

# Intellectual Discourse

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Volume 26

Number 2

2018



**International Islamic University Malaysia**  
<http://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam>



# CONTENTS

## ***Editorial***

*Ishtiaq Hossain* 513

## ***Special Articles***

Politics of Forced Migration and Refugees: Dynamics of  
International Conspiracy?  
*Md. Moniruzzaman* 519

Roots of Discrimination Against Rohingya Minorities:  
Society, Ethnicity and International Relations  
*AKM Ahsan Ullah and Diotima Chatteraj* 541

Exploring Ways to Provide Education in Conflict Zones:  
Implementation and Challenges  
*Kamal J. I. Badrasawi, Iman Osman Ahmed and Iyad M. Eid* 567

Political Settlement Analysis of the Blight of Internally  
Displaced Persons in the Muslim World: Lessons  
from Nigeria  
*Ibrahim O. Salawu and Aluko Opeyemi Idowu* 595

## ***Research Articles***

Women's Work Empowerment through "Re-upcycle"  
Initiatives for Women-at-home  
*Rohaiza Rokis* 617

The Islamization of the Malaysian Media: A Complex  
Interaction of Religion, Class and Commercialization  
*Shafizan Mohamed and  
Tengku Siti Aisha Tengku Mohd Azzman* 635

Rise of Central Conservatism in Political Leadership:  
Erbakan's National Outlook Movement and the 1997  
Military Coup in Turkey  
*Suleyman Temiz* 659

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Language Policy and Practices in Indonesian<br>Higher Education Institutions<br><i>Maskanah Mohammad Lotfie and Hartono</i>   | 683 |
| A Novel Critique on ‘The Scientific Miracle of Qur’an<br>Philosophy’: An Inter-Civilization Debate<br><i>Rahmah Bt Ahmad H. Osman and Naseeb Ahmed Siddiqui</i>   | 705 |
| Duties and Decision-Making Guidelines for Shari‘ah<br>Committee: An Overview of AAOIFI<br><i>Muhammad Nabil Fikri Bin Mhd Zain and<br/>Muhammad Amanullah</i>   | 729 |
| Waqf Institutions in Malaysia: Appreciation of Wasatiyyah<br>Approach in Internal Control as a Part of Good Governance<br><i>Nor Razinah Binti Mohd. Zain, Rusni Hassan and<br/>Nazifah Mustaffha</i>                     | 749 |
| Muslim Jurists’ Debate on Non-Muslim Religious Festivals<br>and Its Effect on Muslims in the United States<br><i>Ali Ahmed Zahir</i>  | 765 |
| Archaeological Analysis of Arabic-Malay Translation<br>Works of Abdullah Basmeih<br><i>Azman Ariffin, Kasyfullah Abd Kadir and Idris Mansor</i>   | 785 |
| <i>Takyif Fiqhī</i> and its Application to Modern Contracts: A Case<br>Study of the Central Provident Fund Nomination in Singapore<br><i>Mohamed El Tahir El Mesawi and<br/>Mohammad Rizhan bin Leman</i>                 | 807 |
| Revisiting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Vs.<br>English Lingua Franca (ELF): The Case for Pronunciation<br><i>Wafa Zoghbor</i>  | 829 |
| “How did we Choose?” Understanding the Northern Female<br>Voting Behaviour in Malaysia in the 14th General Election<br><i>Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan, Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani,<br/>Norehan Abdullah, and Zaireeni Azmi</i> | 859 |

- Unintended Consequences? The Commodification of Ideas  
in Tertiary Education and their Effects on Muslim Students  
*Anke Iman Bouzenita, and Bronwyn Wood* 883
- Ultra Petita and the Threat to Constitutional Justice:  
The Indonesian Experience  
*Muhammad Siddiq Armia* 903
- Methods of Qur'ānic Memorisation (Ḥifẓ):  
Implications for Learning Performance  
*Mariam Adawiah Dzulkifli, and Abdul Kabir Hussain Solihu* 931
- Book Reviews**
- Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political,  
Economic and Religious Change by Bernard Haykel, Thomas  
Hegghammer and Stephane Lacroix (Eds.). New York, USA:  
Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 351,  
ISBN: 978-0-521-18509-7  
*Syaza Farhana Shukri* 949
- 'Arab Spring': Faktor dan Impak ('Arab Spring': Factors  
and Impact). Edited by Wan Kamal Mujani & Siti Nurulizah  
Musa. Bangi: Penerbit Fakulti Pengajian Islam,  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. 2015, pp. 164.  
ISBN 978-967-5478-91-8.  
*Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin* 952
- Faith in an Age of Terror. Edited by Quek Tze Ming and  
Philip E. Satterthwaite. Singapore: Genesis Books,  
Singapore, 2018, pp.150.  
ISBN: 978-981-48-0707-4  
*Rabi'ah Aminudin* 956
- Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion. By Gareth Stedman Jones.  
London: Penguin Books, 2017, pp. 768. Paper Back.  
ISBN 978-0-141-02480-6  
*Zahid Zamri* 959

***Research Note***

“O People of the Book”: An Exegetical Analysis  
of the Ahl al-Kitāb in Qur’ānic Discourse

*Jonathan Alexander Hoffman*

965

***Conference Report***

International Conference on Religion, Culture and Governance in the  
Contemporary World (ICRCG2018) 3-4 October 2018  
(Wednesday-Thursday) 23-24 Muharram 1440.

*Atiqur Rahman Mujahid*

979

political thought in order to reconcile with secularism, democracy, and modern nation-states. Lewis E. Winkler also touches on the role of Muslims in the chapter titled 'Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Challenged and Opportunities'. Here, he raises the challenges in having peaceful and enlightened discussions between the two faith groups due to high level of distrust and cynicism. He suggests that there are opportunities for both communities to move beyond the existing stage by concentrating on having dialogues on themes that will enable both Christians and Muslims to discuss on the same wavelength.

The book provides a new insight on the role of religion in dealing with terrorism. It proposes that faith groups play a crucial role in addressing the issue of terrorism. The missing link in previous discourse on terrorism in Asia is addressed in the book which is the relations between different faith groups in addressing religious extremism and terrorism. Nevertheless, the book suffers from a serious drawback. It pays too much attention on Christian conversation. Perhaps this is understandable considering that the book is an outcome of a Christian-themed conference. However, it would be more interesting to see the perspective of other dominant religions in Singapore and Southeast Asia such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Nevertheless, the book is extremely useful for readers who seek to understand Christian perspective on the issue of terrorism and how they view their relationship with others especially the Muslim religious groups. Religion, undeniably, throughout the history of mankind has shown potentials to be used as a tool for extremism and violence. However, religion also promotes positive values that should not be disregarded such as peace, kindness, love, and righteousness. Therefore, it is important for religious groups especially in a multi-cultural society such as in Singapore and Malaysia to promote mutual understanding and mutual respect among them and to deny extremist and terrorist groups from using religious values as their drive.

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**Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion. By Gareth Stedman Jones.  
London: Penguin Books, 2017, pp. 768. Paper Back. ISBN 978-0-141-02480-6.**

Reviewer: Zahid Zamri, Department of International and Strategic Studies, University of Malaya. E-mail: zahidzamri@yahoo.com

As early as page 2 in *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, Stedman Jones boldly highlights that “(t)he invention of what came to be called as ‘Marxism’ was initially in large part the creation of Engels in his books and pamphlets, beginning with *Anti-Dühring* in 1878”. He further adds, as keepers of Marx’s works, the leaders of the German Social Democratic Party, including August Bebel, Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein, and Franz Mehring, were also responsible for further mystifications of Marx by hiding the embarrassing gaps between the image and reality of Marx and his theory. This was ostensibly done in order to protect the party – which had Marx as its founding theorist – from being attacked and discredited by the ruling power which was the imperial government of Wilhelmine Germany (p. 2-3). Jones subsequently states, “From the beginning, what came to be called as ‘Marxism’ had been built upon an unambiguously selective view of what was to count as theory, not only in relation to would-be heretics, but also in relation to Marx himself” (p. 4). Afterwards he reveals a content from Bebel’s letter to Kautsky: “By the way, I want to tell you – but please keep absolutely quiet about it – that some of the letters (Marx’s) were not published, above all, because they were too strong for us” (p. 4). These punchlines are more than enough to shake the general understanding of Marx and “Marxism” to acclaiming Marxists and critical theorists alike.

The first chapter provides detailed descriptions of Marx’s family background, starting from his father’s career and, later about Marx himself as an enthusiastic young man who communicated with his father, who “knew Voltaire and Rousseau by heart” (p. 29), through letters reporting on his intellectual journey. It is also appealing to know that Marx in his youth had almost died due to pulmonary disease (p. 35). Then the chapter explains that the reasons for Marx’s father’s conversion to Christianity were due to suppression from the Prussian authority and for his family survival (p. 23). Simultaneously, Jones presents an exceptional account that contextualises Marx’s life within 19<sup>th</sup> century Prussia. In this account, we could feel the Prussian polity at work, including rifts between liberals, radicals, republicans, constitutional monarchists, Bonapartists, nationalists, and democrats (p. 30) as well as international factors (post-French Revolution Europe) that shaped the cultural, political, and economics of the country at that time. It is also fascinating to know, via the second chapter entitled ‘The Lawyer, the Poet and the Lover’, that Marx as a young man was actually dedicated to become a poet. The chapter shares a few of Marx’s romantic poems (p. 44-46).



In the following chapters, Jones displays Marx's strong passions in seeking knowledge. Marx is shown to have been constantly challenging his intellectual capability through meetings, learning, and debates with great scholars and his contemporaries, such as the Hegelians Eduard Gans (chapter 3, Bruno Bauer (chapter 4), Moses Hess (chapter 6), as well as the so-called "utopian" socialists like Ludwig Feuerbach and Charles Fourier (chapter 5), and Pierre Joseph Proudhon and Louis Blanc (chapter 6). Afterwards Marx's atheism takes centre stage, when Jones highlights Marx's concern with the degradation of men by religion as stated in the foreword section of his doctoral dissertation, "All heavenly and earthly gods who do not acknowledge human self-consciousness as the highest divinity" (p. 92) as well as in 1844's *On The Jewish Question*, wherein he theorized Judaism: "Money was 'the worldly God' of the Jew, and 'huckstering' his 'worldly religion', since the secular basis of Judaism...was 'practical need' and self-interest" (p. 151). Further, Jones shows that Marx in 1844 had concluded that to reconcile between reason and revelation is defective for human emancipation as opposed to the argument of Bauer, his former teacher (p. 132-135). Perhaps Marx, up to this stage, never had the chance to be acquainted with other religious traditions that were able to balance between rationality and faith.

In chapter 7, 'The Democratic Dictator', Jones provocatively portrays Marx's totalitarian tendencies. In 1846 in Brussels, Marx, together with Engels and Philippe Gigot, set up a Communist Correspondence Committee to supervise and "cut off" rival socialist popular writings so as to keep the German, English, and French socialists ideologically and organizationally intact. The same dictatorial image of Marx was projected by Jones in chapter eight, when Marx was the editor-in-chief for *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (p. 263).

Further, in chapter 9, Jones suggests, rather indirectly, that Marx was anti-oriental, due to his antagonistic perception towards monarchical power that dominated India and China at that moment. Jones excerpts Marx's 1853 *The British Rule in India*, "Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history" (p. 357). Marx then degraded the age-old 'village system' in India and applauded British invasion of India. In addition, religion in India was, according to him, "at once a religion of sensualist exuberance and...self-torturing asceticism" (p. 358). When Marx came to know about Taiping Rebellion in China – the country he

called “that living fossil” (p. 57) – Marx scoffed, “they are aware of no task except changing the dynasty. They have no slogans...destruction without any nucleus of new construction” (p. 359).

Chapter 10 derides *Grundrisse* as having only a single paragraph – in addition to the word “if” as a starter – to hypothetically explain about “surplus value”, the idea that has since become the article of faith of Marx’s followers (p. 401). Chapter 11 accentuates that Marx’s framework of analysis in *Capital* has actually come from the ‘Provisional Rules’ of the International, which was earlier drafted by the Owenites (John Weston and ‘Major’ Luigi Wolff) and a French republican by the name of Victor Le Lubez.

However provocative these anti-Semitic, anti-oriental, anti-religion, pro-European colonization, and undemocratic images of Marx could be, in the last chapter entitled ‘Back to the Future’, Jones does highlight some reversals that were made by Marx. The chapter reserves some, yet important clues for future theoretical projects on Marx. Jones argues that in the last 15 years of his life, Marx started to cherish the social and political settings of “village community” that had traditions of communal ownership, democracy and liberty which existed in the ancient Europe as well as Asia particularly in Russia, China, and India. Marx also criticised European (French) colonization over Asia (Algeria), “To the extent that non-European, foreign law is “profitable” for them, the Europeans recognise it, as here they not only recognise the Muslim law – immediately! – but “misunderstand it” only to their profit, as here” (p. 583). To large extent Marx in his last years began to think like those whom he used to call as “utopian” socialists and Jones states Charles Fourier as one that he had come to agree with. Furthermore, in the epilogue, Jones claims that David Riazanov, the Marxist scholar, had disappeared into Stalinist purges for his research on Marx’s 1881 letter which urged the Russian Group for the Emancipation of Labour to support the village community as opposed to the orthodox “Marxist” strategy in building an urban-based workers’ social-democratic movement. As Jones has consistently argued throughout the book, “But this only reinforces the point that the Marx constructed in the twentieth century bore only an incidental resemblance to the Marx who lived in the nineteenth” (p. 595).

Previously having edited Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* for the Penguin Classics, the *New Left Review*, and an authority in Victorian

studies, Jones is another Marxist historian after the late Eric Hobsbawm that came from the King's College, Cambridge. Stedman Jones however, as we could see, appeared to be more transparent in tabling Marx's historical background including ignoble facts that may spoil the 'noble' image of and personality cult surrounding Marx compared to Hobsbawm, as the latter was criticised, for instance, for turning a blind eye on Stalin's terrors in his works. If Louis Althusser had stressed for the readings of the four volumes of Capital line by line at least ten times to really understand Marx's philosophy, it then should be done with the accompaniment of this definitive biography. *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* thus leaves revisionists plenty of tasks ahead.

# In This Issue

## *Editorial*

### *Special Articles*

**Md. Moniruzzaman**

Politics of Forced Migration and Refugees: Dynamics of International Conspiracy?

**AKM Ahsan Ullah and Diotima Chatteraj**

Roots of Discrimination Against Rohingya Minorities: Society, Ethnicity and International Relations

**Kamal J. I. Badrasawi, Iman Osman Ahmed and Iyad M. Eid**

Exploring Ways to Provide Education in Conflict Zones: Implementation and Challenges

**Ibrahim O. Salawu and Aluko Opeyemi Idowu**

Political Settlement Analysis of the Blight of Internally Displaced Persons in the Muslim World: Lessons from Nigeria

### *Research Articles*

**Rohaiza Rokis**

Women's Work Empowerment through "Re-upcycle" Initiatives for Women-at-home

**Shafizan Mohamed and Tengku Siti Aisha Tengku Mohd Azzman**

The Islamization of the Malaysian Media: A Complex Interaction of Religion, Class and Commercialization

**Suleyman Temiz**

Rise of Central Conservatism in Political Leadership: Erdogan's National Outlook Movement and the 1997 Military Coup in Turkey

**Maskanah Mohammad Lotfie and Hartono**

Language Policy and Practices in Indonesian Higher Education Institutions

**Rahmah Bt Ahmad H. Osman and Naseeb Ahmed Siddiqui**

A Novel Critique on 'The Scientific Miracle of Qur'an Philosophy': An Inter-Civilization Debate

**Muhammad Nabil Fikri Bin Mhd Zain and Muhammad Amanullah**

Duties and Decision-Making Guidelines for Shari'ah Committee: An Overview of AAOIFI

**Nor Razinah Binti Mohd. Zain, Rusni Hassan and Nazifah Mustaffha**

Waqf Institutions in Malaysia: Appreciation of Wasafiyah Approach in Internal Control as a Part of Good Governance

**Ali Ahmed Zahir**

Muslim Jurists' Debate on Non-Muslim Religious Festivals and Its Effect on Muslims in the United States

**Azman Ariffin, Kasyfullah Abd Kadir and Idris Mansor**

Archaeological Analysis of Arabic-Malay Translation Works of Abdullah Basmeih

**Mohamed El Tahir El Mesawi and Mohammad Rizhan bin Leman**

*Takyif Fiqhī* and its Application to Modern Contracts: A Case Study of the Central Provident Fund Nomination in Singapore

**Wafa Zoghbor**

Revisiting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Vs. English Lingua Franca (ELF): The Case for Pronunciation

**Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan, Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, Norehan Abdullah, and Zaireeni Azmi**

"How did we Choose?" Understanding the Northern Female Voting Behaviour in Malaysia in the 14th General Election

**Anke Iman Bouzenita, and Bronwyn Wood**

Unintended Consequences? The Commodification of Ideas in Tertiary Education and their Effects on Muslim Students

**Muhammad Siddiq Armia**

Ultra Petita and the Threat to Constitutional Justice: The Indonesian Experience

**Mariam Adawiah Dzulkifli, and Abdul Kabir Hussain Solihu**

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### *Book Reviews*

### *Research Note*

### *Conference Report*

ISSN 0128-4878 (Print)

ISSN 2289-5639 (Online)

