



REVIEWS

K.S. Nathan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali, ed. *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005. 362 pp.

The book *Islam in Southeast Asia* is a revised version of the proceedings of the conference on “Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social, and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century.” The conference was organized by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore on September 2-3, 2002. The intent of the conference and the present volume is to widen the “horizons of understanding between the West and the world of Islam” (xii). Or not really with the West as a whole but more importantly with the United States of America. Of course, saying “the West” sounds more grandiose. But since what brought about this volume was the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States, the editors have to make assertions purely intended for the United States:

The crimes of September 11 were ones of political protest, but they were not something inexplicable or *sui generis*. They symbolized a total breakdown of the centuries-old cosmopolitan conversation with Islam. There exists today a fundamental disconnect in communication between the United States and Muslims around the world Efforts are being made in the meantime at international forums and conferences, interfaith dialogues and persons of goodwill to open up avenues of communication and draw attention to the more enduring themes of shared values on both sides. (xi-xii)

The book then is a contribution towards this effort. It contains sixteen articles which were grouped into four cluster of themes. The first cluster is on Islamic doctrine, history, growth and institutions in Southeast Asia, followed by a set of articles that discusses politics, governance, civil society and gender issues in Southeast Asian Islam. The next two cluster of themes are modernization, globalization and the "Islamic state" debate in Southeast Asia, and the impact of September 11 on Islamic thought and practice. This review will not be a summary of these articles. Instead, it will highlight some contentious assumptions that the book sustains, in particular those relating to the dialogue between the West and the Islam, and the issue of the Islamic moderates and extremists.

Let me start by going back to the quoted part above and ask this question: If such is the case, why is it that Islam is the one that is always dissected or needed to be explained? And who is listening and talking on both ends, except for the academics on conference junket and bleeding-heart intellectuals out to save the world? Why is it that there is hardly any effort to explain America to the Muslim world? This unrelenting effort to explain Islam away lends credence to the perception that the non-Islamic societies, especially the West, possesses an unbounded capacity for forbearance and understanding. This, unmistakably, is such a patronizing attitude that will surely stifle any attempt on a true dialogue.

And what would a reader make of this statement: "If one were to characterize aspects of the two cultures, the Arab culture, one might say Islam generally, accentuates human dignity whereas Western culture tends to emphasize liberty" (xii). What is the value of reducing cultures and societies to mere signifiers of a singular human desire? Can a person have dignity when he or she does not possess liberty? Or can one be truly free and yet continue to wallow in human misery? Dichotomies harden into impermeable boundaries when left unquestioned; or if made to appear natural as the "given" boundary of a discourse. These tendencies are anathema to opening a dialogue. And there lies the irony. The demons of dichotomies must be wrestled first before any meaningful dialogue can proceed.

Now on the issue of Islamic moderates and extremists: "Just as moderate Islam was beginning to emerge at the center state (or should this be stage? the book is littered with typographic errors and grammatical lapses that one wonders whether the copy for this book came out straight of the conference kit), September 11 and its aftermath was a shot in the

arm for radical Islamism, and gave a new lease of life to Muslim extremism” (xiv). In this metaphor, radical Islamism is made to appear as a foreign substance wielded by an unnamed (or is it unseen?) hand that jolted the Islamic body politic. Radical Islamism however is more like a cancer that was left undiagnosed and now has fully metastasized.

“The lead-up to the 9/11 tragedy reflected the widespread frustrations of Muslims about inequalities and unjust situations brought about by the West” (351). What about the West’s Muslim allies that foster the most conservative interpretation of Islam in order to preserve the status quo that benefits them? What of authoritarian regimes in Islamic societies that serve as Washington’s henchmen in its war on terror? By coming out with just two actors: the West, i.e. the United States and the Islamic world, the book managed to gloss over important actors who are as instrumental as the two main protagonists in giving birth to the current environment poisoned with terror and suspicion.

Instead of focusing on how to root out these imperial allies that basically foster oppression and inequality in Muslim societies, the editors and some of the authors will repeatedly state that the hope lies with the moderates. Moderates far outnumber the shrill and violent extremists, especially in Southeast Asia and thus should be a source of comfort.

To conclude, it is terribly wrong to assume that these groups are influential to Southeast Asia. The history and sociology of Southeast Asian Muslim societies have shown us that this kind of fringe groups have never been able to exercise significant influence among Muslim society as a whole. One can expect, most of such groups will disappear through time simply because their literal interpretation and radicalism cannot be accepted by other Muslims. In the meantime, however, moderate Muslim leaders and organizations should pay more attention to this tendency of radicalism, and find ways to address it.” (19)

This is like saying that the cancer patient should not be bothered much by his or her sickness and should just focus on his or her body’s healthy cells. The healthy cells will win the day.

The book would plod along this line: “Not only the international community, but also the moderate strata of the Afghan populace, indeed the vast majority of Muslims, opposed the Taliban vision and practice of Islam. This is borne out of the fact that even after five years in office, only three Muslim countries had established diplomatic relations with the Taliban” (350). That three Muslim countries bothered to establish relations

with a regime of religious thugs that takes pleasure in opium, raping little boys, and stoning rape victims should have been a cause of concern for the so-called moderate Muslims. The moderates merely shied away and stayed silent. The Taliban reigned on for five years.

Despite the Taliban example, the book opines that, “Muslim states, organizations, and individuals are obliged to decide on what would be the best strategy or strategies to advance the interests of the Islamic world without necessarily triggering a major confrontation with the world’s current superpower. Given the lack or absence of effective leadership from the Muslim World unlike the existence of a coherent power (United States) centre in the Western world, the successful pursuit of global Islam would necessarily have to stem from stronger internal social, political, economic, intellectual, and cultural foundations.”(351)

But what of decisions that does not necessarily impinge on any superpower but must be done in answer to Islam’s practices that increasingly horrify most of the world’s peoples? In a piece for the *International Herald Tribune* (December 6, 2007), Ayaan Hirsi Ali started by quoting the Koran: “The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication, flog each of them with 100 stripes: Let no compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by Allah, if you believe in Allah and the Last Day” (Koran 24:2). Then the article went on to mention the fate of a twenty-year-old woman from Qatif, Saudi Arabia. This woman was a victim of abduction and gang rape. As if that nightmare was not enough, the woman was sentenced to six months in jail and to be lashed two hundred times by a bamboo cane. The woman was said to be guilty of a crime called “mingling.” During her abduction, she was in a car with a man not related to her by blood or marriage. Then Ali asked: If moderate Muslims believe there should be no compassion shown to the girl from Qatif, then what exactly makes them so moderate?

Where is the moderate voice of Islam in Southeast Asia?—**JOEL F. ARIATE JR.**, UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, THIRD WORLD STUDIES CENTER, COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND PHILOSOPHY, UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES DILIMAN.

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