

Book Review :

Whose Islam?

The Western University and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia

(Megan Brankley Abbas)

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021.

Mufti Labib Jalaluddin

Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII)

mufti.jalaluddin@uiii.ac.id

For centuries, Islamic schools or *madrasa* have been the primary source of Muslim religious authority, with Indonesia no exception in this regard. For generations, Indonesia's foremost Muslim leaders have received their Islamic education from Middle Eastern *madrasas*. In her book *Whose Islam?*, Megan Brankley Abbas challenges the notion of Middle Eastern centrality in Islamic education by arguing that Western universities has emerged as significant sites for the production of Islamic knowledge and Muslim religious authority in the last century. In her research, Abbas examines the far-reaching repercussions of this change for Muslim communities across the globe and for the future of Islamic studies as an academic discipline.

The study highlights the contested boundaries between modern Islamic thought and modern Western academia. For a long time, the boundary separating Muslim intellectuals and Western academics who study Islam — placing them in two distinct and even rival traditions — has been taken for granted. Abbas refers to this as a form of intellectual dualism. The emergence of Islamic modernity integrating Islam and modern sciences in the twentieth century in turn divided modernist Muslims into two groups, dualists and fusionists. While the latter group attempted to concatenate both Islam and Western academic traditions in cross-discursive interpretative exercise (*ijtihad*), the former rejects this approach and claims that such a discourse is linked to colonialism. As Abbas notes, not all modernists engage in this type of *ijtihad*.

Abbas divides her book into several chapters. In chapter 1, she focuses on Mahmud Yunus and Mohammad Natsir, two prominent Indonesian Islamic thinkers. Both played a significant role in designing and running the Islamic college system (later

known as State Islamic Institutes (IAIN), which eventually developed into State Islamic Universities (UIN)), which aimed to overcome the hurdles of dualism and lay the foundations for modern Islamic thought. She finds that the mission to integrate Islamic and Western modes of knowledge managed to survive several challenges, but the fissures created by these challenges foreshadowed coming larger conflicts.

Chapter 2 explores the position of fusionist thinkers in Western academia and the position of McGill University's Institute of Islamic Studies in North America. The institute was established to facilitate fusionists attempts to revolutionise both Western academic and Muslim approaches to Islam. This institution had a significant impact on many of its Muslim students due to its cross-discursive research model and it also gained some traction in Islamic studies.

Chapter 3 traces three influential Indonesian McGill alumni in their efforts to reform higher Islamic education and to reimagine Muslim politics in the 1970s. These alumni were divided into two groups. The first group promoted fusionist thinking and engaged other Muslims to study in Western academic methods and in Western universities, meanwhile, the other group criticised fusionism as a neo-imperial threat to Islam. In this chapter, Abbas argues that Muslim fusionist intellectuals shared many core values with the New Order Regime and developed a mutually beneficial partnership with the regime, despite vocal opposition.

In chapter 4, Abbas explores the experiences of the second generation of Indonesian scholars who studied Islam in the 1970s and 1980s at the University of Chicago, including Amien Rais, Ahmad Syafii Maarif, and Nurcholish Madjid. As they studied under Fazlur Rahman and Leonard Binder, who were involved in the "Islam and Social Change" project, they applied their ideas on Islam and development to the evolving political landscape in Indonesia. These figures and other alumni of American universities straddled the border between Muslim "insiders" and academic "outsiders" and between "normative" Islamic thought and "empirical" social-scientific research. Abbas concluded that, by the 1980s, modern Islamic thought was almost inseparable from Western academia, despite many ongoing challenges.

Abbas reaches the core of her argument in chapter 5, where she discusses the careers of the three Chicago alumni and other American alumni, which marked a shift of religious authority in the 1990s. Rais, Maarif, and UCLA alumnus Din Syamsuddin consecutively served as chairmen of Muhammadiyah, the largest modernist Islamic organisation in Indonesia, from 1995 to 2015. Meanwhile, Madjid became a public intellectual, establishing Mazhab Ciputat, with other prominent Indonesian American alumni, and the Paramadina think-tank. Abbas regards all of them as fusionists and analyses their responses to opponents who accused them of being overly Westernised, inauthentic, and subservient to Western and developmentalist agencies. Abbas shows that even though the fusionist project survived, they were

still haunted by what Abbas calls the spectre of academic imperialism. However, Abbas emphasises that fusionist thought and transnational networks did not dismantle the new model of Islamic religious authority that had been developed over the preceding decades.

Finally, Abbas discusses the future of Islamic studies as a discipline. For her, the future of Islamic studies cannot just rely on discursive boundary maintenance, cross-discursive dialogue, and radical introspection. It also requires academic evaluation to develop new methods, ensuring that it becomes neither too permissive or imperialist.

The strength of Abbas's work is in her ability to deftly outline the shift of religious authority in Muslim society in Indonesia and the disruption to prevailing modes of Western academic authority. By exploring the influence of Indonesian Muslim US alumni through a historical account combined with political analysis, she successfully interrogates the contested and evolving demarcation between Western academics and Muslim religious knowledge and authority. Her outlining of the development and spread of Muslim fusionism is exceptional and presented in easy-to-understand narratives.