

Book Review:

Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements
(Muhammad Afzal Upal and Carole M. Cusack [ed.]
Leiden: Brill, 2021.

Izza Annafisatud Daniah

Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia

izza.daniah@uiii.ac.id

With more than 1,8 billion followers, Islam is the second largest religion in the world. As a faith, Islam is often referred to as *al-deen*, which is derived from the diversity of its thought. Islam will always face dynamic changes from within and at the same time will have to deal with various advances in civilization, such as modernization, states as well as social, cultural and political developments at different points in time. As a result, Islam and Islamic thought are differentiated from one another. Islam is a revelation from God and immutable, while Islamic thought is a subjective truth according to one's understanding of the objective of revelation. The spread of various sects and movements in Islam has shown that Islamic thought is in a constant state of development and does not remain static. Moreover, because Islam has spread throughout the world, it is embedded and developing in a variety of peoples and cultures, from Africa to Asia and beyond.

The rich five chapters of *The Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements* illustrate the innovation of Islamic reformers in going beyond monolithic Islam. Each of these chapters highlights a certain sect and movement, including; Sunni, Shi'i, Fundamentalism and Extremism, Sufism and Fringe Islam. Each chapter opens with an explanation of the chapter's aims, providing a readable introduction enabling readers to better understand and map out the contents of the chapter. In the first section of the book, the editors, Upal and Cusack, provide a general overview of Islamic sects, movements, developments and a short historical discussion. They also outline the abstracts of articles presented throughout the book and seeks to draw relationships between the various chapters.

In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, although the population is predominantly *Sunnī (Ahl Sunnah wa Al Jamaah)* there has been a significant flourishing of sects and movements. Ronald Geaves writes that the term *Ahl al-Sunna*, 'the people of tradition', referring to *Sunnī* Muslims, is highly contested because several movements and strands of Islam use this term to define themselves

– not in a neutral sense of *Sunnī* identity, but in a highly charged contest for legitimacy, authenticity and a sense of uniqueness. This is despite the ideal of a singular, divinely revealed, and united Islamic community tending to dominate in *Sunnī* Islam, with variations among different groups as to who should be included. There are also difficulties in defining the term ‘sect’ within Islam – in the Qur’ān this is sometimes referred to as *taklif*, while civil society organisations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah use the term *firqah*.

Farid F Saenong discusses the history, organisation scope and work of NU, a traditionalist Islamic organization established in 1926 by several *kiai* (Muslim scholars) that ran Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia. NU and their *pesantren* served as key centres for the dissemination of Islamic thought and contributed to the struggle for Indonesian independence. In general, his article serves as an autobiography of sorts for NU. Citing the works of Barton (1997) Saenong discusses the role of former NU chair (1984-1999) and former Indonesian president (1999-2001) Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), who was a pioneer of the Islamic neo-modernist movement in Indonesia. Neo-modernism, in its simplest sense, was a response to the complexities of the post-modern world, which has seen a strengthening of the role of the mass media, an increasingly interdependent world economy, and several other effects caused by globalisation. Quoting Fazlur Rahman (2017), Islamic neo-modernism offers renewal within Islam that still adheres to the traditions and main teachings of Islam, while being able to answer the challenge of Western post-modernism which presents Islamic identity as being in competition with westernisation..

The positioning of Wahid as an Islamic neo-modernist figure in Indonesia is interesting, because among the many works discussing his thoughts and ideas, relatively few place him among the ranks of neo-modernists. What are Wahid’s views on neo-modernism in Indonesia? He argues that the relatively harmonious relations between different religions in Indonesia serves as clear evidence of strong traditional roots that support modern pluralism. Wahid outlines two key features of modern pluralism; developing theology and a noble culture. In accordance with this approach, NU in 2016 formally declared the concept of ‘Islam Nusantara’ during The International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL), an event initiated by NU. The Islam Nusantara declaration emphasizes the linkage between Islamic values and the Indonesian local culture and the local version of Islam. This concept has generated significant debate, with voices for and against. According to another contributor, Hisanori Kato, supporters of the Islam Nusantara concept seek to implement Islamic values in accordance with Indonesia’s broader system of national values. Meanwhile, those who oppose the concept consider it to be a sect-in-the-making – and one which could present an obstacle to their goal of establishing a state based on Islamic law.

Several scholars argue that Indonesian Islam is syncretic and not monolithic. As outlined by Clifford Geertz, and quoted by Kato, Islam in Indonesia has multiple voices, takes on multiple forms and has spread across the archipelago in a non-uniform fashion. NU aims to focus on the uniqueness offered by Islam Nusantara, contrasting it with Islamic culture in the Middle East, by highlighting moderate and tolerant Islam as a blessing for all creation. Islam Nusantara still grounds itself in conventional traditionalism but with four basic principles serving as its foundation: moderation (*tawasut*), tolerance (*tasamuh*), equality (*itidal*) and equity (*tawazun*). Several scholars have also argued that this movement will not abandon Islam's authenticity nor will it sideline orthodoxy. Kato (drawing from Azyumardi Azra) describes the three greatest influences on Islam Nusantara as being orthodox Asharite Sunni ideology, which follows four schools of Islamic thought: Syafi'i, Hambali, Maliki and Hanafi, as well as the sufism of Persian mystic Al Ghazali.

Studies on Islamic sects and movements, particularly in Indonesia, aim to map out and display the richness of the religious community. There is little point in comparing Sunni Islam to other sects, owing to its hegemonic position in Indonesia. But this does not mean we should ignore minority groups. Examining the spread of religious communities in Indonesia enables us to map out the growth of these groups demographically, for example, examining why other sects struggle to expand their reach and the reasons that may lay behind this. Part of religious moderation is learning from and not ignoring minority groups. The key to this book is that by seeking to understand these groups we are no longer ignoring them. As a result, this book is highly recommended for those undertaking comparative studies on sects and movements within Islam. But even for broader audiences, this book makes a valuable contribution to debates between sects and movements, contributing to the dynamic evolution and culture of Islamic studies.