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Al-Shajarah is a refereed international journal that publishes original scholarly articles in the area of Islamic thought, Islamic civilization, Islamic science, and Malay world issues. The journal is especially interested in studies that elaborate scientific and epistemological problems encountered by Muslims in the present age, scholarly works that provide fresh and insightful Islamic responses to the intellectual and cultural challenges of the modern world. *Al-Shajarah* will also consider articles written on various religions, schools of thought, ideologies and subjects that can contribute towards the formulation of an Islamic philosophy of science. Critical studies of translation of major works of major writers of the past and present. Original works on the subjects of Islamic architecture and art are welcomed. Book reviews and notes are also accepted.

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Book Reviews

Carool Kersten. *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Trends, Themes, and Issues*. Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group. 2019. 228 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-85507-5, 978-0-415-85508-2.

Reviewer: Quynh Yusuf, Postgraduate Candidate, ISTAC-IIUM.

Prior to joining King's College London in 2007, Carool Kersten was a faculty member at the Centre for International and Graduate Studies at Payap University in Chiangmai, Thailand. His professional expertise and research areas cover intellectual history of the modern and contemporary Muslim world, political Islam, history of Islam in Southeast Asia, Islam in global and interregional contexts, as well as theory and method in the study of religions.

This book illustrates how ideas have stimulated a new generation of progressive Muslim thinkers and scholars to radically rethink the ways in which immediate and emergent issues are affecting the contemporary Muslim world in an increasingly interconnected world. Based on the author's long teaching experience about the intellectual history of the contemporary Muslim world, the contents of this book go well beyond the findings of his own specific projects, extending to wider reading in terms of studying Islam and the Muslim world in general. The chapters point out parallels and contrasts, differences and similarities between thinkers and their ideas, presenting a variety of themes and issues as a set of interlocking concerns for contemporary Muslim intellectuals.

Focusing on the period from roughly the late 1960s to the first decade of the twenty-first century, the book is global in its approach and offers an overview of different strands of thought and trends in the development of new ideas, distinguishing between traditional, reactionary, and progressive approaches. Therefore, this is a synthetic rather than an analytic book.

The opening chapter titled "The Problem of Taxonomy:

Categorizing Contemporary Muslim Intellectual” maps the intellectual landscape of the contemporary Muslim world. It classifies its intellectuals into three categories that are broad enough to capture the enormous variety of ideas circulating in the Muslim world today. The categories – traditional, reactionary, and progressive – refer to ideas, not people. It is very well possible to be a pious and socially conservative Muslim, faithfully adhering to the religious traditions of Islam, while at the same time subscribing to progressive political ideas. A reactionary Muslim can restrict his return to the practices of the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) and his companions to a personal lifestyle choice, without translating it into a political agenda, let alone propagate or actively engage in its implementation through violence. Similarly, a progressively minded Muslim advocating gay rights can also be captivated by the Muslim world’s spiritual tradition, becoming an initiate in one of many Sufi Orders that still exist and commanding millions of adherents worldwide.

While Chapter 1 introduces how to classify contemporary Muslim intellectuals, Chapter 2 entitled “Philosophies of Knowledge: Transmission and Reason” is of central importance to the understanding of contemporary Islamic thought in epistemology. A distinctive feature of Muslim epistemologies is the prominence of *fiqh* and *uṣūl al-fiqh*, two Arabic terms referring to Muslim jurisprudence and its foundations, respectively. This close relation between law and epistemology may strike non-Muslim readers as odd, but the same could be said of the continued interest of contemporary, and supposedly secularized, Western philosophers in Christian theology. A central theme running through Islamic intellectual history is what constitutes knowledge and how to attain it. Coming from various academic disciplines, and with interests in different aspects of the Islamic tradition and its wider civilizational heritage, the progressively minded Muslim intellectuals introduced in this chapter have developed their own approaches to studying the intellectual legacies of various parts of the Muslim world. As philosophers, historians, linguists, legal scholars, and social scientists, they propose different research agendas and have developed a variety of projects. According to the author, if there is

one common denominator that characterizes their work, then that would be the anthropocentric focus of their epistemologies: Religious knowledge and religious traditions are the outcome of human interpretative efforts.

In consideration of contemporary Muslims, the Qur'ān – as the revealed word of God – stands as the first point of reference for all things Islamic. Chapter 3, “Scripture: Alternative Ways of Engaging with the Qur'ān” deals with new approaches to scriptural exegesis and Qur'anic studies as a field of academic inquiry. In the character of the foundational Islamic scripture for several generations consisting of the present-day Muslims, the Qur'ān endures as the essence of religious understanding. As a result, the interpretation of Islam's main sacred text persists to embrace innumerable modern intellectuals as well. Their new approaches to the Qur'ān are closely tied up with the epistemological questions addressed in the previous chapter. Hence, they are a prime illustration of how the thematic topics discussed in this book form a set of interlocking interests and concerns. By positing a dialogue between the divine author of the Qur'ān and its human recipients, a subject-to-subject relationship is established, whereby the text becomes an object of interpretation by an exegete who retains his freedom.

In the same nature, comparable considerations underlie the decision to include a chapter on the spiritual dimensions in contemporary Islamic thought, Chapter 4, titled “Spiritual Dimensions of Contemporary Muslim Thought: Sufism Today: Psychology, Literature, and Islamization” *of Knowledge*. The acquisition of religious knowledge is confined to not only the domains of transmission and reason alone, but also a spiritual dimension. While manifesting itself in various forms, it emphasizes a highly personal, intimate and inward experience of the encounter between an individual believer and the transcendent. Some orders are confined to particular regions, whereas others have developed into transnational brotherhoods, with followings across the Muslim world and in communities elsewhere. In more recent times, some orders have adapted or reinvented themselves to remain relevant to the concerns of present-day Muslims. This way, the order managed to lay out ‘the intellectual and historical groundwork for a new urban

Islamic intellectual discourse' (p. 97).

The next four thematic chapters address topics that are closely connected and even intertwined. Titled "Islam and Politics: Thinking about Secularity, Freedom and Democracy," Chapter 5 focuses on the political thoughts of Muslim intellectuals such as Ali Abd al-Raziq (1888-1966), Muhammad al-Ghazali (1917-1997), Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Apart from taking up the substantive interpretations of these notions, the author's intention is to show how the political ideas of contemporary Muslim intellectuals fit with their epistemologies and theologies. It is fair to state that, where it concerns politics, the intellectuals featuring in this chapter have most in common with the minimalists or deconflationists. What ties together the buzzwords of this chapter—secularity, freedom and democracy—is transformation. In other instances, the secularization thesis of the 1960s and its more sophisticated reformulation of the 1990s have produced a transformative Islam held on to by successive generations of Indonesian Muslim intellectuals, whereas Turkish Islamic exceptionalism has been replaced by a Turkish-Islamic Synthesis. On the back of these developments, Indonesia and Turkey embarked on what are still – despite obstacles and setbacks – the most successful experiments with democratization in the Muslim world. This, in turn, has motivated some Islamists from elsewhere to reinvent themselves as Muslim democrats.

Islam is often characterized as an orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy, meaning that it is a performative religion rather than a theological edifice structured around a complex doctrine. Instead, an orthopraxy is characterized by a preoccupation with the correct execution of religious obligations and with appropriate conduct. This favours the believers with the necessary guidance and rules regulating practices and behaviour, as well as giving ethical qualifications to their actions, a matter of central importance. What Muslims refer to as *Shari'ah*, a shorthand for 'Islamic law', has thus become the focal point of intellectual attention in scholarship. This has led to a lot of misconceptions and misunderstandings among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The root meaning of the Arabic word *shari'a* is a route to a water source. It is a misnomer to have it

translated as ‘Islamic law.’ It is therefore better understood as a moral compass or ethical guideline for the believers, whose profound comprehension is portrayed in Chapter 6, “*Shari’a*: Islamic Legal System or Ethical Guideline?” In today’s Muslim world, legal and ethical questions take centre stage in Islamic religious thinking. Contemporary Muslim intellectuals, traditionally educated religious scholars and experts in modern academic disciplines alike, continue to grapple with these questions, in terms of substance, method and theoretical approach. *Maqāṣidi* thinking as well as minority *fiqh* also highlight the other side of the coin: namely the acceptance of diversity and equality, together with developing attitudes of toleration in relation to plurality on the part of Muslims when they occupy a majority position. This is the subject of the next chapter.

The question surrounding the legal position of Muslims in minority situations, which is discussed in Chapter 6, points at wider issues pertaining to the freedom of religion, conviction and expression, and by extension to the matter of human rights in relation to the recognition and acceptance of diversity and plurality in Islamic contexts. This is why Chapter 7, “Dealing with Difference and Plurality: Emancipation, Toleration and Human Rights” links Muslim attitudes toward women, gender equality and religious plurality to human rights. This chapter deliberates a variety of intellectual developments as Muslims come to terms with questions of diversity and equality, plurality and toleration in an increasingly interconnected world. Advances have been made in the formulation of emancipatory discourses by Muslim feminists. Looking for ways to deal with religious difference, Muslim scholars of religion and participants in interfaith encounters and dialogue have explored the distinctions made between religious exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, and how these impact on tolerating other beliefs, while retaining their own religious distinctiveness and Muslim identity.

Last but not least, even though Chapter 8 could have preceded the previous three, “Issues of the Twenty-first Century: Globalization, Ecology and Medical Ethics” is placed where it is in order to facilitate a transition to contemporary questions which Muslims have to confront, at the present and in the future. For that reason, the final chapter accordingly adjoins an exchange of Muslim

engagement with ecology and life sciences as two themes with which Muslims have to grapple and to which their responses will be not only determined by scientific advances, but also shaped by their religious worldview. Globalization, primarily associated with economic integration on the basis of open market and free trade principles, also tends to be regarded as setting in motion a homogenization process of other values. However, increasingly extensive and intensive contacts between different parts of the world have given new salience to cultural diversity and religious plurality. This awareness, combined with a growing assertiveness on the part of non-Western cultures, also carries over in the responses to other matters of a global nature, including ecological questions, such as environmentalism and sustainability, as well as questions related to medical ethics. What the Muslim world needs instead is a genuinely reformulated theology that will also take theoretical debates beyond the 'ethical pragmatism' of the juridical casuistry.

Kersten offers us a much-needed compass through the wide landscape of contemporary Muslim thought addressing some of the essential intellectual, ethical, legal and political issues of the Muslim world, from the Middle East to North and South Africa, Asia, Europe, North America and Oceania. The complex, varied, and nuanced picture he depicts is a valuable service to the growing field of contemporary Islamic intellectual history. Encompassing philosophy, theology, history, politics and ethics, among other subjects, Kersten contributes a lucid reading of especially the contemporary debates and intellectuals who are earnestly engaged with the construction and critique of Muslim thought. Readers, especially students, will greatly profit from both the historical details and the contours of ideas generated by an array of modern thinkers hailing from different geographical locations. Representing as an alternative account of Islam and the Muslim world today, counter balancing narratives that emphasize politics and confrontations with the West, this work is an essential resource for students and scholars of Islam.

TRANSLITERATION TABLE

CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	
ء	ء	ء	ء	ز	z	z	z	گ	—	g	g	g
ب	b	b	b	ژ	—	—	ʀ	ل	l	l	l	l
پ	—	p	p	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m	m
ت	t	t	t	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	n
ث	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h ¹	h ¹
ث	th	th	th	ص	ş	ş	ş	و	w	v/u	v	v/u
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḍ	ḍ	ḍ	ی	y	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	—	-a ²
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al ³	—	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	‘	‘	‘	—	—	—	—	—
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğh	—	—	—	—	—
ڈ	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f	—	—	—	—	—
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	q	—	—	—	—	—
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	—	—	—	—	—

¹ – when not final

² – at in construct state

³ – (article) al - or l-

VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iy (final form ī)	iy (final form ī)
	و	uww (final form ū)	uvv
	و	uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	ev
	ی	ai or ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a or e
	ا	u	u or ū
	ا	i	o or ö
	ا	i	i

URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. جھ jh گھ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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