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Interview with Kenneth George about "Ethics, Iconoclasm, and Qur'anic Art in Indonesia"

"[Ethics, Iconoclasm, and Qur'anic Art in Indonesia \(http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2009.01041.x\)](http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2009.01041.x)." *Cultural Anthropology* 24, no. 4 (2009): 589–621. [Supplemental material \(.pdf\) \(http://www.culanth.org/articles/48-ethics-iconoclasm-and-qur-anic-art-in-indonesia\)](#).

Kathryn Zyskowski: How does a focus on current styles in art illuminate an understanding of both local and global iterations of Islam?

Kenneth George: I don't focus on "styles in art" in my essay, but grapple instead with some of the discursive currents and crafted objects that are part of the traffic in our contemporary art worlds. So let me rephrase the question: *When* do contemporary art worlds throw light on local and global iterations of Islam? In posing the question this way, I'm taking a cue from the late art historian, Michael Baxandall (1985, 1), who argued that "we do not explain pictures; we explain remarks about pictures." As I see it, the task Baxandall gives us is to examine what remarks about images and objects *do*, to understand their aims and purposes, as well as their planned and unforeseen effects. The moments of iconoclastic panic, outrage, and censorship that I explore in my essay are moments that are rich in remarks, in ethicopolitical claims about what objects, images, materials, and practices are Islamically significant in the field of visual culture. I hope I succeeded in shedding some light on the when and how of rivalries between Muslim clerics and Muslim artists in speaking for the interests, aspirations, and ethical imperatives of the local, national, and transnational *ummah*. These rivalries plausibly may point to the fragmentation of religious authority in Muslim communities and networks, but I suspect we may be witnessing the proliferation and pluralization of religious authority across the *ummah*.

KZ: Methodologically, can you elaborate on how a focus on moments of panic may help us understand broader ethicopolitical debates?

KG: Panic. Upset. Outrage. Alarm. All suggest a visceral, emotional, potentially contagious, and oftentimes iconoclastic response to images and objects, and to the discourses that surround them. W. J. T. Mitchell (2005, 128), whom I cite in the essay, observes that images that offend and alarm typically "take residence on the frontlines of [broader] political and social conflicts . . . as combatants, victims, and provocateurs." They are tinder for the fires of political and cultural struggle. My discussion of the Lagerfeld-Chanel incident touches on the way Lagerfeld's "offending designs" were seen by some clerics as part of the West's effort to humiliate and provoke Muslims around the globe. (In this instance, we can see how print and visual media contributed to the globalization of Muslim alarm.)

Let me stress, in the meantime, that it is ethnographically and analytically worthwhile to also plumb the anxieties and ethical sensibilities of individual artists in their everyday lifeworlds. An understanding of "broader ethicopolitical debates" doesn't exhaust what we can or ought to learn from our study of contemporary art worlds or from the study of Islam. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, for example, considered the study of lifeworlds as crucial to our grasp of religion. More recently, Veena Das has called our attention to everyday life as a site of ethical striving and "coming into being." Looking at moments of panic may tell us much about the improvisations of "becoming Muslim." I touch on that as well in my essay when I discuss the way painter A. D. Pirous has made and displayed his calligraphic paintings featuring Qur'anic Arabic.

KZ: In this article, you aim to bridge the anthropology of Islam and anthropology of art. What do you hope will gain more salience in the upcoming years for the broader anthropology of Islam?

KG: Let me preface my answer by saying that the "anthropology of Islam" has never been a field in which I have felt especially or confidently expert. Working in Indonesia on art and the politics of culture has led me to spend time listening to and talking with Muslims. Because of those conversations, I have come to think of "Islamic life" as a pragmatic ethical and spiritual improvisation that informs Muslim lifeworlds, something that I explored more fully in *Picturing Islam* (2010).

Among recent works of interest to me, there are: Naveeda Khan's *Muslim Becoming* (2012), which offers a bold, brilliant study about religious aspiration and the state in Pakistan; Ronit Ricci's prize-winning, *Islam Translated* (2011), which is a marvelous study of Muslim literary networks across the Indian Ocean; and Amira Mittermaier's *Dreams that Matter* (2010), a splendid ethnography of dreams and the imagination in Muslim lifeworlds in Egypt. These three works are very, very welcome agenda-setting studies for the anthropology of Islam.

Interest in Muslim visual culture is already well-established among anthropologists, and tilts largely to the study of media rather than to the study of static forms (e.g., painting or photography). I think work on media in Muslim communities and networks will endure for some time as a key topic in the anthropology of Islam.

KZ: How does an investigation of local iterations of religion help us to understand the form or meaning of a global religion?

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KZ: What direction do you see anthropology of Islam moving towards, and what analytic tools do you think may be useful for this shift?

KG: I don't have a sure sense of its directions. I would welcome increasing comparative study. Ronit Ricci's stellar work in *Islam Translated* shows how important multilingual studies can be to an understanding of the global life of Islam. Her command of Arabic, Malay-Indonesian, Tamil, and Javanese allows her great insight into the Arabic cosmopolis and the literary networks that stretch across the Indian Ocean.

KZ: What direction is your own research moving towards?

KG: I am at work on a project called "Companionable Objects, Companionable Conscience," which explores how ethics are entangled in material culture. I have a forthcoming essay on ethical pleasure and visual ethics in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*.

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