian Douglas Wilson, "As Long as It's Halal: Islamic *Premian* in Jakarta," in *Expressing Islam*, pp. 192–210.

²¹ Ken Ward, "Indonesian Terrorism: From Jihad to *Dakwah*?," in *Expressing Islam*, pp. 211–28.

²² Umar Juoro, "The Development of Islamic Banking in the Post-crisis Indonesian Economy," pp. 229–50; Muhammad Syafii Antonio, "Islamic Microfinance Initiatives to Enhance Small and Medium-sized

chapters in the book on the commodification of Islam. Although Islamic financial instruments are only a small part of a rapidly growing Indonesian economy, these articles are a reminder that Islam may manifest itself in some unexpected places and that Indonesia is moving quite noticeably away from the rural, self-contained society described not so long ago by foreign anthropologists and becoming a modern, financially savvy one. The subject of Islamic finance is one about which few readers will boast much familiarity, at least in an Indonesian context, and the clear explanations of how Islamic banking and microfinance actually work (along with tables of definitions) are very enlightening. There is one small problem with this last section of the book: the editors should offer some form of standard value of the currency for the amounts of money referred to, perhaps attached to the glossary (which, incidentally, is quite comprehensive), or within the individual articles. The rupiah has been sharply devalued since 1997, and for any reader who is not aware of the costs of living in Indonesia there is no way of determining whether one million rupiah for microfinance, for example, is a sizable sum.

The overall impression one gets of this book is of a description of an Islam that sits comfortably within an Indonesian context, linked to older traditions and yet changing as the larger society changes. One is reminded of the opening paragraphs of Howard M. Federspiel's book, *Sultans, Shamans, and Saints*, in which he describes travelers answering the call to prayer at the modest mosques around a bus stop near Medan:

The entire scene—trade, travel, small pleasures, and worship—could be seen to provide a brief sketch of civilization at a normal, unspectacular time and place. Significantly, religion was integral to the portrait and natural to it without undue notice or effort extended on the part of the believers. Islam was not born in Southeast Asia, but it became an important element in the region, almost as if it had been created for the role it fulfilled.²³

At the same time, the book is a description of Indonesia itself, a country of shopping malls, cell phones, credit cards, and traffic gridlock—a place that some might not recognize if they had been absent for but a few years. This book is not theoretically groundbreaking, but it is a good antidote to simplistic stereotypical descriptions, as well as being simply a fascinating read. It is strongly recommended to any student of contemporary Indonesia (or the Islamic world as a whole), or to any casual visitor who wants to move beyond the guidebooks and newspaper headlines (the book is even readily available in Indonesia itself).

Enterprises," pp. 251–66; Minako Sakai, "Community Development through Islamic Microfinance: Serving the Financial Needs of the Poor in a Viable Way," in *Expressing Islam*, pp. 267–86.

²³ Howard M. Federspiel, *Sultans, Shamans, and Saints: Islam and Muslims in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), pp. 1–2. In fact, *Expressing Islam* would be a nice companion piece to Federspiel's general historical survey, acting as a contemporary update on centuries-long trends.