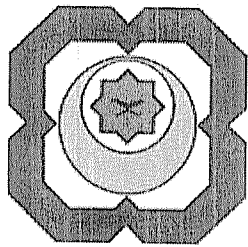

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Islam From Within: A Preliminary Evaluation of Malaysian Scholars Contributions to Scholarly Writings on Islamic Reform in Malaya

HAFIZ ZAKARIYA

 THE development of Islam in Malaysia and Southeast Asia in general regrettably occupies a marginal place within the field of Middle Eastern/Islamic studies. As such there is a relative dearth of literature on Islam in Southeast Asia, and Muslim experiences in the region have not been widely and firmly included in the field of Islamic studies. This phenomenon possibly exists due to several reasons. As Reid (1993:5) has noted, the primary reason for Southeast Asian Muslims' marginal place within Islamic studies is due to the fact that they "entered the Islamic world too late to play a part in the shaping of either its doctrines or its civilization." Although prominent Malay writers in various parts of the archipelago have produced numerous works on Islam, mostly in Malay — the lingua franca of the region — for the most part these works were derivative scholarship, modeled on works produced by prominent Muslim scholars in the Middle East.

Marginality of Islam in Southeast Asia

On the part of the Islamicists, most of whom are primarily trained in Arab-centered Islamic experiences, the exclusion of Southeast Asian Islam in their works is probably not due to their assumption that Islam in the areas outside the Middle East and North Africa is insignificant. It is rather probable that this negligence is primarily due to the enormous difficulty of such a task. After all, the Muslim world covers a broad spectrum of disparate historical experiences and each particular Muslim society has its own peculiar historical experience. Even a narrower field like Middle Eastern studies is actually a vast field in its own right. Thus, understandably the task of firmly placing the experiences of Southeast Asian

Muslims within the field of Islamic studies is a tall order indeed, for it requires scholars not only to master Islam and its various related disciplines, but also to have an adequate understanding of Southeast Asian Muslim society and its peculiar socio-historical experiences.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Southeast Asian Islam as "peripheral Islam" by some Southeast Asian specialists certainly does not help in making a case for the significance of incorporating Islam in Southeast Asia in the plane of Islamic studies. The basic argument of this "peripheral Islam" thesis is that Islam in the Malay world is actually "syncretic Islam"— influenced by local custom and pre-Islamic beliefs and practices, which differ from the "pristine" Islam as emerged and developed in the "heartlands" of Islam. This argument was put forth by Landon (1949:164), who contends "Islam is but a thin veneer over indigenous Indonesia civilization." J.C. van Luer (1955:169) echoes Landon's view when he says that Islam is only "a thin, easily flaking glaze on the massive body of indigenous civilization." In the case of British Malaya, R. O. Winsted (1951:71-73), a prominent British administrator-scholar of Malay language and history, argued that whatever influence Islam had on Malay society was very limited, and even that was strongly mixed with Hindu and Buddhist beliefs and practices. If these scholars' arguments are to be believed, it is probably appropriate that Islam in Southeast Asia should not be taken seriously, and thus should not be included in the Islamic studies.

Such a line of thought has been refuted by a number of comparatively recent works on Islam in Southeast Asia. William Roff (1985:7) in his critique of selected studies of Islam in Southeast Asia deplores "the extraordinary desire on the part of western social science observers to diminish, conceptually, the place and role of the religion and culture of Islam, now, and in the past, in Southeast Asian societies." Nikki Keddie (1987:3), in perhaps her least known article, "Islam and Society in Minangkabau and in the Middle East: Comparative Reflections" echoes the same sentiment. Keddie points out that there is a tendency to exaggerate that Muslims in the Middle East are the good and normative Muslims while those "inhabitants of more recently converted areas are 'bad', 'syncretic' or 'nominal' Muslims, whose Islam is sometimes called a veneer over their pre-Islamic beliefs and practices." (1987:4)

Apart from the difficulty that the Islamicists face in comprehending Islam in Southeast Asia, specialists on Southeast Asian studies also confront a problem of a similar nature. Although most experts on Southeast Asian studies have a respectable knowledge of Islam, they are not originally trained in Islamic studies. Many of them made concerted efforts to learn Arabic and Islam; however, they have not received rigorous training in Islam as most Islamicists have had. Thus Southeast Asian specialists are not really in a better position than the Islamicists to fulfill the ambitious task of firmly incorporating Islam in Southeast Asia in the field of Islamic studies. As Reid has noted, among the western experts on Southeast Asia, A.H. Johns and Peter Riddell are the only scholars who could claim to have deep knowledge of Arabic and Islamic-related subjects.¹