KENNETH M. GEORGE

PICTURING ISLAM

ART AND ETHICS IN A MUSLIM LIFEWORLD

WILEY-BLACKWELL

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For Pirous and Erna

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Paintings must be like miracles.

Mark Rothko

PREFACE

Picturing Islam is an ethnographic portrait of a postcolonial Muslim artist, Indonesian painter Abdul Djalil Pirous. My goal is to sketch a story of self-fashioning in the contemporary cauldron of politics, art, and religion. At root, this is a story about making art and a lifeworld "Islamic" as a way of coming to terms with political, cultural, and historical circumstances. It considers very generally, then, a question of enduring interest to anthropologists and others in the humanities and social sciences – the question of subjectivity, our experience of acting and being acted upon in our relations with others as we are caught up in the sway of powerful social and ideological forces. As Judith Butler (2005), Michel Foucault (1997, 2005), Paul Ricoeur (1992), and others have shown so persuasively, questions of subjectivity are also questions of ethics. We commonly look to art and religion for special insights into the ethics and aesthetics of self-fashioning, despite all our trouble in defining art and religion, or the risks we may take in giving them privileged attention. My long collaboration with Pirous has given me a chance to reflect on the hopes and perils of self-fashioning in a Muslim lifeworld. How Pirous has pictured Islam is not just about his relationship to God, but also about his artistic and ethical being and location in this world.

My aim here, then, has been to write an accessible ethnographic account that will find use in a broad range of classroom discussions in anthropology, religious studies, Asian studies, and art history. *Picturing Islam* is not a primer on that religion, or on the Qur'an, but a portrait of how Islamic ideas and dispositions might settle into the experiential and expressive lifeworld of a believer, or make their way into art. It is a study of lived religion. At the same time, I have tried to show in this book how ethnography might be used to "confront art history with the present

tense” (Belting 2003: 192). In that spirit, this book is a modest contribution to a global art history that includes Southeast Asian art and Islamic art as part of its theoretical, historical, and critical venture.

Framing the book as I did around an empirical look at art and ethics in the work of a Muslim painter, and wanting to keep it to a manageable length, I left many theoretical and comparative questions unaddressed. Colleagues interested in subjectivity, the anthropology of art, or art history and visual culture may want to glance at the Afterword.

I will be especially glad if Muslim readers find this book useful or pleasurable. If they find errors of understanding in this book, the errors are mine, despite Pirous’s generous and unflagging effort to help me see clearly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Picturing Islam would not have come together as it did without the intellectual push from four colleagues: Charles Hallisey, who drew me into conversations about ethics and lived religion; James Siegel, whose work and conversations about subjectivity, language, cameras, and the political unconscious in Aceh and Indonesia suggested ways I might dwell with materials; Nora Taylor, who reassured me that an ethnography of a single artist might actually be a very welcome intervention in art history; and Kirin Narayan, who knows better than most the joys, risks, and power of bringing friends and family into ethnographic writing. Charlie, Jim, Nora, and Kirin bear no responsibility for this book's shortcomings, many of which stem from my not always following their example or advice. I thank them for their inspiring support.

Conversations with other colleagues and friends have enriched this book in countless ways too. I am especially grateful for helpful insights and suggestions from Abdul Hadi W. M., Warwick Anderson, Lorraine Aragon, Iftikhar Dadi, Veena Das, Kevin Dwyer, Susan Friedman, Anna Gade, Hildred Geertz, Byron Good and Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Ramachandra Guha, Michael Herzfeld, Charles Hirschkind, James B. Hoesterey, Pradeep Jeganathan, Carla Jones, Webb Keane, Arthur Kleinman, B. Venkat Mani, Vida Mazulis, Birgit Meyer, Sarah Murray, Fred Myers, Paul Nadasdy, Hamid Naficy, Ashis Nandy, Sally Ness, Terry O'Nell, Kevin "Will" Owen, Christopher Pinney, Allen and Mary "Polly" Roberts, Kathryn Robinson, Setiawan Sabana, T. K. Sabapathy, Patricia Spyer, Mary Steedly, Sunaryo, Stanley J. Tambiah, Julia Thomas, Fadjar Thufail, Aarthe Vaddi, James and Rubie Watson, Andrew Willford, Jessica Winegar, Aram Yengoyan, Yustiono, and Merwan Yusuf. I am indebted, as well, to

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Closer to home, I thank Didi Contractor, Maya Narayan, and Devendra Contractor for their unflagging interest and support. Cheers from my brothers Phil and Andy, my sister Lois, and their families have meant much to me too.

Which leaves Kirin, my wife, companion, and mutual muse. Kirin appears rather late in this book, but has been a miracle of goodness and inspiration since page one. I once knew writing as a desperately lonely burden. Kirin has helped me see writing otherwise, as a way to care for myself and for us both. For that and for all the light she continues to throw into my world she has my unending affection.

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"Ethical Pleasure, Visual Dzikir, and Artistic Subjectivity in Contemporary Indonesia." *Material Religion* 4(2): 172–93 (2008). Berg Publishers, an imprint of A&C Black Publishers Ltd.

"Art and Identity Politics: Nation, Religion, Ethnicity, Elsewhere." In *Asian and Pacific Cosmopolitans: Self and Subject in Motion*, edited by Kathryn Robinson, pp. 37–59. New York: Palgrave (2007). Palgrave Macmillan Publishers.

"Picturing Aceh: Violence, Religion, and a Painter's Tale." In *Spirited Politics: Religion and Public Life in Contemporary Southeast Asia*, edited by Andrew C. Willford and Kenneth M. George, pp. 185–208. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asian

Publications Series, Cornell University (2005). Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University.

“Violence, Culture, & the Indonesian Public Sphere: Reworking the Geertzian Legacy.” In *Violence: Culture, Performance and Expression*, edited by Neil L. Whitehead, pp. 25–54. Santa Fe: SAR Press (2004). School for Advanced Research. “Conversations with Pirous.” In *A. D. Pirous: Vision, Faith, and a Journey in Indonesian Art, 1955–2002*. Bandung: Yayasan Serambi Pirous (2002). Yayasan Serambi Pirous.

Signature Work: Bandung, 1994. *Ethnos* 64(2): 212–31 (1999). Taylor & Francis Group.

Designs on Indonesia’s Muslim Communities. *Journal of Asian Studies* 57(3): 693–713 (1998). Cambridge University Press and the Association for Asian Studies.

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I am so very lucky to have had the professional assistance of the Pirous family “Dream Team.” The digital reproductions of Pirous’s paintings and family photos were prepared with the superb care of Rihan Meurila Pirous, Eka Sofyan Rizal, and their colleagues at dialogue+design and at paprieka. Mida Meutia Pirous and Dudy Wiyancoko kept me supplied with archival data from Yayasan Serambi Pirous. Dudy and Iwan Meulia Pirous also reviewed this manuscript and offered helpful tips and insights.

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In memory

Since late 2002, I have lost six colleagues and friends whose personal and intellectual company helped guide me as I moved forward with this project. I want to remember them here: anthropologists Begoña Aretxaga, Daphne Berdahl, and Clifford Geertz; painter Umi Dachlan; art writer Mamannoor; and the always kind Masjoeti Daeng Soetigna.

NOTE ON QUR'ANIC VERSE

Ilham Khoiri and A. D. Pirous identified the Qur'anic passages that appear in the paintings discussed in this book. I have rendered these Qur'anic passages in English, adapting and mixing translations prepared by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (2005), Ahmed Ali (1994), M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (2004), and Michael Sells (1999). I use the abbreviation QS followed by a number when identifying a Qur'anic sura, or chapter (e.g., QS 112 is Qur'anic Sura 112, *Al-Ikhlas*). Sura names and their translations are taken from Ali or Sells.

Khoiri and Pirous also transliterated the Jawi in these Qur'anic paintings into Romanized Indonesian-Malay.

GUIDE TO INDONESIAN SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION

I use conventional Indonesian spellings for Indonesian, Arabic (without diacritics), and Acehnese terms. Some personal names reflect an idiosyncratic mixing of modern and colonial-era spellings. Here are the rough approximations for pronouncing consonants and vowels.

Consonants: as in English with the following differences:

< ‘ > is a glottal stop, as in “Uh’ oh!”

< c > like the first “ch” in “*ch*urch”

< kh > as in the German “Ach!”

< sy > as in “Syah” or “Shah.” Also written < sh >

< dz > like < z >, but with the tongue on the alveolar ridge above the teeth

Vowels:

< i > as the vowel in “f*ee*d”

< a > as the vowel in “p*o*t”

< o > as the vowel in “b*oa*t”

< u > as the vowel in “b*oo*t”

< oe > = < u > (colonial era spelling, usually in names)

< oo > = < u > (in personal names)

< ou > = < u > (as used by Pirous)

< ö > = < o > (approximate)

< e > as in the first vowel in “*a*bout”

< é > as the vowel in “m*ai*d”

< eu > as the vowel in “h*e*r” but with rounded lips

INTRODUCTION: PICTURING ISLAM

“This isn’t *dawah*. I’m not campaigning for religion. I am making art. What you see here, all these paintings, these are my spiritual notes.” My friend Pirous grew animated, eager to refute the complaints of the clerics and critics who had questioned his motives in making “Islamic art.” It was early March 1994, and we had spent much of the afternoon at his private hillside gallery, Serambi Pirous, sorting through paintings for the gallery’s long-planned opening, timed to coincide later in the week with the artist’s birthday, but designed too as a special Ramadhan gathering of family, friends, and colleagues. With sunset and the muezzin’s call to *maghrib* prayers echoing from mosques and radios, we put aside some paintings that still needed hanging, broke the daylong fast with sweets made from palm sugar and coconut milk, and headed back to his nearby home. Our car crept through narrow, crowded lanes of motorbikes and mosque-bound pedestrians. A bend in the road gave me a panoramic glimpse of Bandung’s sprawling neighborhoods and urban ridgetops, all aswarm with the lamps and headlights of the city’s two and half million inhabitants. We pulled into Pirous’s driveway. Pirous climbed

upstairs to the rear of the house to pray, while I lingered in the entryway, as I sometimes did, to study one of his signature Qur'anic paintings.

Pirous and his wife Erna had designed and built this house in the early 1980s. Featured in several of the popular architecture and design magazines that cater to Indonesia's urban elite, the house served as their home and studio, as well as a showcase for some of Pirous and Erna's best paintings. The main doorway had brought me – like all their guests – squarely before the ochre-and sienna-colored expanse of *At the Beginning, the Voice said "Recite" (Sebermula Suara Itu, "Iqra")*,

Figure 0.1 A. D. Pirous, 2001. Photograph courtesy of Yayasan Serambi Pirous.

a “calligraphic painting” that features the first five verses of Qur’anic Sura 96, *Al-‘Alaq* (“The Embryo”). Take a look at Plate 1. Many Indonesian Muslims place decorative plaques featuring short and familiar Qur’anic inscriptions near the main threshold of their homes – the *Basmallah* (“In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring”) and the

“Verse of the Throne” (QS 2: 255) are favorites. Pirous’s painting is a grand and arresting variation on this customary use of calligraphic art. Pirous once told me that he kept this painting for himself, and placed it at the doorway, “because it builds the spirit of the house.” It renders in unblemished Qur’anic (or Classical) Arabic one of the first revelations given to the Prophet Muhammad. Opening with the *Basmallah*, the passage reads, from right to left:

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

Recite in the name of your Lord who created

Humankind from an embryo

Recite, for your Lord is all-giving

Who taught by means of the pen

Taught man what he did not know before

This Qur’anic passage reminds the faithful of their capacity for language, thought, and learning – the gift of knowledge and reason from the pen of God. The passage appears written in raised letters on an immense slab, a visual allusion, perhaps, to what Islamic traditions describe as a concealed primordial tablet, the eternal, already-inscribed, “uncreated” Qur’an. Yet the tablet looks broken or divided at the painting’s midsection, a “break” that visually marks a shift in language. The Qur’anic passage is repeated on the lower panel, but translated and inscribed in Jawi – Indonesian-Malay written in Arabic script. Two languages, one “message.” Five gold-lipped holes – are they punctures? leaks? – pockmark a fragmented plate near the top of the painting. Are they a painterly reference to the “five pillars” of Islam? To the five hours reserved for daily prayer and witness to God?

After a few minutes of reflection, I pulled myself away from the painting, slipped off my shoes, and wandered upstairs to the living room. Not long after, Pirous came down. Freshened by prayer and evening bath, Pirous settled into a

chair and earnestly resumed our conversation about the mingling of religion and art and the dilemmas one has to face in making “Islamic art” in Indonesia. A massive painting loomed high on the wall behind us as we talked: *For the Sparkling Morning Light* (*Demi Cahaya Pagi yang Cemerlangi* Plate 2). The cracked, magenta tablet in the center of the painting displays all of QS 93 *Ad-Duha* (“The Early Hours of Morning”) in Qur’anic Arabic and turquoise. The first few verses reassure the faithful in the face of adversity:

> In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring
>
> By the morning’s bright light
>
> By the night when it is still
>
> Your Lord has not abandoned you and does not hate you
>
> What comes after will be better for you than what came before

Pirous went on to tell me about some of those who harbored suspicions about his calligraphic paintings and who had scolded him for using art for *da’wah*, proselytizing or spreading the faith. Like all our conversations, this one was a playground of languages. Pirous darted back and forth between Indonesian and English. His hands joined the conversation too, his fingers and palms speaking animatedly about his exasperation.

> The religious leaders and *ulama* (Islamic scholars) here never talk about art and culture. They are blind to art. They don’t know what is meant by modern art. And they don’t recognize it as a form of knowledge or its relationship to Islam. They don’t know anything about that.

A smile broke out behind his mustache and goatee, and his eyes brightened with earnest conviction.

> Whatever I say in my art expresses my belief, and my faith in values for this life, because for me, religion has

two faces: There is a face in the form of religious teaching. But there is also a face that is in the form of art, the face of culture, where my life is at peace, and where I can learn more about Islam. Like I say, I am an ordinary Muslim. I just want to be a good Muslim.

Lifeworlds

Picturing Islam is about Indonesian artist Abdul Djalil Pirous and the many years he has spent making "Islamic art." It tells a story about an artist with an anthropological and art historical twist. Pirous has long been celebrated as a pioneer of contemporary Indonesian Islamic art, and there is no shortage of newspaper articles, reviews, exhibition catalogues, and book chapters about him, read mostly in Indonesia, but found in Europe, the United States, Australia, and other places in Asia too. As for me, I see in his art a vast canvas of global social and cultural forces. These forces result in the mingling of religion, art, nationality, and selfhood, sometimes with great promise and potential, other times with considerable panic and peril. The story is not Pirous's alone, but could be told by (or about) many post-colonial artists throughout the Muslim world. The details might be different, but the dilemmas would be similar. At root, it is a story about making art and a lifeworld "Islamic."

The term "lifeworld" belongs to a long tradition of phenomenological philosophy and sociology. I use it in this book as shorthand for the ongoing circumstances in which we find ourselves, culturally, politically, historically, and experientially. Each of us is thrown, with others, into a lifeworld through which we must find our way, refashioning its horizons as imaginatively and as pragmatically as we can. What I find so useful about the term is that it helps us avoid portraying people in the confines of an all-encompassing language or culture. Today's lifeworlds are