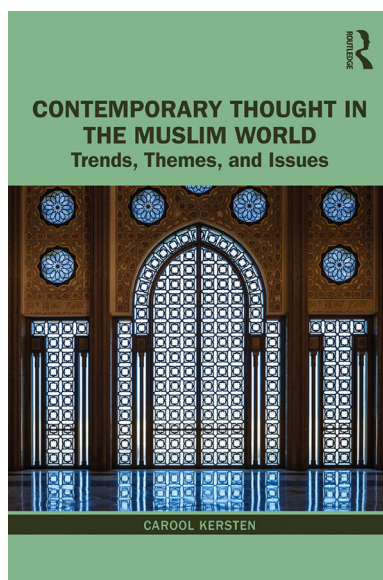

REVIEW OF
Carool Kersten,
CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT
IN THE MUSLIM WORLD:
TRENDS, THEMES, AND
ISSUES

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Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Trends, Themes, and Issues, a scientific monograph by Carool Kersten, is a synthetic presentation of the intellectual aspect of the contemporary Islam and



Muslim world. This condensed text was enabled by the author's 35-year experience in wide readings and researching of the intellectual history of Islam and thoughts and texts of Muslim intellectuals. To the author's deep engagement in his research field testify not only his edited and authored books, such as *The Fatwa as an Islamic Legal Instrument: Concept, Historical Role, Contemporary Relevance* (in 3 volumes, from 2018), *A History of Islam in Indonesia: Unity in Diversity* (2017), *Islam in Indonesia: The Contest for Society, Ideas and Values* (2015), *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the*

Study of Islam (2011), or other chapters and articles he contributed to the scientific collections and journals, but also the interviews and talks he gives to the public through the media in order to offer an alternative view on Islam and the Muslim world to the Western societies.

This book, published by Routledge in 2019, is an alternative account in its field, “counterbalancing narratives that emphasise politics and confrontations with the West,”¹ and this is only one of the reasons this book is “an essential resource for students and scholars of Islam.”² Another is the impressive variety of topics this book covers: starting from an overview of contemporary Muslim intellectuals and with an attempt at categorisation of their ideas, followed by a fundamental insight into philosophies of knowledge and their transmission and apprehension of reason. The author proceeds to specific topics, such as scripture, where he focuses on the Qur’an, the spiritual dimensions and Sufism in contemporary Islam, politics, legal systems, and law, along with issues of plurality, including emancipation, tolerance, and human rights, offering insights into the latest manifestations of globalisation, ecology and even medical ethics.

The table of contents, listing these topics, unfortunately does not present their content in detail, since the titles of subchapters are omitted from it. If included, these could present to the reader the actual structure of the book and its intersections, its connectedness through themes, and its deep insight. However, the content becomes clear when one goes on reading chapter by chapter, where it is possible to realise that each chapter adds a pebble to the colourful mosaic of the themes and ideas in the Muslim world.

The first chapter, “The problem of taxonomy: Categorizing contemporary Muslim intellectuals,” opens the problem of categorisation of the vast variety of Islamic intellectuals’ ideas and touches upon the issue with the process of taxonomy: it is typically too rigid for a coherent account of the actual maze that these ideas form. As the author points out, “like taxidermy, taxonomy is best not performed on the living.”³

¹ Carool Kersten, *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Trends, Themes, and Issues* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), iii.

² Ibid., iii.

³ Ibid., 6.

In this vein he stresses that the alternative categorisation he proposes should be applied to ideas and not the individuals that expose them. Kersten offers three clusters of ideas: “Traditional and socially conservative,” “Reactionary,” and “Progressive Islamic discourses.” The first cluster names the mainstream current of ideas that considers centuries of Islamic doctrines and employs them mainly in socially conservative values and customs. However, the author stresses that heralds of these ideas are not to be confused with the so called “traditionalists,” whose orientations are usually more radical, but also the denomination of “moderate” is not accurate since representatives of these themes regard themselves as deeply devoted believers. This kind of comment makes this book very precious, because it allows for a widening of perspectives on Islamic issues that the Western public might not be aware of.

In a similar manner, Kersten warns about the various denominations used for the cluster of reactionary ideas that are often too general and confusing. He takes the example of the term Salafism as broken down by the political scientist Quintan Wiktorowicz, who distinguishes three Salafistic groups, “purists,” “politicos,” and “jihadis.” The first group does not engage in politics, but mainly in education and personal conduct and they are prone to spread Salafism through non-violent and non-political means, and therefore these so called “purists” are not to be associated directly with reactionary ideas. The “politicos” are prone to enact the Islamic law in the political arena and public life, whereas the “jihadis” add to this the support of the use of violence. The latter two groups can therefore be considered as Islamists due to their political engagement of Islam, but, as the author emphasises, not all Islamists are to be considered as politicised Islamists,⁴ nor do they all condone the use of violent means. In order to avoid misnaming and to allow for inclusion of a wide range of contextualised interpretations of modes of engaging Islam in society, Kersten uses the term “reactionism” for thoughts emerging from a general discontent about the circumstances in the Muslim world and searching for a solution to solve these situations using the past Islamic traditions. Among reactionary thinkers he presents are the Egyptian poet and scholar Sayyid Qutb and the Iranian

⁴ Ibid., 13.

sociologist Ali Shari'ati, whose revolutionary ideas were also adopted by violent Sunni and Shi'a political extremists.

Kersten understands as progressive Islamic discourses those perspectives and ideas that would in general be marked as "liberal" or "modernist," which, in his point of view, are not completely appropriate terms for their comprehensive description. These ideas are mainly prone to advocacy of a creative, critical, and future oriented understanding of the Islamic cultural heritage while trying to find their proper space in the present globalised and postmodern world. Among progressive thinkers he presents Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad Iqbal, Mohammed Arkoun, Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, Hasan Hanafi, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Abdolkarim Soroush, Farid Esack, Ebrahim Moosa and others. These intellectuals present their views in a direct and often provocative way. Given that their ideas are outside the traditionalistic perspectives of Islam, they stand on the borderline of acceptability and are regularly criticised by conservative and reactionary thinkers. Many times, these progressively thinking intellectuals were forced to seek refuge from their hegemonic systems in exile abroad.

The following chapter, "Philosophies of knowledge: Transmission and reason," offers an insight into one of the main themes of Islamic intellectual history; that is, the understanding of knowledge and how it is acquired. The main division in these epistemological debates is between *naql*, the transmitted knowledge through revelation and Islamic tradition, and *'aql*, knowledge that derives from the use of reason (*ijtihād*). These debates are often politicised and are held in the realm of hegemonic, orthodox discourses. After a brief presentation of the dominant themes in questions of epistemology argued by both Sunni and Shi'a Islam, the author goes into a deeper exposition of progressive heritage thinkers. He presents the so called Arab Averroists (Mohammed Abed al-Jabri), Renewers (Hasan Hanafi), and Critics (Mohammed Arkoun and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd). An interesting aspect of this chapter is that the author offers specific insights to the contemporary Muslim thought in Indonesia, Turkey, and Iran. Moving from renewal thinking to Islamic post-traditionalism and transformative Islam, Kersten presents some progressive Muslim discourses in Indonesia of which he exposes authors as Nurcholish Madjid and his idea of the

need of modernisation and the movement for the renewal of Islamic thinking, and Abdurrahman Wahid with his alternative reinterpretation of doctrines in the vein of Islamic post-traditionalism. The author presents Turkey's Ankara school and its inclination towards historical criticism and rationalisation, of which two representatives are mentioned, Edip Yüksel and Fazhur Rahman. The exposure of new religious intellectuals in Iran is particularly interesting, since it offers some insight into the controversy, alternativity, and dynamic rationality of Ali Shari'ati's thought, the "intersubjective hermeneutics" and "new theology" of Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, and the "new religious intellectualism" of Abdolkarim Soroush that reconciles reason and Islam. At the end of the chapter Kersten dedicates a page to the methodology of *ihsan* advocated by the Kuwait-born and California-based professor of law Khaled Abou El Fadl that combines a delegitimisation of hegemonic discourses, a plurality of the postmodern context and ethical understanding.

The author also offers details about the intellectual formation of the aforementioned progressive thinkers, listing the universities and professors where they gained their education and scientific background, as well as exposing the various theoretic and cultural influences they were subjected to. It is interesting to note that a great majority of these thinkers were at least partly educated in the Western countries, which has led to their knowledge and inspiration from Western theorists, philosophers, and scientists. It is telling that Kersten returns to these progressive thinkers throughout the remaining chapters of the book, in which he addresses a variety of specific topics, since their ideas affect different areas of religion, society, and culture. They come from different fields of knowledge, such as history, philosophy, linguistics, law, and social sciences and they adopt alternative ways in approaching the Islamic legacy. Their epistemologies are mainly anthropocentric, which allows for an understanding of knowledge and tradition as a result of human interpretation.

In the third chapter, "Scripture: Alternative ways of engaging with the Qur'an," Kersten presents some new, innovative, and sometimes controversial ways of reading and approaching this Islamic sacred text, which is always a very sensitive issue. First, he exposes textualist

and contextualist approaches of which the former is atomistic, based in literary and legal readings, while the latter is more holistic, plural, based on ethical reading. To these the author adds Mahmud Muhammad Taha's contrarian reading and Muhammad Shahrur's scientific contemporary reading of the Qur'an. He concludes the chapter with an "indirect exegesis," offering a possible way to understand revelation in post-revolutionary Iran through the explications of Shabestari and Soroush. The following chapter entitled "Spiritual dimensions of contemporary Muslim thought: Sufism today: Psychology, literature, and Islamization of knowledge" offers an insight into the critiques of modernism through the connections between modern-day Sufism and traditionalism. This is followed by a presentation of the Islamisation of knowledge and Sufi psychology which integrate the intellectual and spiritual realms of Islam. Connections of Sufism and literature are explicated very well, deriving from Sufi poetry, biographical writings, and stressing the imaginary and individualism. Further manifestations of contemporary Sufism are possible as urban, intellectual and otherwise, as represented also in ethnographic studies or its role in Turkey's "third way" – the neoliberal politics established through the so called "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis."

The second part of the book centres on themes in the realm of the political, ethical, and moral, social and public, local and global. The fifth chapter, "Islam and Politics: Thinking about secularity, freedom and democracy," opens with a question about Islam being either a religion and a state, or a religion and not a state. This is followed by an exposition of the terms "secularity," "secularisation," "secularism" and the differences among them and the variety of approaches to them in Islamic thought. Kersten also offers valuable insights into themes such as the form that theorising Islam and the state has taken in Indonesia; freedom, democracy and reason in Iran and Turkey; the case of democracy in the Arab-Islamic world; Euro-Islam: citizenship, loyalty, and political participation of Muslims in minority situations. The sixth chapter poses a question: "Shari'a: Islamic legal system or ethical guideline?" The author's answer inclines towards the latter, explaining that the term "Islamic law" for denominating the notion Shari'a is an unfortunate translation, since the term would literary mean "route to a wa-

ter source.”⁵ Kersten brings to the fore the technically proper term for Islamic law, *fiqh*. He offers substantivist critiques and interpretations of Islamic law and also instances of debating Islamic law in the Islamic Republic of Iran. He discusses the notion of *maqasid al-shari‘a* which he explains as a version of philosophy of law and translates as “the higher objectives of Shari‘a,” being “the preservation of religion, life, property, intellect and offspring.”⁶ This inspired a development of maqasidi thinking, which led to an alternative theological approach based on a theoretic system that is cognitive, holistic, hierarchic, and multidimensional, and represents a moral orientation, which is mainly relevant to questions of minority rights. Here, the legal and ethical questions are of central importance and their discussions are oriented towards acceptance of diversity, equality, and tolerance towards plurality.

The seventh chapter is dedicated to “Dealing with difference and plurality: Emancipation, toleration, and human rights” and touches upon contemporary themes such as Muslim feminism; minority *fiqh* and religious diversity; Islamic exclusivism and religious pluralism; Islam and human rights. These discourses are emancipatory in nature, striving for pluralism and often inspired by Sufism. They understand and stress the phenomena of cultural hybridity and the importance of intellectual symbiosis, characteristic of the cosmopolitanism of the late 20th century progressive Muslim thinkers that left an impact on discourses considered in the chapter that follows. The eighth and last chapter of the book discusses “Issues of the twenty-first century: Globalization, ecology and medical ethics.” An interesting view proposed by the author is that globalisation was long integrated into the Islamic tradition, which is clear from its sacred texts and territorial expansion, having a long history of intensive interactions with other civilisations. Muslims in a globalising world are, intellectually speaking, reacting to the globalising processes in different manners, but progressive thinkers are contributing to a securitisation of the globalisation debate. Some intellectuals are warning against the dominant debates on the legal system, opposing modernisation and secularisation of the public life tak-

⁵ Ibid., 127.

⁶ Ibid., 129, 135.

ing all the space in the discourse, while we are globally “sleepwalking into a crisis” in term of ecological concerns, as Sayyed Hossein Nasr has put it.⁷ Kersten briefly touches on the topics of medical ethics and bioethics, exposing their problematic treatment founded in the Islamic law, the ontological turn of the meaning of “being human” and the vulnerability of Muslim ethics.

This overview provides a kind of a detailed “table of contents,” which is unfortunately missing in this book. It should be said that, due to the wide-ranging contents of the book, some topics are not presented in depth. For example, regarding the realm of feminism, Kersten claims that women’s voices are virtually absent from traditional and reactionary discourses, and present mainly in progressive Islamic discourses.⁸ They address themes on women’s rights and gender equality. In the survey across the categories of contemporary Islamic thought in the first chapter, the author briefly introduces such names as Fatima Mernissi, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Amina Wadud, Saba Mahmood, Kecia Ali, Sa’diyya Shaikh, Asma Barlos. However, in the final chapter that includes a subchapter on feminist thinkers, only three of them are presented, adding to their voices the ideas of Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, who is an advocate of LGBTQ+ rights and the destabilisation of heteronormativity. This topic would merit a subchapter of its own, which would allow for both issues – namely, gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights – a more detailed account.

The reader is enriched by a great variety of topics and offered insight into a complicated net of intricate connections of topics in the contemporary thoughts of Muslim intellectuals; a conclusion could have aided the reader in connecting them. A note on topics that were not included in this condensed presentation of contemporary thought would also be beneficiary, so the reader could further appreciate the breadth of Islamic tradition. On the other hand, an extensive bibliography and abundant index are available.

The book is part of the Routledge series *Contemporary Thought in the Islamic World*, also edited by Kersten, which includes various other

⁷ Ibid., 183.

⁸ Ibid., 23.

studies on a wide variety of topics about Islamic tradition, with titles such as *Contemporary Approaches to the Qur'an and Its Interpretations in Iran* by Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed, *The Sociology of Islam* by Bryan S. Turner, *Alternative Islamic Discourses and Religious Authority*, edited by Carool Kersten and Susanne Olsson, *The Symbolic Scenarios of Islamism: A Study in Islamic Political Thought* by Andrea Mura, *A Muslim Response to Evil: Said Nursi on the Theodicy* by Tubanur Yesilhark Ozkan, and *A Muslim Reformist in Communist Yugoslavia: The Life and Thought of Husein Dozo* by Sejad Mekic. It seems like all these titles are branches of Islamic thought whose roots and trunk are presented in this book and which carries infinite possibilities for further research about the richness of contemporary ideas of Islamic intellectuals and their development.

There is much to be said for the relevance of this book to interreligious dialogue, as it presents the broad aspects of Islamic thought, its various branches and routes that are far from encompassing Islam as an exclusivist religion. Many contemporary Muslim thinkers presented in this book are calling for religious tolerance and adhere to a pluralistic understanding of religious life and are therefore more than suitable for considerations in the realm of interreligious dialogue. But this is again, only one of the many precious aspects of Carool Kersten's insightful book on contemporary Muslim thought.