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978-1-107-11914-7 - Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance Without Liberalism

Jeremy Menchik

Excerpt

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## I

## After Secularization

The Christians should worship God according to the teachings of Jesus Christ, Moslems according to the teachings of the prophet Mohammed, Buddhists should discharge their religious rites according to their own books. But let us all have Belief in God.... And the state of Indonesia should be a state incorporating Belief in God.

Soekarno, 1945<sup>1</sup>

Rule of law in Indonesia must be understood through the viewpoint of the 1945 Constitution, namely a constitutional state which places the ideal of Belief in God as its foremost principle as well as religious values underlying the movements of national and state life, and not as a country that imposes separation of state and religion or merely holds to the principle of individualism or communalism.

Indonesian Constitutional Court, 2010<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

On March 17, 2010, I was leaving the Indonesian Constitutional Court building with Asrul Sani, the lawyer representing the world's largest Islamic organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), in a hearing on the country's law forbidding religious blasphemy. On the way out we ran into lawyers from some of the country's more conservative Islamic organizations: Abdul Rahman Tardjo from the Indonesian Council for Islamic Propagation (Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia) and Lutfi Hakim from the Indonesian Council of Ulama (Majelis Ulama Indonesia). In the hearings, NU took a similar position as the conservatives and Sani usually chatted amicably with the other lawyers. Sani introduced me, saying, "This is Jeremy, he is an American studying Islam." Sani then paused. "But you will like his research project. It is called 'Tolerance *without* Liberalism.'" When I presented my work at the State Islamic University (UIN)

<sup>1</sup> Soekarno in Yamin (1959, 77–78).

<sup>2</sup> Court verdict, 2010, 140/PUU-VII/2009, 3.34.10.

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Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta, the noted Islamic intellectual Azumardi Azra said, similarly, that in order to understand Indonesian Islamic organizations, it is necessary to differentiate their values of tolerance from their liberal values. “Of course these institutions are tolerant, but they are not liberal, and they do not want liberalism in Indonesia.” Likewise, a banner at the 2010 NU congress in Makassar expressed a similar idea by warning leaders of the dangers of fundamentalism, radicalism, and liberalism, even while Christians were publicly welcomed at the meeting.<sup>3</sup> Over and over, the leaders of Indonesia’s mass Islamic organizations made the same point: we are tolerant, and we are proud of our country’s religious diversity. But our society is not liberal, and we are wary of the influence of liberalism in democratic Indonesia.<sup>4</sup>

In some respects, Sani’s and Azra’s desire to simultaneously express tolerance but disavow its connection to liberalism is not surprising. Frustration with self-proclaimed liberal Muslim activists is common in the Muslim world. Also common is frustration with the linkage of the liberal conception of religious freedom with other democratic rights such as free speech and political representation. Throughout the twentieth century, the guise of religious freedom has been used as an entry point into Muslim societies by Christian missionaries. It was not a conservative Islamist but rather Indonesia’s most outspoken advocate for liberal Islam, Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, who expressed this sentiment most succinctly:

Even I think that too much liberalism is bad, like with the freedom of religion. That is how the Christians have spread their proselytization, via “freedom of religion.” When I was in [Washington] DC, I met with a group of Christians and they had a very sophisticated operation to promote freedom of religion. But I think this is not the same freedom that I am talking about. That is Christianization.<sup>5</sup>

Abshar-Abdalla highlights an important distinction between the right of Indonesians to explore their country’s diverse belief systems and the right of foreign churches to build houses of worship in Muslim villages. He supports the first but not the second. His critique of religious freedom dovetails with that of scholars who have shown how the promotion of religious freedom for Christians living in the Muslim lands has served as an entry point for imperialism.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Author’s observation at the March 2010 NU Mukhtar, Makassar. The banner was created by the Riau Islands Province branch of NU.

<sup>4</sup> Liberalism has of course had an influence on Indonesian society through the colonial and missionary encounter as well as through contemporary nongovernmental organizations. Yet, as will become clear, liberalism’s influence pales in comparison to the power of historical interactions, ethnic identities, state influence, and Indonesian Islamic political thought in shaping ideas about tolerance.

<sup>5</sup> Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, interview by the author, Jakarta, June 12, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Mahmood (2006, 327; 2012).

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Yet there is something in the sentiment shared by Sani, Azra, and Abshar-Abdalla that goes beyond a wariness of imperialism or Christian proselytizing in the name of religious freedom. Indonesia's mass Islamic organizations value the country's religious diversity but do not want to sanitize the public sphere of religion, see individuals abandon centuries-old religious practices, or destroy institutions that they see as integral to peaceful coexistence in order to promote a volunteerist idea of religious freedom. They see value in diversity and in maintaining practices that have structured social and political life since the Islamicization of insular Southeast Asia.

How do Indonesia's mass Islamic organizations understand tolerance? How do they envision the accommodation of religious difference in state and society? This book is my attempt to explain Indonesian Islamic organizations' vision for tolerance. Putting that vision into practice is exceedingly difficult at a time when secularism is often equated with tolerance and religion is synonymous with intolerance. Although I do not share these organizations' vision uncritically, I believe that their understandings of tolerance are no less worthy of study and debate than the secular-liberal one.

After all, tolerance, defined as the willingness to 'put up with' those things one rejects or opposes, has emerged as the singular solution to the problems of the twenty-first century: how to resolve identity conflicts, how to cope with instability in new democracies, and how to resolve the friction between the dueling projects of liberal secularism and religious revival. Massive education programs are devoted to teaching tolerance of Muslims in France, Jews in the United States, and Christians in Egypt. The institutional framework, however, for religious accommodation is poorly understood in places like Indonesia where religion is central to politics rather than relegated to the private sphere. Although scholars can draw on an extensive body of liberal political theory to explain the system for the accommodation of religious minorities in ostensibly secular states such as the United States, our understanding of the relationship between religion and the state outside of secular-liberal government is limited.

Our understanding of the relationship between religion and the state in such polities is immediately constrained by our vocabulary: the terms 'non-secular' and 'nonliberal' tell us nothing about the civic virtues and institutional structures that underpin democracy in places where religion is central to politics. Likewise, such categories deny agency to actors like NU, which embrace democracy and religious pluralism but not secularism or liberalism; their goal is to see belief in God, religious education, religious values, and religious organizations celebrated and incorporated into social and political life rather than being benevolently tolerated by a secular state.

In explicating Islamic organizations' vision for religious accommodation, then, we must expand our vocabulary for describing the politics of tolerance, democracy, and national identity. As Chakrabarty rightly notes, "European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and

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provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everyone’s heritage and which affects us all – may be renewed from the margins.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, we will have to identify the narrowness of the categories of analysis inherited from liberal political thought in order to bypass them. For this project, that means investigating and even embracing political concepts of tolerance, democracy, and nationalism as they are understood in the global periphery.<sup>8</sup>

This need for theoretical renewal is an indicator of a related problem; our explanations for the place of religion in politics have not kept pace with world events. In the twenty years since the field of political science rediscovered religion, scholars have struggled to advance the literature without access to a common paradigm. Both the ‘clash of civilizations theory’ and secularization theory – the idea that economic and political development would lead to the disappearance of religion – are increasingly doubted if not completely discarded. The task of rebuilding is complicated by events as varied as the attacks of 9/11, Europe’s struggle to accommodate public religions, the influence of Christian evangelicals in the United States, and the ‘Arab Spring’ and its varied aftermaths. How should scholars rebuild the study of religion and politics after the failure of secularization theory?

Rebuilding is especially challenging when it comes to tolerance. Harvey Cox’s seminal text *The Sacred City* famously declared that “Pluralism and tolerance are the children of secularization.”<sup>9</sup> Yet NU is tolerant, but not secular. Its commitments to religious accommodation come from other sources: historical interactions between Muslim groups, interactions between Muslim groups and Christian missions, Islamic political thought, and the influence of modernizing states. In order to explain both how Islamic organizations understand tolerance and *why*, this book will focus on the historical and causal determinants of social attitudes.

These concerns – the need to understand the meaning of tolerance to Islamic organizations, the limits of our conceptual vocabulary for understanding tolerance in places where religion is central to politics, and the disillusionment with secularization theory’s ability to explain the place of religion in modern life – provide the motivation for this book. I examine the origins of tolerance, a core value of modern, plural, democratic life. And I do so by looking for tolerance in one of the most unlikely places: Islamic organizations in the developing world.

The primary goal of *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism* is to explain the meaning of tolerance to Indonesia’s mass Islamic organizations in order to understand how their normative values shape politics

<sup>7</sup> Chakrabarty (2008 [2000], 16).

<sup>8</sup> My task is inspired by the work of Bajpai (2011), Bhargava (1998), Chakrabarty (2008 [2000]), Euben (1999), and Mahmood (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Cox (1965, 3).

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in a Muslim-majority democracy. Each chapter investigates a different aspect of tolerance or intolerance among Muslim democrats.

The second goal of the book is to explain *why* Islamic organizations understand tolerance the way they do. This task demands careful methodology in order to explain the determinants of tolerance, intolerance, and the variation in tolerance across time and toward varied subjects. It entails examining the religious and nonreligious factors that drive Islamic organizations, the local context in which Islamic organizations develop, and the history of relationships between Islamic organizations and other groups.

Finally, explaining the origins of attitudes in Indonesian Islamic organizations means articulating an approach to the study of religion that is minimally beholden to the troubled paradigms of the past. As a result, the third goal is to develop what I call a ‘historical constructivist’ approach to the study of religion and politics. To do so, I isolate and build on three strategies:

1. Situating religious actors in their local and historical context in order to explain behavior. Religion as an object of study is approached as a discursive and embodied tradition with a past, present, and future embedded in a place with agents and actors, and not as a timeless system of beliefs.
2. Recognizing the coevolution and mutual constitution of states and religion. Rather than developing in isolation, practices of secularism, religious observance, attitudes toward minorities, and policies of the state develop through iterated interactions.
3. Reimagining the meaning of political science concepts such as tolerance and nationalism to travel beyond their secular-liberal and largely European origins.

Together, I hope these strategies effort will help scholars chart a path forward for research on religion, politics, and modernity.

As the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, Indonesia provides an ideal field site for understanding contemporary religion and politics. Indonesia is also home to the world’s largest Islamic organizations: Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and one of the world’s oldest Islamist groups, Persatuan Islam (Persis). NU, founded in 1926 in East Java, has more than 60 million members and is the leading traditionalist body in Indonesia.<sup>10</sup> In the Indonesian vernacular, a ‘traditionalist’ is someone who follows one of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence. Muhammadiyah, founded in 1912 in Central Java, has between 24 million and 32 million members and is Indonesia’s largest reformist organization.<sup>11</sup> Indonesian ‘reformers’ or ‘modernists’ are part of the global movement to revitalize Islamic societies through scientific education,

<sup>10</sup> NU has between 60 million and 84 million members (interview with NU board member Nasaruddin Umar, Jakarta, July 24, 2009; Mujani and Liddle (2004, 111, 121)).

<sup>11</sup> Mujani and Liddle (2004, 111, 121).

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social reform, and reliance on the Qur'an and Hadith for direct interpretation, based on the ideas of Mohammad Abduh and Rasyid Ridha. The third, Persis, founded in 1923 in West Java, is a smaller reformist group with about 500,000 members. All three organizations are crucial cases for understanding politics in the Muslim world.<sup>12</sup> Indonesia is also an ideal place for studying the contribution of Islamic organizations to democratic transition and consolidation. NU and Muhammadiyah's leaders are strong backers of democratic institutions; they are quick to defend the rights of the country's Christian, Confucian, Hindu, and Buddhist minorities. Moreover, their commitment to religious pluralism has proven vital during Indonesia's successful transition from authoritarianism.

Based on twenty-four months of field research, this book intervenes in debates about religion and democracy, Islam and politics, and the future of political theory in a postsecular world. In doing so, it attempts to transcend the narrative of a teleological progression from traditional societies to a modernity organized around secular democracy and the liberal virtue of tolerance.

### Contribution of the Book

The pioneers of the modern social sciences – Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Fredrick Engels, and Karl Marx – believed that religion had a short half-life.<sup>13</sup> Weber said, “The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world’.”<sup>14</sup> No wonder that political scientists have mostly ignored religion; in almost 100 years, the preeminent journal for political science published only 25 articles with a focus on religion.<sup>15</sup> Even politicians leading religious movements claimed that religious rituals were doomed to disappear in favor of secular endeavors. In the words of David Ben Gurion, “Judaism as religious practice and tradition is Judaism of the ghetto. Judaism in a Jewish state is Judaism of labor and

<sup>12</sup> These groups do not fit standard political science terminology. They are organizations in that they have members. But they do more than propagate their faith: they run more than 10,000 schools, as well as banks, hospitals, women's organizations, youth organizations, labor unions, and paramilitary organizations. They are part of civil society in that they are autonomous from the state, but their members *staff* much of the state bureaucracy. Although in the past they have had formal ties to political parties, their associated parties now have autonomy from the central boards. Theoretically, I define them as institutions that “represent socially sanctioned ... expectations with respect to the behavior of specific categories of actors or to the performance of certain activities” (Streeck and Thelen 2005, 9). This definition dovetails with Talal Asad's conception of Islam as a discursive tradition with a history (1986).

<sup>13</sup> Marx and Engels (1999 [1848]); Durkheim (2001 [1915]).

<sup>14</sup> Weber (1918, 155).

<sup>15</sup> Wald and Wilcox (2006). The problem is worse in the *American Political Science Review* than in peer disciplines. From 1906 to 2002, the peer journals for sociologists – the *American Journal of Sociology* and *American Sociological Review* – each printed four times the number of articles with a religious title as their political science counterpart.

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creativity in every field of economic and scientific endeavor, for all of man's needs."<sup>16</sup>

Rather than disappearing, however, religious traditions and rituals endure in our modern age. Survey research shows that large percentages of the public continue to express belief in God, belong to religious organizations, and participate in religious rituals. Of Weber's three tenets of secularization – the separation of church and state, the growth of individual disbelief, and the rational extinction of religious organizations – only the first retains support, and even that is bitterly contested.<sup>17</sup> Instead of the world evolving toward a uniform, secular modernity guided by rationality and organized around nation-states, many scholars now contend that the world is composed of 'multiple modernities' where no single trajectory holds true for every society.<sup>18</sup> The influence of religion on politics is marked more by diversity than by convergence to a single, secular-liberal modernity.<sup>19</sup>

These academic debates have been foregrounded by another, more pressing impetus to understand the place of religion in modern life: the declaration of war on the United States by Al Qaeda, the tragedy of September 11, and the ensuing US-led 'war on terror.' The US government highlighted the threat posed by religious organizations in far-flung locations such as Afghanistan and Sudan, even while evidence mounted that these organizations posed less danger than a rational appraisal of their security risk would justify.<sup>20</sup> Part of the miscalculation was theoretical; policy makers were stunned by the relevance of religion to the conflict and miscalibrated their response. Similarly, the war on terror forced international relations (IR) scholars to address the fact that their theories of world politics paid short shrift to the role of nonstate actors, transnational religious movements, and religious ideas in shaping world politics.

Some scholars, however, were prepared for the moment; the war gave prominence to a small group who divided the world into religious 'civilizations.' The wars of the twenty-first century, they argued, would be fought over religion since the values of the West are alien to other civilizations. The 'civilizationalists' devoted their most severe criticism to Islam, which they believed to be incompatible with modernity, tolerance, and democracy.<sup>21</sup> In the years since 9/11, the arguments of the civilizationalists have come to be seen as reflecting the emotional anxieties of a period of economic and global instability rather than rigorous scholarship. Scientific reasoning, rationality, tolerance, and respect for human rights did not originate in the West nor are these values confined to its borders. Wars are not fought on civilizational lines. Rather, differences

<sup>16</sup> Ben Gurion Diaries, March 14, 1959. Quoted in Zameret and Tlamim (1999).

<sup>17</sup> Cassanova (1994); Asad (2003); Fox (2006).

<sup>18</sup> Eisenstadt (2000).

<sup>19</sup> Cassanova (1994); Bhargava (1998); Katznelson and Stedman Jones (2010); Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and van Anteroen (2011).

<sup>20</sup> Brooks (2011); Mueller and Stewart (2012).

<sup>21</sup> Huntington (1993, 1996); Lewis (1990).



between rich and poor states, colonial and postcolonial states, and strong and weak states continue to shape the world's conflicts.<sup>22</sup> Islam is responsible for no more bloodshed than other religions.<sup>23</sup> Democratization can and does thrive in non-Christian states. Democracy even thrives in Muslim-majority states.<sup>24</sup>

To move beyond secularization theory and the civilizational debate, I isolate three strategies for studying religion and politics in an age of 'multiple modernities': situating religious actors in their local and historical context, recognizing the coevolution of states and religion, and reimagining political theory.

### *Local Genealogies*

The first task of reconstruction is building models of religious actors' interests and beliefs that are rooted in local history rather than universal models of rationality or deterministic applications of theology. Religious actors' interests originate in a specific place, time, and set of discourses; their behavior cannot be understood without understanding that context. Indonesia's Islamic organizations develop their understanding of friends and enemies, threats and interests through locally generated social interactions. Drawing on decades of work on religion in anthropology, I suggest that religion as an object of social scientific study should be approached as a discursive tradition with a past, present, and future embedded in a place with agents and actors.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the interests of religious actors cannot be exogenously determined apart from the context that they inhabit.

As a result, the task of understanding the meaning of tolerance for contemporary Islamic organizations must begin with history in order to then explain how Indonesia's Muslim actors came to understand the concept the way they do. This task demands careful causal analysis to explain the determinants of tolerance, intolerance, and the variation in tolerance across time and toward varied subjects. It entails examining the religious and nonreligious factors that drive Islamic organizations. The ethnic makeup of the organization, the interactions during the period of organizational formation, and the relationship between the organization and the state all affect ideas about group identity and interests. Chapter 2 outlines these hypotheses in detail along with the methods to test them. The subsequent three empirical chapters are then devoted to the history of Islamic organizations' relationships with Christians, Communists, Hindus, and Ahmadi Muslims.

The approach of this book stands in contrast to the dominant approaches to religion in political science: rationalism and theological determinism. Rationalist accounts of politics posit that religious actors have fixed preferences that are clearly specified, and that they will select strategies for behavior

<sup>22</sup> Fox (2001, 2005); Fearon and Laitin (2003); Fish, Jensenius, and Michel (2010).

<sup>23</sup> Fish, Jensenius, and Michel (2010); De Soysa and Nordås (2007).

<sup>24</sup> Ciftci (2010); Hefner (2000); Stepan (2000).

<sup>25</sup> Asad (1986).



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that maximize their utility within given constraints.<sup>26</sup> More than the Islamic revival or even the attacks of 9/11, this approach has helped bring religion and politics out of the shadows and into conversation with the rest of political science. But it has limits. Wildavsky suggests that while a rationalist approach can explain how actors pursue their preferences, the origins of preferences are either assumed or unspecified.<sup>27</sup> In addition, Euben argues that rationalist models of religious actors are poorly positioned to model the preferences of actors whose worldview may be based on nonrational truths, a rejection of individual choice, or conceptual categories that work apart from those that rational choice scholars take for granted, such as the separation of the public and the private.<sup>28</sup>

While these critiques are important, my concerns with rationalist accounts of religion are different. The political economy of religion school defines religion as “a public and collective belief system that structures the relationship of the individual to the divine and the supernatural.”<sup>29</sup> This definition is problematic on at least three grounds. First, it ignores religion’s communal imperatives. Religious organizations shape individual identities, orient individual values, and mobilize individuals across class, ethnic, regional, and national lines. Ignoring the communal imperatives of religious practice risks misunderstanding a whole range of attitudes and behaviors. Second, this definition of religion as a ‘belief system’ ignores the fact that ‘religion’ as a social scientific category is grounded in the political production of knowledge.<sup>30</sup> As Chapters 4 and 5 will make clear, what constitutes ‘religion’ is an outcome of political struggle. Finally, and this problem may account for the previous two, the political economy of religion school relies on a definition of religion that reveals its parochial genesis; the emphasis on supernatural beliefs and individual choice reflects a *normative* contention that religion should be a private, internal matter sharply differentiated from public comportment. There is the church of John Locke: a ‘free and voluntary society’ with jurisdiction only over the ‘salvation of souls’ and nothing in the world. This definition is a mismatch for any religious organization possessing coercive power, institutional rule-making capacity, symbolic power, potential for social movement mobilization, or affiliations with structures that shape individual choice.

My unease with rationalist models does not imply that I endorse a theological approach to the study of religion and politics. Theological accounts place heavy emphasis on the religious ideas held by religious actors in order to explain their behavior.<sup>31</sup> Philpott defines *political theology* as “a set of

<sup>26</sup> Gill (1998, 2001); Kalyvas (1996, 2000); Warner (2000).

<sup>27</sup> Wildavsky (1989); see also Philpott (2009, 198).

<sup>28</sup> Euben (1999). See Chapter 2 for further critiques of the ‘religious economies’ approach.

<sup>29</sup> Gill (2001); Grzymala-Busse (2012).

<sup>30</sup> On the political nature of the category of religion, see Shakman Hurd (2007, 509).

<sup>31</sup> Philpott (2007); Duffy Toft, Philpott, and Shah (2011).

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propositions about politics that people hold in their minds, share and develop through language and discourse, and use to persuade and motivate.”<sup>32</sup> This approach is laudable for its attention to the role of ideas in constructing an actor’s interests, but it is difficult to apply. Within any religious organization there are multiple ideas about political authority, especially within decentralized faiths such as Islam and Judaism.<sup>33</sup> Philpott’s second explanatory variable, differentiation – defined as actors’ relationship to the state – is similarly ambiguous.<sup>34</sup> As Chapters 2, 3, and 5 will make clear, theological approaches are unable to explain variation across the organizations or change over time, and thus fail also on empirical grounds.

Instead of a rationalist or theological approach, I draw on the growing literature showing that rational interests cannot be determined apart from local ideas, structures, and practices.<sup>35</sup> Meaningful behavior is possible only within a social context. Religious actors develop their relations with others through social interaction and practices. Absent that context, it is not possible for scholars to develop grounded accounts of actors’ behavior.<sup>36</sup> The historically grounded approach to religion developed here suggests that actors’ interests are generated through social interactions and that these interests, while open to change, shape their subsequent behavior. I demonstrate that ideas about interests, preferences, threats, and strategies emerge from the local context and have long-term effects on behavior.<sup>37</sup> This does not mean that Islamic organizations are not strategic, as we will see. But it means that ‘strategy’ must be understood within the local and historical context in which interests are generated in order to explain the meaning and practices of tolerance.

### *The Coevolution of Religion and State*

The second strategy for the reconstruction of scholarship on religion and politics is to rethink the relationship between religion and the state. Proponents of secularization argue that with political and economic development, religious organizations and religious life will become irrelevant to state affairs and

<sup>32</sup> Philpott (2007).

<sup>33</sup> Rosefsky Wickham (2013).

<sup>34</sup> It is also unclear whether the two variables are distinct. The archetypal example of *social* differentiation is Martin Luther’s *theology* of differentiation, specifically his “Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms and the Two Governments,” which Philpott argues led directly to the Westphalian system of separation of civil and spiritual authority (2000, 223).

<sup>35</sup> For the clearest applications of this approach to international relations and comparative politics, see Hopf (1998); Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986); Wendt (1987); Herrera (2005). On constructivism and religion, see Laffan (2011); Wedeen (2008, chapter 4); Rosefsky Wickham (2013, 11–12).

<sup>36</sup> Rabinow and Sullivan (1987).

<sup>37</sup> In emphasizing context, I follow the lead of Moaddel: “It is insufficient, if not flatly wrong, to try to explain Islamic society – its concrete political and social institutions and Muslim social behavior – in terms of textual analysis. The analysis of text is important, but it must be complemented by a systematic comparative analysis of historical cases” (2005, 8).