Much of the literature about Islam in Southeast Asia deals with politics, social movements and civil society, or groups or networks engaging in religiously motivated violence. Much less attention has been given to the majority of ‘ordinary Muslims’, who, in the words of Michael Peletz (1997:231), are ‘not in the forefront of contemporary religious or political development’. In fact, we know surprisingly little about the relationship between structural, political, and economic changes and the ways in which ordinary Muslims actually shape their own existences. How do Southeast Asian Muslims experience their daily lives? What (old or newly formed) religious routines and practices do they engage in? And how do they deal with the increasing range and intensity of moral admonitions, purist pressures, and knowledge regimes designed by the state and other public actors?

A particularly interesting question is the deepening of individual religiosity. Francis Robinson (1997), a specialist of South Asia, has argued that, since the nineteenth century, a broad shift from an ‘other-worldly’ to a ‘this-worldly piety’ has inspired not only consecutive surges of activism and reformism,
but also the development of a distinct Muslim ‘self’. A central component of this process is the ‘inward turn’, or the ‘growth of self-consciousness and reflection’ as a crucial dimension of the Muslim self. Practices of ‘inner investigation’ have been increasingly important for political activists and Muslim intellectuals (Howell 2001), but also for all those ordinary Muslims, who have tried to make the best of their lives while simultaneously asking themselves the question: ‘How can I be a good human being?’ (Schielke 2009:165).

The books under review, recently revised doctoral dissertations, all deal with everyday expressions of pious practice. Their shared focus is the urban middle class, often seen as the driving spirit of the contemporary pious resurgence. I will begin this essay by discussing each book in turn. In the final section I return to the theme of the inward turn, and ask how the research agenda may be expanded beyond concerns typically associated with middle class affluence and concurrent lifestyles.

Submitting to God

In Submitting to God, Sylva Frisk discusses practices of moral and spiritual development among (upper) middle class Muslim women in Kuala Lumpur. Little has been written, she says, about the role of women in the Malaysian ‘Islamization’ process ‘from the perspective of women themselves’ (pp. 4-5). Frisk wants to ‘fill this gap’ by offering an ‘ethnographic account of women’s religious activities in urban Malaysia, focusing on religion as an everyday, lived practice’ (pp. 4-5). Frisk’s interlocutors followed an ‘orthodox model of Islam’, which means that they kept strictly to the basic requirements of the faith (in terms of dress, prayer, and other acts of worship). At the same time, they engaged in a creative process of cultivating self-improvement by frequenting Islamic study groups and religious gatherings. Theoretically, Frisk takes aim at the tradition of ‘Western feminist thought’, which, in her view, tends to present Muslim women’s piety either as resistance, or as passive submission to, a male-centred process of Islamization (p. 8). Frisk’s interlocutors fit neither of these categories. Most of them received only basic religious training in their youth. However, in the present stage of their lives they were actively, and voluntarily, ‘seeking to realize lives permeated by Islam in every aspect’, identifying poor knowledge of Islam as ‘the main obstacle to achieving such a life’ (p. 66).

Frisk carried out twelve months of fieldwork in 1995-1996, during which she lived in ‘one of the middle- to upper-middle class areas in Kuala Lumpur’, and where she participated in mosque activities and religious lessons (p. 20). She also moved through the city a lot, for many of the women she got to know visited religious lessons at locations other than their own neighbourhoods. As a consequence, she ‘ended up with a very dispersed network of sorts, with
women living in different areas, and with different occupations and family situations’ (p. 20). Her interlocutors, introduced early in the book as ‘ordinary Malay women’ (pp. 16-7), were clearly people of privilege, in terms of education levels, overseas experience, and language skills (Frisk conducted her research in English). Unfortunately, the book does not really offer a discussion of income levels or class background. She does state, however, that ‘all the women participating in the various study groups described in this book had performed the hajj [the holy pilgrimage to Mecca] at least once’ (p. 133), which suggests that they came from families most Malays, I presume, would classify as ‘rich’.

The book starts with an introduction, and a background chapter dealing with ethnic relations, the Islamic resurgence, state Islamization, and the effect of these processes on gender equality. It moves on to discuss four main themes: religious study; forms of daily worship; debates about ritual, cultural celebrations, and religious gatherings; and the concept of ‘becoming mukmin’ (a ‘true believer’). A central theme is the connection between the desire for religious knowledge and life stage transformations. For example, Frisk describes how the decision to wear a veil often marked the perception of a more radical ‘turning point’, not seldom triggered by a personal crisis of some sorts. Such choices were considered by her interlocutors as a conscious act to ‘create, and maintain, a relationship with God’ (p. 135). This version of the notion of ‘Islam as a way of life’, Frisk argues, differs considerably from the more ‘political’ interpretations expressed by activist reformists (often grouped together as the ‘dakwah movement’) since the 1970s (p. 135).

Another central theme is the tension between ‘scripturalist’ styles of Islam and the Malay customs and kinship structures generally referred to as adat. This is especially relevant, because adat, and its incorporation of local matrilineal traditions, is often seen as the main ‘indigenous’ ideological source of gender equality in Southeast Asian Islam. Frisk offers an interesting discussion of practical questions, for example, when her interlocutors debate the religious ‘validity’ of Malay healing practices, ritual feasts (kenduri) or prayers at the graves of the deceased (ziarah), all practices in which women traditionally play an important role. Unfortunately, this was also the part where I felt most disappointed by the book. Although Frisk gives valuable insight in the arguments and personal experiences referred to by these women, we learn little about the ways in which these debates actually played out in the lived reality of family, neighbourhood, or working space. As a result, the question of how these women actually tried to implement ‘correct’ practice in ‘every aspect’ of life remains unelaborated, with scripturalist interventions being presented as the inevitable answer to undoubtedly complex contentions and dilemmas.

Today, more and more women in Muslim Southeast Asia are able to engage in religious or theological debates on the basis of knowledge and
skills which, a century ago, were still largely the domain of men. Frisk rightly emphasizes the social esteem enjoyed by female teachers, and its positive implications for female agency and religiously grounded perceptions of gender equality. Unfortunately, this discussion is not extended to class as a possible factor in education taken generally, and access to these study group networks more specifically. In fact, class is not a theme at all, and little attention is paid to the question whether the ‘religious turn’ of these women may be connected, one way or another, to the moral side of success and mobility, or, in the words of Robert Hefner (2010:1039), to the promotion across Asia and across religions of an ‘upbeat and accommodating message on markets, consumerism, and wealth’. Still, this book should be regarded as a valuable contribution to an important field of study.

Proper Islamic consumption

In contrast, the question of class takes centre stage in Johan Fischer’s *Proper Islamic consumption*, which discusses constructions of middle class identity among Malay Muslims in Taman Tun Dr Ismail (TTDI), a relatively affluent suburb roughly fifteen kilometres from Kuala Lumpur. The location is important. A symbol of high-modern suburbia, TTDI also lies less than a stone’s throw away from Sungai Pencala, a rural Malay ‘reserve’, which, since the 1970s, has accommodated the Darul Arqam commune, a group of pious Muslims attempting to emulate the life of the Prophet Muhammad. In 1994, Darul Arqam was banned by the government for comprising a deviationist cult. Equally important is that the group pioneered what Fischer calls the ‘halal industry’, or the increasingly lucrative production and marketing of products branded as ‘permitted by Islam’. As an organized sect, Darul Arqam seems to be well beyond its prime. According to Fischer, however, Arqam members still represent a ‘unique visibility’ in TTDI residents’ everyday lives, thus inciting ponderings about what should, and what should not, be regarded as ‘proper Islamic consumption’ (pp. 1-4).

Fischer conducted fieldwork in TTDI in 2001-2002. His data consist of a survey investigating consumer behaviour among TTDI residents of different ethnicities, a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with 14 adults from 10 selected families, articles from magazines and newspapers, and participant observation. He focuses on consumption patterns in middle class Malays households, and the relation of these patterns to discursive constructions of class, ethnicity, piety, and the state.

Fischer treats consumption as a ‘particular mode of Islamic practice’, arguing that the development of a consumer culture among Malays has led to an intensifying in everyday ‘controversies over what Islam is, or ought to
be’ (pp. 8-9). He identifies two core processes. Firstly, there is the ‘nationalisation’, or ‘domestication’, of Islam, based on the officialisation by the state of ‘correct’ Islamic practices and consumption as an inextricable part of a Malay-centred project of modernisation. Secondly, he introduces the term ‘halalisation’ as the collection of acts of valorisation by Malay Muslims of commodities (such as food and dress, but also cosmetics, houses, and cars), and its use, as either halal (‘allowed’) or haram (‘forbidden’). These two processes are linked, writes Fischer, for in this valorisation process Malays have little choice but to rely on the judgment of state officials and institutions. In particular, he points at the official certification by the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (JAKIM), and its recognizable ‘halal’ logo visible in supermarkets, malls, restaurants, and cafes.

Fischer approaches the topic of consumption from multiple angles. He looks at the importance of ‘moral’ consumption for the perception of ‘middle class-ness’, practical attitudes related to shopping, eating, dressing, celebrating, entertainment and banking, and the attachment of ideas of cleanliness and purity to the styles of suburban living and aesthetics. In his analysis of these attitudes, he attaches primary importance to the role of the state, and state approved discourses of Islamic modernity. When middle class Malays shop for themselves and for their families, he argues, they also ‘shop for the state’ as they try simultaneously to be good Muslims and patriotic citizens sympathetic to the state-driven practice of framing the nation as an economic project. Halalisation, then, ‘stands out as an extremely elaborate avenue for manufacturing and sustaining modern forms of state power’ (p. 44). Particular attention is given to the connection between practices of consumption and the discursive construction of the family as a national ideal. In state ideology, discursive constructions of family life function as a counterweight against the ‘perils and moral panic’ associated with younger generations and modern city life, from incest, rape and adultery to teenagers’ loitering in malls and the influence of ‘Satanic rock bands’, thought to threaten the morality of young girls in particular (pp. 152-75).

One of the book’s main strengths is its engagement with the question of what it meant for the residents of TTDI to be ‘middle class’. Fischer’s interlocutors confidently identified themselves as Melayu Baru, or ‘New Malays’, a term rooted in controversial state programs designed to engineer a Malay bourgeoisie countering ‘Chinese’ economic dominance. Fischer is creative and convincing when he presents the halal industry as a key interface between achieving and demonstrating socio-economic status on the one hand, and ambiguous moral concerns on the other. Central in this attempt is his discussion of the perception of ‘excess’. For the middle class, he writes, shopping and consumption is about finding a moral balance. It is also a ritualized act that can be patriotic (driving economic development) and unpatri-
otic (causing excess) at the same time. Halalization causes ever more objects, products, practices and places to be valorised as either ‘wrong’ or ‘right’. At the same time, it creates doubt and ambivalence by erecting ever more contested boundaries, and corresponding questions about what can, and what cannot, be seen as ‘authentic’ or ‘pure’.

There are also less convincing elements. In particular, I found problematic Fischer’s excessive use of dramaturgical metaphors (‘performance’, ‘front region, back region’, etcetera, as modeled primarily on the work of Erving Goffman). While this idiom works well to describe practices of constructing and manipulating social status, it is much less equipped for theorizing the fundamental ambiguities involved in the construction of personal religiosities. This problem becomes evident, for example, in Fischer’s habit to (apparently randomly) alternate between ‘purist’ and ‘pragmatic’ styles as either ‘registers’ or ‘groups’. It is perfectly reasonable to distinguish between such attitudes for analytic purposes. However, treating religious styles as ‘groups’ is something very different than distinguishing between flexible ‘registers’ available to different people when they judge or plot their own behaviour or that of others in particular contexts and places. This confusion does not help to clarify a text which is already a challenging read, full of woolly prose and complexly formulated passages. These points left aside, I think the book offers an important and original study of a fascinating and intangible topic.

Women, Islam and everyday life

Nina Nurmila’s *Women, Islam and everyday life*, which focuses on Islamic debates and practices revolving around polygamy in Indonesia, is a remarkable book. On the one hand, it is a work of scholarship. On the other hand, it is a piece of engaged activism, offering a critique of mainstream Islamic thought, politics, and law, based on a rather unusual combination (in the English language literature at least) of scriptural interpretation theory and grounded fieldwork research. Describing poignant examples, Nurmila draws attention to the economic, emotional psychological, and occasionally physical violence confronting women and children in polygamous marriages. How, asks Nurmila, is it possible that polygamy proponents think this is compatible with Islamic concepts of ‘justice’ and ‘fairness’?

Growing up in a ‘devout’ Muslim family (p. 11), Nurmila received secondary and tertiary educations at mixed secular/religious institutions in Bandung, where she is currently employed as a lecturer at the State Islamic Institute. At the time of her BA training, she was a supporter of ‘Islamism’. When continuing her studies in MA and PhD degrees in Australia, she became influenced by feminist ideas that were diametrically opposed to her
previous opinions. She now refers to herself as a ‘Muslim feminist’ in the tradition of progressive female Muslim thinkers such as Amina Wadud, or the leaders of Sisters in Islam (SIS) in Malaysia.

Adopting a classification of Quranic interpretation originally proposed by Abdullah Saeed, she argues that the majority of Indonesians (whether politicians, activists, or ordinary citizens) approach the issue of polygamy from a ‘textualist’ or ‘semi-textualist’ perspective. This means that, although polygamy (or, more precisely, polygyny) is unpopular and often frowned upon, most Indonesians do regard the practice as permitted by scripture (the Quran, particularly verse 4:3, but also the Hadith), on the condition that the husband takes care of his wives and children ‘justly’ and ‘evenly’. Nurmila seeks to replace this dominant strand of thought with a ‘contextualist’ approach in the spirit of modernist reformists like Muhammad Abduh and Fazlur Rahman. Contextualists, she explains, understand Quranic references to polygamy as a historical intervention to protect widows and children by regulating pre-Islamic practices of boundless polygamy. Textualists and semi-textualists, in contrast, regard polygamy as a universal and timeless rule or value. Today, argues Nurmila, polygamy must be regarded as unnecessary, and therefore ‘prohibited’ by Islam. Indonesian Marriage Law should be ‘modified to abolish the practice of polygamy’ (p. 146).

The book starts with an outline of the topic, the author’s own position as a Muslim feminist researcher from Indonesia, and a basic overview of the literature on Javanese kinship structures, changing patterns in marriage and family relations, and feminist critique. It moves on to discuss Muslim discourses on polygamy in Indonesia. Nurmila discusses in some detail the history of the current (1974) Marriage Law, which left polygamy legal, but erected barriers for people employed in the public sector. More attention is given to the present (post-Soeharto) period and the increasing influence of ‘Islamist’ voices. In the early 2000s, a ‘pro-polygamy’ movement of some sorts emerged. Nurmila describes how, in 2003, a wealthy restaurant owner and polygamist called Puspo Wardoyo organized the ‘Polygamy Awards’ as a form of mediatised advocacy. What is particularly interesting about examples like this, is that, in the free-speech environment of democratic Indonesia, advocates of polygamy have shifted from a largely apologetic discourse to a celebration of ‘rights’, male sexual needs, and moral arguments such as ‘polygamy is better than adultery’ (p. 65).

The ethnographic part of the book is based on four months of fieldwork carried out in 2003-2004 in the Javanese urban regions of Bandung, Jakarta, Depok, and Bogor. In total, Nurmila studied 39 households. The cases discussed revolve around the experiences of ‘first wives’, but she also interviewed husbands, ‘additional wives’, and children above eleven years old. Most families were middle class in terms of education and income (despite of Nurmila’s
earlier statement that polygamy is equally practiced among lower income groups, p. 13). She presents six detailed case studies of polygamous marriages, and a more general discussion of ‘everyday’ concerns in polygamous households, such as the treatment of wives by their husband, financial arrangements, and the effects on children. Her conclusions are clear: while the attitudes and reactions of women involved in polygamous marriages are multiple, in general their experiences can be characterized as miserable, and the behaviour of husbands as plainly abusive. Often, men marry secretly. If men care to have these polygamous marriages officially registered at all, they lie, bribe, and manipulate their way through court. Nonetheless, Nurmila warns against seeing these women as passive victims. Many of them find ways to negotiate and strengthen their own position within the household, or realize a divorce. For Nurmila, the struggle for gender equality takes place in parliament and in court, but also, crucially, in the minds of individual women in polygamous marriage, who are forced to perform a moral and emotional balancing act.

The weak point of the study, in my view, is the analytic set-up. While Nurmila’s framework may be adequate with regard to her engagement in theological debate, they seem to be less useful for analysing the complexities of everyday life. The six main cases of the study are organised according to the distinction between ‘textualist’, ‘semi-contextualist’, and ‘contextualist’ approaches. This breakdown corresponds, in turn, with the level of resistance of the first wives. Thus, textualist dispositions explain why some women accept their husband’s decision, even though they feel hurt by it. Women displaying a contextualist attitude offer more resistance. It is quite plausible, of course, that women socialized in an Islamist environment are relatively susceptible to the fear of being seen as un-Islamic. At the same time, the application of a rigid typology of religious ‘preconditioning’ tends to close off the analysis from a more systematic treatment of other crucial factors, such as social environment, economic circumstances, or personal character. This is surprising, because Nurmila mentions plenty of these factors in her descriptions. Nonetheless, I believe that this book should be regarded standard reading for anyone interested in Islam, gender (in)equality, and development in a Southeast Asian context.

The inward turn

Most of the people mentioned in these studies seem to be unaffiliated with any particular religious or political current or movement. At the same time, ‘state’ and ‘public’ Islam are clearly important for the ways in which most of them formed opinions, approached dilemmas, and discarded, preserved, or changed religious practices. In Malaysia, debates about ‘correct’ Islamic practice have
been central to national politics, and the struggle for the ‘Malay vote’ between the government and the Islamist opposition party PAS. But while ponderings about the correct and incorrect, or pure and impure, have clearly seeped into the capillaries of social life, both Fischer and Frisk show that people do not primarily put these concerns in (party-)political terms. Rather than public (legal or political) domains, these three authors emphasize the family as a primary site of ritual contestation and everyday debates about what counts today as ‘properly’ Islamic, and as a critical domain of moral self-making.

In conclusion, I would like to ask some questions about the study of Islam and the conceptual limitations of the focus on the ‘urban middle class’. To a large extent, the spiritual concerns described in these books are related to the anxieties and aspirations commonly associated with the so-called Asian ‘new rich’, populating the city centres and classy suburbs of cities like Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Bangkok. Often, increasing wealth, social mobility, and urban living are thought to go hand in hand with spiritual emptiness, ‘moral panic’ or nihilism associated with anonymous apartment or condominium style living, luxury, malls, cinemas, and other forms of entertainment, and youth going astray (see, for example, Van Leeuwen 2011; Fealy 2008). These concerns are evident, for example, in Fischer’s passages about ‘excess’, Frisk’s discussion of ‘becoming mukmin’, and Nurmila description of the fear of being seen as un-Islamic.

One of the common presumptions underlying the current study of Islam in Southeast Asia is that there is a single logic underlying both the popular pious resurgence and the success of ‘purist’ discourses inciting expressions of political Islam. This ‘logic’ is, in a sense, the ordeal of the middle class. After all, the advocacy for, and development of, Islamic state institutions has been largely a matter for the more vocal echelons of Islamic middle class activism and (lower) middle class Muslim bureaucrats (see Peletz 2002; Van Bruinessen 2011). It is my contention, however, that personal piety and the development of political Islam are processes characterised by different historical trajectories, and should be analytically distinguished. This can be done if we look beyond the limitations of ‘middle class piety’, and ask instead how the ‘inward turn’ has affected ordinary Muslims across socio-economic cleavages.

When conducting fieldwork in Aceh in 2009-2010, I was struck by the persuasion among my interlocutors to see both pious expressions and the hopes and promises connected to the idea of ‘success’ as part of a single, ideally progressive, and highly personal project. The majority of my interlocutors were not particularly highly educated or affluent, and their living environments (a relatively ‘poor’ rural village and a more mixed urban kampung in Banda Aceh) had little of the social alienation associated with the ‘new’ Asian metropole. This means that the concerns of personal ethical improvement, and its connection to the more ‘worldly’ aspiration of social mobility, is not limited to an
affluent middle class. In fact, I found much familiarity in the books discussed above, such as the reflexive nature of pious practices and performances. By this I do not mean to say that class is unimportant. In fact, the factor of class may be crucial to understand how tensions between individual religiosity and ‘purist’ pressure have been experienced by Southeast Asian Muslims.

To make this more concrete, let me return to Francis Robinson’s discussion of the formation of a Muslim ‘self’. It is true that the reformist currents inspiring the ‘inward turn’ have also incited those discourses of discipline and constraint which have been adopted, in different ways, by the Islamic judiciary and religious bureaucracy in Malaysia and Indonesia (see, for example Peletz 2002; Bowen 2003; Feener 2007). It is crucial, however, to investigate both the successes and the failures of locally grounded Islamic reformism in engaging ordinary lay Muslims. A good example is the work of Kai Kresse on the Muslim community of the Kenyan Swahili coast. According to Kresse (2003), early twentieth century purist reformism in Kenya had ‘enlightening’ effects, for it provided lay Muslims with an anti-dogmatic source of self-reliance, independence, and personal responsibility. In the second half of the twentieth century, this tradition became dogmatic itself, as it relied increasingly on external influences, and became less intent on addressing the local concerns and debates that were of interest to the majority of ordinary Swahili Muslims. Purist activists, Kresse suggested, thus repudiated their own principles in a way comparable to the process in which the French Revolution ‘devoured’ its own enlightened children. While the question of what counts as ‘properly Islamic’ is, undoubtedly, more entrenched in Muslim majority Malaysia and Indonesia, there is a certain value in exploring the nature of purist reformism to become ever more ‘universal’ as a process related to, but not exactly the same as, the constitution of a Muslim ‘self’.

One implication of this is that we may want to be more careful to apply sweeping statements about the role of the state. Fischer’s approach is interesting, in the sense that it treats the state simultaneously as a source of economic opportunities, a producer of religious knowledge, and a disciplinary force. I am suspicious, however, of the centrality of state discourses in his account of everyday concerns. Even in Aceh, where the implementation of Shari’a law evidently has direct consequences for the relationship between the state and its citizens, in practice local communities and individuals are quite self-conscious and creative in negotiating or evading its measures. Again, there are limits to these comparisons: the state disciplinary apparatus is much more effective in Malaysia than it is in Indonesia. Yet this is not the same as to say that its (discursive, judicial, or physical) power is all-pervasive (Peletz 2002).

This leads to a final, more general suggestion, which is to investigate more explicitly the limits of purification discourses, disciplinary regimes, and even the legal and political spheres at large. In particular, I think we should deal
with the Muslim ‘subject’ not only in terms of increased piety, success, social mobility, transformation, and ‘progress’, but also in terms of its emotional drawbacks, including its false promises, senses of failure and stagnation, and concomitant feelings of stress and disillusion resulting from shared moral and economic aspirations. In other words, we should look not only beyond the middle class, but also beyond ‘Islam’ as the single most important repertoire of ordinary Muslims’ ethical lives (Schielke 2010). Finally, I believe that expressions of piety and purism can be understood only by taking seriously the ‘inward turn’ as a dimension of both historical and ethnographic inquiry.

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