The recent ISIM Conference on Modern Islamic Intellectual History in Comparative Perspective (Utrecht, 29-30 September 2005) brought together scholars working on developments in a diverse range of Muslim societies to discuss the production, transformation, and reception of Islam in the modern period. It was also a much-welcomed opportunity to raise issues of methodological and theoretical relevance for scholars working on Muslim intellectualism of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This is an extremely complex field that requires not only high levels of linguistic expertise and area-specific knowledge, but also a careful attention to the broader political and epistemological contexts of globalization. The truly trans-regional nature of developments affecting contemporary Muslim societies pose new challenges to scholars of Islamic Studies in which traditional “Area Studies”-type training will continue to be valuable in preparing for scholarship in this field, but it is no longer sufficient in itself to deal with the global dimensions of regional developments.

Attempts at understanding contemporary Islam through its intellectual history demand new analytical frameworks to be brought to bear on both Muslim religious thought and the academic study of religion. The established Islamic Studies methodologies developed to deal with the medieval period, such as philological analyses of texts and the documentation of chains of teacher/student transmissions of knowledge, are simply inadequate for dealing with the intricacies of the modern period. What is needed are new approaches to modern Muslim intellectualism that build upon the traditional strengths of Islamic Studies while also taking into account contemporary realities, which add new dimensions to the processes of producing and transmitting knowledge.

The problematics of conceptualizing such a project, however, are considerable, for beyond the boundaries of Islamic Studies the very field of “Intellectual History” itself has experienced a rather tumultuous time in modern scholarship. Both internal debates and critiques from outside have characterized the historiographies of ideas and intellectual history since the early twentieth century. Much can be gained from a critical and selective engagement with recent developments in the field. However, in doing so students of modern Islam must negotiate several significant obstacles, including that posed by the fact that intellectual history has been heretofore almost exclusively focused on ideas and texts produced in the “West.” Recognizing this fact and facing this challenge can, in fact, provide opportunities to reconsider the ways in which various “voices” in modern discourses are presented and placed in conversation with each other.

Attempts at understanding contemporary Islam through its intellectual history demand new analytical frameworks to be brought to bear on both Muslim religious thought and the academic study of religion. Contemporary scholars must thus begin to explore new approaches that build upon the traditional strengths of Islamic Studies while also taking into account contemporary realities that add new dimensions to the processes of producing and transmitting knowledge. This will require a self-conscious engagement with developments in fields ranging from the sociology of philosophies to media studies.

Modernity, media, and Muslim thought

One of the central issues in debates on intellectual historiography is that of “contextualization” and the problematizing of the selection of particular contexts within which to situate our discussions of specific texts. This becomes an especially complex question for studies of modern Muslim writings; should, for example, modern Islamist elaborations of Sunnattullah as a “natural law” concept be read against the background of medieval falsafah, twentieth-century Neo-Thomism, or the works of Leo Strauss? In selecting specific texts to be subjected to such contextual analyses, the historian must devote careful attention to the identification of texts that might be considered as particularly illuminating examples of the intersection of established traditions and contemporary concerns and insights situated in concrete historical moments.

Striking a balance in scholarly attention between a focus on the particularities of a given text and a work’s embodiment of broader trends within the cultural contexts of its creation requires considerable efforts to resist the pulls of polar methodological orientations toward either an over-emphasis on idiosyncratic attributes or a tendency toward some form of contextual reductionism. A nuanced treatment of both a book’s unique qualities and the general cultural background against which they are elaborated can make it possible to open up new discussions of the ideas presented and the processes by which they are symbolized, thus facilitating the recognition of connections between various facets of the broader cultural histories of Muslim societies and the diverse social functions of ideas and rhetorical formulations in changing historical contexts. What is called for then is not the dogmatic adherence to the abstracted ideals of any one school of historiography, but rather a theoretically aware—as opposed to conceptually oblivious—methodological flexibility that self-consciously moves back and forth between text-specific and broader cultural dimensions of analysis.

Interpreting modern Muslim thought and its public impact also requires a nuanced appreciation of the media through which ideas are developed and distributed. Thus approaches need to be developed that can address issues of both the production of knowledge and its reception by diverse publics. This will require thinking through new ways of situating the works of prominent writers in relation to readers in the creation of contemporary discourses on Islam. Here there are rich developments in other academic fields including the History of the Book and Media Studies that can be drawn upon to construct models for contextualizing the production, distribution, and
reception of texts in modern Muslim intellectual history. An acknowledg-
ment of the significance of media and communications technologies in
the modern period should not, however, be taken as implying any
totalizing role for technological determinism in the development of
new forms of discourse. Rather these technologies should be reg-
carded as important factors that present new possibilities for, as well as
new restrictions on, the production and dissemination of knowledge.
Such an approach, for example, could help us to better understand the
diverse impacts that “media multifa” and celebrity preachers such as
Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Amr Khalid, or A.A. Gym are having upon Muslims
diverse societies all across the contemporary world. Pace McLuhan,
modern media, while important in its own right, still conveys messages
that need to be carefully parsed.

Insiders, outsiders, and the production of knowledge
In the modern period definitive lines between “Muslim” and “West-
ern,” as well as “academic” and “confessional,” conversations on Islam
have often been obscured in the permutations of public discourses of
identity and power politics. Given this historical reality, any rethink-
ing of the field of modern Muslim intellectual history must start with
a frank recognition of the fact that for well over a century now the
blending of emic and etic discourses on Islam has been a complex and
creative dynamic in Muslim thought. Perhaps the most high-profile in-
dividual example of the politicized intellectual interactions of Western
and Muslim scholars can be found in the late nineteenth-century po-
lemics between Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Ernst Renan over the rela-
tion between “Islam” and the complex of “science” and “progress” that
was considered to comprise “modernity” at that time.

All across the Muslim world during the modern period, Western
scholarship came to exercise complex influences on the development of
internal Muslim conversations—sometimes with very specific con-
nections. One thinks, for example, of the impact of modern Orientalist
“discoveries” of Ibn Khaldun on Muslim social scientists in North Africa,
and the impact of Geertz’ work on conversations among Indonesian
Muslims. Such works held prominent place within a rather eclectic set
of canons formed out of some rather odd combinations of Western
authors frequently cited in modern Muslim literatures—with colonial
classics such as Carlyle’s portrait of Muhammad in On Heroes, Hero-
Worship, and the Heroic in History and Trobriand Stoddard’s New World
of Islam gradually giving way to works like Maurice Bucaille’s Le Bible, Le
Coran, et la science, and Samuel Huntington’s Foreign Affairs article on
“The Clash of Civilizations” in more recent years.

Beyond this, however, over the latter decades of the twentieth century,
there developed in the work of some Muslim scholars and authors trends
toward an increasing openness to and influence of “Western” thinkers be-
ond those dealing with issues of Islam and Muslim societies. The first
influences were most commonly from the social sciences, as seen for ex-
ample in the impact of modern social sciences theories on the work of
Ziya Gökalp, Ali Shariati, and Nurcholish Madjid in modern Turkey, Iran,
and Indonesia, respectively. More recently, however, international devel-
oppments in hermeneutics and other fields of the Humanities have also
come to be both reflected and further developed in the writings of such
thinkers as Muhammad Arkoun and Nasr Abu-Zayd. Over the course of
the twentieth century, the works of various “Western” authors on Islam
began to serve as major points of reference in the rhetoric of modern
Muslim authors across a diverse range of African, Middle Eastern, and
Asian societies, producing a rich range of modern Muslim thinkers.

Post-“Orientalism” and globalization
In assessing the impact of “Western” academic writings on the scholar-
ly and public discourses of twentieth century Islam, particular attention
must be directed toward interpreting the legacies of “Orientalist” schol-
ars in modern understandings of Islam among particular Muslim
communities—the nature and history of which have been both more
profound and more nuanced than may be apparent in the treatments
of the subject developed in circles of literary critics. To cite just a few
examples from mid twentieth century Indonesia: In his oft-republished
history of Sufism, the popular preacher and novelist Hamka praised
Louis Massignon as “the great pillar of all Orientalists” and cited ap-
ngrily his work on Hallaj, as well as the Frenchman’s speculations on
the relevance of this tenth century figure for the later development of
Islam in the Indonesian archipelago.1 Well outside of Sufi Studies, H.A.R.
Gibb’s observation on the totalizing, holistic nature of Islam became a

Notes
1. Hamka, Perkembangan Tasauf dan Abad ke-
Abad (Jakarta: Pustaka Kibra, 1952), 116.
2. “Islam is much more than a system of
theology; it is a complete civilization.”
(Whither islam? 2), was repeatedly quoted
by Natsir and other prominent Islamists in
the twentieth century. See, for example:
M. Natsir, Islam Sebagai Ideologi (Jakarta:
Penjara Ilmu, 1950), 7.

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