

EUROSEAS 2017 Panel Proposal

Title:

“What Is Islam?”: Reflections on the Late Shahab Ahmed’s Challenge to Islamic Studies for Scholars of Southeast Asia

Conveners:

Ismail Alatas (New York University), Daniel Andrew Birchok (University of Michigan-Flint)

Description of Panel:

In his posthumously published *What is Islam?* (2016), Shahab Ahmed calls for a reinvention of interdisciplinary Islamic studies through a critical tour-de-force of over a century of scholarly approaches to Islam and Islamic societies. He argues that the field has generally tended to overemphasize prescriptive and monovalent models of Islam, and challenges scholars to more rigorously theorize the ways in which Islam is coherent because of, and not despite, its ambiguity, polyvalence, and relativism. His own attempt to illustrate these points rests upon his account of a “Balkans-to-Bengal complex,” the transregional culture that he argues was Islam’s dominant form from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Through this work, he develops an analytic vocabulary that aims to account for Islam’s productive contradictions.

Ahmed’s provocation has sparked discussion and debate among both scholarly and lay audiences; however, those with an interest in Southeast Asian Islam have not yet taken up Ahmed’s work with much intensity. This panel is meant to seed a conversation. Each of its participants will take up one or more of Ahmed’s key concepts, and use them to think through the possibilities and limitations of Ahmed’s arguments for analyzing specific historical and ethnographic materials. In doing so, the panel will consider broad questions about the significance of Ahmed’s argument for Southeast Asia. Are the features described by Ahmed helpful beyond the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex,” or are they limited to the times and places central in Ahmed’s account? How might Ahmed help us to rethink new orthodoxies regarding the trajectory of Islamic politics and practice in the Malay world, or the place of Southeast Asia in the broader Islamic world? What difficulties might one encounter in attempting to translate Ahmed’s work into the context of Islam in our geographic region of interest?

Presenters:

- 1) Ismail Alatas (New York University): “Wali Salik, Wali Jadab: Prescriptive and Explorative Religious authorities among traditionalist Muslims of contemporary Java”
- 2) Daniel Andrew Birchok (University of Michigan-Flint): “‘Young People are Seeking Their Fortune’: Islamic Life Courses, Sufi Ethics, and the Possibilities of an Explorative *Adab* in Rural Aceh”
- 3) Mulaika Hijjas (School of Oriental and African Studies): Title TBD
- 4) Iza Hussin (University of Cambridge): Title TBD

Discussant: R. Michael Feener (University of Oxford)