

Quo Vadis?

Religious Obscurantism in Our Midst ¹

by

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If one were to observe the types of discourses that exist within our Muslim community, there is not much to be savored. When one discusses Islam, it becomes almost necessary to avoid discussing some of the more pertinent issues and problems facing the community. Educational underachievement, drug abuses, high divorce rates, delinquencies and crime rates amongst youths, teenage prostitution, premarital abortions, unemployment and many other problems were not central to a religious discourse in the Muslim community. Instead, one finds obscurantism dominating the discourse and consuming much of the intellectual energy of Muslims here. Issues like when the Day of Judgement will come, who shall go to Heaven or Hell, whether it is necessary to keep a beard and if yes, what is the minimum length, where *jinn*s reside (and books were written about what they are, what they eat and where they sleep), as well as many other myriads of issues had become subjects to be deliberated, expounded and pondered upon. Enter a local Malay-Muslim bookstore and you will see book after book written on such matters. These issues had shorn whatever is left of the relevance of Islam to the present reality we are in. Perhaps, discussing these issues is a form of escape for Muslims who are facing tremendous pressure in coming to terms with modernity. But certainly the loss is ours. When issues discussed no longer bear any semblance to present context and reality, religion itself will cease to be a player in shaping and guiding the Muslims. What we shall have then, is a death of religion - just like Friedrich Nietzsche's Madman who lamented "Where has God gone? I shall tell you. We have killed him - you and I. We are his murderers." Religion must be saved from obscurantism. And a way to do that is to bring our religious discourses back to reality, addressing the conditions of man and his present realities.

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¹ This short reflective piece appeared as a primer to Khaled Abou El Fadl's article, "Killing Flies" in *Teens' Crossroads* magazine (May-Aug 2004).