

Fauzan Saleh. *Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in Twentieth Century Indonesia: A Critical Survey*. Leiden: Brill, 2001. xvi, 343 pp.

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It is only recently that Indonesia has begun to be recognized among Muslim-majority societies as a place to look for important and innovative thinking about Islam. Although Islam was hardly neglected by the Western scholars writing about this "new nation" in the decades after independence, it was studied mainly as part of an Indonesian story about integration and nation-building. The questions asked were about "Islam in . . . ": the legal system, politics, Javanese culture, Acehnese society. Rarely was the work of Islamic scholars in Indonesia studied in relation to their counterparts in, say, Egypt or Iran.

This focus shifted in the 1990s, as a few European and North American students, but especially their Indonesian colleagues, began studying Indonesian Islam as part of an Islamic story about religion and society. Although the first North American writings along this line were in anthropology, and thus mainly focused on local religious practices, Indonesian (and Dutch) scholars began writing about the history of contacts between Indonesia and the rest of the Islamic world. It was the Indonesians, often working with colleagues in Leiden, who had received training in Arabic as well as in Western languages along with their disciplinary training in history or Islamic studies; this training allowed them to undertake the new scholarship.

In the early 2000s, the number of scholars throughout the world studying Islamic thought in Indonesia is steadily rising. Two features of this new scholarship are of particular interest. The first is that the center of scholarship is in Indonesia, perhaps best identified with the publication *Studia Islamika*, edited at the State Islamic University in Jakarta by Azyumardi Azra, himself one of the pioneers in the new history of Indonesian Islam. The second is that whereas once Western interest in Indonesian Islam was limited to Indonesianists, now it is more widespread, and that, in the United States, this now includes people in Islamic Studies departments.

Fauzan Saleh's book is only one of several studies of Indonesian Islam published recently by Brill, the high-value (and price) purveyor of "classical" scholarship on Islam, and these publications add additional visibility to the subject. The book is a revision of his 2000 doctoral dissertation at McGill and has all the marks of the care and evenhandedness that one expects from a good dissertation. Indeed, Saleh is perhaps too reluctant to offend as he picks his way through minefields of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western scholarship on Indonesian Islam (which he too often equates with Javanese Islam). This brief review is a preface, however, to his real topic, which is the development of modernist Islamic thought by Indonesians, starting in the late 1960s.

Saleh approaches his subject as a scholar of Islam, and this approach gives his work special interest. He begins his analysis by asking an important question. If modernist or reformist thinkers have claimed to be returning to a more orthodox form of Islam,

how precisely should we understand the idea of “orthodoxy”? There are a number of possibilities: it could be the areas of agreement by the community of Muslims, thus, the idea of consensus. Or, it could be seen as the middle path between literalism and rationalism. Or, it could be method that defines orthodoxy, as in the rigorous application of the science of *hadîth*, which winnows the reliably transmitted from the uncertain of the purported statements and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. In the end, Saleh emphasizes the importance of claiming to follow both the Prophet’s example and the consensus of the community of Muslims, as expressed in the designation *Ahl al-Sunnah wa’l-Jamâ’ah*, “the people of the tradition and the community.” Of course, one may place emphasis either on *Sunnah*, as do those who stress strict selection of *hadîth*, or on community, as do those who advocate following the traditions of jurists. Although Saleh underplays the flexibility of this phrase, he does point to the fact that everyone within Indonesian Islam cites it as part of their claim to be “orthodox.” He finds that both the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the Muhammadiyah, thus, the major “traditionalist” and “modernist” associations, see themselves as part of the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa’l-Jamâ’ah*. However, what each group means by this can be seen only in the contexts of their struggles with other groups, and here Saleh offers some important insights. For the NU, the main issue is defending the generally followed practices based on teachings in the four legal traditions or schools, the *madhhabs*, against Wahhabi attacks on those traditions in Saudi Arabia. Although the expression, *Ahl al-Sunnah wa’l-Jamâ’ah*, is emphasized less often by the Muhammadiyah, some of their leading thinkers, among them Munawar Chalil, could claim that, by searching for the sources of norms and practices in the Prophet’s lifetime, they are indeed following the *Sunnah*, perhaps more faithfully than are those who practice blind obedience (*taqlîd*) to a particular *madhhab*.

Saleh himself intervenes in this debate by emphasizing the possibility that everyone is right because the entire, pluralist, even factionalized population of Muslims constitutes “the community.” To demonstrate this and show the Muhammadiyah’s concern with orthodoxy (and following here the theologian and historian Nurcholis Madjid), he analyzes the idea of faith, the unity of God, and free-will in the works of prominent Muhammadiyah thinkers. His discussion is interesting for the wealth of Indonesian sources on which he draws.

Saleh argues that twentieth-century Indonesian thought represents a continuity of thinking along orthodox and rationalist lines, which leads to the successful merger of older and newer modes of thought in the years after 1960. Here, he focuses on two thinkers: Harun Nasution and Nurcholis Madjid, both of whom he sees as among the first true Indonesian Islamic intellectuals who are also outside the two large Islamic associations. Nasution represents the free thinker, the rationalist, who insists on considering all possible ways to interpret scripture. Although strongly condemned by some for his views that anyone could in theory create his (or her?) own legal school, Nasution’s major writings became basic texts at the Islamic universities, and he is widely credited with creating a climate in which students can disagree on basic matters of theology.

Nurcholis Madjid, Saleh’s second “case,” is today the most prominent of Indonesia’s theologians, and through the discussions and publications associated with his institute, Paramadina, he has become a highly successful intellectual entrepreneur.

It is only with his generation that two types of education come together: the modern university education abroad (in his case, at the University of Chicago, where we were classmates) and the classical training in Arabic and in Islamic sciences. Saleh interprets the phrase, “neo-Modernist,” associated with Madjid, as pointing to this combination: modernist but with classical learning. Saleh emphasizes Madjid’s argument that Islam was, in its origins and thus in its essence, egalitarian and pluralistic, and that the secularization of Islam demands a separation between religion and politics. Saleh also gives the reader a summary of recent criticisms of Madjid’s writings, and makes the important observation that some of today’s most intellectually creative thinkers come from the NU, “traditionalist” camp. Although Saleh speaks only of theological discussions, a similar argument could be made for reinterpretations of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), that is, that the younger feminist Muslim activists in NU are going far beyond anything yet attempted in Muhammadiyah.

Although there have been a number of recent treatments of Madjid’s thinking and specialists will already be familiar with many of the other major arguments made in this book, its real value is twofold. First, it presents an analysis of these theological debates and deliberations from the perspective of an Indonesian Muslim scholar, someone who sees his own work as growing out of this intellectual and religious history. Secondly, in his abundant references to works in Indonesian and Arabic, Saleh shows the wealth and depth of contemporary Indonesian scholarship on Islam.