Chapter 1

Islam in an Era
of Nation-States

POLITICS AND RELIGIOUS RENEWAL
IN MUSLIM SOUTHEAST ASIA

Robert W. Hefner

Ours is a time in which visions that animated an earlier era have faded, while those that will shape the coming age remain unclear. The most obvious causes of this world-changing transformation were the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the end of the cold war. In the aftermath of these events, the Western media were full of commentaries attempting to explain the causes and consequences of what had taken place. Some observers saw the events as evidence of an unprecedented shift in world politics, a veritable “end to history” as we know it. The defining feature of this development, at least as described by Francis Fukuyama (1989), was an end to the ideological struggles that had marked the late modern era and a new international consensus on the virtues of democratic governance and market-oriented development.

Unfortunately for this prognosis, world events quickly proved that, however much it might have marked the close of one era, this end of history was really just the beginning of another, animated by its own passions and polarities. The communist collapse was accompanied by growing ethnic, religious, and national conflict in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc as well as in much of the developing world. The genocide in Ruanda, the brutalization of Bosnia, religious and ethnic struggles in the Caucuses, interreligious strife in India—these and other conflicts served as painful reminders that, contrary to some optimistic ruminations, politics in much of the world had not yet reached a consensus on the means and ends of the modern age.

The intensity of international conflict eventually led other Western commentators to pull back from the optimistic forecasts of the immediate post–cold war era. Where before there was talk of a triumphant end to history, one now heard ominous predictions of a coming “clash of civilizations.” In a widely read article published in Foreign Affairs in the summer of 1993, for example, the senior political scientist and State Department
advisor Samuel Huntington suggested that international politics in the post-cold war era would be shaped not by modern ideology or economic interests, but by deeply irreconcilable “civilizational identities.” “The fault lines between civilizations,” Huntington observed, “are replacing the political and ideological boundaries of the Cold War as the flash points for crisis and bloodshed” (Huntington 1993, 29). Among the most likely trouble spots on the horizon, Huntington advised, was the Muslim world. “Conflict along the fault line between Western and Islamic civilizations has been going on for 1,300 years,” he warned, citing the briefest of evidence to buttress this astounding claim, and in the future this “military interaction between the West and Islam is unlikely to decline” (emphasis added).1

Against this backdrop of international ferment, in general, and Western anxiety as to the political future of the Muslim world, in particular, the authors of these essays came together to discuss Islam and nation building in the Southeast Asian nations of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.2 In simple geographic terms insular Southeast Asia lies far from the Middle Eastern terrains conventionally associated in Westerners’ minds with Islam. Indeed, many Middle Eastern Muslims are unfamiliar with Southeast Asia or uncertain as to the precise character of their fellow believers’ faith. Notwithstanding this unfamiliarity, Southeast Asia is home to the most populous majority-Muslim country in the world (Indonesia) and contains an aggregate Muslim population greater than the Arab Middle East. The study of Islam in Southeast Asia thus presents an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the Muslim world’s diversity and to challenge unitary characterizations of Islam’s civilizational identity. Equally important, given the tenor of our times, this exercise allows us to disengage Muslim politics from histories and circumstances that owe more to the peculiarities of the Middle East than to Islam itself. All this is to say that Muslim Southeast Asia provides us with a much-needed opportunity to reevaluate the varied political potentialities of Islam in the modern era.

For the contributors to this volume, the more immediate benefit of such an intellectual inquiry is that it allows us to deepen our understanding of Islam in Southeast Asia in its own right. The nations in which Muslim Southeast Asians reside are characterized by extraordinary cultural and linguistic variety. Stretching across Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, southern Thailand, Brunei, and the southern Philippines, this region contains hundreds of ethnic groups, a similar variety of languages, representatives from most of the world’s historic religions, and numerous tribal and localized traditions. Perhaps because of this dizzying diversity, Western scholars have until recently paid relatively little attention to Islam in Southeast Asia. Several years ago William Roff may have been guilty of hyperbole when he
wrote that “there seems to have been an extraordinary desire on the part of Western social science observers to diminish, conceptually, the place and role of the religion and culture of Islam . . . in Southeast Asian societies” (1985, 7). But Roff’s remark accurately conveys the conviction among many observers, Western and Southeast Asian, that Islam’s influence on Southeast Asian society has been severely underestimated.

Recent developments in this region have made clear that such a neglect can no longer be justified. The economies of the two largest majority-Muslim countries in Southeast Asia, Malaysia and Indonesia, are today among the most rapidly growing in the world. Their economic dynamism has given both nations a heightened prominence in international affairs. Equally important, it has earned them the respect of Muslim leaders elsewhere in the world, many of whom have begun to wonder whether Southeast Asia might provide clues on how to manage market economies and cultural pluralism.

More significantly for the authors in this book, Islam in Southeast Asia can no longer be overlooked because since the late 1970s this region has experienced an unprecedented religious resurgence. Mosques have proliferated in towns and villages; religious schools and devotional programs have expanded; a vast market in Islamic books, magazines, and newspapers has developed; and, very important, a well-educated Muslim middle class has begun to raise questions about characteristically modern concerns, including the role and rights of women, the challenge of pluralism, the merits of market economies, and, most generally, the proper relationship of religion to state.

There have been many influences on this religious resurgence. Internationally, such developments as the Iranian revolution, the growth of Middle Eastern economic power since the 1970s, and the recent disenchantment in much of the Muslim world with secular nationalism have all played a role (see Esposito 1992, 11–24; Piscatori 1986, 26–34). However, at the center of all developments affecting Southeast Asian Islam looms one key institution: the modern nation-state. However rich its precedents, varied its influences, and diverse its motivations, the Islamic resurgence in Southeast Asia bears the imprint of this distinctly modern institution, with its projects for economic development and a state-shaped citizenry.

Though its policies and programs vary widely across national boundaries, the state in Southeast Asia, as in much of the modern world, has an “infrastructural reach” (Mann 1986, 114) far greater than the traditional states that once predominated throughout this region. Its capacity to shape public affairs and intervene in the most intimate domains of private life has presented Southeast Asian Muslims with a historically unprecedented chal-
lenge. It has reduced the territorial fragmentation long characteristic of this region, undercut the autonomy of Muslim social organizations, and, at times, deployed its forces to hunt down and eliminate Muslim rebels. For many political Muslims, however, there is also a romantic allure to this modern institution. Whatever its current uses, the state appears to offer the means for realizing long cherished dreams of religious and social transformation on a societywide scale. The idea of the nation has thus captured the Islamic imagination and intensified debate on what Muslim society should become (cf. Piscatori 1986; Moussalli 1995).

The resurgence also bears the imprint of something more uniquely Islamic: the emergence of a new style of religious activism that supplants or marginalizes the classically educated scholars of traditional Islam in favor of, as Dale F. Eickelman has described it, “religious and political activists who seek open religious discussion and whose authority is based upon persuasion and the interpretation of accessible texts” (Eickelman 1992, 652; cf. Meeker 1993; Yavuz n.d.). Though its precise influences vary from nation to nation, the ascent of these “new Muslim intellectuals” with their untraditional training and unconventional concerns is everywhere related to urbanization, mass education, new print and electronic media, and the growth of a Muslim middle class. These new movements build, of course, on the struggles of an earlier generation of Muslim reformers, who sought to open the door of religious interpretation (ijtihad) and make Islam responsive to the demands of the modern world, including the threat posed by the West (Keddie 1968; Piscatori 1986, 10). A century after the appearance of reformist Islam, however, developments in majority-Muslim nation-states have worked to create a new kind of Muslim discourse and a new kind of renewalist dynamic. The new discourse of renewal is oriented to the needs of a broad, mass-educated public rather than a narrow circle of religious adepts. In place of esoteric doctrine, the spokespersons for this reformation conceive of Islam in modern, quasi-ideological terms, as a source of practical and systematic knowledge “that can be differentiated from others and consciously reworked” (Eickelman 1992, 653; cf. Roy 1994, 3). This shift in religious rhetoric and its relevances is one more symptom of an Islam reinterpreted in the altered circumstances of the nation-state, national “publics,” and the media that sustain both.

Though some Western and even Muslim observers speak as if they were a unitary phenomenon, these new Muslim groups do not speak with a single voice. On the contrary, one of the most striking features of the contemporary revival here in Southeast Asia is the diversity of its adherents and the vitality of its debate. Admittedly, the region has its radical militants and others who seem to conform to Western stereotypes of Islamic “fund-
mentalist.” And, more generally, as in many other parts of the Muslim world, the resurgence has been characterized by intense “competition and contest over both the interpretation of symbols and control of the institutions . . . that produce and sustain them” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, 5). However, here in Southeast Asia, the dominant discourse to emerge from this contest has been marked not by theological totalism or strident authoritarianism, but by a remarkable combination of pluralism, intellectual dynamism, and openness to dialogue with non-Muslim actors and institutions.

However varied their emphases, most of these new Muslim intellectuals agree in their commitment to a developmental or activist understanding of their faith. Most show little enthusiasm for an Islam that is just a matter of pietistic study, personal morality, and ritual celebrations. Such conventional indices of religiosity remain important. But for new Muslim intellectuals and their followers, Islam must entail more than personal piety and public devotion. It must offer an alternative model of politics. It should provide moral discipline in the face of the anarchy and hedonism of the market. It can run schools, operate banks, and organize farmers’ cooperatives. It may even provide an alternative, some say, to secular nationalism as the moral basis of the national community.

Unsympathetic observers might dismiss all this as the mere ideologization of religion. What is occurring, these critics might suggest, is the subordination of religion to the political needs of the moment or, worse yet, the ambitions of an unscrupulous leadership. Certainly there is such contestation and intrigue, as is the case whenever ethical ideas are drawn into the public sphere. But in Southeast Asia events have forced Muslims to confront a host of new questions and, in at least some instances, formulate new answers. Can Islam contribute to economic development? What posture should it adopt toward business and the market? And what of the status of women? The rights of non-Muslims? Is Islam compatible with pluralism and representative democracy? These questions emerge not from timeless theological doctrines, but from the efforts of Muslims to respond to the challenge of the nation-state and its associated projects for political and moral reconstruction.

Though Southeast Asian Muslims engage these issues with many of the scriptural, exegetical, and legal resources found elsewhere in the Muslim world, they do so within a social and historical horizon quite different from that of the Middle East. Their responses thereby reflect the creative tension everywhere characteristic of Islam (and, it should be said, all world religions) between the transcendent imperatives of the religion, as locally understood, and local histories, cultures, and identities. The latter heritage
predisposes Muslims to selectively highlight certain elements of that heritage while neglecting others (cf. Bowen 1993; Eickelman 1987; Roff 1985). Such a creative tension is reflected in the essays in this volume. To understand its politics and meanings, we have to look into the history of Islam in this region and examine our own understandings or, as the case may be, misunderstandings of that history.

A Dual Marginalization

One of the most serious impediments to the development of a systematic understanding of Islam in Southeast Asia is the fact that the topic has long been marginalized in the fields of Islamic and Southeast Asian studies. In Islamic studies Western and Middle Eastern scholars alike have tended to place Southeast Asia at the intellectual periphery of the Islamic world. Still today in some overviews of Islamic history and civilization, Southeast Asian Muslims are mentioned briefly if at all. Though Southeast Asian Islam has almost two hundred million believers, it is not uncommon for observers, even learned specialists, to identify Islam with the Middle East and to regard Southeast Asia as, at best, intellectually and institutionally derivative of Middle Eastern Islam.

There is a larger and, in one sense, understandable logic to this neglect. By comparison to Persia and the Arabian heartland, in insular Southeast Asia Islam became a civilizational force relatively late in Islamic history. Though Arab-Muslim traders traveled through island Southeast Asia as early as the seventh and eighth centuries, there was little settlement until the late thirteenth, when a Muslim town, inhabited in part by Arab-speaking foreigners, was established in the Pasai region of north Sumatra, an entrepôt for the trade with Muslim India and Arabia (Reid 1993, 133). Shortly thereafter, a Muslim presence appears to have been established in port towns along Java’s north coast, territories still then under the control of the Hindu-Buddhist kingdom of Majapahit (Drewes 1968; Robson 1981). Ruling elites in the Malay peninsula were converted in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and those in coastal Sulawesi and much of the southern Philippines were won to the faith in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The primary impetus for this wave of conversion was not conquest or religious warfare, as had been the case in Islam’s early expansion in Arabia and North Africa, but trade and interethnic intercourse. Certainly, as Anthony Reid has noted, Muslim potentates (like their Theravada Buddhist counterparts in mainland Southeast Asia) regarded forcible conversion of neighbors as “an honourable motive for conquest” (1993, 170), and Muslim rulers periodically engaged in warfare with their Hindu-Buddhist, ani-
mist, or, in later times, Christian neighbors. However, as Thomas McKenna’s essay in this volume illustrates, the causes of these conflicts were as much commercial and dynastic as they were religious.

More decisively, the rapid and relatively uniform spread of Islam to the insular world’s maritime centers was related to broader historical developments, especially the growth of international commerce from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries and the movement of large numbers of people out of localized societies into a multiethnic and interregional macrocosm (Reid 1993, 144; Robson 1981; cf. Hefner 1993a). Most of the map of modern Muslim Southeast Asia was laid out during this “age of commerce,” as Anthony Reid (1988; 1993) has so aptly described it. A few remote corners of Southeast Asia have been converted to Islam in this century, some even in the last decades (see Rössler in this volume; Hefner 1987). In general, however, the dynamism of Islam in contemporary times has had less to do with a new wave of conversion than with the reform and rationalization of religion among established Muslim populations.

By itself, the comparatively late arrival of Islam in Southeast Asia neither explains nor justifies this region’s marginalization within the field of Islamic studies. Given the genesis of what has come to be regarded as “classical” Islamic civilization within the Arabic- and Persian-speaking world, however, there was a tendency on the part of early Western Islamicists to devote their attention to regions where the classical tradition was first composed. This emphasis was reinforced by the focus of this early scholarship on Islamic “culture,” not in the modern, social-historical or anthropological sense of this term, but in its great-traditional sense, as in written literature, philosophy, art and architecture, and law. With several notable exceptions, the Orientalist commentaries that introduced Islamic civilization to a Western readership in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were concerned with high culture, not the everyday meaning of Islam for ordinary Muslims. The focus of this writing was leading thinkers and civilizationwide achievements, especially those preserved for time in the printed word.

As a result of this textual emphasis, Southeast Asia—and other areas marginalized in the Orientalist understanding of the Muslim world, such as Central Asia, Bengal, and West Africa—was accorded only a minor role in early accounts of Islamic civilization. In some subfields of Islamic studies, such as jurisprudence (fiqh), this perception of Southeast Asia as a latecomer and bit player in Islamic civilization seemed justified. As Hooker has noted (1983, 9), from the sixteenth century onward Muslim scholars in Southeast Asia were familiar with the standard works of Shafi‘i law (one of the four schools of Sunni Muslim jurisprudence and the one most com-
But local jurists confined their activities to the translation and interpretation of legal traditions codified in the Middle East; they never made an independent, distinctly Southeast Asian contribution to Islamic law. Equally important, the Shafi’i works familiar to Southeast Asian jurists were never used as the sole basis for legal deliberations in Southeast Asia’s sultanates. Local potentates used a variety of legal systems, as was consistent with the cultural pluralism of their subjects (Milner 1983, 27; Reid 1993, 182–184).

This lack of originality in legal scholarship (if not legal practice), however, still tells us little about the ways in which Islam became part of the culture and lifeways of Southeast Asian Muslims. To understand this process requires that we distance ourselves from the legalistic, “shari’ah-centered” understanding of Islam that predominates in classical scholarship, Western and Muslim, and examine Islam in its local and regional context (cf. Munawar-Rachman 1994). From this perspective the diffusion of Islam into Southeast Asia looks more richly distinctive.

The first centuries of the Islamic expansion into Southeast Asia coincided with an era of great Sufi influence in Mecca, Medina, and northern India (Schimmel 1975, 344–363; Roff 1985, 20; Woodward 1989, 54–55). Not coincidentally, then, mystic literature and practices were conspicuous among the items first appropriated into popular Islamic culture in Southeast Asia. As Anthony Johns has noted (1961; 1993), the Sufi role in early Southeast Asian Islam was facilitated by the religious traditions already established in the region, which had an elective affinity with certain aspects of Sufism. Most notable among these affinities was the monist disposition of many of this region’s existing religious traditions, with their idea that rather than standing apart from this world, divinity infuses it.

The Southeast Asian response to Islamic mysticism was not passive or derivative, but complex and creative. In the works of such learned mystics as Hamzah Fansuri (al-Attas 1970) and Abd. al-Rauf (Johns 1955), Southeast Asian Muslims developed a literary and intellectualized variant of Islamic mysticism among the richest in the world. The impact of this thought reached far beyond esoteric circles, providing popular devotion with a non-legalistic disposition (see Bowen 1993; van Bruinessen 1994) and influencing the practice and meanings of kingship (Hooker 1983, 11; Milner 1983, 35; Woodward 1989, 59). In court-based variants of this Southeast Asian Muslim tradition, the ruler, rather than independent religious scholars (ulama), came to be seen as the mystical anchor of the religious community. He was the defender of the faith, the shadow of Allah on earth, and a mystically powerful “perfect man.” By virtue of his spiritual preeminence, he, not the ulama, was responsible for the transmission and implementation of
Islamic law. This prerogative provided rulers with discretionary leeway in deciding how strictly they wished to apply Islamic law. Though at times in early modern history (from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries) ulama attempted to assert their authority against that of the court, sometimes in alliance with merchants hoping to limit the absolutist claims of rulers (Reid 1993, 263), the more general pattern resembled that Milner has described for Malay sultanates: “The Raja, not the Malay race or the Islamic ummat (community), was the primary object of loyalty” (1983, 31). And the raja himself was usually concerned with worldly interests more varied than the unitary conduct of worship and law (cf. Woodward 1989, 154).

Here, then, is at least one clue to the way in which the universalist injunctions of Islam were accommodated to Southeast Asian culture. In modern times, however, our appreciation of this tradition’s distinctiveness in Islamic civilization has been hampered by the obscurity of its literary sources and the embarrassment of some modern Muslims in the face of religious traditions regarded (much too simplistically) as undemocratic or heretical. For these and other reasons, it was all too easy for students of Islamic great traditions to perceive Muslim civilization in Southeast Asia as derivative or, worse yet, as the curious product of peoples who, somehow, weren’t quite “real Muslims.”

Islam in Southeast Asian Studies
The other marginalization to which the study of Islam in Southeast Asia has long been subjected unwittingly reinforced this neglect. This marginalization occurred within the field of Southeast Asian studies, particularly the form that took shape in the United States in the aftermath of World War II. In this emerging academic field, it was not uncommon for Islam to be portrayed as an intrusive cultural force or, as another widely used metaphor would have it, a late-deposited cultural “layer.” The real Southeast Asia lay deeper and was somehow less Islamic.

This perspective on Islam in Southeast Asia had deep historical and, more specifically, colonial precedents. In colonial times, particularly in the Dutch East Indies, this notion of Islam as a “thin veneer” appealed to those who wished to justify the suppression of Islam on the grounds that it was a threat to colonial power (Ellen 1983, 65; Roff 1985, 13). In Java, for example, nineteenth-century colonial administrators developed a “structure of not seeing” (Florida 1995), overlooking Islamic influences in Javanese tradition, while exaggerating and essentializing the influence of non-Islamic ideals. In the aftermath of the brutal Java War (1825–1830), colonial scholars worked to create a canon of Javanese literature that romanticized pre-Islamic literature as a golden age and portrayed the coming of Islam as
a civilizational disaster. These Dutch Orientalists conveniently overlooked the fact that the proportion of Islamic-oriented literature in modern court collections was vastly greater than the so-called renaissance literature (pre-Islamic classics rendered in modern Javanese verse) that colonial scholars portrayed as the essence of things Javanese (Florida 1995; cf. Day 1983; Ricklefs 1974, 176–226).

Colonial law effected a similar essentialization. Under the direction of Cornelis van Vollenhoven, the “adat (customary) law school” worked under state directive to develop what amounted to a system of legal apartheid. A classic example of the colonial “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), European experts divided the native peoples of the Indies into nineteen distinct legal communities. Islamic law was acknowledged in each community’s legal traditions only to the extent that colonial scholars determined that local custom (adat) explicitly acknowledged Islamic law (Hooker 1983, 176). In this manner, colonial authorities reified the distinction between customary adat and Islam. As James Siegel’s (1969) study of Aceh and Taufik Abdullah’s (1966) of Minangkabau both demonstrate, however, this distinction between endogenous “custom” and exogenous “Islam” imposed an artificial polarity on a relationship that had always been dynamic (see Rössler and Peletz, this volume). In fact, in the decades preceding the European conquest, legal traditions in places like Malaya and Minangkabau (west Sumatra) had already begun to accord a greater role to textually based Islamic norms (Abdullah 1966, 10; Lev 1972, 250). It was precisely this growing Islamic influence that prompted anxious Dutch authorities to implement their adatrecht policy.

British legal policies in Malaya differed from those of the Dutch. Drawing on their experience with Muslims in India, the British at first regarded Malay Muslims as “unheretical members of some idealized and uniform civilization” (Ellen 1983, 51). By treating adat as “custom that has no legal consequences” (Roff 1985, 16) and allowing the Malay sultans a measure of jural authority, the British allowed the formation of institutional structures in which Islamic law had a substantial albeit circumscribed role. Nonetheless, lacking a framework for integrating the study of local traditions and Islam, British scholars of the colonial era fell into an “anecdotal empiricism” (Ellen 1983, 53) that failed to grasp the dynamics of religious change in Malay society as a whole.

Though there was a tradition of Islamic studies in colonial Southeast Asia, then, it suffered from the subordination of scholarship to the needs of the colonial political order. In the early postwar era, a new and more contextual framework for the study of Islam in Southeast Asia came on the scene. Harry J. Benda’s 1958 studies of the Muslim role in the struggle for
Indonesian independence provided rich insights into the relationship of Islam to Indonesian nationalism and the social bases for the fierce rivalries that pitted secular nationalists and communists against Muslims in the early independence era. Benda relied too uncritically on colonial historical scholarship in characterizing popular Javanese religion as “rooted in age-old pre-Hindu mysticism with accretions from later, including Muslim, religious elements” (1983, 14). Nonetheless, his research into Islam and nationalism provided a critical foundation for the reassessment of political Islam in the postcolonial era. A few years later, William R. Roff’s (1967) analyses of Islam and Malay nationalism guaranteed that, in Malay historical studies at the very least, Islam would never again be assigned a peripheral role. In Islamic literary studies, finally, the pioneering scholarship of G. W. J. Drewes (1968; 1969; 1978) and Anthony Johns (1957; 1965) revealed the depth of mystical writing in Southeast Asian Islam and its intimate relationship to South Asian and Middle Eastern sources.

However divergent their concerns, the works of Benda, Roff, Drewes, and Johns together laid the foundation for the revitalization of the study of Islam in Southeast Asia. In the end, however, their influence in the broader field of Southeast Asian studies was limited, in part because other scholars working in the region saw little need to devote further attention to Islamic matters and in part because all four men were soon overshadowed by the most famous American anthropologist and Indonesianist of the early postwar era, Clifford Geertz. At least in the United States, it was Clifford Geertz who set the agenda for the study of Islam in Southeast Asia from the 1960s until the mid-1980s. Later generations of Southeast Asianists would have to position themselves within and against Geertz’ awesome legacy.

Geertz and Islam

Clifford Geertz’ perspective on Islam is a complex and fascinating one, and, contrary to the claims of some of his critics, does not allow for easy dismissal. Geertz’ early writings on Islam and Indonesian society (Geertz 1960; 1965; 1968) combine brilliant ethnographic insight with somewhat less careful historical generalization. Many of these works—particularly those written before the late 1960s, after which he distanced himself from the structural-functionalist methodologies in which he had earlier been trained—were strongly influenced by a sociological version of modernization theory adapted from the work of his mentors, Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils (Hefner and Hoben 1991). Whatever their shortcomings in light of today’s preoccupations, Geertz’ works were unparalleled in their ability to combine subtle ethnography with provocative theoretical reflection.

Although one of his most widely read books compares Islam in Indo-
nesia with that in Morocco (Geertz 1968; cf. Munson 1993), Geertz was generally impatient with the historical and literary scholarship long at the heart of Islamic studies. In retrospect, there can be little question that some of Geertz’ skepticism was justified; whatever its logic, it allowed him to set off in new directions and make strikingly original contributions to the comparative study of Islam. In particular, by using an ethnographic approach and sensitizing Islam scholars to the issues it could illuminate, Geertz was better able than textually oriented Islamicists to explore the practice and meanings of Islam among ordinary Muslims. This concern with “everyday” or “practical Islam”—the activities and meanings through which ordinary Muslims experience their religion—has been a central and eminently welcome feature of Islamic studies since Geertz’ work in the 1970s (Ellen 1983, 54; Eickelman 1976, 11–13; Munson 1993, 1–3).

In another respect, however, Geertz’ estrangement from Islamicist scholarship had less fortunate, if largely unintended, consequences. Whatever its high-cultural biases, Orientalist scholarship had amply detailed the variety of religious styles and world views within Islamic civilization. By failing to take note of this “burden of complexity,” as William Roff has described it (1985, 26), Geertz tended at times to draw on what was, in fact, a narrow standard for distinguishing what is and what is not Islam. This shortcoming is especially ironic in light of Geertz’ stated concern with looking at Islam from an ethnographic point of view; however, it illustrates the dangers of any approach to Islam that erects too great a divide between ethnographic and textual study (Bowen 1993; Woodward 1989). The fact is that proper ethnographic characterizations of local Islam require familiarity with Islam’s textual and normative sources.

Ironically, Geertz may have been influenced on this point not merely by his own disciplinary predilections, but by the biases of his modernist informants in Java, where he worked in the early 1950s. Many of these religious reformers were only too willing to describe the religious practices of their less orthodox Javanist rivals, the so-called abangan, as un-Islamic or “Hindu,” since this allowed them to discredit those activities more thoroughly. Whatever the precise influences on his ethnographic vision, Geertz identified an array of devotional practices in Indonesia as non-Islamic because they were inconsistent with the modernist practice of Islam. Rather than talking of pluralism and subalternity within Islamic tradition, then, he tended to see the Javanese Muslim community as split between those whom he effectively regarded as true Muslims, the so-called santri, and those whom he thought only nominally Islamized, the abangan (lit. “red”). Abangan religious culture, Geertz felt, owed more to animism and Hindu-Buddhism than to Islam.
Inasmuch as it worked at all in Muslim Southeast Asia, Geertz’ model really applied only to Javanese society. In a few areas of the Indo-Malaysian archipelago such as Lombok (Cederoth 1975; Krulfeld 1966), there existed religious divisions of equivalent severity to those found in Java. Until recently, however, throughout most of the region the more common religious opposition has been that John Bowen describes in his chapter in this book, between “old group” (kaum tua) traditionalists and “new group” (kaum muda) modernists (cf. Abdullah 1966; Bowen 1993, 21–30; Roff 1967). The modernists were strongly influenced by ideas of Islamic reform emanating from the Middle East, emphasizing the self-sufficiency of scripture and decrying what were regarded as unacceptable innovations (bid‘a) in matters of worship. They were also critical of traditionalist religious jurists (ulama). The modernists felt that these caretakers of tradition had compromised their scholarship by relying too heavily on the scriptural and legal commentaries of previous scholars, especially as codified in the madhab, the recognized legal traditions of Sunni Islam. The modernists also felt that traditional ulama had been too tolerant of popular ritual practices that the modernists regarded as unacceptable innovations or, worse yet, polytheistic deviations (shirk) from true Islam (Noer 1973).

In light of more recent research, however, it is clear that Geertz’ categorizations exaggerated Hindu-Buddhist influences and oversimplified Islamic ones. For example, he described premodern Javanese Islam in terms of what he called a “classical religious style,” which he felt had predominated in Java from the sixteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. Its characteristics, he said, were a quietistic mysticism, rather than legalism, and a decided nonchalance as regards Islamic ritual obligations. In a loose sense this characterization is consistent with the raja-centered Islam that, indeed, had once held true across Southeast Asia. However, the distinction overlooks the fact that even in Java there was from early on a vigorous legalistic tradition, associated most especially with the pasisir culture of Java’s north and northeastern coasts (Pigeaud 1967–1980). While Geertz’ account of one of the early apostles of Islam in Java, Sunan Kalijaga, emphasizes the aestheticized quietism of his conversion experience, other accounts of this saint (wali) emphasize his military and commercial prowess and his concern with the law (Graaf and Pigeaud 1974; Woodward 1989, 97). As Roff has observed (1985, 24), building in part on Pigeaud (1967–1980), the “classical style” of Javanese Islam had always been more richly differentiated and included a more significant legal-normative component than Geertz’ rendering of the Kalijaga myth implies.7

These shortcomings in Geertz’ analysis were summarized by the renowned Islamicist Marshall Hodgson: “Influenced by the polemics of a cer-
tain school of modern Shari'ah-minded Muslims, Geertz identifies ‘Islam’ only with what that school of modernists happens to approve, and ascribes everything else to an aboriginal or Hindu-Buddhist background, gratuitously labelling much of the Muslim religious life in Java ‘Hindu.’ He identifies a long series of phenomena, virtually universal to Islam and sometimes found even in the Qur’an itself, as un-Islamic; and hence his interpretations of the Islamic past as well as of some recent anti-Islamic reactions is highly misleading” (Hodgson 1974, 255). Among other things, Hodgson is referring here to Geertz’ tendency to see numerous aspects of Malayo-Indonesian mysticism, with its Sufi-derived topography of self and divinity, as “Hindu-Buddhist”; his identification of trafficking with local spirits as animist, even though such beliefs have been accommodated within Islam since the time of Muhammad (as the Qur’an itself makes clear); and his repeated identification of ritual festival meals (slametan) as animist or Hindu-Buddhist, even though similar rites (complete with incense) are common in other parts of the Muslim world. More recently, Mark R. Woodward (1989) has extended this line of criticism, revealing strongly Islamic elements within, most notably, the Javanese tradition of kingship, ritual, architecture, and the arts. In identifying mysticism, slametan feasts, the veneration of ancestors, and trafficking with tutelary spirits as invariably “animist” or “Hindu-Buddhist,” Geertz may have conveyed a view of Islam consistent with that of his reform-minded informants. In doing so, however, he unwittingly diminished the civilizational pluralism of historic Islam.8

If, in the end, Geertz’ categorization of things Islamic was too tightly drawn, this criticism is true in spades of Southeast Asianist scholars who followed in his wake, particularly in America-based Indonesian studies. By unwittingly sanctioning a restrictive view of Islam, Geertz seemed to confirm the suspicions of less careful scholars that Islam was of marginal or segmental importance to the study of Southeast Asian culture. In the Indonesian case, this impression seemed justified by the fact that the severe politicization of religion and politics in Java during the 1950s and the 1960s eventually led some nominal Muslims to repudiate Islam outright (see Pronowo 1991; Lyon 1977).

Not surprisingly, then, during the 1960s and 1970s some of the most influential essays on politics, personhood, and culture in Muslim Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia, were written without serious exploration of Islamic influences. For example, Benedict Anderson’s widely cited and otherwise remarkable essay, “The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture” (1972), drew extensively on Javanese literary and ritual traditions to develop a model of indigenous ideas of power in Java. In “A Note on Islam,” which appears
toward the end of the essay, Anderson cites Clifford Geertz to back up his claim that “the penetration of Islam scarcely changed the composition and recruitment of the Javanese political elite or affected the basic intellectual framework of traditional political thought” (Anderson 1972, 59; emphasis added). This observation raises complex and important issues. Its full assessment, however, would require at least some reference to Sufi notions of kingship, popular Islamic concepts of sainthood, and folk Islamic views of sacrifice and spiritual power, all of which exercise palpable influences on Javanese traditions (cf. Reid 1993; Lombard 1990, 176–208).

In a later and equally influential book on the origin and spread of nationalism, Anderson displays a similar blind spot. His comments on early Indonesian nationalism abound with insightful references to the “creole functionaries” who were recruited by the colonial state into institutions of modern learning and resocialized in the ways of European administration (1983, 105–106). These “functionary journeys,” Anderson argues (p. 111), nurtured a sense of solidarity across linguistic and ethnic barriers that had previously segmented indigenous society, and thus created the links required for this group’s leadership of the Indonesian nationalist movement. In this otherwise subtle account, however, we once again hear nothing about Muslim pilgrimages across ethnic and linguistic boundaries. In places like North Sumatra, Java, and South Sulawesi, these movements also shaped an anti-colonial imagination. Though, like their non-Islamic counterparts, many of these Muslim pilgrims at first enunciated political visions premised on only pre- or protonationalist ideals, their religious pilgrimage and political struggles still worked to create a commitment to transethnic solidarities. Eventually, like their counterparts in most of the Muslim world (Piscatori 1986), Muslim leaders elaborated their own versions of the nationalist ideal. These were not secondhand derivatives of secular nationalism, but full-blown alternatives to the version created by Anderson’s European-schooled, “creole nationalists.” In religious centers in Aceh (Bowen 1993) and eastern Java (Hefner 1994), among others, Muslim thinkers elaborated a vision of the nation premised on shared religion, not merely common ethnic culture. They linked its meanings to Islam’s ancient glories and the distant rumblings of Turkish, Persian, and Arab nationalism.10

In this and other examples, a generation of scholars went much further than Geertz had ever intended in marginalizing Islam in Southeast Asian studies. Slowly, however, the cumulative effect of scholarship by such pioneers as Benda, Roff, Drewes, and Johns led to a deeper appreciation of Islam in contemporary life. Renewed interest in Islam was not merely the result of accumulating scholarly wisdom, however. More significant was the impact of Islamic resurgence itself, which swept across Muslim South-
east Asia in the 1970s and 1980s. The evidence of those decades made all too clear that Islam was not a declining cultural force but an ascendant one.

Nationalism and the Secularist Juggernaut

Another reason Islam poses such problems for students of modern politics has to do with the conviction once widespread among Western political theorists that religion is, at best, a declining historical force, destined to give way to the twin forces of economic modernization and nation-state formation. One of the more remarkable facts of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western political theory was the near universality of this belief. On the left and on the right, among Marxists and Weberians, and among modernization theorists and their postmodern critics, the view that modernity is inherently secularizing—or, at the very least, so thoroughly destabilizing of religious certitudes as to demand the privatization of religion within a realm of personal belief—has dominated all the important schools of modern Western social thought (Berger 1982; Casanova 1994).

Outside of Marxism, which had its own version, the most sustained expression of the secularization thesis was associated with the modernization theory of the 1950s and 1960s. Drawing on the works of Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, modernization theory asserted that modern political-economic development involves, above all else, the increasing differentiation and specialization of social and economic structures. Commerce and, later, industrialization bring about a growing division of labor, and this in turn promotes the differentiation of society into the pluralistic entities characteristic of much of the world today. It is the cultural consequence of this change that is the primary concern of secularization theorists. Where previously there was a “sacred canopy” (Berger 1967) stabilizing life experience and providing shared meanings, in modern times the canopy is rent and the collective bases of morality and identity are diminished or destroyed (cf. Beckford 1989, 74–107).

Given the severity of its forecasts, it is not surprising that from early on observers began to express doubts regarding the relevance of secularization theory for the Muslim world. Some theorists, such as the Turkish-born sociologist Bassam Tibi, continued to insist that secularization is intrinsic to modernization, and the Islamic world is no exception. How then to explain the Islamic revival occurring in the Muslim world today? Citing the experience of Christianity in Western Europe, Tibi notes that Protestantism, too, once had grandiose political aspirations, but it was eventually “domiciled within the sphere of interiority” (Tibi 1990, 139). Islam, he predicts, will develop in a “parallel direction” because this is what modern development
requires. It would seem that only inasmuch as the Islamic world is commandeered by antimodernizing reactionaries can it evade this privatization.

Other observers of the Muslim world, however, appeared less certain of this prognosis. In his Islam Observed (a work that still shows the influence of his earlier training in modernization theory, which he subsequently rejected), Clifford Geertz argued that the “secularization of thought” is characteristic of the modern world (1968, 88). He attributed this trend to the “growth of science” and its destabilizing influence on revealed truths. Geertz qualified this generalization, however, by noting that “the loss of power of classical religious symbols to sustain a properly religious faith” can provoke the “ideologization of religion,” as the bearers of revealed truths mobilize against secularist assault. While thus embracing a variant of the secularization thesis, Geertz recognized the possibility of antisecularizing movements. Contrary to what he might argue today, however, he also implied that these were by their very nature countermodernizations, rather than alternative modernities.

Some observers, such as the philosopher and anthropologist Ernest Gellner, have been even more adamant in rejecting the relevance of the secularization thesis for the Muslim world. Unlike Tibi or Geertz, Gellner attributes this exceptionalism not to Islam’s antimodernizing dispositions, but to its uniqueness in adapting to the modern nation-state. The key, Gellner argues, is that Islam has been able to play a role in the nation-state functionally (but not substantively) equivalent to that of nationalism in the West. In the West, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century nationalists revived and idealized popular ethnic culture, using it as an instrument of nation building. This change in political culture was facilitated by the social dislocation reshaping Europe, as the vertical allegiances of the feudal era were undermined and replaced by new lateral ones. Nationalism seized on the realities of vernacular language, folk customs, and myths of national origin to respond to this crisis and forge a new basis for the political order, one founded on the sovereignty of a “people” defined by common culture. In this manner, nationalism displaced Christianity as the key idiom of European political identity and, along the way, accelerated the secularization of modern European politics.

Gellner points out that a similar detraditionalization has altered social ties in the Muslim world. However, he argues that for several reasons Islam has been able to respond to the change while avoiding the secularist juggernaut. Islam, Gellner notes, had long been divided between an elite and a popular variant. The high tradition was associated with the tranethnic and transregional clerisy, the ulama, who were responsible first and foremost for preserving and implementing the law, the master institution in Islamic
tradition. By contrast, the low or folk tradition in Islam was grounded on tribal organizations, kinship politics, and the veneration of living Muslim saints (Gellner 1981, 75–76). While paying homage to the high tradition of scholarship and law, popular Islam had an only intermittent interest, at best, in its casuistic detail. Throughout history the two traditions flowed into and influenced each other. Periodically, however, they also erupted into conflict, when reformers “revived the alleged pristine zeal of the high culture, and united tribesmen in the interests of purification and of their own enrichment and political advancement” (ibid.). For a while thereafter, a purified Islam would dominate the political scene, but eventually it too would succumb to the twin corruptions of urban decadence and tribal parochialism.

With its industries, education, and, above all, powerful state, the modern era has irreversibly altered this “flux and reflux” (Gellner 1981; 1992, 14) in the life of Islam, shifting the historical advantage to the supporters of the clerisy-sustained high tradition. Modernizing reformists have blamed folk Islam for the Muslim world’s backwardness. In reformers’ eyes, the twin challenges of modernization and Western dominance demand that this backward tradition be replaced once and for all with a purified, high Islam. Only through such a total-cultural revolution can the Muslim world retrieve its lost glory and propel itself into the modern era. With the machinery of the modern state at their disposal, Gellner suggests, Muslim reformists can for the first time implement their programs of total-cultural revolution on a societywide scale. For Gellner, Islam is unique among the world’s historic religions in being able to pull off this feat, using “a pre-industrial great tradition of a clerisy as the national, socially pervasive idiom and belief of a new style community” (Gellner 1983, 81).

There are several problems with Gellner’s analysis. While emphasizing the vitality of religion in the modern Muslim world, Gellner preserves a too-Weberian understanding of religion’s decline elsewhere. He thereby exaggerates the degree to which the non-Muslim world has been secularized, at least in the dual meaning of secularization as privatization and decline. Recently a number of scholars have commented on the inadequacy of this portion of the secularization argument for characterizing religious developments in the West, not least of all in the United States, where religious institutions have shown great resilience (Berger 1983; Wuthnow 1988; 1989). This resilience is not just another example of American exceptionalism. Throughout large portions of Latin America, Africa, and eastern Europe, Christianity has demonstrated an ability to project itself into the public arena with a vigor and expansiveness quite contrary to post-Enlight-
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enment understandings of religion as essentially a matter of “private” belief or as a declining historical force (Casanova 1994; Martin 1990).

It is not just at the margins of the Christian world that one sees problems with secularist models of nation building and modernity. Recently India has witnessed the rise of a virulently anti-Muslim but broadly popular Hindu nationalism (van der Veer 1984; Juergensmeyer 1993). In Sri Lanka Theravada Buddhists have been at the vanguard of Sinhala nationalist efforts against the Tamil minority (Tambiah 1992). Even in Thailand, Burma, and Laos, Buddhism has been forcefully drawn into nation building (Keyes 1987; Reynolds 1978). All this leads to an obvious but important conclusion. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s the marginalization of religion from northern European nation building was seen as the prototype for modern development, nation building now appears consistent with a wider array of moral-ideological regimens, including some in which religion plays an important public role (Casanova 1994).11

In half-century retrospect, then, it is clear that the secular nationalism of the postwar era was not the harbinger of a worldwide evolution, but the peculiar product of a particular historical epoch. Today, secularist modernism is being challenged in many parts of the world (Casanova 1994; Cohen and Arato 1992, 345–420; Juergensmeyer 1993). A general theory of religion and modernity must begin with this fact and with the more context-sensitive approach to religion it requires.12 It is just such a contextualized understanding of the politics and meanings of nation building—and the plural nature of the project of modernity itself—that underlies the essays in this volume.

Islam and Nation

Each of the nations discussed in this volume is markedly different with regard to the role of Islam in the nation and in the public sphere more generally. As is the case throughout the Muslim world (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Esposito and Voll 1996), the ideals and activities of the new Islamic resurgence reflect not the irremediable influence of inalterable ideological forms, but country-specific patterns of civil and state organization. More specifically, most show the strong impact of state-society interactions that have evolved over the course of several decades of national independence.

In Indonesia, Muslim organizations played a pivotal role in anticolonial resistance from the very beginning of the nationalist movement; eventually, however, they had to resign themselves to a less central role in the institutions of government. At the beginning of the independence war in
1945, the Muslim leadership was itself divided on the question of an Islamic state. Some leaders advocated it; others merely wanted the government to enforce religious obligations among that portion of the population who professed Islam; and still others advocated a plural and liberal-constitutional democracy. In the face of bitter opposition from Christians and secular nationalists, the leadership opted for a compromise formulation, whereby there would be no unitary establishment of religion within the Indonesian state. Unlike a secular European state, however, the Indonesian constitution would require all its citizens to profess a state-recognized world religion, and it would otherwise promote religion through schools and other public institutions (Boland 1982; Hefner, Chapter 3, this volume). Though the precise nature of the state’s support for religion was left vague at the time of independence, this principle of state support for religion provided Muslims with grounds for argument against secular nationalists in years to come.

During the 1950s, the nonsectarian compromise struck in 1945 was again the subject of intense debate. Some in the Muslim leadership felt that the spirit of the 1945 compromise violated Islamic doctrine and should therefore be repudiated in favor of a new drive for an explicitly Islamic state. Other Muslim leaders, however, strongly disagreed with this view. In the nation as a whole, as discussed in the essays by Feillard and Hefner below, the nationalist and communist parties eventually came to exercise greater influence than their Muslim rivals, at least until the cataclysmic violence of 1965–1966. The destruction of the powerful Indonesian Communist Party at that time set a new political dynamic in motion and once again raised questions regarding the proper role of religion in national life.

The military-dominated government that emerged after 1965–1966 came to power with the support of Muslim organizations, many of which actively participated in the physical liquidation of the Communist Party (Cribb 1990; Hefner 1990, 202–215). But the new regime soon marginalized its erstwhile allies by adopting policies designed to undercut the political capacities of the Muslim community as well as anyone else who might aspire to independent political organization. While suppressing political Islam, however, the regime was more tolerant of what it regarded as a depoliticized “cultural Islam”—especially those Muslim organizations that accepted the government’s ideological principles of Pancasila pluralism, thereby renouncing the goal of establishing an Islamic state.

The latitude for civil (as opposed to explicitly political) organization provided by the government inadvertently worked to favor the efforts of those Muslims unhappy with the party-based rivalries of the 1950s. These advocates of nonpolitical activism wanted the Muslim community to con-
centrate its energies on education, social welfare, and the deepening of religious piety. Twenty years later, it is clear that this strategy of working in the system and promoting a moderate Islam has, for the moment, proved a success from the government’s point of view, as well as for most of the Muslim community. Contrary to the hopes of some in the ruling elite, however, this government support for nonpolitical Islam helped to fuel an Islamic revival of unprecedented proportions (see Pranowo 1991, and Feillard and Hefner essays below). Moreover, as in other Muslim countries where the government has sponsored Islamic proselytization (Piscatori 1986, 138; Roy 1994, 125–131), it is by no means clear that the long-term consequences of this development will coincide with government strategists’ intentions.

In Indonesia the consequences of these changes for state and society are as yet unclear. The New Order regime has consistently adopted a policy toward nonstate organizations that is centralizing, hierarchical, and corporatist. In a pattern of heavy-handed cooptation that goes back to the Sukarno era (Reeve 1985), political, professional, labor, religious, and other civil associations are subjected to extensive state controls, including tests for ideological correctness and strong pressures to choose leaders amenable to government directives. In such circumstances, it is difficult for any civic organization to operate independently of strict state supervision. Indeed, as Indonesia’s private business sector has grown in recent years, the government has sought to force even business associations to play by these corporatist rules (MacIntyre 1990).

Such a hierarchical authoritarianism creates a political atmosphere in which it is all too easy for rival claimants to power to conclude that the only rational way to engage in politics is to work behind the scenes, forging alliances with ascendant factions in the ruling elite and taking care not to push for broader political participation. It is important to emphasize that this corporatist policy is in fact quite contrary to the Muslim community’s own organizational history. Prior to the patrimonial politics of the independence era, Muslim organizations had a long history of pluralism and extragovernmental independence. In precolonial and colonial times, most of the Islamic community stood apart from the state, in village schools and networks of trade, learning, and pilgrimage. Though the state had its hired clerics, often recruited from the ranks of the lesser aristocracy, most Islamic scholars kept a careful distance from state bureaucrats. In the face of Old Order patrimony and New Order controls, some Muslim organizations have had difficulty maintaining their independence. Nonetheless, in recent years such organizations as Nahdlatul Ulama and the Muhammadiyah have preserved a vital nonstate organization and have been among the most consistent advocates of social and political reform (see Feillard and Hefner, below).
Under the government’s corporatist controls, however, it is understandable that some in the political arena, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, may be tempted to opt for a state-centered strategy aimed at capturing control of government, keeping the system closed, and using the state to suppress rival claimants to power. Were a vigorously Islamic leadership to move into a governing coalition and opt for such a strategy, it would destroy the Muslim community’s historic role as a promoter of civil association and extra-governmental freedom. The Muslim world would have lost one of its brightest prospects for a democratic and pluralist Islam.

There is considerably less of a historic precedent for Muslim civil autonomy in Malaysia, though even here the situation is complex. Influenced by their longer experience with Muslims in India, from early on in the colonial era the British formally acknowledged the role of Islam among the Malay population. Primary responsibility for the management of Islamic affairs was left in the hands of the native elite, especially the sultans, under the watchful eye of British supervisors (Roff 1967; Mutalib 1990, 16). From an organizational perspective, then, Malaysian Islam has tended until recently to display a more socially conservative, establishmentarian face than Islam in Indonesia.

This tendency to work through government rather than through civil institutions was reinforced in the late colonial era. At the end of the Second World War, Malayan society was shaken by events known as the “Emergency,” a combination of ethnic and political disturbances provoked in the first instance by a Chinese-led communist insurgency against British occupation. In its first months, this struggle was marked by gruesome episodes of violence between Chinese and Malays. The Chinese had suffered under the Japanese occupation, and many among them resented what they regarded as Malay collaboration with Japanese authorities against the Chinese (Omar 1993, 34). The communist rebellion was suppressed by the British authorities after a long antiguerilla campaign. In its aftermath, as Malaysia prepared for independence, the British instituted political and constitutional measures that effectively guaranteed Malay dominance in the government. (Malays make up just over 60 percent of the country’s population, Chinese 30 percent). Equally important, they perpetuated the tradition of direct government involvement in the management of Islamic affairs. The three-sided dialogue seen in Indonesia between nationalism, state organization, and independent religious association was here replaced by a more unitary pattern of (limited) religious establishment and Malay political dominance.
It is important to note, however, that the British introduced legal institutions and constitutional balances into the Malaysian political system of a far more extensive sort than those developed by the Dutch in the East Indies. Indeed, the Dutch bequeathed a legal tradition that preserved large portions of the colonial system’s police-state controls. However shaken they have been by recent developments, Malaysia’s legal and political structures provide a significant counterweight to the establishmentarianism of the political order and have insured a greater measure of political and associational freedom than seen in Indonesia during the New Order. Nonetheless, the identification of Islam with Malayness and Malayness with political dominance has guaranteed that, unlike in Indonesia, there has been a strong tendency to coordinate Islam through state bureaus rather than through independent social organizations. As Pelerz’ essay in this volume indicates (cf. Jomo and Cheek 1992), many of Malaysia’s new Muslim movements have focused not on building extrastate associations, but on challenging the government’s Islamic credentials and calling for greater state involvement in religious affairs.

Some Malay religious organizations have responded to this situation by withdrawing from the political arena in favor of the purity and privacy of cult organization. However, as Malay politics in the Mahathir era has moved out of the hands of aristocrats and into those of new administrative elites, government Islam itself has been opened to people from a wider range of social backgrounds, even if its basic structures have remained unchanged (Crouch 1996, 246; Jomo and Cheek 1992; cf. Nagata 1984). The situation of Malaysian Muslims thus reflects two contrary influences. On one hand, Muslim interests have been premised on Malay political dominance and pursued in the corridors of state power rather than through civil association. On the other, Malaysia’s remarkable economic boom and the growth of a more confident Malay middle class have served to mute demands for a more radical establishment of religion in the state. How much these latter qualities—and Malaysian democracy in general (see Crouch 1996, 236–247)—are dependent upon the country’s continuing economic growth remains unclear.

In the third Muslim community represented in this volume, the Philippines, the relationship of Muslims to the nation-state has been different yet. If, in Malaysia, the state has been an official promoter of Islam and, in Indonesia, Muslims have struggled to guard their independence and project their influence into an otherwise nonsectarian state, in the Philippines the Muslim community has had to balance dominance within their own territories against marginalization within the institutions of the nation-state as a whole. In recent years, as a result of an influx of Christian Filipino migrants
from the north, Muslim dominance even in regions of historic Muslim settlement has been severely threatened. As McKenna shows in his essay in this volume, this combination of regionalist vigor and national marginalization has given rise to armed movements for political secession. Yet, even here, the Muslim leadership has not been willing or able to agree on a unitary formula for Islam and state. As the essays by Horvatich and McKenna indicate, the Muslim community does not comprise a nation united around common religion and regionalism. On the contrary, it is cross-cut by competing affiliations, most notably those of ethnicity. These ties work to push segments of the Muslim community into alliance with non-Muslims. Even among those who joined the secessionist Moro National Liberation Front at the height of its armed struggle in the 1980s, there was strong disagreement as to whether the goal of their movement was the establishment of an Islamic state or a regionally encapsulated, nonsectarian state. Given the vulnerable position of Muslims in Philippine society as a whole, this contest of views among Philippine Muslims will be as much influenced by state actions as it will by ideological dispositions in the Muslim community itself.

**Conclusion: Islam and the Public Sphere**

These three examples should make us wary of talking about a single “Islamic politics” or, worse yet, “civilizational identity” in Southeast Asia (cf. Eickelman and Piscatori 1996). Islamic politics there is, but it spans a range of ideologies and organizations. Not insignificantly, it includes in its ranks a good number of ardent democrats and liberal-constitutionalists. “Civilizational identity” there is too in Muslim Southeast Asia. While providing for certain commonalities of worship, law, and custom, however, this identity is not the sort of thing that engenders commitment to a shared or totalizing political ideology.

These Southeast Asian examples also provide several more generalizable lessons on Islam in an era of nation-states. First and most basically, this region’s diverse history demonstrates that the nation-state and nationalism have been as decisive an influence on Muslim politics as have any timeless principles of Muslim governance. It is important to stress this point, not to diminish the moral and transcendental truth of Islam, but to check the essentializing claims of those analysts, Western and Muslim, who would see Islam as an unchanging and all-encompassing blueprint for political order. Such a simplification does violence to the historical diversity of Islamic politics; more basically, it ignores that most Muslims in modern times have embraced the idea of the nation-state and incorporated its central ideological assumptions into their political world view (Piscatori 1986). Equally important, such a simplification overlooks the way in which the
great majority of Muslim intellectuals in this region have embraced the ideals of popular sovereignty and citizenry participation.\textsuperscript{11}

Just how Muslims should work to implement these ideals in the real world, however, is another, more complicated, matter. On this point there are great differences of opinion. Even as Muslim leaders have embraced principles of popular sovereignty, they disagree on what institutional structures might best realize that ideal. Even as they agree on the importance of respecting other religions, they disagree on how those religions should be accommodated within the nation.

In general terms, and leaving aside a few marginal groupings, one can distinguish two general views on these matters. The one—and in Southeast Asia it is held by a minority—would insist that anything short of a total Muslim state regulated by divine law (shari’ah) is a betrayal of Islam’s promise. Islam, it is often said, is a “total way of life.” The way in which this principle should be implemented, these advocates insist, is to subordinate all institutions to Islamic law (shari’ah) and to bring the full weight of the state to bear on its implementation. Hence, the argument goes, Muslims must seek to win control of the state and, once captured, reorganize its institutions in line with this total social plan. In absolute terms, government is not subject to the sovereignty of the people, but only to that of God (cf. Moussalli 1992; Norton 1995, 22).

Though advocates of this position insist that it is premised on the oldest of Muslim values, its manner of articulation here is distinctly modern. Often it is linked to the principle of God’s oneness (tauhid), an ideal that is, indeed, at the very core of Islamic belief. In the context of Muslim political theory, however, the concept of tauhid is applied by these conservative Islamists to an issue with which historically it has not been associated: the idea that society itself must reflect the unity and lordship of God through its subordination to a single body of divine principles supervised by the state. Interpreted in this way, tauhid becomes an argument against modern social differentiation and against, in particular, the open expression of divergent interests sanctioned under constitutional democracy. No social divisions should be allowed to destroy the unity of the Muslim community and nation. Both are subject to divine law, the supervision of which is the responsibility of modern government with all its intrusive power (cf. Moussalli 1995, 88–89).

Many people in the second group of new Muslim intellectuals also respect the idea that Islam is a total way of life; and they embrace the principle of God’s oneness. But they interpret these principles quite differently from the first group of conservative Islamists. For these civic modernists, the ideal of tauhid requires precisely the opposite of the pluralism-denying
unitarianism advocated by conservatives. God’s oneness is such, it is said, that under no circumstance can it be profaned through its confusion with things nonsacral. On this point, these intellectuals are in general agreement with the great Egyptian reformer Muhammad Abduh, who insisted that Islam does distinguish between the religious and the secular, and who allowed great latitude for human reasoning in the organization of the latter—including, in this instance, the organization of modern government. According to this liberal interpretation of *tauhid* truth, then, it is imperative not to confuse the urgent reality of God’s oneness with any particular state structure, political establishment, or, least of all, powerholder. Though God has provided guidelines, their interpretation is often difficult; pluralism and tolerance are thus imperative. Though Islamic tradition provides precedents regarding how specific principles should be interpreted, the precedents themselves demonstrate that Muslim thinkers must be responsive to historical context and their conceptual reformulation. The law demands freedom and pluralism, not an inalterable list of rules.

Most who advocate this latter position would reject the Western secularist argument that the way to resolve problems of religion and state is by erecting a high wall between the two and declaring religion a “private” matter, barring it from the public stage. But Western observers must remember that this rejection is by no means peculiar to Muslim modernists. In fact, on this point, these modernists sound a good deal like the Christian advocates of a post-Enlightenment “civil politics” described by Jose Casanova in his recent book on Christianity and civil society in the West (1994). Like these Christian critical theorists, these civic Muslims insist that to restrict religion to the private domain is to deprive it of its vital ethical role in public discourse and activity. Such a privatization of religion only cedes the moral high ground to the opportunistic instrumentalities of market forces and political entrepreneurs. Neomodernist Christians and Muslims thus agree in seeing virtue as vital to political life. Hence, as a source of moral guidance, religion is never just a matter of personal belief, but the most vital of public concerns.

These Southeast Asian Muslims and their Western counterparts also agree in insisting that religion’s public role is best served by maintaining a careful distance from any particular government or political faction. Religion’s goals must not be profaned through their identification with efforts to seize state power. Religion must be anchored in the religious community and civil society, not in state bureaucracies, and from there it should work to inform public policy and discourse. For this Muslim variant of civic republicanism, then, the very principle of God’s oneness (*tauhid*) mandates what is, in effect, a kind of secularization. But this secularization is not the
same as that espoused by laicist secularists, with their privatization of religion and abandonment of the public domain. On the contrary, religion remains a vital element in public life, through its elevation above party politics and state structures into a more abstract moral ethos that pervades the whole of society.

It would be an exaggeration to claim that this latter view is now or will necessarily become dominant in Southeast Asian Islam. At the moment, the sense of political (not to mention military) crisis in the Muslim Philippines leaves little room for the luxury of such careful reflection. Similarly, for historical reasons noted above, such civic views tend to be more popular in Indonesia than in Malaysia. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that this view is as widespread as it is throughout the region. Could this pluralist Islam predominate in the long run? It is much too early to answer this question. At least in Malaysia and Indonesia, the Muslim community is just now emerging from a period of extraordinary and, in many ways, unexpected revival. Confident that it has secured a solid social base, it is only now beginning to grapple with the difficult questions posed by its increased influence.

At the very least, however, those of us with a sympathetic interest in the region would do well to acknowledge the significance of what has already been achieved in Muslim Southeast Asia. Though Western scholars once thought that the most distinctive feature of Southeast Asian Islam was the strength of so-called pre-Islamic survivals (some of which, we now realize, were actually subaltern variants of Islam), from a political perspective the more unusual feature of Islam in this region is its long-established tradition of intellectual and organizational pluralism. Even in an earlier era when virtually all Javanese, Malays, or Minangkabau called themselves Muslims, neither the courts nor the ulama exercised an effective monopoly of power over the Muslim community’s moral and intellectual life. There were varied religious views even in premodern times and diverse ways of being a good Muslim. This pluralism was perhaps more pronounced in Indonesia than it was in Malaysia, and, as several chapters in this volume illustrate, certain forms of authoritarian cooptation threaten its vitality today. Nonetheless, it is remarkable to see how throughout this region the Muslim community has maintained its diversity and eschewed totalizing political formulae.

Though a few Muslim leaders occasionally lament this pluralism, seeing it as a fatal political weakness, from a democratic perspective, this pluralism is really a blessing in disguise. Much as with post-Reformation Christianity in Western Europe, this situation has led some Muslim leaders to the realization that the aspiration for monopolistic unity must be renounced in favor of pluralism, tolerance, and the abstraction of Islam into
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a deeply pervasive civic influence. There are other influences on this tradition of Islamic tolerance as well. In Indonesia, for example, the experience of Muslims since independence has impressed upon many the dangers of politicizing religion too directly. It was, after all, during the Old Order (pre-1966) period, when religious issues were politicized to an extreme, that one heard the loudest cries among some in the Javanist community for a turning away from Islam. Similarly, it was in the aftermath of the bloodshed of 1965–1966 that one saw some Muslims flee Islam for Hinduism and Christianity (Hefner 1993b; Lyon 1977). Conversely, there has been an unprecedented deepening of Islamic piety since the 1980s, a period during which political Islam has been far less influential than a civic-minded, cultural Islam. It is clear that for some Indonesians this dampening of political-religious passions, which is to say, the “desacralization” of certain kinds of party politics, has allowed for the realization of deeper Islamic ideals.

Though historical lessons of this sort may seem a fragile basis on which to build a consensus for democratic pluralism and tolerance, it is this same kind of heritage that promoted, and promotes, pluralist ideologies in the West. Conversely, where such a pluralist precedent is lacking, a modern society can easily slip into bitter civic discord. As Nazi Germany, contemporary Bosnia, and today’s debates over the Muslim minority in France and Britain all illustrate, the struggle for pluralism is not something the West resolved once and for all in the nineteenth century; as in the Muslim world, it remains a living challenge. Where precedents for civic tolerance exist—and especially where their principles have been abstracted from public culture and reinforced in legal-political charters—they are among the most vital of resources for civil accommodation. As in the early modern West, religious pluralism can also serve as a school in which young nations learn the habit of political tolerance (Martin 1978).

At the same time, Southeast Asia has other political precedents—most of them owing little to Islam—that look unfavorably at social autonomy and are little inclined to respect pluralism. We know, however, that, in the economic sphere, this heritage of a hierarchical and corporatist “bureaucratic polity” has proved itself less of an impediment to market dynamism than observers a generation ago would ever have thought possible (McVey 1992). Unfortunately, on the evidence of recent world history, it seems that the formulae required to manage religious and ethnic pluralism are considerably less certain than those required to manage capital and labor markets. Even today religious and ethnic absolutism has reappeared to ravage otherwise prosperous societies, including European ones.

The challenge for Southeast Asian Muslims is thus to build on and extend their tradition of pluralism and autonomy. The tradition can serve
as a vital ingredient in any effort to devise a modern and democratic politics. Muslim success in this effort is no more guaranteed in Southeast Asia than that of Christians and Jews in the West. As in the West, however, the prospects for long-term success depend less on the timeless momentum of “civilizational identities” than on the fault lines of modern contests and, it is to be hoped, the creative efforts of willing men and women to make good on their religion’s promise of universality and justice.

Notes
1. This and other statements gave rise to a small library of books and articles on the nature of political Islam in a post–cold war era. Among the most interesting overviews of this debate are Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, Esposito 1992, Fuller and Lesser 1995, and Halliday 1996. The Huntington debate, it should be noted, was widely covered in Southeast Asian Muslim newspapers and journals. To cite but one source, the liberal Islamic Indonesian journal *Ulumul Qur’an* published the full text of the Huntington article in translation and used the occasion to present a superbly balanced series of essays on Islam, Occidentalism, and modern politics. See *Ulumul Qur’an* 4:5 (1993) and 5:2 (1994).

2. The Muslim population of Southeast Asia is dispersed across Indonesia (whose population is 88 percent Islamic), Malaysia (55 to 60 percent), Singapore (about 16 percent), the southern Philippines (4 to 7 percent), Brunei (86 percent), and the four southern (and historically Malay) provinces of Thailand, near the border with Malaysia. There are also smaller Muslim populations in Burma, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

3. In his *History of Islamic Societies* Ira M. Lapidus presents one of the most sweeping characterizations of this sort, arguing that “for nearly 5,000 years Middle Eastern and Islamic societies have been based upon the constellation of lineage, tribal, religious, and political institutions first evident in the ancient cities of Mesopotamia in the third millennium B.C.” (1988, 879). This is a view of culture that assigns unqualified primacy to historical precedent, rather than to the recreation of tradition in emergent and contextually renewed ways. As John Bowen remarked, Lapidus’ image “becomes exceedingly shopworn by the time the author reaches the societies of modern Southeast Asia” (1993, 6). Even as sophisticated an observer as Olivier Roy is not immune to this peculiar geographic essentialism. In his recent *The Failure of Political Islam*, he observes that the Muslim world is divided into “three geographic and cultural tendencies: the Sunni Arab Middle East, the Sunni Indian subcontinent, and Irano-Arab Shiism” (1994, 2). Piscatori (1986) and Piscatori and Eickelman (1996) provide a welcome exception to this tendency.

4. As Roy F. Ellen has noted (1983, 50), an important exception to this emphasis in Islamic studies was the renowned Orientalist C. Snouck Hurgronje. In addition to his remarkable ethnography of the Meccan pilgrimage (Snouck
Snouck is famous for his careful ethnological study of society and religion among the Acehnese of northern Sumatra (Snouck Hurgronje 1906). Unfortunately, until well into the postwar era, the work of this unusual ethnographic pioneer remained the exception rather than the rule within Islamic studies (cf. Benda 1983, 20–31).

5. For a more recent overview of Sufism’s role in early Southeast Asian Islam, see Martin van Bruinessen 1994.

6. On all these points, Dutch cultural policies bore a striking resemblance to those of the French colonial administration in the Berber regions of Morocco (Munson 1993, 103). There too, in contradistinction to their policies among Arabs (with whom, it was assumed, an explicit policy of de-Islamization was too dangerous), colonial authorities overplayed ethnic “tradition” so as to downplay the influence of Islam.

7. All of this is not to deny, however, that Islamic cultural influence in Java has varied over time. M. C. Ricklefs’ remarkable studies of Central Javanese history show there were periods of such variation in the early modern period; he also provides insight into the political reasons for this variation (Ricklefs 1974, 176–226; 1978, 154). In particular, Dutch colonialism caused a crisis of confidence among the Javanese aristocracy and a nostalgia for (a somewhat fantasized) pre-Islamic tradition (cf. Florida 1995). As Stuart Robson (1981) and Anthony Reid (1993, 181) have demonstrated, the decline was reinforced by the Mataram court’s loss of the north coast mercantile trade, which isolated Javanese Muslims from the international ties through which legalistic and reform Islam were disseminated. Another period of decline for Islam in Java was the 1950s and early 1960s, when party rivalries in the countryside pushed some nominal Muslims toward the creation of explicit alternatives to Islam (Geertz 1973, 151; Hefner 1987). This politicization of religious ideologies culminated in the massacres of 1965–1966, prompting a significant flight of Javanists to Hinduism and Christianity (Lyon 1977; Hefner 1993b). From this historical perspective, one can appreciate that Geertz’ characterization of Islam and Javanism was also influenced by the highly charged nature of religious politics during his fieldwork in the early 1950s.

8. Let me emphasize here that, even while agreeing with the spirit of Hodgson’s critique, I want to avoid the converse error of identifying everything in Javanese culture or abangan religion as Islamic. To do so is to introduce a unitary holism to a cultural tradition that has long been marked by polyvalence, contest, and even violence. As I have discussed elsewhere (Hefner 1985), there are important elements of abangan tradition that clearly owed much to earlier non-Islamic traditions. Many of these, such as certain categories of spirits and offerings, were reconceptualized by many Javanese within a Javo-Islamic framework. But not all Javanese traditions were so assimilated, and not all ethnic Javanese were equally agreed on identification as Muslim. The incidence of apostasy and extreme heterodoxy apparent in nineteenth- and twen-
tieth-century Java shows that the Islamization of Java was ongoing and contested rather than a finished cultural event.

9. Anderson does make reference to Islamic educational pilgrimages, but only to deny that they might inspire nationalist sentiments as colonial schools did: "One has to remember that in complete contrast to traditional indigenous schools, which were always local and personal enterprises (even if, in good Muslim fashion, there was plenty of horizontal movement of students from one particularly well-reputed ulama-teacher to another), the government schools formed a colossal, highly rationalized, rightly-centralized hierarchy" (Anderson 1983, 110–111; my emphasis). Yet, as John Bowen has shown in Sumatra (1993, 55–73) and Dale F. Eickelman in Morocco (1985), Muslim religious schools were not "always local and personal"; and in the colonial era they became important centers for the nurturing of religious-nationalist sentiments (cf. Hefner 1994; Noer 1973).

10. Deliar Noer’s The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia (1973) provides an important overview of the role of Muslim schools in the development of Islam and nationalism in Indonesia; Omar’s recent book (1993) provides a useful analysis of the somewhat more ambivalent relationship between Islam and nationalism among Malays.

11. Habermas’ widely influential model of the development of Western civil society and “public” culture (1991) is notably flawed by a similar tendency to portray religion as a historically declining and essentially private concern.

12. Rather than seeking the causes of religious “disenchantment” in unilinear and irreversible processes of cultural evolution, then, it seems more prudent to recognize that secularization or, more precisely, desacralization, is reversible and contingent, depending as it does on the political and moral forces at work in a given time and place. While criticizing mainstream secularization theory, it is important to point out that the best among the secularization theorists in historical sociology always recognized this fact. David Martin’s A General Theory of Secularization (1978) is exemplary in this regard, exploring European secularization not as a unilinear process, but as a consequence of the struggles for and against the establishment of church and state. More recently, Winston Davis has used a related approach in a fascinating study of modern Japanese religion (Davis 1992, 8–9). For Davis, secularization models formulated in terms of the general decline of religion are so grossly cast as to be meaningless. For him, a rehabilitated interest in modern secularization begins with the understanding that secularization operates to differing degrees in different social domains, creating a highly mottled pattern of religiosity and secularity in different societies.

13. This situation contrasts with Olivier Roy’s observations on Islamism in the Middle East. There, he observes, the majority of Islamists reject the ideal of popular sovereignty as a Western idea, insisting instead that there can be no separation of religious and political authority because it is God and not the
people who is absolutely sovereign (Roy 1994, 40–41). Sayyid Qutb, a leading theorist for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (until his execution by President Nasser in 1966), and, more recently, Hasan al-Turabi of the Sudan have made similar arguments (see Moussalli 1992; Muslih 1995). As Ahmad Moussalli has recently argued, however, it is equally clear that there is broader support for representative democracy among Middle Eastern Muslim intellectuals than such generalizations imply (Moussalli 1995; Norton 1995, 1). There are Muslim intellectuals in Southeast Asia who adopt a position opposed to the principle of popular sovereignty, but most prominent thinkers in Indonesia and Malaysia embrace variants of a pro-democracy “modernist” or “liberal” democratic view, close to that formulated by the influential Egyptian modernist Muhammad Abduh (Muslih 1995). These thinkers look to the concepts of consultation (shura) and the public interest (al-maslahah) as grounds for democracy within the Islamic tradition (cf. Esposito and Voll 1996, 18–32). Many also place great emphasis on the notion of God’s oneness (tauhid) and sovereignty, a concept that Roy links to Islamist rejection of popular sovereignty. For an overview of debates on these issues among Muslim Indonesians, see Abdillah 1996.

14. In an intriguing essay on traditions of social criticism (nasiha) in Saudi Arabia, Talal Asad captures the spirit of this principle quite insightfully: “[A] well regulated polity depends on its members being virtuous individuals who are partly responsible for one another’s moral condition—and therefore in part on continuous moral criticism” (1993a, 233). Though Asad goes on to argue that “modern [Western] liberalism rejects this principle,” his characterization of Western liberalism overlooks the fact that the civic republican stream within Western liberalism invokes precisely the same principle of politics and virtue as expressed in his quote. In fairness to Asad, one can note that there is no shortage of Western proponents of just the atomized liberalism Asad generalizes to the whole of the West. But Western liberalism has its own contests and “subalterities,” one of which is concerned with the question of just how to maintain the public virtues required for a vibrant civic life. See Taylor 1992, Rosenblum 1989, Douglass et al. 1990, and Putnam 1993 for recent perspectives on this issue.

15. On the challenges of Muslims to French society, see the collection of essays in Bruno Étienne 1990; for a highly critical discussion of the Muslim situation in Britain, see Asad 1993b. 

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