
In performances, improvisation often enhances the quality. Audiences indeed rate them according to the improvisational skills of the actors. Coining the terms ‘religious improvisation’ and ‘improvisational Islam’, Nur Amali Ibrahim contends that improvisation also happens in the field of religion, including in Islam. It refers to ‘acting, performing, or making something spontaneously using whatever resources that are available, often as a response to a situation that is rapidly changing’ (p. 7). He argues that such religious improvisation, in the sense of ‘unconventional forms of religious practices’ or religious innovations, is not only done by liberal believers, as is commonly assumed, but also by ‘rigid’, conservative ones.

Ibrahim began his eighteen-month ethnographic research in Jakarta in 2008 among two student organizations: the Campus Proselytization Association (Lembaga Dakwah Kampus; LDK) of the University of Indonesia, which is a nation-wide intra-university Muslim student organization preoccupied with the proselytization of students, and Formaci (Forum Mahasiswa Ciputat), an extra-university reading group comprised of secular Muslim students at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, informally affiliated to the Muslim Student Association (HMI). The author studies how Islam is understood, interpreted, and practiced in their everyday lives by activists from these two organizations, focusing on the three key interlocutors: Hassan, representing the Islamists, and Nuriyah and Rizal, representing liberal Muslims.

Ibrahim uses an ‘everyday religion’ approach to analyze these phenomena. Rather than focusing exclusively on Islamism—as has been done by Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirshkind (2006)—Ibrahim also deals with liberal Muslims. Among both groups, practices of religious improvisation have arguably been made possible amid the processes of secular democratization emerging after the collapse of the totalitarian Suharto regime (Chapter 2). Two key instances of Islamist practices considered to be religious improvisation are presented in Chapter 3: stepping on broken glass to develop religious fervor and using accounting notebooks to monitor how often people pray, fast, and read the Qur’an. Surprisingly, the former was inspired by the American self-help guru Tony Robbins and the latter by Western business practices. As such, these practices challenge the common perception of Islamists as rigid, conservative, and especially anti-Western.
Liberal Muslim youths affiliated with Formaci, discussed in Chapter 4, show that one’s religious background, including having studied in a madrasah and/or Islamic university, does not always correspond with orthodox and pious religiosity. Instead, the group is described studying Western thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Lock, Hegel, Marx, and Derrida, along with Western social theories. Ibrahim call this ‘playing with scripture’. Playing, rather than learning or studying, reflects the improvisational nature of their engagement with the Qur’an and Prophetic traditions. They use Western social sciences to critically interpret and reinterpret—or even question—certain verses or concepts of the Qur’an. Nevertheless, Ibrahim recognizes that this comes with limitations; however liberal an argument may be, it must be grounded in Islamic scriptures to persuade other Muslims (pp. 120–24).

In Chapter 5, Ibrahim connects religious improvisation to political attempts to present Indonesia as a moderate Muslim nation, different from Muslim nations in the Middle East that are portrayed as despotic and chaotic. The government and general public present liberal Muslims as ‘good’ and Islamists as ‘bad’ Muslims. The book’s epilogue, finally, highlight its contributions to studying improvisational Islam, while also pointing out that Western portrayals of Indonesia as a moderate Muslim nation or ‘a nation where Islam and secular liberalism can successfully commingle’ are intimately connected to Western interests and part of the culture-wars discourse (p. 152).

Ibrahim foregrounds “novel and unexpected ways of being Muslim where religious dispositions are achieved through techniques that have little or no precedent in classical Islamic texts or concepts” (p. 6). These practices are considered new, unexpected, and unprecedented because they are not in accordance with religious authority. Ibrahim’s claims to novelty are justified in the context of the everyday. In the context of historical studies of the Islamic civilization, however, the phenomena one could regard as “religious improvisation” have been studied—albeit using a different terminology—by Thomas Bauer (2011) and Shahab Ahmed (2016), whose works are missing in this book.

Thomas Bauer argues that pre-modern Islamic civilization exhibited a high ‘tolerance for ambiguity’ in its dogmatic or ethical definitions and in the art of trying to reconcile conflicting opinions. He holds that colonization and modernization of Muslim lands resulted in the refashioning of Islam as an alternative to Western ideologies. As a consequence, modern Islamists have adopted Western ways of approaching Islamic dogmas, ethics, and traditions. They adopted a form of positivism which denies contradictions and ambiguity. It would seem that Ibrahim’s findings contradict Bauer’s. The aforementioned adoption of Western techniques, utilized to achieve religious piety, may reflect a type of religious improvisation, but one should keep in mind that they are years...
used to enforce positivist religious understandings and piety. Islamists do not improvise in the reinterpretation of the Islamic scripture and doctrines, as progressive and liberal Muslims do.

Shahab Ahmed argues that in conceptualizing Islam one must not only engage with *prescriptive* authority, but also, more importantly, with *explorative* authority; ‘setting out into the unknown, the uncertain, the unexperienced, the unsettled, the new’ (2016:282). He explains how and why Muslims through history have embraced not only prescriptivism, but also values of aestheticization, exploration, ambiguity, ambivalence, contradiction, paradox, and relativism, as well as such practices as music, figural art, and even wine-drinking as Islamic. In other words, Muslims have improvised throughout history.

Aside from the underutilized opportunity to engage with these scholars, one misses the observation that religious improvisation is closely related to the discursive traditions of *bidʿah* (religious innovation) and *ijtihād* (independent religious reasoning). Islamists usually consider *bidʿah* as forbidden, referring to the Prophetic saying that ‘all religious innovations are misguided (*dalālah*); and all the misguided will lead to the Hell’. Meanwhile, *ijtihād* is exercised in matters or situations not found explicitly in the Qur’an and Prophetic traditions. A proper discussion about these two discursive traditions would have led to a better understanding of the novel and unexpected ways and techniques of being Muslim the book seeks to uncover. The book does not discuss why Islamist interlocutors deal only with techniques to strengthen their Islamic disposition and piety, but not to reinterpret Islam. Likewise unexplained are the reasons why liberal Muslim interlocutors borrow Western concepts and methodologies to interpret Islam, yet do not draw from Western techniques to strengthen their religious disposition or piety. It would seem that using Western techniques to strengthen religiosity, rather than interpret Islamic scripture, is widely accepted because doing so is considered acceptable *ijtihād* rather than forbidden *bidʿah*. The student activists the book focuses on are not the first in Indonesia to employ this type of improvisation. The businessman-cum-preacher Toto Tasmara pioneered in adopting Western business techniques to nurture religious piety, followed in this pursuit by Muslim televangelist Abdullah Gymnastiar (better known as A’a Gym). Tasmara promoted ‘Spiritual Centered Leadership’, ‘Muslim work ethos’, and ‘Transcendental Intelligence’, while Gymnastiar championed ‘Heart Management’. Both scholars thus skillfully adopt and adapt a selection of Western concepts and practices to develop Muslim religious piety (Hoesterey 2015).

Despite these shortcomings, Ibrahim’s book is important for at least four reasons. First, amid the trend of studying Islamism in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, in which Islamism tends to be perceived as mostly
rigid and anti-Western, Ibrahim’s study shows that Islamism is not singular and that certain Islamist groups are in one way or another inspired by the West, not unlike liberal Muslims. Second, Ibrahim shifts the focus to the youth by pointing out that young Muslims are the key agents of religious improvisation (p. 17). Third, unlike Bauer's focus on the “culture of ambiguity” and Ahmed’s focus on “explorative authority” and “explorative reasoning” in the context of longue durée Islamic history, Ibrahim adds to the broader literature an ethnographically-informed study of religious improvisation among Muslim youths, both Islamist and liberal, as performed during everyday life in Jakarta.

Last but not least, Ibrahim has contributed to a new field of inquiry: religious improvisation through everyday approaches to Islam. ‘Improvisational Islam’ is an important analytical concept to explain a variety of religious practices among Muslims in their everyday lives. These do not necessarily align with religious authority, yet are claimed by their practitioners as religiously justified. Future studies on improvisational Islam might move beyond this book’s focus on moderate Islamists and liberal Muslims and foreground traditionalist Muslims, radical Islamists, and Jihadists. It would also be interesting to study mediated and online modes of religious improvisation.

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References