

rites and responsibilities

A DIALOGUE SERIES ON SOVEREIGNTY, AUTHORITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL



“CHANGE OVER TIME”

A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT W. HEFNER

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In this installment of the Rites and Responsibilities dialogue series, I met with the Boston University anthropologist and scholar of Islam [Robert W. Hefner](#). A world renowned expert on Muslim culture, politics, and education in Southeast Asia and beyond, Hefner is the author or co-editor of more than a dozen books, including [Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia](#) and [Shari‘a Politics: Law and Society in the Modern World](#). Hefner has led numerous research projects globally, ranging from examinations of sharia law and citizenship to assessing the social resources for civility and civic participation in plural societies such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. Recipient of many prestigious grants and fellowships, including serving as the Lee Kong Chian Senior Fellow for a joint project between Stanford University and the National University of Singapore and the Carnegie Scholar in Islam for the Carnegie Corporation, Hefner is professor of anthropology and the director of the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs.

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David Kyuman Kim: This is David Kim, and I'm here from the Social Science Research Council for another installation of the Rites & Responsibilities dialogue forum. The forum focuses on questions of sovereignty, accountability, authority, and the public life of religion. It's my pleasure to be in conversation today with Robert Hefner, the director of the [Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs](#), at Boston University. Bob, the acronym for the institute is "CURA." Tell me why the "W" dropped out.

Robert W. Hefner: There is a perhaps not-so-subtle religious resonance intended, and that sense is conveyed a little more effectively without the W. CURA's founding director, Peter Berger, came up with the name and ran it by me in the mid-1990s. But we've gone through several titular permutations over the years and earlier had slightly different names, in a way that reflected the happenstance evolution that many research institutes dedicated to public scholarship experience. The Institute was founded in 1985. Religion and world affairs were always our primary foci, but with the "CURA" title we opted to make that emphasis more salient.

DKK: Now, have you been here since the founding of the center?

RH: The Institute was founded in 1985 by Peter Berger, the well-known sociologist of religion. I became associate director working with Peter in 1986. In those early years some of our colleagues in the social sciences thought the focus on religion and world affairs quaintly anachronistic. And I suppose we did look either ahead of the times or out of step with them. CURA was a small, two-person operation in its first years. Our model was to work toward building a network of researchers and friends around the world with like-minded research interests, and a similar sense that religion's public biography was not yet finished. Since those early years, we have sponsored more than 100 collaborative projects of this sort, resulting in the publication of some 120 books—not all of them, I will concede, of equal quality! Over the course of these various collaborations, our program-building principles remained the same. First, rather than relying just on in-house staff, we worked with institutes and researchers around the world; second, we were unapologetically multi-disciplinary in our approach to religion and world affairs.

DKK: I was struck, in looking at your programs, that there seem to be some parallels, if not in structure, in scope and scale, between what CURA does and what the SSRC does, particularly in terms of convening workshops and so on.

RH: Yes. CURA is a research institute and is, like the SSRC, dedicated to public scholarship. In addition, I suppose the SSRC and CURA were preoccupied *avant la lettre* with secularity and the problem of multiple modernities. Public scholarship means different things to different people, but the core idea for us has always been that we bring what we hope are useful academic instruments to bear on issues of broad public concern. In this too I would like to think that we have something in common with the SSRC.

DKK: So, we know you as an anthropologist who has done important work in Indonesia, with particular foci on Indonesian politics and Islam. Talk about what it is to be an anthropologist who is engaged in field work but also doing the kind of work that you're doing at CURA, namely, the kind of convening and public intellectual work you just mentioned. I think you referred to yourself as a social anthropologist.

RH: A social *and* cultural anthropologist is how I like to think of myself. I use both terms, because in contemporary anthropology each connotes a slightly different intellectual legacy. To draw the contrast too starkly, social anthropology highlights the ways in which social interactions and forms of life generate certain patterns of behavior, organization, and power; cultural anthropology as classically formulated is concerned with cultural meaning, knowledge, and their creation and transmission over time. I was, in my youth, before coming into anthropology, greatly influenced by post-structuralist theories of meaning and what we used to call, a bit too boldly, theories of "semiotic practice." But I was also influenced by the "harder" wing of the human sciences, especially political economy and comparative politics, so saying I am both a social and cultural anthropologist is, I suppose, a way of reminding myself that I like to move between problems of knowledge and subjectivity, on one hand, and politics and modern political history, on the other.

DKK: I like how you say, "In your youth..."! [Laughs].

RH: Yeah, well, my youth intellectually, not necessarily in terms of my actual age. Those two things have pulled my scholarship back and forth across the course of my life. In my early years as an anthropologist, they also put a little distance between me and mainstream anthropology, at least the American variety that was in ascendance in the 1980s and early 1990s. Anthropology has changed over the past twenty years, and I think there's a great difference between what anthropology was then and what it is today. In the 1980s, the field was still in the throes of an understandable reaction against the homogenizing grand narratives of an earlier anthropology and social science. Certainly, anthropology had never been as much subject to grand-modernist schemes as sociology or political science. Nonetheless, anthropology in the postwar period had felt influences from secularization theory, modernization theory, and rather-too-mechanistic models of market development. In the 1980s and early 1990s, anthropologists repudiated these "high modernist" ideas. This laudable critique was accompanied by, in my opinion, a somewhat overdrawn emphasis on the particularity and incommensurability of human cultures. This self-critique was felt across the discipline, but it came to be most famously associated with postmodernism, or postmodern theory, which in anthropology, one should emphasize, was always slightly different from its counterparts in sociology, literature, and cultural studies.

DKK: Right. In anthropology, it took the form more of self-consciousness about ethnographic practices, about writing and so on.

RH: That's right, it did. But some among the first and most interesting exponents of anthropological postmodernism were as much concerned with Jean Francois Lyotard's critique of grand narratives as they were the more anthropology-specific issue of reflexivity in ethnographic research. Eventually, however, the latter concern became a primary diacritic for anthropologists, and it contributed to a necessary, if at times painfully self-regarding, critique of power relations in fieldwork. That was a dominant current in the American anthropology of the 1980s and early 1990s.

The problem for me was that I had come out of a different social and intellectual tradition, as well as perhaps a different part of 1960s America. I came up through Catholic grade schools and high school in the 1960s, and was very pious, in a manner that bore some resemblance to what the anthropologist Mary Douglas described years ago in her book, *Natural Symbols*, as "Bog Irish ritualist." I am not Irish, but there was a little of that Bog Irish ritualism to me nonetheless.

In my high school years, however, which is to say between 1966 and 1970, I became active in a small Catholic activist network known as the Thomas Merton Community, which had been founded by some active and/or defrocked priests and nuns in inner-city Cleveland. These Catholic activists' deep commitment to voluntary poverty, civil rights, and social justice left me with an abiding interest in, and respect for, the transformative potential of religious ethics. But the times they were a-changing, and I would shortly too. My involvements in the U.S.'s student movement of the early 1970s took me into a different milieu, and the splintering and radical sectarianism into which some of my friends were drawn left me frustrated and confused. The experience also taught me a life-long lesson about how social movements can lose their way.

In the aftermath of all my idealistic fervor, and not quite sure of where I was going in my life or politics, I spent an academic year in France during 1972-73. It was there that I was exposed to an intellectual tradition that allowed me to link my personal interest in religion, ethics, and modern life to a more intellectualized style of public engagement.

So it was these rather-too-disparate experiences that I brought into my own training in anthropology, not all of which resonated with the American anthropology of the 1980s. Not surprisingly, a decade or two later, as anthropology threw itself into the study of cultural complexity, I began to feel that maybe I hadn't ended up in the wrong field after all.

DKK: So among the social theorists and political theorists that you were influenced by early on, who would you name as central to your formation?

RH: Well, in intellectual spirit if not theoretical pedigree, Clifford Geertz was an early influence; I had the great honor of working as his assistant in 1981-1982, just after finishing my Ph.D. But I was never a “Geertzian” theoretically speaking, and in my early academic years I found his gentle diffidence with regards to political theory and engagement perplexing. But Cliff’s interdisciplinary spirit, his life-long interest in philosophy, and his from-the-ground up interest in Islam (as demonstrated in his [Religion of Java](#) more than his less careful [Islam Observed](#)) were all inspirational.

In my early years as an anthropologist, I was also influenced by the anthropologist Mary Douglas’s effort, late in her career, to link cross-cultural psychology to the comparative sociology of human relationships—her famous, if ultimately flawed, “group-grid” analysis. Eventually this concern with the imbrication of social relations and subjectivity drew me to the work of Maurice Bloch and Arthur Kleinman, two figures who have influenced my sense of the not-wholly-culturally-constructed nature of human subjectivity.

With regard to general social theory, however, I was in my early academic training strongly influenced by Pierre Bourdieu, in particular his concern for the ways in which the production and reproduction of social orders both shapes and is shaped by the constitution of certain types of subjectivities. Most of us who read Bourdieu in the 1970s were aware that there were mechanistic short-cuts in his approach—structuring structures seamlessly creating structured subjectivities, and all that—but there was something nonetheless exciting about the way in which he linked a generative macrosociology to the constitution of micro-subjectivities, and vice versa.

DKK: Of course.

RH: There was one more influence in terms of my early interest in meaning-making. I was, I’m today a little embarrassed to say, greatly influenced by the young Jacques Derrida, and his critique of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology of the sign. This was the Derrida, not of deconstruction, but of *decentrement*: the idea that signs or symbols achieve their significance by always pointing to a network of memories, traces, and competencies beyond the experienced sign itself. To this day I think that his *Speech and Phenomena*, as it was called in its English translation, is really a remarkable work—and a point of entry to theories of meaning that, I think have a good deal of overlap with American pragmatism, at least the better parts of American pragmatism. Those are very much still lively influences on my own understanding of how people make sense of the world, and the decentered and multivalent nature of subjectivity.

DKK: As I read your work, and if I read your work over and against certain kinds of anthropology and social theory, I see the central concern with what you were calling problems of incommensurability. In other words, it seems to me that a central theme for you is uncovering what one might call anthropology’s anxieties, say, about Orientalism, or anthropology’s self-conscious anxieties about Occidentalism, especially the ways in which conceptions and representations of “the East” or “the West” are over-inflated. Is that accurate?

RH: Yes, that is right. I both benefit from the critique of Orientalism and am also, at certain points, made uneasy by its at times too-facile dichotomization of the “West” and the “Oriental other.” For a variety of reasons, and on a number of analytic levels—both at the level of human subjectivity and meaning-making and at the level of, one might say, the condition of modernity and late modernity—I tend to see greater areas of commensurability across cultures, religions, and subjectivities than some colleagues of mine.

DKK: That’s fascinating. You have some very strong critiques, both of philosophical relativists and cultural relativists, and what we might call parochial political theorists, which I gather to be largely liberal democratic theorists who want to argue that the history of, or the legacy of, democratic practices reside in the West, and that these practices have supposedly been transposed on “the East” or “the Global South.” That’s part of the critique that I read in your work.

RH: That is very much part of the critique. It’s a critique that wants to listen to those voices in the Global South and, for example, in the Muslim world, where I spend time. And I also listen to those actors in those lands who are themselves exploring areas of commensurability and engagement across what others might see as unbridgeable cultural divides. By my understanding, the areas of commensurability arise not as an

effect of all-powerful discourses, but in the course of actors' experience of social circumstances and ethical problems that display situational or existential convergences—Wittgenstein's "family-resemblances," if you will—across late-modern societies. By assuming that subjectivity is primarily a constituted effect of all-powerful discourses, one risks losing sight of these convergences and commonalities, as well as the agency exercised by actors in everyday life.

DKK: Right. So let's talk about this idea of political theory in practice. This is something that I'm very much preoccupied with in my own work. I tend to frame it as a concern for the practical effects, or lived effects, of political theory. You have some very strong and I think well-made critiques of contemporary political theory, particularly around issues of cultural pluralism and political pluralism. One particular focus of your work appears to be a focus around commensurability and religion. Which is to say, you seem to be making a move that forgoes the formulation that insists that religion is innately divisive in favor of an analysis that is trying to uncover and detect the ways that religion can enable commensurability. Does that sound right?

RH: It sounds right, if complicated, and appropriately so. At the risk of veering a little far afield, let me say something further about human subjectivity. While I consider myself primarily a scholar of religion, modernity, and politics, I have over the course of my life continued to read and teach on children, adolescents, the acquisition of culture, and human development. I pursue these interests so as to force myself to read and reflect on the nature of human nature—a concern that some of my colleagues might think intellectually impossible or essentializing. Whether we recognize it or not, our characterizations of human nature inform all that we do. And as I read the literature, and as I and others engage the problem of subjectivity across cultures, I am struck by the fact that there are striking developmental commonalities across the human life career, as well as certain recurring problems of public ethics in late-modern societies. One is struck by this whether we look at the nature of social interaction during the first weeks of life or language acquisition, or whether, as Richard Shweder did some years ago, we look at the way in which pre-adolescent youth learn to reason morally in Orissa, India, and South Chicago. It's that tension between the universal or convergent, and the cultural and differentiating that I find especially interesting.

So what's this mean for religion and politics? Cultural anthropology, cultural studies, and feminist philosophers like Judith Butler have taught us to think that our subjectivities are constituted by the cultural discourses we learn and inhabit. But I think it might be worthwhile to consider other, less discursively powerful views of subjectivity and subject formation. Some varieties of psychological anthropology, like those of Arthur Kleinman or Maurice Bloch, as well as much recent research on moral development in cross-cultural psychology, reminds us that our subjectivities are never exhaustively constituted by the cultural discourses we learn and engage. As human subjects, we bring competencies, dispositions, and unique life memories to the learning of language and culture, and these are never *entirely* erased by or subsumed within the discourses we learn. In this sense, we never fully inhabit a culture. There is something irreducibly interactive, decentered, and need-seeking to our subjectivity, and some dimensions of this subjectivity provide us with very real bridges to the experience of other individuals and groups.

DKK: I'm struck by your focus on children in your teaching. One of the themes that have come up with a fair amount of frequency in these Rites and Responsibilities conversations has been questions about generations. So, the public life of religion is not just about what adults do, or what adults do in social formations and political formations, it's also what we do as we hand down traditions to younger folks. This is true with traditions, secular or religious, that attempt to establish continuities between what we inherit and what we hand down. A concept that kept coming to me as I read through your work was responsiveness, particularly in regard to Islam: responsiveness to perception, to precedent, and to promise. As you are well aware, there is a perception in the West about Islam—which may really be a set of misperceptions—that there are no precedents, in Indonesia and elsewhere, for the cultivation of the common good in regard to democracy, in regard to education, in regard to cultural innovation and the question of promise. These themes are persistent ones in your work on democratic civility and civil society.

RH: Well, I would like to think that those three themes do indeed run through my work. But, speaking specifically about Islam—yes, the issue of how Islamic discourses and practices shape Muslim subjectivities has moved to the fore in recent years. And I understand Islam against the background of my

own pragmatic and decentered understanding of how subjectivity and ethical problem-solving operate within and across cultures. So, I see actors, both at the individual and collective level, engaging traditions in a very active but never subjectively totalizing way. This is the case, I believe, even for those among the religiously pious who aspire to a totalizing “subjectivation” of their being. I think when one looks in detail at both the contemporary Muslim world and the history of Islamic education, one can see actors selectively engaging their tradition in a way that shows the interplay of culturally salient themes as well as the not-so-salient competencies, desires, and concerns of individual and social groups. The process of engagement doesn’t unfold in the self-conscious and subjectively unitary way that some rational-choice theorists emphasize. But there is nonetheless a selective engagement and mutual imbrication of subjective and cultural concerns. In this sense, whether we are speaking of pietist Muslims, Pentecostals, or humanist liberals, subjectivity is never coterminous with, or constituted by, any discursive tradition.

My point in this is not to assert some amorphous and naively voluntaristic notion of individual agency, like that which we encounter in some varieties of rational choice theory or, in a different manner, nineteenth-century American romanticism. The agency we encounter here is one that operates within the horizons of a constructed and constraining social reality. Nonetheless, there is more to inhabiting a tradition than internalizing prefigured meanings. At the subjective and collective level, the acquisition and deployment of culture is not just a matter of mimesis, imitating one’s predecessors. It’s also a matter of recovering elements in one’s traditions or cultural environment to solve certain social and individual life-problems, such as those related to living together in deeply plural societies.

This theme is one that I am happy to say has recently surged to the fore in the anthropology of Islam and “everyday ethics,” as in the work of young scholars like Samuli Schielke. But some years ago a similar idea was developed in a different cultural context and a cultural psychological way in Arthur Kleinman’s pathbreaking work on emotions and depression in China. These and other approaches highlight the inherent multivalence of human subjectivity, and the interplay between cultural discourses, social relations, and a personal subjectivity operative in all human experience.

But, one also sees evidence of processes like these in unexpected fields, for example, the study of Islamic jurisprudence. Pluralism, or plurality more specifically, in Islam, is not something that is invented by contemporary thinkers so as to justify, for example, the idea that Islam can be compatible with democracy. General and legal reasoning in Islam are by their very nature deeply plural and situationally contingent, not entities whose experience by human agents is ever fixed and finished for all time.

DKK: You say something to that effect in a few different places—I’m thinking particularly in [Civil Islam](#)—with the case of Indonesia being a really fascinating one in regard to these questions about sovereignty and authority and accountability. You write that what happens in Indonesia is as significant an example of democratic transition as those that took place in post-communist Europe or in post-Franco Spain. That sounds right to me, notionally. So my question is: Why is it that in the West we don’t appreciate with much substance the significance of Indonesia not just as a political and cultural phenomenon but as a precedent? Again, the issue of precedent. That is, Indonesia as setting an Islamic precedent as opposed to all that happens in Islam in the Middle East.

RH: Well, there’s a practical as well as an intellectual reason for that neglect. And I actually do not mean to single out Indonesia as a special or superlative case. Rather I reference Indonesia so as to draw Western and even some Muslim publics toward a deeper engagement with the diversity of Muslim societies.

DKK: Sure.

RH: I would however, like to make Indonesia one among several important cases that we need to consider, so as to pluralize our understanding of the contemporary Muslim world—a world in which, we have to remember, twenty percent of the population is Arab, and about sixty to sixty-four percent of the population is Asian.

DKK: Right.

RH: But, OK, back to your original question, as to why Indonesia has not loomed larger, I think there are some fairly simple reasons for the neglect. One is that coverage of the Muslim world has been deeply affected in Western countries by their colonial and post-colonial involvements. With the exception of the Netherlands, where Indonesia is well-known, the areas of the Muslim world that receive the greatest attention in the U.S. and Western Europe are North Africa and the Middle East, as well as Iran. Secondly, with regards to the U.S., this Middle Eastern bias in the coverage of Islam is reinforced by the political interests put in place by U.S. involvement with Israel. In the U.S. in particular, the securitization of much of the media and public's gaze on this part of the Muslim world has also not been conducive to a nuanced understanding of Muslims. Yet, the optimist in me notes that things are changing. Scholars of Islam today devote far more attention to African and Asian Islam than was the case a generation ago. In comparative politics, scholars like Al Stepan of Columbia University, have brilliantly highlighted the importance of Indonesia, Senegal, Turkey, and many other long-overlooked Muslim-majority countries for our understanding of Muslim politics.

DKK: Right. When you and I met a few weeks ago at the SSRC meetings on Mindanao, I was struck by—maybe because you and Al were in the room—both the ways in which comparative politics speaks in a related but slightly different idiom than straight-up political theory. And by straight-up political theory, I mean theory that is tilted toward generating theory, even as it expresses concerns that you share, about justice, equality, freedom, pluralism. One of the strong critiques that you make says something to the following effect: “Well, a lot of contemporary political theory rings a bit empty, precisely because it doesn't understand the thick complexity of what happens in a place like Indonesia, or a place like Turkey.” So how do you help make that translation? It's not that theorists are insignificant, particularly well-placed theorists, in terms of the influence they have, both on policy and public perception. For example, you refer a lot to [Samuel Huntington's book](#)...

RH: Critically! [Laughs].

DKK: Yes, critically! And there are a few figures I want to talk about in regard to that. Nevertheless, how do you talk about these complexities to the academy and to the various publics, whether it's a discussion of the ulama, or the intellectual classes? Or let's say a child in Jakarta? What do you say to a child in Jakarta about these issues? How do you talk to a child in Jakarta about the misperceptions of his or her tradition? About the misperceptions and the politicization of his or her tradition?

RH: Well, those are big questions, and all are important. What I would explain to, say, youth in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, or Istanbul is easy to relate, since my wife, Nancy Smith-Hefner, and I have occasion to speak with youth groups regularly, since this is a major part of what we do in our research, and what we value personally. What I say when speaking in such groups usually begins, not with the rarefied discourses of formal ethics or religious doctrine, but with down-to-earth comparisons of the life circumstances and aspirations of youth in different parts of the world. Only after grounding ourselves in the “lived,” the life-situational, and existential, do my interlocutors and I begin to speak about more explicit and formalized doctrines. Approaching Islam or the so-called liberal West in this way makes it easier to highlight the situated and contingent ways in which actors use ethical and religious ideas to resolve certain problems.

By moving the discussion upward from the situated lives and challenges of real-and-existing people to religious and ethical discourses, I also find that most people have an easier time recognizing that we moderns share much in common, and the differences that do exist are not the result of some timeless clash of civilizations.

I suspect I use a similar method when speaking in policy circles—or when, for a year and a half in the late 1990s, I sat around a seminar table with Sam Huntington. That is, even while joining with Alasdair MacIntyre and Talal Asad (two scholars from whom I have also learned much) in recognizing the importance of ethical traditions, I try to show that the way in which elements of that tradition are amplified or damped (to borrow terms from Arthur Kleinman again) depends heavily on the circumstances in which actors find themselves, and on the concerns they share and pursue. I believe this approach offers a different way of thinking about religions and civilizations than the clash of neatly opposed, core civilizations Sam Huntington had in mind.

DKK: The strong anthropological commitment to understanding cultural complexity for which you advocate is evident in [Democratic Civility](#), as well as in Civil Islam, and in some of your more recent work. It's notable that you make very strong claims about the universality of certain kinds of value and virtue commitments.

RH: Yes. Although, if I may be allowed a more convoluted phrasing, perhaps we might say the “accessibility” of certain values and virtues in the convergent circumstances of the late-modern age.

DKK: Especially equality, freedom, toleration, and so on, as indispensable to the persistent need to attend to and to cultivate civil society. So how do you square those two together, namely, the commitment to rendering thick pictures of everyday life and these universal values and virtues? I don't want to call them abstract, because I don't think that's a useful way to characterize them. But these universal claims about common human purpose—maybe, is a better way of putting it.

RH: I square them, in part, by trying to think like a practical anthropologist or sociologist—and a variety of generative sociologist, in particular—when reflecting on questions like the conditions of democracy's possibility. If, like Sam Huntington or radical Islamists who reject democracy as un-Islamic, you see democracy's prospects as depending on a society's having long nurtured an ancient discourse called “democracy” or the “separation of religion and state,” then, yes, democracy, equality, freedom, and all the rest are not likely to be imaginable in most of the world. But, again, my view of cultural and political genealogy is more situationist and generative than it is Nietzschean-genealogical. I don't see public interest in democracy as contingent on a people being able to trace lineal ties back some 2400 years to some curious experiments in elite male politics in Athens, Greece.

Rather, I see democratization as something that has had multiple genealogies, reflecting commonalities or convergences in late-modern political and public-ethical problem-solving. In other words, as I see it, “democracy” is above all a creative response to problems of plurality and coexistence that happen to be widespread in the late-modern world. The problems include how to live together in a world of difference, how to limit the power of the modern state as well as uncivil groups in society, how to enhance the dignity and participation of women in world where the patriarchal traffic in women—in Levi-Strauss's sense—is no longer a precondition for family or political life. The ideals of human dignity, democracy, and pluralism are today attractive across cultures not because of their Western genealogy, but because they are cultural instruments reinvented and contextualized by actors and societies who find themselves confronting “family-resemblant” ethico-political problems.

DKK: For sure. Let's talk about the family resemblances, and let's go back for a moment to this word "precedent."

RH: Yes.

DKK: If we consider concepts like "Muslim democrats" or "Muslim democratic formation"—I don't know if you use that phrase—it seems clear that these concepts have either been under-acknowledged or under-recognized. Given these conditions, can you give us an example of democratic formation in a Muslim-majority country that would be an instructive example to and for the West? An example that says, “Here is a vibrant form of democratic life, and it took place or is taking place within the Islamic world, not despite Islam.” I think one of the bad-faith narratives about Islam says that democracy happens in the Muslim world despite Islam, despite what Islam wants for itself.

RH: Well, I think there are two striking examples. And then there are a number of still important but, for a variety of reasons, less salient examples. But the two most striking examples of Muslim democracies today are Indonesia and Turkey. People will point out that the Turkish state was until recently Kemalist, and was therefore a largely laicist state. On these grounds some would say that the Turkish case is too exceptional to figure in any discussion of Islam and democracy. But since the 1970s Turkey has experienced an Islamic resurgence comparable to that which we've seen across most of the Muslim world. In Turkey, as the political scientist Ahmet Kuru has so insightfully argued, the state structure that was put in place during

most of the twentieth century was more aggressively secularist than that in the great majority of Muslim societies around the world. Inevitably, then, Turkey's democratization shows some path-dependent contingencies and imperfections, not least of all with regard to ethnic minorities like the Kurds or religious minorities like the Alevis. That said, the continuing relaxation of military controls, the growing openness of electoral competition, and the preference among observant Muslims for an ethicalized profession of Islam rather than a woodenly formalistic implementation of sharia codes—all this bespeaks a political development of global importance.

The path-dependent nature and imperfection of democratization in Indonesia is somewhat different. Indonesia is sometimes described as a secular-nationalist state, but the reality is more complex. The country's constitutional framework is a multi-confessional, "confessionalized" state, in the sense that the state is actively committed to the promotion of religion as a public good.

But the way in which this confessional commitment has been realized has varied over time, in a manner that both expressed and influenced Indonesian politics. From '65-'66 until 1998, Indonesia was ruled by an authoritarian and, at first, conservative, nationalist ruler, President Suharto. However, in the last fifteen years of Suharto's New Order government, the country witnessed an unprecedented resurgence of Islamic observance in society. Although, in the last five years of his rule, Suharto attempted to deflect the growing opposition to his rule by cultivating ties to anti-democratic Islamists, in the 1990s the country nonetheless developed a lively pro-democracy movement at the forefront of which were Muslim activists and intellectuals. Since Suharto's fall, conservative Islamists have been consistently rebuffed in national elections. But small alliances of radical Islamist militias have taken advantage of the post-Suharto spring to press, sometimes violently, for curbs on Christian church-building as well as non-conformist Muslim groupings like the Ahmadiyah. So yes, there are path-dependent peculiarities and imperfections to democratization in Indonesia, as in Turkey, but this is par for the course in the democratization game, including here in the West. Democratization is always characterized by heightened levels of public participation, and at times this participation may result in massification that undermines rather than strengthens citizen rights and democratic institutions.

DKK: By massification, I assume you mean, not just popularization, but a sort of populism that can infuse democratic systems. As you know, there is an anxiety even among democratic theorists that thoroughgoing democracy—not quite radical democracy—in that sense, isn't necessarily a good thing, insofar as there are popular formations that are primarily concerned to establish the authority of a particular mindset.

RH: That's right. Indeed, I use the term to refer to a situation in which one sees, in whatever sphere—be it religion, politics, cultural life, the economy, etc.—heightened rates of popular participation, but without that participation necessarily being regulated or regularized by democratic or pluralism-embracing norms. So, massification can lead in some instances to democratization, but it need not: it can team up with highly uncivil and anti-pluralist movements or imaginaries. The challenge in any modern democratic system, then, is to take that heightened mobility and mobilization that characterize so much of modern society and canalize them in ways that reinforce a culture of democratic proceduralism and citizen rights for all. The history of mass politics in the mid-twentieth century West reminds us that the outcome of efforts like these is never a foregone conclusion.

DKK: You have written that Suharto had, at one point, sought out either moderate or even liberal Muslim leaders as he was trying to re-think what Indonesia was as a nation. And then he moved away from these moderates and liberals toward more conservative, traditionalist, and dogmatic figures. How do you explain this move? Would you ascribe Suharto's shift in policy to anxiety about massification, and the anxieties about the loss of control?

RH: There were issues related to massification, but Suharto, actually, was a fairly effective administrator and, more importantly, a brilliant if at times ruthless tactician, a master of selective mobilization, which in many instances took the form of "divide and conquer." As the Islamic resurgence gained momentum, in the mid-1980s, he realized that it posed a threat to his rule. Indeed, as one of his advisers told me in 1992, he looked at what had happened in Iran, and he realized that, for tactical reasons, he'd better engage the organized Muslim community more effectively. But his first tack, as you said, was to reach out to Muslim

moderates, if you will—indeed, even Muslim liberals, such as a dear friend and teacher of mine, Nurcholish Madjid, who died a few years ago, and who was really one of the great thinkers of late twentieth-century Islam. So, Suharto first reached out to Madjid, as well as to other Muslim reformers who were linked to mass organizations, thinking that intellectuals and leaders of Muslim mass organizations would allow him to co-opt and control the Muslim community.

DKK: Normatively speaking, in terms of these moderate or liberal Muslim political theorists, what were they telling Suharto, particularly in contrast to the conservative views he sought out later on? I'm curious about that difference.

RH: What those leaders told Suharto is that he had to take steps to contain corruption, including that of his children, and to transition to a democratic political order. Nurcholish Madjid was quite explicit about this in his speeches and writings, though he was not a vociferous, street-fighting opponent of Suharto—other people, like Abdurrahman Wahid, the now-deceased head of Nahdlatul Ulama, and the man who was president of Indonesia from late 1998 to 2001, played a more complex and mass-politics game. Both men, however, spoke of the importance of free elections, a deepening of citizen rights, religious freedom, and civil society, and both too saw parallels between Indonesia and the earlier processes of democratization in Taiwan and Korea.

DKK: "Five Tigers." That sort of rhetoric.

RH: That's right. Indonesia has always been unusual in that, although it is the world's largest Muslim-majority country, on matters of politics and economics many in the political class have looked as readily to East Asia as they have the Middle East for political and economic lessons.

In any case, because Madjid, Wahid, and others continued to press for democratic reforms, from about 1994 to 1998 President Suharto reached out to hardline Islamists who had earlier been his critics, and he succeeded in winning them to his cause by alleging that the democracy movement was really a kind of Christian-influenced organization, and that democracy itself was antithetical to Islam. But the great majority of Muslim leaders in the late 1980s and early 1990s had already concluded that constitutionalism and democracy were not merely compatible with Islam but required by the circumstances of modern life and politics.

DKK: Well, let's shift a little bit, on that point. You've written quite a bit about modernities and multiple modernities. Taking the examples you just cited, you write that Suharto and the Indonesians looked to South Korea and...was it Taiwan?

RH: Taiwan, yes. But I was speaking more of Suharto's critics than Suharto himself.

DKK: Right. South Korea and Taiwan. In both cases, it wasn't simply culture and ideas that rendered the gradual changes to democracy. Particularly in Korea, you had military regimes. These two elements—capitalism and militarism—are critical here. South Korea probably doesn't make a transition to democracy if it doesn't receive pressures around trade and military practices. In the early 1980s, when Korean democracy was at best imperfect, the pressure took the form of a message that said "Well, if you're going to move to the First World order, if you're going to join that club, you have to at least act like you belong in that club, meaning that you have some semblance of democratic practices." I guess I'm asking about these complex global forces: capitalism as a complex, complicit force at times—sometimes as a benefit of democracy, at other times a hindrance to democratic development; militarism as another complex complicit force—certainly predominantly complicit in preventing democratic formation, and yet at other times complicit, usually partially and reluctantly, in the generation of democratic life in nations like Indonesia or Korea or Taiwan. Again, these are big, big topics, and big, big forces. I am constantly looking for ways to get some critical and conceptual hooks into these sorts of big topics, in an attempt to try to understand how political, cultural, and social changes are rendered, but also how people live the effects of changes in these big forces. So again I turn to you as an anthropologist who has sociological interests to help get a handle on all of this.

RH: Well, all those global forces were very much in play in Indonesia, as they were in Korea and Taiwan, but in a locally grounded or mediated way. It is no coincidence that the United States, in the aftermath of the Cold War, through the State Department, USAID, and even the Department of Defense, began to press Suharto to implement political reform. But the pressure was effective in large part because in Indonesian society there were political elites and mass constituencies who had already committed themselves to democratic pluralism.

DKK: Right.

RH: And the process as a whole was deeply dependent on other domestic developments, which included the formation of a middle class that, while much smaller than its counterparts in Taiwan and South Korea, was still influential and, equally importantly, had an interest, right from the beginning, in the development of a new kind of public sphere—not necessarily a democratic public sphere, but a public sphere that allowed for a much wider exchange of views than had previously been possible. Many public spheres are actually, from a political-theoretical perspective, rather banal or uninteresting entities. But they're nonetheless real and important, especially inasmuch as they are part of the process of expectation-building whereby new publics come to imagine and debate who they are. That process was critical here in Indonesia in the 1990s, as it is in the Arab world today. The process of democratization that eventually unfolded was similar to what Al Stepan had observed in Latin America many years earlier, for instance, although it had some particularities as well, not least the presence of a small, but well-organized radical Islamist community, which wanted nothing of this idea of democracy.

DKK: Right. That speaks both to and against what we were talking about earlier: democracy as happening despite Islam, and democracy happening because of Islam.

RH: Yes.

DKK: And when you talked about the rise of the kind of middle class, or, more specifically, the rise of the middle class that was also a rise of an intellectual class, I can't help but think again to a comparison to South Korea, where the military regime was directly pressured by the labor movement. Remember the massive labor riots, with acts of martyrdom and suicides.

RH: Yes, the parallels are striking.

DKK: I'm thinking about this particularly in regard to the symbolic effects of certain actors. The labor movement in South Korea was quite effective in its ability to deploy the symbolic significance of these folks who had put their lives on the line for political change, for social change. In the contemporary Muslim world, you have analogous attempts at heroization, especially after 9/11. Nonetheless, there are obvious problems with trying to talk about democratization after 9/11. Can you lay out what you consider some of them to be, both the large scale challenges that need to be addressed—particularly in regard to pressing for the formation of good publics in democracy—but also to the challenge of symbolic representations to both the world outside of Islam as well as perceptions within Islam?

RH: There are a number of points of entry to these questions. I think the first would be to focus, not so much on activists, but on what is really an unacknowledged, or under-acknowledged, change in popular political culture across most of the Muslim world. And it really is remarkable. When I, or when people like Al Stepan, refer to this change, we're sometimes criticized for exaggerating its scale, but in fact I think it's hard to exaggerate this change's importance. What I'm referring to is the fact that the majority of Muslims today—in Arab as well as non-Arab Muslim-majority countries—affirm that democracy is not just compatible with Islam but is a political system to which they aspire. But one might well ask, as some critics, including Samuel Huntington, have, “Is democracy for such Muslim publics not just another term for majoritarianism?” But when you look at the survey data, and especially when you go beyond the survey data and look at interviews and discussions of democracy in public life, one sees that the operative idea of democracy includes a variety of citizen rights, including freedom of speech, association, and a variety of other non-majoritarian rights. Now, it is important to note that there are exceptions to the trend. Both polling and interview data from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and, at least prior to the Arab spring, Libya

indicate that publics in those countries seem to think that there are inconsistencies or incompatibilities between Islam and democracy. But even in these cases there's evidence of porousness and change.

But it is equally important to make a second point, one which complicates my otherwise optimistic account. There remain areas of tension or friction between the Muslim publics' democratic aspirations and rights typically associated with democratic citizenship. There are three especially recurring points of tension: with regard to women, non-Muslim minorities, and, perhaps most problematically, Muslim non-conformists, that is, Muslims who profess Islam in a way that their fellow Muslims don't regard as properly Islamic. With regard to women, I might note that, to many Westerners, this looks like the big wrench in the democratic machine, but I think it's worth considering that across most of the Muslim world, with the notable exception of traumatized or tribalized societies, like Afghanistan or the Northwest Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) of Pakistan, there's an educational reformation taking place, such that women are now either approaching or already a majority in higher education. And even where they're not a majority, their numbers have increased spectacularly, as is the case even in Saudi Arabia, a country that, in 1960, did not have primary education for girls. In places like Egypt, too, the majority—it's a slight majority, but a majority nonetheless—of students in higher education are women. And the same is true of Malaysia.

DKK: In terms of the higher education that they're receiving, how would you characterize it? What would you compare it to? Is it comparable to forms of higher education that take the liberal arts as a model? What kind of higher education are these women receiving?

RH: In most instances, it's a professional or sometimes basic liberal arts education. But it's nonetheless recognizably similar to what we in the West associate with higher education. And its impact on gender relations is just beginning to be felt. In fact, as scholars like Leila Ahmed have long emphasized, it seems we're in the early stages of a far-reaching transformation in gender relations across the Muslim world. I would add, however, that Western analysts have to be careful here. The gender revolution in much of the Muslim world is not likely to be a simple replay of what we sometimes too simplistically think of as first-generation feminism in the West, with its secularist emphasis on individual rights and the maximization of individual autonomy ("choice"). The gender reformation in Muslim lands is taking place in conjunction with a broad religious revival, and the two developments will continue to inform and shape each other. I would note, however, that *religious* feminisms in the late-modern West showed a similarly complex interweaving of concerns.

The issue of non-Muslims is also a fraught one. What I mean is that, if we take the historical sharia as our point of reference, the situation of non-Muslim minorities in a Muslim-majority society might appear to be a real impediment to democracy. There is in classical jurisprudence the doctrine of *ahl al-dhimma*, or "protected minorities," a sort of political contract recognized between Muslim rulers and their non-Muslim subjects. The agreement extends rights of self-organization to non-Muslim communities but, in matters of public welfare and politics, it relegates non-Muslims to an unambiguously second-class status. But what's striking about developments over the past thirty years is that, while a few Islamist conservatives have attempted to revive the concept of protected minorities (and a variation on the model is used in the Islamic Republic of Iran), the model as a whole has not caught on. This said, as with the Copts in Egypt or Pentecostals in Indonesia, the problem of religious minorities can be a vexing one, and is likely to remain an issue of public contention for some years to come.

DKK: Right. There are a few pieces that you've written, both in the introduction to Civil Islam, as well as your essay "On the History and Cross-Cultural Possibility of a Democratic Ideal," in Democratic Civility, where you make very punctuated conclusions about the necessity of constitutionalism.

RH: That's right.

DKK: And I must admit, I was caught off-guard both times when I read this. But it makes more sense given what you've just described, particularly those three factors around gender and non-Arab or non-Muslim minorities, and the failures of recognition. And I take the point you're making about constitutionalism to be, in part, a claim for the need for some kind of apparatus and structure and set of procedures that allows

for change and growth, which is another way of saying it allows for modernity to happen in East Asia, as well as in Muslim-majority societies.

RH: Yes. Perhaps another reason that you see me returning to what looks like a surprisingly formalistic or institutional understanding of democracy, with an emphasis on constitutionalism, has to do with my sobered or realist understanding of civil society, and my defection early on, if you will, from classical Toquevillian views of democracy and civil society. I was never actually a Toquevillian, as the 1998 piece on “democratic civility” makes clear, but if anything I’m now less Toquevillian than ever. My realist sense of civil society is informed by what we’ve seen in post-communist Yugoslavia and parts of Eastern Europe, as well as what we’ve seen in some transitional settings in Africa and in some Muslim-majority countries. In all of these examples, the rise of vibrant associations and networks in the middle ground between the family and the state—that is, “civil” society in the structural sense of the phrase—has not always been conducive to the generalization, or universalization, of “civil” culture in the *normative* sense of that term. In the 1990s, there was a tendency among some civil society theorists toward what we might call a structural reductionism. The assumption was, develop intermediary, or “civil,” associations independent of the state, and you’ll eventually get democratic habits of the heart. But social and political reality is more complex: civic associations, structurally speaking, are not always civil in the normative sense of the term.

DKK: So is this, at least in part, why you are so hard on radical democrats?

RH: Yes, that’s exactly right. Hard on, yes, but appreciative of. I like the way in which radical democrats tweak the nose of classical democratic theorists and say, in effect, “You can have a democracy in the formal electoral arena, but what does this mean if there is no democracy in economic life, civil society, or gender relations?” This is an interesting and important critique, one which projects the democratic norm more deeply into society. But there are a number of levels at which this impulse may become problematic. First of all, the package deal that is democratic normativity is actually made up of several related but potentially contradictory normative strains. The most notable of these is the tension between equality and individual autonomy. As you radicalize democracy, then, the question becomes, are you going to maximize equality or individual autonomy? We can see, from our own experience in American society, that even in a long-consolidated democracy, these two values may not merely stand in tension but can contradict each other. Here in the U.S., we saw just such a tension in the debate in the 1970s and 1980s over gender- and race-based affirmative action. So, left to itself, radical democracy leaves some of the most vexing of democracy’s normative dilemmas unresolved.

DKK: If you consider the two prominent advocates of radical democracy—I’m thinking of Laclau and Mouffe—and if you read their recent work, their most recent writings, you would think that they were Rawlsian political liberals. [Robert laughs]. You know, I heard Laclau give a talk maybe about five years ago, and it was straight-up political liberalism!

RH: Yes, I give them great credit for this intellectual evolution: they correctly perceived and then addressed, quite courageously I feel, tensions in the earlier radical democrat program.

DKK: And at the time I thought, “Well, here’s someone who made his name as a radical democrat, talking about hegemony and so on, and he now is arguing for the priority of rational deliberation.” My guess is that at some point he became disenchanted with radical democracy practices and possibilities. This is fascinating and troubling to me. I don’t want to say that Laclau’s or Mouffe’s respective shifts in their political thought represent inevitable changes that radical democrats will undergo. Nevertheless, they represent cautionary tales, albeit fascinating ones, if you’re thinking about democracy not just as episodic possibility but as a long-term political aspiration. There are moments, Durkheimian moments of collective efflorescence, in which the call for democratic participation is an important one. But the hard work, as you were saying, demanded by the kind of banal forms of public life that most theorists don’t want to pay much attention to, may very well induce a kind of disenchantment—a response that asks “Well, what was this all about in the first place?” Right?

RH: Yes, well said. The banality of everyday democracy, its slow routinization and habituation, can lead to impatience and disappointment, not least among activists and intellectuals. But in reality there’s nothing

banal about drawing democratic discussions and procedures down into the lives and worldviews of ordinary women and men

DKK: It's very much Weber's notion of "the slow boring of hard boards"...

RH: Yes.

DKK: .The demands of "real politics"...

RH: Yes, and the demands of real-and-existing public ethics.

DKK: ...weighing a politics that defers to the pragmatic versus a politics that seeks to inspire change, and instill change, and yet not a frame that will fully displace religion. Right? So, for example, you have a lot of people working on political theology, on questions about political theology at the moment. And my worry there is that there's a potential over-investment in the political, in what the political can render, such as what we were discussing earlier in terms of making meaning. A bit like the Obama campaign versus the Obama presidency...a pretty good example of over-inflated political theology! [Both laugh]. During Obama's campaign there was a headiness in the air about democracy's possibilities. Do you think there is that kind of over-investment in the political, an over-investment in democracy right now? As opposed to, say, critical reflection about supposedly secularized religious traditions, or moral traditions?

RH: Well, there are a couple of things going on in those efforts to construct "political theologies." One is an effort, I think, simply to remind political theorists that religious ideas are important, and they have a salience beyond intellectual and academic circles, a salience and a resonance that in some instances is much wider than that which is enjoyed by formal political theory. That's a simple fact, and it's important. There's also, I suspect, an effort, not to move religion in directions which are entirely new, but to explore latent potentialities of the religious. Every religious tradition, as it is lived or enacted, is the result of both a powerful social idealism and inevitable pragmatic accommodation. Both the ideals and the accommodations change over time, and the latent, implicit, or as yet unelaborated potentialities are discovered, or rediscovered, and experimented with in the face of new opportunities and challenges. And I think that's also what many of the political theologies are trying to do.

Certainly in the Muslim world, that's very much the case, though there, I think, political theology would more appropriately be called political *fiqh*, that is, political jurisprudence, because jurisprudence occupies the space, for Muslims, that theology does for Western Christianity. And, for a variety of reasons, *fiqh* has the potential to become a far more central issue of contention and debate in Muslim-majority societies than has been the case for Christian theology in the West, at least for the West for most of what we now call the late-modern period. In Muslim lands, the discursive tradition that is the *fiqh* was never as severely marginalized from public life. Nonetheless, and contrary to the claims of some conservative Islamists, the law is today being renewed and reconstructed in light of the new circumstances in which Muslims find themselves. The process is not going to be easy, and its outcome will not be singular. On one hand there are those who insist that the tried and true methods and conclusions of classical jurisprudence must be maintained. But then there are those—from both democratic and conservative camps, I might add—who insist that individual rulings should be made in light of the overarching aims of God's law, the *maqasid ash-sharia*. Scholars like Tariq Ramadan point out that only the latter approach can draw the law and Islamic ethics into more vigorous dialogue with modern problems

DKK: So, can you fill that out on two levels? First, who are the figures in that tradition of fiqh that have gone under-recognized in the West, that is, figures who most of us in the West don't know about? And then second, talk a bit more, if you would, about why there's a more immediate practical effect in the development of fiqh?

RH: Let me begin, maybe, with the second, because I think that this is one of the questions that comes up, for example, when one thinks of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* and some of the discussion that's taken place of his portrayal of Western Christianity and late Christianity, as opposed to Islam, on which he focuses very little. But a number of people who've commented on Taylor have, quite appropriately drawn

contrasts with the Muslim world. And of course the point that comes up is that Islam doesn't have a church and, at least in a sacramental sense, doesn't have a clergy. It does have religious specialists, the *ulama*, "those who know," and what they know especially, though not exclusively, is *fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence, in all of its rich variety, complexity, and unfinishedness.

But there's more there, as well. To answer your question as to why *fiqh* looms so large in public ethics and politics in the contemporary world, in the absence of a church, and in the absence of a sacramental clergy, the major institution through which Islam's normative visions were disseminated across the vast expanse of territory that is the Muslim world was the madrasa system. The madrasa system has a very complex history. In some Muslim societies, it was more closely linked to the state, not least in the Ottoman period. But in other state systems—the Mughal, for instance, or in Egypt, even under the Ottomans—madrassas enjoyed a great degree of legal and economic autonomy, and represented a key institution in Muslim "civil" society.

So, what's the significance of this for Islam, and what's its significance for politics? Prior to say, 1800, the historian Carter Findley tells us, about two percent of the population of the Middle East was literate. The figure may have been higher in urban areas, but not greatly.

DKK: In other words, a very low number.

RH: Yes. More people than that—more men, in particular—had, of course, gone through the madrasa system and learned to recite if not comprehend verses from the Qur'an, but that wouldn't amount to what today we would call "functional literacy," which is what Finley was talking about. But, nonetheless, there was this small portion of the population that had been funneled through the educational complex, which was supported by the state but typically not controlled by it, wherein people were socialized into an understanding of Islamic norms. Most of these had to do with how to live one's social and personal life as a Muslim. That's what *fiqh* is primarily concerned with: not politics or the state, but relations with God and one's religious fellows.

But the law had a lot to say about marriage, divorce, and gender relations; it had a lot to say about commerce; and it had perhaps not as much but nonetheless some serious things to say about relations with non-Muslims.

So wherever it took hold, the madrasa system put in place a kind of literate constituency with a cultivated commitment to the implementation of Islamic norms in society. And it was this simple but powerful institutional complex that succeeded in creating this convergence of normative ideals on matters where the law is explicit, which we see across the Muslim world up to the modern period. This educational-and-normative constellation survived into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although no longer in a hegemonic position. In most countries it eventually collided with, and was displaced by varieties of secular law, or secular law lightly spiced with a little Islam. Although marginalized in this way, the law was never entirely forgotten. It continued to inspire great numbers of people, and whenever the secular nationalist system fell into crisis, lo and behold, we saw large numbers of people tapping into the earlier normative tradition, not for set answers, but for ways of publicly rethinking key ethical and political problems.

DKK: That's fascinating. I can't help but think of the parallels to Confucianism—a pervasive worldview that's able to inculcate a whole set of moral norms and moral systems, precisely through "education," broadly understood, and through the organization of civil society. Even in modernity, Confucianism's hangover, as it were, continues to resonate, even for folks who disavow Confucianism. And so, I'm curious, then, about ways to think about that parallel: about the effects of these traditions, or rather the ways these traditions encounter modernity and the variety of expressive forms they take. We might compare the different responses of modernity between Islam and Confucianism. It's an old issue in the debates about secularism and secularization: the balance that is struck between the maintenance of "tradition" and forms of disavowal of these ways of being, between acknowledging and respecting a spiritual and moral heritage and genealogy, and knowing that change, often seismic change, is inevitable. Public intellectuals play an important role in thinking through how to render, live, and endure through these shifting balances and change. Certainly, critical scholarship and institution-building play important roles here. What seems very

significant to me about these stories, or, more specifically, the genealogy you just told so beautifully is that it's a very powerful counter-argument to the polemics one hears in regard to Islam and secularism, in regard to Islam and modernity. I'm thinking about someone like Hirsi Ali, who is apparently everywhere right now! In her capacity as a public figure, what does she do? She disavows Islam, and says, "Well, Christianity's great, isn't it?" In a very naïve manner, she says to the Muslim world "Let's look elsewhere!"—to sources outside of Islam. I have lots of concerns about the "let's look elsewhere, and not look within" approach. So how do you expand on the genealogy you just identified to contend with this phenomenon?

RH: Well, first of all, since you mentioned the Confucian parallel, Confucian education and subject-formation, if you want to call it that, was organized in a somewhat different way, inasmuch as there was a far more extensive articulation of the educational system with state structures than there was in most of the Muslim world. Now, the Ottomans, actually, who were a rather important part of the Muslim world from 1500 to the early twentieth century...

DKK: I hear they had an army!

RH: Yes! And they had a more centrally controlled educational system than was the case in most other Muslim lands. So, in many ways the Ottoman educational system was, if you will, a little more mandarinized, and *ulama* at the center of state power had characteristics similar in some regards to those of the Confucian elite. But in the empire's hinterland, there were people who went through this educational system without the least regard to state employment or to otherwise positioning oneself vis-à-vis the state. And, in this sense, there was a public-cultural process similar to what you highlight in Confucian China. A large number of people who studied the Confucian classics and engaged in the kind of self-motivation that they emphasized didn't become mandarins, and that provided a widespread stability and continuity of tradition, similar, I think, to the even more decentralized educational system in most of the Muslim world. But your question is, I think, how does one stand within that tradition and engage it?

DKK: Yes. Exactly.

RH: The main thing one must keep in mind is that this style of reasoning, all throughout Islamic history, has been applied to new challenges and new problems in very dynamic ways. So there has always been a push into new horizons, some of which was then captured and funneled back into the textual tradition, the corpus of *fiqh*, but much of which was not. And that is why, I think, one of the most interesting tensions in Islamic civilization, and perhaps something that's a little different from the Confucian tradition, is that some of the greatest political writing was done by people who were writing handbooks for princes and providing counsel to governments, including on questions such as how to deal with religious minorities, or, in the case of Mughal India, how to deal with the enormous Hindu majority. But much of this rich intellectual legacy was not incorporated back into jurisprudence but remained a separate tradition. Now, as I said, for some secular Muslims, throughout much of the twentieth century, the revival of an authentically Islamic politics wasn't really a pressing issue. But for others it was, and certainly by the end of the twentieth century, the question of Islamic authenticity and identity was looming much larger. And the result of this parallel development, of *fiqh* and the manuals for princes, is that when Muslims go back and say, "Well, what is our Islamic heritage?" they focus exclusively on *fiqh*, that is, on jurisprudence, and overlook the wider body of literature that was created by Muslim scholars. Now, that may sound like a formula for disaster, but the other thing that needs to be said is that *fiqh* itself is such a rich and complex source that it contains rather remarkable resources of its own.

DKK: For sure. You made a comparison to Western Christendom earlier in regard to the ways in which modern theologians strive for political and cultural salience and relevance. In a manner of speaking, there is a disconnect, a contrast between a time when Christian theologians had widespread political and cultural impact and import—think of the debates over biblical criticism in the nineteenth century, or the cultural influence and prominence of the Niebuhr brothers, or the cultural stature of Barth or Tillich in the twentieth century—and the diminished influence of theologians in our time. It raises a question in regard to contemporary Islam, something like "Who is the analogue in Islam, say, to Reinhold Niebuhr?" For example, I did an interview with Tariq Ramadan in the fall of 2010. As much as I admire what he's doing in

his efforts to broaden the dialogues within and about the Muslim world, I wouldn't necessarily put him in the same category as Niebuhr, perhaps because I don't think Ramadan is doing the same kind of systematic work or attempting a critical project that one can compare to a figure like Niebuhr. Ramadan is a very important contemporary interventionist. But who else would you identify as doing this sort of intellectual and public heavy-lifting in the Muslim world? Surely there are people that we're not paying attention to. Maybe that's the question. Who are the people that we're not paying attention to that are attempting to speak to, who are attempting to maintain the integrity of Islamic traditions as we have been discussing? And if we were to pay more attention to these folks, might we be having a different discussion about Islamic modernity?

RH: Well, I'd like to break that question into two—first, who are the important thinkers, and then, second, to whom should we pay attention so as to get a different image of Islam as regards issues of democracy and pluralism. The first question is, I think, more important. And many of the more influential thinkers are more conservative than post-1960s Western liberals on questions of women's rights, and, of course, sexuality. In fact, issues related to alternate or plural sexuality, even among progressive and liberal thinkers, are for the most part a no-go zone.

But if we're interested in who's influential, we have to listen to popular conservative thinkers. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the very famous and probably single most influential juristic thinker in the Muslim world today, is one such example. As Noah Feldman has analyzed, Qaradawi provides a lightly qualified but substantial endorsement for the idea that Islam and democracy are compatible. While he may not be the first author that liberal democrats would want to cite, I think he is illustrative of a nonetheless significant accommodation between Islamic jurisprudence, on one hand, and modern political thought, on the other. Other figures we should look at would include Abdolkarim Soroush who's not a jurist, but he is a scholar, and a very synthetic scholar at that. And let me go back to Tariq Ramadan, who I do actually think is an extremely influential and important person. In his early works, Ramadan operated more as a public intellectual, conveying Muslim concerns to a Western audience, but also transmitting certain basic ideas about Western politics back to Muslim publics. But I think that in his more recent work on Islamic ethics and law Ramadan has demonstrated an impressive ability to weave between a much more substantive style of Islamic ethical reasoning and a host of modern questions related to citizenship, gender relations, pluralism, and democracy. I think Ramadan is extremely important, and his influence is likely to grow rather than decline.

DKK: Fair enough. I did not want to suggest that Ramadan is not a significant thinker by any stretch of the imagination. Indeed, I came away from my conversation with him deeply impressed. But I could also see why there are frustrations with him both within Muslim communities and outside of them—frustrations with, I suspect, someone who is trying to mediate on behalf of a tradition. In a manner of speaking, this is a thankless role. For conservatives, the mediation rendered by someone like Ramadan is considered a betrayal of tradition. For liberals, his may be a position that is not sufficiently flexible in regard to the central tenets of Islam. I'm thinking of a moment in our conversation when I asked him "How does Islam say democracy?" And his response was something to the effect, "Well, Islam has always said democracy." And I said, "Hold on! You'll have to break that claim down for me." I didn't get—and this may be due to the constraints of the interview form—a genealogical substantiation to his claim as you had done earlier in this interview, which is to say, an answer that indicated the democratic formations within Islam. Now it may be that he's not working in that register of complex genealogies all the time. He may do it at times. Nonetheless, I do think it's quite important to lift up figures like Ramadan or Soroush, especially given the white noise that surrounds these figures. It's important to peel back the polemics around them, and to be attuned to what they're actually saying. That becomes enormously difficult, as you know. How do you listen through polemics, despite the polemics? Huntington had that problem himself. Once the "clash of civilizations" phrase took on its own life, it was a challenge to peel back the polemics and ask, "What was Huntington really saying?" You can disagree with him, but it is not as if his was a negligible argument. It was—is an argument that you had to take seriously even if you disagreed with it.

RH: Yes, ah...yes! [Both laugh].

DKK: Let's shift a bit. I would be remiss if I did not ask you about your role in publishing [Ann Dunham's book](#). Ann Dunham was, of course, Barack Obama's mother. Since we were talking about madrassas and people who come through madrassas earlier, I am thinking about our own president's experience in Indonesia and in the madrassas there. Talk a little bit about how the book came to publication, but also your role in writing the afterward, and whether you think it'll have any role in Obama's handling of the public life of Islam.

RH: The book was actually the distillation of a more than one thousand-page thesis that Dunham had done with Alice Dewey in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Hawaii. Alice Dewey was a member of the original Modjokuto Mojohuto Team, along with Hildred Geertz, Clifford Geertz, Robert Jay, and, if I am not mistaken, a political scientist named Donald Fagg. So, Dewey goes way back. Dewey herself is an inspiring, larger-than-life figure—an economic anthropologist, who doesn't do much on religion but has done impressive research on grassroots and mid-level economic organization in places like Indonesia. And she was a major force in shaping Ann Dunham as an anthropologist, and training her to appreciate small-scale rural industries, the most important of which in Dunham's study was blacksmithing. The resulting dissertation is vast and far-ranging. It provides a one thousand year history of blacksmithing in Java, as well as a social anthropology of the culture and organization of blacksmithing today. Some of it makes for rather dry reading for non-specialists. But I read the book as a testimony to Dunham's ethical dedication to her field "subjects" and to the impressive breadth of her intellectual interests!

DKK: What?! A dry dissertation? Ha!

RH: What happened, anyway, is that Ann had always hoped to shorten and publish her dissertation, and then, sadly, she passed away in 1995, of cancer. She was still very young, still very vital. And Alice Dewey and Nancy Cooper, at the University of Hawaii, had this manuscript and thought for many years that they might do something with it. And then, I believe, it was Maya Soetoro-Ng, that is, President Obama's half-sister, who came forth in the late 1990s, and said, "Look, can't you do something with this?" It took many years, but eventually Nancy and Alice shortened the manuscript to some 500 pages, and it was published by Duke University Press. I have to say I didn't know Ann Dunham well. I did run into her a couple of times, however, in Yogyakarta, which is a university town and cultural center in central Java, Indonesia. At that time I was still very much an economic anthropologist, in addition to studying the politics of religion and Islamization. I remember being struck by a couple of things in our discussions. The most general impression I had was that Dunham was too darn fair and balanced in her assessment of the economic changes taking place all across Asia. At the time, my own politics, and my ideas about markets and market development, were somewhat more...

DKK: You were the Paul Krugman to her Barack Obama? [Laughs].

RH: Yes, exactly. But I was all the more impressed by Dunham's even-handedness! The other thing that struck me about her, and it came forth very movingly in her dissertation, was the complexity and integrity of her thought. This was not a woman eager to walk in an intellectual fashion parade.

Now, as I wrote in the afterword to Ann's book, she was working at a time at which, in Indonesia, the Islamic resurgence was just gathering momentum. And she was working in an area in south-central Java that was a latecomer to the process. I was out in East Java, an area that in many ways is very similar to Central Java, but where the Islamic resurgence had earlier become an inescapable reality. So, I had the benefit of being in a more vigorously Islamizing part of Java, and being forced to reflect on the process, than she did. I raised the point when I spoke with her, and I also make a brief comment on it in the afterword to her book. But her relative silence on Islam is, I think, the only omission in a study otherwise marked by a remarkable integrity and intellectual range. I cannot say this based on personal knowledge, but I have always had the suspicion that Dunham was a model of an intellectual style for her son, President Obama. Today, of course, some people would see this desire to consider a variety of standards and perspectives, to see all sides of a question, as a political weakness. But I will leave that judgment to the political pundits, and simply observe that, in the case of his mother, these qualities were real virtues.

DKK: So, let's finish with two questions: one about contemporary anthropology's anxieties about public hegemony, particularly in regard to Islam; and the second question about Islam and secularity.

RH: Well, on the anxieties in anthropology about the colonial legacy in the Muslim world—I think many of those are justified, although at times we can be so caught up with them as to lose sight of how rapidly things are changing. But yes, legacies like the category of religion itself, in particular the idea that religion requires, above all, a self-conscious systematization of belief and that this “confessionalized” notion of religion must be at the heart of one’s practice of Islam is a problem, not least when it is linked to public institutions designed to coerce a unitary profession of the faith.

We should be cautiously self-critical about some of our other anthropological anxieties, however, for example on matters of secularity and whether Islam can sanction a separation of religious authority from that of the state. In my opinion, this is not an issue that can be satisfactorily addressed through another Nietzschean genealogy of the concept of secularity. The fact is that the religious and political field in Muslim lands was never effectively regulated by a unitary discourse or normative regime. In most times and in most places, the scholarly or *ulama* community saw it as in its interest to keep the state at arm’s length, if not more. The actual degree of distance varied, and in Ottoman times it shrank considerably. But elsewhere in the Muslim world, scholarly authority was not merely practically but *insistently* separate from that of the state. That doesn’t mean, of course, that religion was “privatized.” The *ulama* community, or the madrasa-mosque complex that I talked about earlier, collaborated with the state in attempting to uphold certain normative ideas. But the idea that it ought to work closely or even merge with the state to create a kind of caesero-papist union was deeply antithetical to political thought and practice in most of the Muslim world. And, therefore, it’s highly ironic that some Western commentaries on Islam today, even in the academy, subscribe to what is a thoroughly modern, Islamist notion, one that is itself a rupture with the tradition, that is, this notion that in Islam there is always and everywhere a fusion of religion and state. That wasn’t the case historically. There is a lively and intellectually rationalized precedent within Islam’s normative tradition for a separation of powers and of authorities.

DKK: So let me see if I can put a slightly finer point on what you're saying. Insofar as a number of things that you have written about have been an attempt to puncture self-conceits of academics, it's worth noting that there has been a rise in what one might call an orthodox school of thought in regard to what secularism is and what it is not. You see this even in the consensus-formation around certain thinkers, whether it's Charles Taylor or José Casanova or Talal Asad. Despite protests to the contrary, there are strong claims not so much for the secularization thesis anymore but about “secularity,” and the multiplicities of secularity. But you're saying something even more specific about the ways in which that new discourse falls short.

RH: Well, it falls short not least of all with regard to Islam. But the Islamic example, I think, carries with it some general lessons, one of which is that we have to be careful about applying the concepts of secularism, secularity, and secularization to the whole of *any* society. I think that, as sociologists, as anthropologists, as political theorists, it is more culturally realistic to begin with the assumption that some degree of secularity has always existed in all societies. By this I mean that there have always been zones, or domains, in life, where the influence of religious ideals and authorities has been limited; “secularity” in this sense isn’t at all a uniquely modern phenomenon. And here I agree with some of the critiques that were made of Charles Taylor’s otherwise fine *A Secular Age*, in the recently published volume [Rethinking Secularism](#). I agree, namely, with those critiques that say that Taylor subscribes to what anthropologists forty years ago referred to as “the myth of the pious primitive.” And you can extend this, in Taylor’s case, to “the myth of the pious pre-modern”—that is, the assumption that pre-moderns lived in worlds that were uniformly saturated with religious meanings, and that those meanings corresponded more or less unproblematically with those of the religiously rationalized elite.

DKK: “An enchanted world.”

RH: That’s right. And I think that scholars who work on the history of popular religion in the West, and popular Christianity, like scholars who work on the contemporary study of world religions, are keenly aware that the epistemological hegemony of intellectualized variants of religion can be very limited. And,

equally important, there are zones of relative secularity, or non-religious thought and practice, operative in all societies, as well as all human subjectivities. In the case of Islam, this has always been the case. You see it in the sciences, for example, as with the history of astronomy. Astronomy was used to provide a better understanding of dates for the purposes of worship, but the methods and procedures developed for its study acquired an autonomy and integrity of their own. The same was true in the Muslim development of mathematics, which again shows an autonomy and integrity, and, in this sense, a kind of “secularity.”

DKK: Right. I guess I'm struck by two things here: one is your well-made point about the secularity of Islam. I often make that point to my students about mathematics. For example, I will say to them "There's a reason we call it 'al-gebra.' Right?" [RH laughs]. But the other point—not just folk religion but vernacular religion is crucial. My sense is that the current discourse about secularism and secularity doesn't quite know how to handle vernacular religion. This may be because vernacular religion represents something more complicated than trying to put a square peg in a round hole. It's more like picking up a rhombus! The challenge here, in part, is whether the rhombus which is vernacular religion demands a whole new schema in regard to secularism and secularity. And so, I do wonder if these are the sorts of questions we should be asking, where we should be. It seems to me that a greater focus on vernacular religion requires resisting the temptation to romanticize vernacular religion, since romanticizing vernacular religion or folk religion or everyday expressions of religion could very well lead to what you had just suggested with Taylor, namely, the desire to claim that there was an enchanted, pre-modern world that we have lost touch with. Right? How do we begin to describe and capture phenomena like vernacular religion without domesticating them to standard discourses about the secular?

RH: Well, I think we capture the phenomena, first of all, by exploring the points of linkage, tension, and rupture between vernacular religion and knowledge, on one hand, and the intellectual systematizers on the other. The lack of such an exploration, and the assumption of a more-or-less unproblematic trickle down from intellectual elites to the masses is, I feel, one of the greatest shortcomings of Charles Taylor's excellent book. Ironically, some anthropologists who write today on liberalism fall into a similarly truncated mode of analysis, assuming that a critical reading of Kant or Rawls provides most of what you need to know about how liberalism works. Not much of a sociology of knowledge and power there! To borrow a term from my former colleague and friend Fredrik Barth, what is missing in such approaches is an appreciation of the way in which the “concerns” actors bring to any religious or ethical tradition affect their understanding, reconstruction, and implementation of its terms. The concerns that emerge as definitive in any religious or political tradition appear quite different when you move beyond the intellectual rationalizers and consider the ways in which individuals and collectivities acquire, apply, and change that tradition over time. From this latter perspective, the tradition will likely appear anything but unitary, and much less linear and stabilized.

DKK: Absolutely. And that's where I think it's less an issue, as you say, of a presiding concern with Foucauldian post-structuralism and as more of a sociology of knowledge problem.

RH: Yes, I agree.

DKK: We're back to mediation and mediators! A heightened awareness of the formation of knowledge, of the social formations that make knowledge and (here this is quite Foucauldian) that are organically related to knowledge regimes. Anyway, Bob, I really appreciate how generous you've been with your time. I'm quite aware that we're sitting in the house that Peter Berger built, but I really can't imagine that there is anyone better to have taken the mantle from him than you. I really laud you for all the work that you have done and continue to do. Thank you.

RH: Well, thank you very much, David. It's a collective mantle that Rob Weller, Adam Zeligman, and a number of us, here at BU and in this broader international network, have inherited and feel very much the weight of as well. This hasn't so much been an interview as a dialogue and learning experience for me, and all the more enjoyable for it.