When Laws Are Not Enough: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Intra-Religious Pluralism in Contemporary Indonesia

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By the late 1960s it was clear that, in addition to many other challenges, the newly independent nations of Southeast Asia faced ongoing complexities resulting from the mix of legal systems they had inherited from their pre-modern and colonial pasts. M.B. Hooker experienced the situation at first hand when, as a young lecturer in law at the then University of Singapore, he observed the laws of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia operating in a range of contexts, including religious courts, at local and national levels. In 1975, several years after leaving Southeast Asia, he published a study of legal pluralism, which he defined as “the situation in which two or more laws interact”. The aim of the study was “to describe the systems of legal pluralism in the contemporary world which have resulted from the transfer of whole legal systems across cultural boundaries”, and he made it clear that what interested him was the action of law as an agent of social change.

Twenty-five years after his study on legal pluralism was published, Professor Hooker began an extended analysis of a diverse range of fatwas in modern Indonesia using materials that were very different
from those used in his 1975 book. He was, however, still interested in
the nature of pluralism, albeit pluralism within the framework of the
same legal system — Islam in Indonesia — and expressed in the form
of fatwas. He wrote, “It is important to stress that there is variation
in principle and practice because multiplicity of principle and practice
is the lifeblood of law and dogma”.5

The point to make here is that Professor Hooker’s research into
legal pluralism began with analyses of differences among systems and
later focussed on differences within the same system of laws (Islam).
One of his primary interests remains the dialectic/dialogic relationship
between the system and the society in which it is expressed. In the
analysis of fatwas, he described in some detail the methods developed
by a range of Indonesian religious scholars to apply Islamic law to
problems confronting modern Indonesian Muslims. He argues that the
fatwas are a means to knowing Indonesian Islam as it is understood
and expressed at a particular time in its Indonesian context.6

This chapter takes up Professor Hooker’s interest in differences
within Islam and the relationship between legal systems and the society
in which they are expressed. But whereas he used fatwas as the basis
for his study, this chapter will shift focus to a little-studied form of
Islamic piety, that is, art which is inspired by the Qur’an, or Islam-
themed art. The artists do not draw on the formal sources of Islamic
law which form the basis of fatwas, but they do base their work on a
system of aesthetics and ethics which draws directly from the Qur’an,
as will be described in Part I, below.

Introduction

Several recent studies of intra-religious pluralism among Indonesian
Muslims have argued that diversity of opinion about religious issues
within Islam is not necessarily divisive but can be a healthy outlet
for differences among Muslim groups.7 To quote Dr Nadirsyah Hosen,
“pluralism in Islamic society cannot be avoided. In fact such diversity
of views has been one of the characteristics of fiqh throughout its
history.”8 So far, studies of intra-religious pluralism have focussed
on the major socio-religious organizations representing Indonesian
Muslims and the decisions of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI).
The issues debated by those groups usually concern very practical points of law, such as methods for determining the beginning and ending of the fasting month. The experts involved are trained in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and they interpret the finer points of that law using texts and methods developed over centuries of scholarship. This chapter aims to extend existing studies by focussing on Islam-themed art as a further example of expressions of intra-religious pluralism. This takes intra-religious pluralism beyond fiqh and the realm of jurists and into the area of ethics and aesthetics.

The chapter does this in three ways. First, when artists decide to use Qur’anic verses as the subject of visual representation, they make a series of choices about the interpretation of those verses. The opportunity for individual Muslims to express their own interpretation of the Qur’an is usually reserved for exegetes (Muslims who have received training in the science of Qur’anic exegesis [tafsir]). Exegetes apply a strict series of rules to reach their interpretation, but even so there are differences among exegetes. Islamic scholarship recognizes this by acknowledging a series of reliable authorities that Muslims may use in their work to understand the meanings of Qur’anic verses. While non-specialists, like the artists, might consult existing books of exegesis, they do not have to do so, nor do they consider themselves constrained by them. Rather, they choose a section of the Qur’an which speaks to their concerns and then express it visually, as described in Part II. The artist’s choice of style of script for the verses, background images, colour, style, and even size of the painting, communicates to the viewer a particular understanding of the purpose of the Qur’anic verse. It is here that intra-religious pluralism is apparent, because it is rare for two artists to provide the same visual interpretation of the same verse. The diversity of interpretation which enables individual artists to respond to particular contexts (personal and social) in their visual depictions of Qur’anic verses keeps Revelation (the Qur’an) relevant to time and place, as is evident in the two paintings presented in Part II.

Second, and following on from the above, the artists’ choice of Qur’anic verse is often in response to an issue in contemporary society, or an issue of particular concern to the Muslim community. Verses chosen might be Qur’anic guidance about disputation among
Muslims; petty corruption; lack of compassion for the suffering of others; greed; absorption with the material world; failure to acknowledge the omnipotence of Allah. These kinds of behaviours are not unlawful in the sense that they contravene specific state or religious laws, but they impact negatively on individuals and society. However, even if they are not specifically forbidden or discouraged by formal legislation, these negative behaviours and attitudes run counter to the values of the Qur’an. Japanese scholar, Toshihiko Izutsu, terms these Qur’anic values “ethico-religious concepts”\(^\text{11}\) and the Indonesian artists refer to them as \textit{etika} or ethics. Their argument for the philosophy of aesthetics and ethics is described in greater detail in Part I. The ethico-religious elements of this philosophy extend into an area not covered by fiqh or by secular law.

Third, although most theories of legal pluralism, including intra-religious pluralism, do not encompass ethics, the Japanese scholar of comparative law, Masaji Chiba, has formulated a theory of legal pluralism which is more broad in conception and recognizes that religious values can affect law.\(^\text{12}\) Chiba suggests that in a context where different systems of law are applied to communities, any definition of “the law” must take into account three sets of dichotomies: “official law” and “unofficial law”; “indigenous” and “transplanted” law; and “legal rules” and “legal postulates”. It is the third set of dichotomies which is directly relevant to understanding the significance of the Indonesian artists’ efforts to formulate an aesthetic and ethical system to underpin Islam-themed works of art.

Chiba defines the “legal rules” in his schema as “the formalized verbal expressions of particular legal regulations to designate specified patterns of behaviour”. He suggests that when a gap or “vacuum” exists in a system of law, it can be filled by “legal postulates”, that is the principal values or ethics which underpin the primary system. Chiba explains further that these “postulates” are “the particular values and ideas and their systems specifically connected with a particular law to ideationally found, justify and orient, or else supplement, criticize and revise the existing legal rules”.\(^\text{13}\) Chiba notes that if “legal rules have become outdated or disappear”, then the “legal postulates” which supported them can function independently.\(^\text{14}\)

Chiba’s theory recognizes that values and ideas which support legal rules and regulations can function independently from those
rules and regulations, particularly if the rules are not being followed or applied. The possibility for independent functioning suggests an explanation for how non-specialists, such as artists, can draw on the ethical and moral elements of the Qur’an to address moral and ethical failures in society which the laws and regulations ignore. The artists have developed a philosophy of aesthetics in which the divine qualities of God (recorded in the Qur’an through references to the Compassionate, the Mighty, the Just, the Good, the Beautiful, and so on) are expressed visually through art.

The discussion which follows is divided into five sections:

I. Beauty and Goodness: the context of Islam-themed art and the development of a philosophy of aesthetics and ethics;
II. Visual Islam: aesthetics in action;
III. Postulates and ethics;
IV. Postulates and aesthetics: the power of affect. Research on the relationship between the Qur’an, piety, aesthetics, and ethics has shown the importance of “affect”, a concept which is particularly appropriate to Islam-inspired art; and
V. Conclusion: when laws are not enough.

I. Beauty and Goodness: Context and Philosophy

Visual art is a relatively new form of artistic expression in Indonesia and was only taught formally from the mid-1940s, developing its own national characteristics during the first decade of Independence. In the late 1950s and thereafter, Indonesian artists were awarded scholarships to study in Europe and the United States, experiences which inspired them and broadened their artistic vision. The artist A.D. Pirous, for example, first encountered examples of contemporary Western painting and classical Islamic art in galleries and museums in New York. He was moved to reflect on his own style and his Islamic heritage. In the early 1970s he began creating works with obvious Islamic themes (often expressed through Arabic script and Qur’anic verses). He was not the first to do this, but he became one of the most active of a group of like-minded artists who staged exhibitions of their Islam-themed works.
In the late 1980s, Pirous and several other prominent Indonesians persuaded President Soeharto to support a large-scale exhibition of Islam-inspired art to be held in 1991 at the national Istiqlal (Independence) mosque in Jakarta. In his preface to the exhibition catalogue, Pirous wrote that for the first time the exhibition brought together the concept of “modern Indonesian art inspired by Islam” with the great venue of the national Independence Mosque. He hoped that the exhibition with its diverse range of works would help the public understand the nature of modern Islam-inspired art. Six and a half million visitors came to see the exhibition, which was held during the fasting month of Ramadan, 1991. Over eleven million visitors flocked to Festival Istiqlal II, which was held in Ramadan 1995, coinciding with the fiftieth year of Indonesia’s independence.

In 1993, Pirous wrote an essay assessing the progress of Islam-inspired art in Indonesia. He tried to draw out the reasons for the rapid development of Islam-inspired art and why it had received such strong support from both artists and the Muslim community. He described trends among Indonesian Muslims which indicated an increasing desire to manifest Islam in their social, artistic, and cultural lives as well as their more obvious religious lives. During the same period, Pirous noted, writers of prose and poetry included Islamic themes in their works and the prestigious national Qur’an Recitation Competition (MTQ) attracted increasing numbers of competitors. Opportunities to learn Arabic calligraphy from master calligraphers became more accessible through the Institute of Qur’anic Calligraphy (LEMKA, Lembaga Kaligrafi al-Qur’an), founded in 1985 and led by the talented young calligrapher Didin Sirojuddin AR.

The growth of interest in these activities heightened Pirous’s concern that Islam-inspired art in Indonesia lacked a system of aesthetics which could support its development. In his 1993 essay, he wrote that the desire to develop Islamic religious content in art was not supported by a special language to describe “visual Islam”. He believed that one of the factors hampering the development of a philosophy of Islamic aesthetics in Indonesia was the response of some religious authorities who had issued fatwas which were often at odds with the creative, imaginative, and innovative nature of artistic creativity.

But after considerable reflection about the responsibility of using the sacred words of the Qur’an, Pirous felt he could combine his
artistic creativity with the ethical values of the Qur’an. He expressed it thus:

... Me what is my life all about? What is a good person? A good person is someone who is useful to others. If I give them something they want, I will be useful. And so I decided to be useful. This is the concept of khairuqum an-fa’aquum linnas – a person useful to others. So I sacrificed myself, putting a limit on my free expression, but I came back to values that I could explore more frequently and more meaningfully in the Qur’an. I planted in the paintings concepts and philosophical values that would make them more enjoyable. *Aesthetic pleasure and ethical pleasure together* [sic].

Didin Sirojuddin AR, the second artist whose work is described in this chapter, is known for his skills as a calligrapher. Like Pirous, he too was critical of those religious authorities who questioned the legality of using Qur’anic calligraphy in works of art. In response, Sirojuddin published an article defending the status of artistic expressions of Qur’anic calligraphy and used arguments from respected scholars of Islam to make his case. Sirojuddin is also well known as a public speaker and in 2003 he was invited to speak at a Ramadan function in Bogor. His topic was the role of Islamic art in social life, focussing on the relationship between beauty, goodness and Islamic art.

Sirojuddin began his talk by explaining that creating good art is an act of worship (*ibadah*). Art created in this way expresses beauty which feeds the desire to do good deeds in this world and the next. Quoting two verses from the Qur’an (Qur’an 50, Qaf, verse 6 and Qur’an 16, al-Nahl, verse 6), he explained how they show that Allah created beauty in nature to be a source of pleasure and enjoyment for humans. To ignore the beauty of Allah’s creation, he explained, is like ignoring an aspect of Allah’s greatness; to give expression to that beauty is bearing witness to His greatness. Sirojuddin quoted the twelfth-century theologian al-Ghazzali, one of the greatest scholars of Islam. The beauty of nature, wrote al-Ghazzali in his *Ihya Ullum al-Din* (revival of the religious sciences), stimulates reflection and contemplation. In a similar way, Sirojuddin argues, a beautiful work of Islam-based art can also inspire reflection, or *zikir* (being mindful of Allah through meditation).
Sirojuddin then describes the beauty of God’s decrees and the beauty of His Qualities.\textsuperscript{25} Drawing on two Hadiths,\textsuperscript{26} that Allah is the most Beautiful and loves Beauty, and that Allah is the Most Good and loves Goodness, he presents a step-by-step explanation to argue that Beauty and Goodness are inseparable. Both, he says, are divine qualities, which, because they come from the Essence that is the One (God), are fused. Their inseparability means that beauty (art) is never expressed purely for its own sake, but always so that it inspires goodness and morality. Enjoying beauty for its own sake can lead to immorality. Thus, he emphasizes, in Islam aesthetics are linked with ethics and form the basis of the conception of Islamic art.

Both Pirous and Sirojuddin have reflected deeply about the meaning and purpose of Islam-inspired art. Their very different backgrounds, interests, and experience are reflected in the way they formulate their philosophies. There is a difference also in the style of argumentation. Sirojuddin, educated in one of Indonesia’s leading Islamic religious colleges, takes his arguments from the Qur’an, Hadith, and the classical works of Islamic scholarship. Pirous rarely refers to these authorities when expressing his views. He uses self-questioning to analyse his personal motivation for using Qur’an-based themes in his works. So it is all the more striking that both artists broadly agree on the basic principles of Islam-inspired art: that there is an aesthetic in which beauty and goodness are inseparably linked to provide the ethical foundation which underpins artistic practice. In “good” art, viewers feel these qualities of beauty and goodness which can make them mindful of Allah and motivate them to follow His values in their lives. This is what both artists say they seek to achieve.

The Qur’an speaks to believers about the transcendence and omniscience of Allah and, as well, outlines the obligations of humans to Allah and to each other. This is expressed succinctly in the often-quoted Qur’anic verse, “And hold fast, all together, by the rope which God (stretches out for you)” (Qur’an Ali Imran 3: 103). Many Muslims describe this as the vertical tie which links human beings to God and the horizontal ties between fellow human beings. In other words, both personal piety and social action are essential expressions of Islam. The ethical propositions of the Qur’an should be manifest in the personal lives of Muslims, and the same values should be extended into social behaviour.
II. Visual Islam: Aesthetics in Action

Pirous and Sirojuddin have painted many Islam-inspired works.\textsuperscript{27} Two of their paintings have been selected for discussion in this section because they depict the same Qur’anic verse. Although the two artists offer very different visual representations of the meaning of the verse, the ethical content of the painting is powerfully expressed. We begin with A.D. Pirous, an Acehnese who was born in 1933, several decades before Sirojuddin. Pirous was educated during the late 1950s at the secular, Western-oriented Faculty of Art and Design at the Bandung Institute of Technology.\textsuperscript{28} His early works were not consciously inspired by Islam.\textsuperscript{29} It was only after several years of postgraduate study in Rochester, New York, 1964–69, and the opportunity to view exhibitions of Islamic art in the United States, that he decided to work with Islam-based themes.\textsuperscript{30} Pirous returned to Indonesia to pursue a very successful career as one of Indonesia’s most famous artists and art scholars. He has curated and organized many major exhibitions as well as his own solo shows in Indonesia and abroad. In 1997 the Rockefeller Foundation appointed him a member of a curatorial team to mount a special exhibition of contemporary Islamic art at the forty-seventh Venice Biennale.\textsuperscript{31}

This is how Pirous describes the relationship between the Qur’an, the source of his inspiration, and his art:

The Holy Qur’an itself may not be changed, but to understand it, you must be free to interpret it. Each and every person may interpret it and glorify its essence, its message. So I take a verse and I try to animate it with my personal vision, with my personal understanding. Now why did I take that verse at that moment? And what is it that I want to say in such a personally meaningful way? If it all comes together and is read by someone else, that’s what you call expressiveness, that’s what you call spirituality. The meaningfulness might come from something I read, something I saw, something I dreamt about, or something I heard in a story and gets into the back of my head. And if it stirs me as an artist, I will want to put it onto my canvas. When I express it in visual language, that’s when I use my aesthetic knowledge: composition, color, texture, line, rhythm, everything. I use all of that to make my dream real, so that it can be felt. So that I can tell a story. At last, the painting, its meaning, the Qur’anic verse, all of it becomes clear.\textsuperscript{32}
Here, Pirous the artist is describing the “visual language” he creates to embody what was in his head; to make it “real” or tell a story inspired by the revealed words in a way that can be “felt”. The painting shown below is one example of how he does this.

PLATE 1


This is a large, eye-catching work, with impressive use of gold leaf.34 Pirous described the context and stimulus for his painting in response to a comment I had emailed him in which I had suggested that, although there are many expert commentaries and interpretations of the Qur’ān (exegeses), individuals remain free to form their own understandings. This is his reply:
Indeed it is correct that the Qur’an is interpreted not translated by the experts. So there is a limited freedom for the exegetes, which later becomes the guide for Muslims. Certainly in the process of *ijtihād* [independent legal reasoning] the users from then on will give it a more contextual quality. This is what happened when I took Chapter Ali Imran, verses 26 and 27 to enrich the painting *An Admonition to the Leader*.

At that time there was a pressing situation which made me anxious and wanting to caution all parties to think again. Around 1995 the New Order government was very violent, many leaders in power went totally too far. It was as if power was something eternal and unending even though everything is transitory and every moment has an end as the Chapter Ali Imran verses 26 and 27 state. In the world of art certainly there is a freedom which is rather personal to express a message. It is as if there will be two identities which can become one, the identity through the language of visual expression (style) and the identity of conveying the message (content). Even if the content of the message is the same it will be expressed differently by a range of artists. [my translation]35

The English translation of verses 26 and 27 from Chapter 3, Ali Imran, depicted in Pirous’s painting reads as follows:

Say: “O God!/ Lord of power (and rule),]/ Thou givest power/ To whom Thou pleasest,/ And Thou strippest off power/ From whom Thou pleasest;/ Thou enduest with honour/ Whom Thou pleasest,/ And Thou bringest low/ Whom Thou pleasest;/ In Thy hand is all good./ Verily, over all things/ Thou hast power.

Thou causest the night/ to gain on the day, and Thou causest the day/ to gain on the night;/ Thou bringest the dead/ out of the living;/ and Thou givest sustenance/ to whom Thou pleasest,/ without measure.36

Pirous has explained his motivation for choosing this Qur’anic verse — the socio-political situation in Indonesia in 1995. The early 1990s saw unprecedented levels of corruption, collusion, and nepotism in President Soeharto’s regime, including the behaviour of Soeharto’s own children. This period also saw the Dili massacre by Indonesian troops in East Timor (1991), followed by increasing brutality. Open displays of abuse of power at the highest levels of the regime prompted Pirous to remind President Soeharto of the divine source and transitory nature of all power. The painting was exhibited at the second Festival Istiqbal
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(1995), which was opened by the president and attended by New Order dignitaries as well as about eleven million other visitors. 37

Pirous’s choice of Qur’anic verses, and its Indonesian title, 38 clearly spell out the awesome, irresistible nature of transcendence. The verses issue warnings to humankind about Allah’s omnipotence — over earthly power and who will hold it, over the cosmos, over life and death. It is a reminder that all existence is dependent on Allah’s will. Mindful of Pirous’s comments about fusion of style and message, how does Pirous convey this Qur’anic message to a contemporary audience?

The impact of the size and scale of the canvas reinforces the message of omnipotence. The double line of gold leaf dividing the canvas into equal halves or pages, and stretching from top to bottom, is perhaps a reference to the “rope of Allah”, which according to the Qur’an links humans to Allah. 39 The canvas is covered with a variety of geometric shapes — rectangles of different dimensions, and triangles, some with softened apexes. A circle of red wax seems to unite the other shapes. The chunkiness of the forms, solid and tough, have been given textures of lines and fissures as if to indicate weathering and ageing. The central group of rounded triangles suggests various forms with iconic meanings in Islam — a mountain, a grave marker, a cave. A band of white, studded with star-like dots, perhaps represents the firmament, which Allah has divided into night from day. And below the firmament across the centre of the canvas, Pirous has copied the two Qur’anic verses as if they are on two pages of a book. They are presented in Arabic fashion, with the first verse copied on to the right-hand side and the second on the left-hand side of the central line. Viewers thus face two metre-high “pages” of a large book, which can also be “read” as a composition of rocks and pillars seeming to have existed since time immemorial. Humans may come and go, all subject to the cycle of birth and death, but the words and rocks will remain, testimony to the eternal nature of divine omnipotence. The title of the painting, “An Admonition to the Leader…”, directs the viewer’s attention to the contemporary relevance of the ethical message of the Qur’anic verse.

Master calligrapher K.H. Didin Sirojuddin AR was born in West Java in 1957 and educated at the famous Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic college, Pesantren Modernen Gontor, between 1969 and 1975. He studied Arabic calligraphy with two of Indonesia’s most respected calligraphers, Professor H.M. Salim Fachry and K.H.M. Abdul Razzaq Muhili. 40 As their titles, K.H. (Kiai Haji) denote, these men were also noted religious scholars for whom calligraphy was an integral part of
the deeper study of the Qur’an. They would have taught their students Qur’anic recitation (‘ilm al-qira’ā), exegesis (tafsir), theology (kalam), and the history of Islam. An education from these masters was training in the Islamic sciences as well as the art of arts, Arabic calligraphy.

During the early 1980s, Sirojuddin worked as a journalist, a teacher of calligraphy, and a lecturer at the State Islamic Institute Syarif Hidayatullah (now State Islamic University) in Jakarta. Since 1983 he has regularly served as one of the judges of the calligraphy sections of the national Qur’anic recitation competitions (MTQ), and in 1987 was winner of the ASEAN calligraphy competition held in Brunei.\[41\]

\[Plate 2\]

Didin Sirojuddin AR, *Kuasa Sang Maharaja* [The power of the mighty ruler], 2001. 30 x 30 cm, mixed media. (Photography: Darren Boyd).
In this painting, Sirojuddin presents only the first (verse 26) of the two verses chosen by Pirous. The painting is 30 cm square, much smaller that Pirous’s work. Sirojuddin painted it in 2001 and it was exhibited at two secular public venues in Jakarta. Although the works of Pirous and Sirojuddin each depict the same Qur’anic verse, their styles are very different. There are just a few similarities. Both artists position the Qur’anic verse(s) in the centre of their works and each divides the canvas into upper, middle, and lower strata. Besides these features there is little else in common. Sirojuddin chooses a more legible form of Arabic script and sets the Qur’anic quote in a golden circle surrounded by a halo of pale light.

The lower circumference of the golden circle is penetrated by two lines of strong and arresting Arabic script. The first is thick letters which read “Allāhummā” (O God) and the second is a set of tubular letters, whose space is not filled with ink, reading “Mālik al-Mulk” (Lord of Power). Both sets of letters rest on pillars (or cubes) of intense black, which resemble the Kaaba in the Grand Mosque at Mecca. The border which runs across the upper part of the painting contains three fragments of text in Arabic calligraphy (of various styles), too fragmented to be understood. One piece of text in English is legible, although incomplete, and reads, “Arafah is the most important part...” and “…prophet said ‘pilgrimage is Arafah’”. These phrases clearly refer to one of the rites of the hajj.

Another border composed of textual fragments runs across the bottom of the painting and provides the foundation for three black (or one large?) cubic structure(s) which seem to rise out of the textual fragments of Arabic, Indonesian, and English. In the only fragment of text in English are phrases which refer, like those above, to rituals of the hajj. In the centre of this lower border is a clearly legible Indonesian translation of the Qur’anic verse written in Arabic in the golden circle. Indonesians who cannot read the Qur’an in Arabic can thus understand the verse.

Sirojuddin’s painting, with its strong central focus on the Qur’anic verse stressing omnipotence, is linked to visual images of the hajj and textual fragments referring to hajj rituals. Many interpretations are possible. The hajj, one of the five “pillars” of Islam, is a ritual which brings together all Muslims, whatever their status, as equals. All the rituals of the hajj emphasize that humans are born and die equals in
the sight of Allah and remain His servants throughout their lives. The Kaaba is the central pivot of the hajj, as well as marking the direction all Muslims face when they perform their daily prayers. These visual elements remind believers of their ritual obligations in Islam, of the omnipotence of Allah, and of the unity of their community.

Pirous has explained the socio-political context of his painting. Sirojuddin has not spoken about that aspect of his work, but it dates from 2001, that is, the early part of the post-Soeharto period of “Reformation”. As well as being hit by the Asian financial crisis of 1997, Indonesia faced political turmoil, violent riots and killings in 1998, and inter-religious violence and killings in Eastern Indonesia. President Abdurrahman Wahid’s time in office ended in July 2001. Against this background, Sirojuddin chose a particular verse from the Qur’an, supporting it with “trigger” images of rites of repentance and equality among all Muslims. The Kaaba and some of the rites of the haj are also directly associated with Abraham/Ibrahim, the founder of the three monotheistic faiths — Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Some of those who viewed the painting when it was first shown in 2001 might well have seen in it a warning to those Indonesians engaged in inter-religious violence, especially in Eastern Indonesia, to remember the elements of faith that Islam and Christianity share.

Intra-religious Pluralism

The act of painting, creating “visual language”, to use the words of Pirous, expresses the artist’s interpretation of a subject. For artists inspired by Islam, the subject will often come from the Qur’an. As the two examples above show, even paintings that depict the same Qur’anic verses will express different aspects of the meanings of the verses, place them in different contexts, choose very different “visual languages”, and convey different moods. The interpretation of revealed words and their painterly settings has further dimensions — as many as the viewers who “read” the visual language. But to engage with the painting the viewer has to stop, consider the images, and perhaps think and reflect on what they see. It is the aesthetics of the work which will make the initial link between painting and viewer. Something in the “visual language” has to connect with the viewer and stimulate them to pause and consider the work. Open-ended, plural interpretations
are stimulated by the artists’ use of aesthetics. Pirous, Sirojuddin and other artists inspired by Islam base their system of aesthetics on the divine qualities of Beauty and Goodness which they seek to reflect in their works.

During the fasting month of 2011, a large exhibition entitled “Bayang” (Shadows/Reflections) was held at the National Art Gallery in Jakarta. The organizers said they were seeking to invigorate Islamic art, and invited artists to respond to the theme with dynamic works. Over three hundred works in a number of mediums (including new media, sculpture, installations and photography) covering a wide range of themes were on display. While most evaluations of the works were positive, one art critic blogged that, in general, the works lacked spiritual depth or relied on the inclusion of Qur’anic verses in the compositions to make them “Islamic”. The critic praised one of the exhibits, an installation entitled Last Journey which included a set of sculptures, whose purpose seemed to be to remind viewers of the impermanence of this world. The blogger made it clear that he reserved his respect for those artists who tried to engage viewers in deeper levels of spiritual reflection. For him, as for Pirous, Sirojuddin and others, the spiritual and ethical messages of works of art that claimed to be inspired by Islam are essential elements in their creation and reception.

III. Postulates and Ethics

In Islam, Revelation is understood to be complete and perfect. In Islamic art this perfection is symbolized by the circle, complete and without beginning or end. Believers seek answers to Revelation in Revelation itself. The Qur’an, they claim, holds its own answers and is its own best commentary.

We have suggested that Pirous and Sirojuddin stand as examples of Muslims whose professional, as well as personal, lives are inspired by the Qur’an. In Sirojuddin’s words, “The Qur’an is the source of all inspiration and can become the hunting ground for endless creativity.” The unending nature of this inspiration, the endless possibilities for new insights, new levels of understanding are seen by believers as signs of Allah’s power. They see multiplicity, diversity, plenitude, as
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evidence of Divine creativity. The plethora of diversity is also seen as proof of Allah’s Oneness — a unity which encompasses all creation. Seen from this perspective, Revelation is not a closed system but, by its inimitable nature, is the most open.

Islam-inspired artists communicate or, as Pirous would say, develop their “visual language” through symbols and metaphors. In this way they exploit the full potential of the abstract to convey concepts, mood, and feeling. Mood and feeling offer a balance to the strict and often literalist argumentation of the jurists, and here we can identify another example of “pluralism” within Islam. As Masaji Chiba has suggested in his theory of legal pluralism, the “legal rules” and “legal postulates” in plural systems coexist and co-function, “as a rule, interactingly. However, in many cases they may fall into conflict, while in others either of them may cease to function or completely disappear. Such cases occur when either of them has lagged behind the other or the socio-cultural development of the society concerned.” And to repeat the quotation from Chiba given above in the Introduction, “Among the various modes of relationship between the two [that is, between legal rules and legal postulates], particularly to be noticed is the independent function of legal postulates when the supported legal rules have become outdated or disappear.” According to Chiba, when that happens, “legal postulates have the potential of reactivating outdated legal rules or even creating new legal rules to embody themselves.”47 We do not suggest that Pirous’s and Sirojuddin’s formulations of an Islam-inspired system of aesthetics and ethics aim in any way to create new legal rules. But based on their own descriptions, the aesthetic elements of many of their works are intended to encourage viewers to think more deeply about goodness, ethical behaviour and spirituality, all of which can also be described as in Chiba’s terms as “legal postulates”. The following quote from Pirous makes his position very clear: “I am trying through the language of beauty to give people something that will stir them to appreciate ethical values. By this I mean those ethical values that have a close connection with the values found in Qur’anic verse.”48

Pirous states that he hopes the beauty of his paintings will “stir” viewers to become aware of ethical values. There is no criticism of lack of ethical awareness, no threats of punishment or suggestions of coercion. If we return to the summary of Chiba’s thesis, made in the introduction above, and consider sharia as the “legal rules” of Islam
and aesthetics and ethics among its “legal postulates”, we see that the “legal postulates” suggested by the artists rest on basic principles in Islam — divine Beauty and divine Goodness.

In the contemporary Indonesian context, the “legal rules” of sharia-related regional legislation (Peraturan Daerah Shari’at Islam) focus largely on the negative qualities of immorality and “social ills”. These negative qualities are human qualities, not those of Allah. The “legal postulates” developed by the artists are, in their own words, based on reflections of divine qualities. The hope of the artists is that the beauty in the artworks might inspire self-motivated feelings of goodness. In this comparison of the legal rules of sharia and the legal postulates of aesthetics and ethics, the punitive and negative formulations of the legal rules (as expressed in regional regulations) are at odds with the inspirational nature of the positive qualities of Allah.

IV. Postulates and Aesthetics: The Power of Affect

The memorized recitation of the Qur’an, the twin of Islam-inspired art, suggests deeper ways of understanding relationships between Revelation, increasing piety, aesthetics and ethics. Reciting the Qur’an and creating art which is consciously inspired by the Qur’an are both activities which bring practitioners into direct contact with Revelation. Dr Anna Gade’s study of intensive Qur’an memorization activities practised by thousands of Indonesians during the 1990s (the period which was also important in the public recognition of Islam-inspired art) is a complex analysis of direct engagement with the Qur’an through “modes of feeling”. She argues that the positive feelings engendered by the intensive practice of direct experience of Revelation (through recitation) generate piety and ongoing religious commitment. Dr Gade’s identification of “the appreciation of beauty and enjoyable activities as the most effective means to ‘motivate’ (memotivasikan) people to deepen mainstream Muslim piety” resonates with the terms Pirous and Sirojuddin use to describe the affect they hope their works have on mindful viewers.

Dr Gade describes how Revelation promises positive change to believers who engage directly with its message:
The Qur’an’s statements about the dynamics of such affective engagement and especially about the impact of reading and hearing the Qur’an read show how the Qur’an claims an immediate, embodied encounter with its Message to be transformative of the enduring moral, ethical and social characteristics of a person.... The Qur’an makes numerous claims about its capacity to affect human experience in the present, to remake a person, reorienting him or her to moral sensitivity, social responsibility and an appropriate relationship to the Creator.\(^{53}\)

Dr Gade develops the argument that “the inherent goodness of a practice may be accompanied by a natural desire among people to pursue ‘goodness’ in individual and collective experience”.\(^{54}\) Although viewers of spiritually charged, Islam-inspired art might also feel a sense of goodness as one of the emotions triggered by the painting, it is not quite the same as Gade’s example. It is not the goodness of the practice which Pirous and Sirojuddin seem to describe as a motivation for their art, but rather the quality (not feeling) of Goodness which is one of Allah’s attributes. In Islam this is a transcendent quality which humans cannot achieve or match in its perfection. But a recognition and acknowledgment of this very transcendence can arouse, or trigger, emotions of worship, gratitude, finiteness, and the desire to apply Qur’anic values in daily social life.

Dr Gade’s research indicates that many Muslims believe that direct engagement with Revelation, through recitation of the Qur’an, has positive transformative effects. The artists whose works and writings have been analysed in this essay, together with art scholars and critics, similarly believe that Islam-inspired art also has the potential to awaken the ethical sensibilities of viewers. The two paintings presented above also show how Islam-inspired artists engage with contemporary social issues in direct and indirect ways.\(^{55}\)

V. Conclusion: When Laws Are Not Enough

In his study of Indonesian fatwas, Professor Hooker included a discussion of “Islam as Object” in his Epilogue. He wrote, “The past 30 years or so have seen an Islamic resurgence; all this means is a renewed confidence in the face of secularism. Essential to this renewal
is the realisation that Islam need not be defined or discussed in any terms other than its own.”\textsuperscript{56}\hspace{1em} Despite this, he continues, the need to develop a “canon” in response to the secular nation-state has meant that “from both the internal and external viewpoints Islam is subject to analysis in terms other than its own.... The mode of discussion is from outside Revelation; it is in contemporary theories of politics, social science, economics or any one of the philosophies of these.”\textsuperscript{57}\hspace{1em} The example of the philosophy of aesthetics and ethics developed by Indonesian artists and scholars suggests that their engagement with, and argumentation within, Revelation provides an exception to Professor Hooker’s observation.

Applying Chiba’s theory of legal pluralism to the art-based system of aesthetics and ethics proposed by the Indonesian artists has highlighted their positive and inspirational nature. Viewing artistic expressions of Revelation offers opportunities for diverse interpretations, that is, expressions of intra-religious pluralism. The artists have the hope that when viewers engage with their paintings, the combination of Qur’anic verses and images might stimulate their sense of ethical responsibility, for their social as well as their personal behaviour. The aesthetic presentation of the ethical component of the paintings suggests an added dimension to Chiba’s definition of “legal postulates”. It also suggests that at least some theories of legal pluralism can find material to support their positions in examples from “culture” in its broadest sense.

Notes

1. The author thanks Emeritus Professor A.D. Pirous and Dr Didin Sirojuddin AR for permission to reproduce their paintings and Professor Kenneth George for supplying the photograph of Pirous’s work. The author is grateful to Professor M. Bambang Pranowo for his gift of a copy of Pirous’s \textit{Melukis itu Menulis} when she visited Bayt al-Qur’an in Jakarta in May 2003. Dr D. Sirojuddin generously provided copies of many of his writings to the author when she visited him several times in Jakarta and Sukabumi. Special thanks to Indonesian colleagues Ali Akbar, Yusuf Susilo Hartono, Hawe Setiawan, and Nadirsyah Hosen for ongoing help with references.

3. Ibid., p. vii; p. 5, “[A]ll the examples of legal pluralism described in this book involve the use of law as an agent or medium in changing social conduct.”

4. The study was published as *Indonesian Islam: Social Change through Contemporary Fatwa* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin; Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003). Hooker defines a *fatwa* as “a formal advice from an authority on a point of Islamic law or dogma. It is given in response to a question”, ibid. p. viii.

5. Ibid., p. ix.


8. Hosen, “Hilal and Halal”, p. 17. Sirry goes further and suggests that “the critical engagement between Muslim progressives and liberals, as well as between radical and conservatives, serves to stabilise relations between groups by defining the position of each group in relationship to the others”. Sirry, “Fatwas and Their Controversy”, p. 117.

9. Not all Islam-themed works of art include verses from the Qur’an.


13 Ibid., p. 178.

14 Ibid., p. 178.


17. For examples, see Machmud Buchari and Sanento Yuliman, *A.D. Pirous* (Bandung: Galeri Decenta, 1985).


20. Pirous included further examples of increased Islamization, such as: the appearance of Islamic hospitals in most of Indonesia’s large cities; Arabic language lessons on government television stations; increasing numbers of Islam-oriented schools and colleges; new mosque-building programmes; and increasing numbers of young people choosing to wear contemporary, designer-styled Islamic fashion clothes, including the Islamic styles of head covering for both men and women. See Pirous, “Seni Bernafaskan Islam di Indonesia”, pp. 116–18.

21. Ibid., pp. 120–21.


26. The origin of and reference for both these well-known Hadiths is not given.

27. The majority of Pirous’s works since the early 1970s are obviously inspired by Islam, but he has also painted works with other themes. All of Sirojuddin’s works are clearly Islam-themed.

29. See Wright, Soul, Spirit, and Mountain, p. 72 for Pirous’s own description of his earlier works.

30. For further details, see George, Picturing Islam, pp. 47ff. Pirous was also aware that the greatly admired abstract painter Ahmad Sadali drew inspiration for his works from the Qur’an. See George, Picturing Islam, p. 51.

31. Ibid., p. 108.

32. Ibid., p. 85. Translated by Kenneth George.

33. Description provided in George, Picturing Islam, colour plate 18, following p. 46.

34. George, Picturing Islam, p. 104.


38. Even if viewers could not read and understand the lines of Arabic script, all Indonesian speakers could understand the meaning of the title.
40. Salim Fachry was chosen by Sukarno, soon after he became president of the newly independent Republic of Indonesia, to prepare the official, large scale, handwritten copy of the Qur’an for the new nation state. It is now known as the “Qur’an Pusaka” (Heirloom Qur’an) and symbolizes the role of Islam in the new nation. Abdul Razzaq Muhili was also highly regarded, and in 1961 published the first Indonesian text book on Arabic calligraphy, entitled *Tulisan Indah* (Beautiful Writing). See further “Dinamika Perkembangan Seni Kaligrafi” [The development of Indonesian calligraphy], 1 February 2011 <http://lemkaonline.blogspot.com/> (accessed 22 May 2013).
41. Sirojuddin has judged calligraphy competitions in the Middle East, Pakistan, and Turkey as well as throughout Southeast Asia. He has exhibited his calligraphy and his calligraphic paintings in many exhibitions and is well known in Indonesia for his dedication to spreading a love for calligraphy, especially through the courses he and his colleagues teach at LEMKA.
44. Ibid.
45. There are numerous verses in the Qur’an which support this statement. See, for example, Qur’an 29, Al’-Ankabut, verses 47–49 and verse 51; Qur’an 7, al-A’raf, verse 2 and verse 203.
48. Translated by George, *Picturing Islam*, p. 95
50. They are twins in the sense that there is overlap in approach to ethics and aesthetics as well as a shared organizational link — Islam-inspired arts which incorporate calligraphy grew national roots and gained in authority by being held in conjunction with the national Qur’an recitation competition (MTQ) events from 1979 onwards.


52. Ibid., p. 17

53. Ibid., p. 38–39.

54. Ibid., p. 276.

55. Sirojudin also creates calligraphic paintings for reproduction as calendars and chooses a significant social issue (for example, corruption or education) as the theme for each year.


References

Books


**Chapters**

**Periodicals**

**Online Citations**
Other