

Abstract

This paper explores some of parameters of the commitment on the part of many Muslims to the cause of religious reform – a project that includes, but is by no means restricted to the attempt to exercise greater control over female sexuality – in the discourse of socially and geographically mobile Muslim entrepreneurs in Malay(si)a. It is argued that it is possible to see in the historical development of such reformist zeal the emergence of modern ascetic sensibility and, moreover, that it shares such a sensibility with a much broader range of modern/universalizing ideologies and practices. Particularly important for my argument are the parallels between religious reform and modern cosmopolitan narratives as that term has been understood in both the western philosophical tradition, and in the writings of more recent cultural theorists on cultural hybridity, multiculturalism and border crossings. I will suggest that seeing such projects for what they actually aspire to, seeing them in other words as asceticising projects that seek to purge the world of particularistic beliefs and practices, allows us better to understand and assess them.

Biographical Sketch

Joel S. Kahn holds a Chair in the Sociology & Anthropology Program at La Trobe University, having previously taught at University College London, Monash University and the University of Sussex. In 2004 he was a Visiting Professor at the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore. He has been carrying out research in and on Indonesia and Malaysia for more than 30 years, and has published articles and monographs on a range of topics including social and anthropological theory; economic anthropology; the formation of new middle classes; and culture, globalization, and identity. His most recent book, to be published by Singapore University Press, is titled: *Other Malays: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism and Modernity in Peninsular Southeast Asia*.