Critical Dialogue

Muslims Talking Politics: Framing Islam, Democracy and Law in Northern Nigeria. By Brandon Kendhammer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 317p. $95 cloth, $32.50 paper.

— Jeremy Menchik, *Boston University*

Over the past 20 years, a wave of political openings across the Muslim world has generated demands for the codification and application of Islamic law. Nigeria, Mali, Egypt, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia have all been home to campaigns to extend Sharia-inspired law. These movements are not blips in the postauthoritarian landscape. Rather, they are a persistent feature of electoral politics and civil society. As a result, they raise hard questions for scholars. Are demands for Sharia compatible with religious pluralism? How do these movements affect the interreligious bonds and social capital that is necessary for a strong civil society? If successful, is state codification and application of Islamic law compatible with the differentiation of state and religion that is essential for making democracy work?

These movements also raise questions about the applicability of the Western European model of political development to postcolonial states. While the creation of Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe hastened a process of declining religious observance, the decreased influence of churches, and a gradual differentiation of the state from religion, political development has occurred along different lines in the Muslim world. In the 1950s and 1960s, postcolonial states struggled to reform institutions that were built for the purposes of colonial rule and resource extraction, rather than domestic economic development and social welfare. During the Cold War, these states were often sites for divisive proxy wars between the United States and the Soviet Union, who chose sides in domestic political struggles in order to advance their influence abroad. The decreasing appeal of the Soviet model for economic development led many Muslims to look not toward the United States for ideological inspiration but, rather, to their own traditions, accelerating the Islamic revival of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In other words, political and religious development in the Muslim world has followed a markedly different track, leaving scholars scrambling for productive lines of comparison that will help us to understand future trajectories.

Brandon Kendhammer tackles these concerns in his impressive first book, *Muslims Talking Politics*. While much of the literature on Islamist movements examines campaigns for Sharia from the normative and rather tendentious question of whether Islam and democracy are compatible, Kendhammer investigates how ordinary Muslims talk and reason about Islam and democracy in public life. His informants' answers shed light on ordinary Muslims' vision for their political future in Nigeria, a country with one of the world's largest Muslim populations as well as considerable religious diversity.

Along the way, Kendhammer does the heavy intellectual work of synthesizing disparate and complicated academic literatures that are too infrequently in conversation. For example, Chapter 2 delves into the interdisciplinary literature on Islamic social movements in order to put that scholarship in serious conversation with democratization theory. His interlocutors include the anthropologists Hussein Agrama, Robert Hefner, and Charles Hirschkind, as well as Islamic Studies scholars like Ebrahim Moosa and social theorists like Craig Calhoun and Seyla Benhabib. The author does so in order to interrogate the similarities and differences between his informants' political and religious vision and the heterogeneous democratic tradition. On this issue alone, Kendhammer sets a high bar for future scholars to follow. Political scientists ignore the high-quality research on Islam and politics in anthropology and Islamic Studies to their detriment.

Similarly, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are a detailed chronology of Sharia politics in Northern Nigeria from the mid-fifteenth century through British rule in the early 1900s and into the contemporary period. Two of the book's six empirical chapters focus on history, showing a commitment as much to African Studies as political science and Islamic Studies. The result is that this book speaks not just to the politics of the moment but will endure as a foundational work in African Studies.

Chapters 6 and 7 are the theoretical meat of the book and draw from Kendhammer's previously published article, "The *Sharia* Controversy in Northern Nigeria and the Politics of Islamic Law in New and Uncertain Democracies," (in *Comparative Politics*, 45(3), 2013).

These chapters present an overview of how Muslims frame their demands for Sharia and the way that these demands are a result of media framing. Media frames structure debates, providing social actors with a set of arguments and logics. Drawing not just the book's title but a certain ethic of empathy with William Gamson's *Talking Politics* (1992) and Kathy Cramer's *Talking about Politics* (2004), Kendhammer uses original data from focus group interviews and open coding of Nigerian media to explain how those frames structure and give meaning to Nigerians' demands for Sharia.

The respondents view Sharia as part of their larger social and political goals. Their most common frame is that Sharia will fix the problems of economic inequality, elite corruption, and underdevelopment that plague Nigeria. In this view, Sharia will hold accountable those leaders who violate Islamic values and engage in corruption. The second most common frame is that Nigeria is a multireligious state and that Sharia will help unify the Muslim population behind a single identity and political cause. In this reading, a unified Muslim community would be best able to work with the unified and influential Christian community. Sharia would help unify an interreligious pious public to better combat prostitution, alcoholism, and the other vices brought on by secularism. The third and final frame focuses most directly on the material benefits of democracy and religious revival. The respondents believe that Sharia will lead to the development of infrastructure, improve the welfare of the poor, improve education, and support mosques and their staffs. In sum, ordinary Nigerian Muslims feel that the implementation of Sharia is not just compatible with democracy but even a benefit of democracy.

As with any book that synthesizes disparate fields into a single narrative, *Muslims Talking Politics* faces some trade-offs. Kendhammer's commitment to Nigerian history is laudable, but it does not leave as much room for discourse and content analysis as the reader expects on the basis of the title and motivating questions in the preface. It is only halfway through Chapter 5 that we hear from ordinary Muslims, and the relatively spartan use of original data makes it difficult for Kendhammer to make full use of Gamson's and Cramer's approach. The reader is left wondering, for example, whether men and women frame Sharia differently. Likewise, in what ways are ordinary Muslims' visions for Sharia similar to and different from the vision of Islamic law scholars? Islamic law is not a single text but, rather, an immense field divided by schools of jurisprudence, methods of exegesis, and areas of application. As the author notes, Islamic law has undergone tremendous reform over the twentieth century owing to increased mass education and the decentering of religious authority from the elites to the masses. Tracing the changes in the content of Islamic law over time and space,

or charting differences between elites and the masses, is a challenging task, but it is important for scholars to be able to understand where ordinary Muslims' vision originates. Kendhammer rightly says that "All Sharia is Local" (p. 213), but without comparison of varied visions, it is difficult to explain their provenance.

A related trade-off concerns causality. Kendhammer notes in a thoughtful methodological appendix that frame analysis is not well suited for determining the direction of influence and the nature of the relationship between elite and mass discourse. As a result, we do not know *why* Nigerian Muslims support state application of Sharia; we only know *how* they do so. The author is rightfully wary about the book being a normatively charged verdict on whether demands for Sharia are compatible with democracy. He shares Alfred Stepan's desire to "make democracy work" in places with strong demands for both religious government and democracy. Yet the text is bookended by Kendhammer's own concerns about Boko Haram, an Islamic insurgency that has slaughtered thousands of civilians, destabilized interreligious cooperation, and further weakened the country's fragile democracy. Ordinary Nigerian Muslims who demand Sharia do not support Boko Haram. But neither are their origins unrelated (p. 215). Poor governance and underdevelopment have led Nigerians to demand Sharia as a remedy. Once implemented, however, Sharia has failed to achieve the hoped-for "dividends of democracy" (p. 163). Instead, Sharia has proven socially divisive and yet another example of failed governance, thereby contributing to Nigeria's decade of stalled democratic development.

While Stepan rightly points to the institutional compatibility of demands for religious government and democracy in Western Europe, India, and Senegal, Kendhammer reluctantly acknowledges that Nigeria is a rather different case. It is unclear that a low-capacity state with high levels of corruption and a deeply divided society is capable of the delicate work necessary for reconciling demands for Sharia and democracy. That incapacity makes the lack of a causal story in the book unsatisfying since we do not know how Nigerian Muslims' preferences might change.

Nevertheless, *Muslims Talking Politics* is compelling and essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the vision for human flourishing that underlies everyday Muslims' demand for Sharia. In a productive departure from much of the political science literature that seeks to advance the project of secularization, the book is not a critique of ordinary Muslims' vision for democracy. Instead, it is an elegantly crafted portrait of the challenges facing Muslim-majority countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and an overdue history of Nigeria's Sharia politics. Kendhammer's erudite engagement with related literatures in anthropology and Islamic Studies, and his research ethic of empathy, set this book apart from

recent work on Islam and politics and should ensure that it has a lasting influence.

Response to Jeremy Menchik's review of *Muslims Talking Politics: Framing Islam, Democracy and Law in Northern Nigeria*

— Brandon Kendhammer

Jeremy Menchik's kind and thoughtful review does a very fair job of summarizing what I hope are the key contributions of *Muslims Talking Politics* to research on Islam and democracy. Inspired by a wide range of literatures that rarely end up in conversation with one another, the main goal of my project was to test the deceptively simply hypothesis that Nigerian Muslims reason about politics in more or less the same ways as people everywhere else, namely, by relying on a combination of personal values, beliefs, and experiences and heuristics provided in the public sphere. When put this way, discovering that the answer is "yes" is hardly surprising. However, my book also suggests that more traditional approaches to exploring the "compatibility" of Islam and democracy do not really capture how politics actually works in Muslim communities.

The critical point in Menchik's review that bears responding to is that in describing the middle chapters of the book as a historical overview on the way to my empirical findings, he misses their broader significance to the theory and approach I am attempting to articulate. Although it is not exactly an original argument in Islamic Studies or sociology, relatively few political scientists interested in contemporary Islamic revivalism (Iza Husain's work is a notable exception) have looked to colonial transformations in law and legal authority as influences on the discourse of today's Sharia advocates. In those chapters, I argue that the demands and expectations of Nigerian Muslims who support Sharia today are deeply marked by the shift to direct state control of Islamic legal institutions under colonial rule, and the resulting politicization of Sharia's administration by indirect rule authorities.

As a result, contemporary efforts to revive Islamic law (in Nigeria, but also in most other places where they have occurred) have inevitably been run through the very state institutions whose dysfunction and corruption served as their inspiration in the first place. Not surprisingly, the outcomes have satisfied almost no one. The terms of Sharia's "return" in Nigeria have also been shaped by postcolonial political processes, including the extraordinary politicization of ethnic identity and the efforts of religious activists to find a resonant language for making their demands on the state. And, of course, this history also played at least some role in the rise of Boko Haram,

a Salafi-jihadi group whose leadership dabbled in various government-led Sharia implementation committees in northeastern Nigeria before rejecting the entire process as tainted and corrupt. Certainly, this is a highly local, contingent story, but the basic outlines (colonial co-optation of Islamic law, growing political conflict in the postcolonial state) are actually quite common, and have a lot to say about global patterns of Islamic revivalism.

Whatever our differences in approach, I think that both my book and Menchik's testify to the need for a new generation of political science research on religion and politics that moves away from rational actor assumptions, excessive attention to elite-articulated "political theologies," and the political culture tradition. Albeit in different ways, both of our books are challenges to these older approaches in that both seek to center actual religious experiences and practices in political life, and explore the normative consequences of that centering. What I think we both provide is a plausible description of (and a theoretical framework for understanding) what non-secular support for democracy might look like in the Muslim world, while our differences reflect the role of historical contingency and local experience in shaping our case countries' experiences. Together, and with more research to come, I believe that they add up to a real improvement in how political scientists think about religion and democracy in the Muslim world.

Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism. By Jeremy Menchik. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 207p. $99.99 cloth, $28.99 paper.

— Brandon Kendhammer, *Ohio University*

Jeremy Menchik's wonderful new book takes the challenges of doing constructivist political science theory seriously. That is no simple task, since even the best works in the constructivist tradition often avoid the difficult work of actually defining the approach and its implications. What Menchik achieves is not a replacement for the grand theoretical traditions of religion and politics that he criticizes but something more useful. He provides a careful research design that produces a handful of empirically consequential mechanisms explaining why leading Indonesian Islamic organizations are sometimes more or less tolerant of non-Muslim minorities, a credible account of how these mechanisms might generalize to other times and places, and a clear examination of their normative consequences.

Conceptually, this book is a challenge to several generations of research examining the "relationship" between Islam and democracy, a political science literature that has yielded remarkably little new insight since the first challenges to the orthodoxy of secularization theory. In

large part, that is because the approaches that dominate the broader field of religion and politics—rational actor theory, associated with scholars like Anthony Gill and Stathis Kalyvas, the "political theology" approach pursued by Daniel Philpott and Monica Duffy Toft, and the political culture work of Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris—tend to treat "religious actors" as possessed of relatively straightforward, fixed preferences that naturally and unproblematically shape their political behavior. In other words, they tend to foreclose the possibility that the "relationship" between faith and political outcomes is constructed through practice—the practice of being religious, living in a religious community, and participating in political life. By starting with the assumption that the relationship between theology and practice is likely to be contingent and constructed (in other words, inseparable from politics itself), *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia* offers a more persuasive answer to the broader question of Islam's relationship to state politics and power.

Menchik's particular concern within the larger Islam/democracy debate is tolerance, and its role in shaping the possibility of just and effective democracy. Indonesia, Menchik's country of expertise, has long been lauded for its particularly "tolerant" strain of Islamic thought. Yet its most important Islamic movements and organizations have exhibited wildly different patterns of toleration toward Christians and other non-Muslims, and outright intolerance and hostility toward minority communities like the Ahmadiyah and Indonesian communists. Building out from a "most different" research design, Menchik focuses on the careers of three of Indonesia's largest and most significant Islamic movements—Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the Muhammadiyah, and Persatuan Islam (Persis)—each with a different theological approach, organizational history, and relationship with the Indonesian state, in order to trace the origins of tolerance and intolerance among Indonesian Muslims. The result is a set of generalizable mechanisms that explain how Islamic movements come to adopt particular patterns of toleration, emphasizing a combination of historical interactions between groups and the role of state policies toward minorities. Along the way, he argues that a shallow distinction between "tolerance" and "intolerance" masks subtler but empirically meaningful distinctions in how Islamic organizations conceptualize who "counts" as Indonesian, and who does not.

Methodologically, Menchik engages in a process of triangulation, disaggregating the question of where tolerance comes from into a set of nested hypotheses and causal tests. In one chapter, he relies on rarely consulted primary sources like organization publications, *fatwas* (religious edicts) issued by leading affiliated clerics, and meeting notes to build the case that much of the difference

in levels of official tolerance of Christians among these organizations was driven by their initial experiences with Christian missionary activity in the early twentieth century in their respective home regions on the island of Java. Where Christian polemics attacked Islam, Muslim organizations like Persis and Muhammadiyah formed political alliances to "repel the Christian threat" (p. 37), with durable implications not only for these organizations' contemporary rhetoric but also for the actual attitudes of their members. Another chapter relies on careful historical process tracing to explore the role of the Indonesian nationalist struggle—and Muslim groups' incorporation in it—to unpack the puzzle of why NU's leadership came to tolerate Hinduism (a polytheistic faith) but not Indonesian communism (no faith at all).

In another chapter, Menchik takes on the plight of the Ahmadiyah, a minority Islamic sect that faces wide global persecution by the broader Sunni community and whose members face substantial formal legal and social discrimination across Indonesia. In explaining why a group like NU might tolerate Hindus or practitioners of traditional Javanese religion (two polytheistic traditions, not "people of the book") and reject fellow Muslims, Menchik makes one of his most important interventions, a concept he calls "godly nationalism." Godly nationalism, "an imagined community bound by a common orthodox theism and mobilized through the state in cooperation with religious organizations in society" (p. 67), suggests that in deeply religious (and religiously plural) societies like Indonesia's, nationalist projects can incorporate multiple religious traditions into their "imagined community" in much the same way that consociational pacts incorporate ethno-national ones—by offering them state recognition *as religions*. Yet this inclusion requires a parallel exclusion ("productive intolerance"), and the Ahmadiyah, who profess to be Muslims but also recognize their late nineteenth-century founder as a prophet, have become a scapegoat to the state's need to preserve the boundaries of correct faith. As Menchik puts it, "Ahmadiyah's exclusion allow[s] . . . the state to proclaim their commitment to a limited form of pluralism without extending religious freedom to heterodox faiths" (p. 85).

What sets Menchik's work apart is not simply that these various pieces add up to a constructivist argument in favor of looking toward "historical and political conditions" to explain variations in tolerance, but his careful attention to the normative implications of his findings. In Chapter 6, he argues that Muslim tolerance toward non-Muslims in Indonesia is not "liberal" (in the Lockean sense) or rooted in secular ideals about freedom of conscience, but communal in orientation and grounded in the "primacy of belief over other values" (p. 145). Indonesian Muslims

cannot (and will not) tolerate limits on the role of religion in public life in order to preserve the freedoms of others. The question then becomes whether or not this "communal tolerance" is an adequate building block for sustainable democracy, liberal or otherwise.

Menchik's answer—not surprisingly, given his emphasis on tolerance—follows the thrust of an influential literature perhaps most associated with Alfred Stepan, which argues that in religiously plural societies, the best hope for stable democracy is to promote mutual respect between religious communities and state authorities, accepting religious practice as a normal part of communal life but requiring, in turn, that all faith communities recognize the fundamental legitimacy of the others in its polity. But where Menchik differs usefully from Stepan and his "twin tolerations" is in his rejection of secularism as the overarching conceptual framework into which groups like NU have to be incorporated. As he notes, "Indonesia's Islamic organizations . . . are less interested [in] varieties of secularism than they are in varieties of religious governance" (pp. 159–60). This is an important distinction, and it is rare to see a Western social scientist both recognize its importance and own up to the difficulties in imagining what a genuinely religious democracy—particularly one that inevitably requires the partial exclusion of some communities from full participation in the body politic—might look like.

If I have a criticism of Menchik's approach, it is that he has greater confidence in the ability of tolerance—even if divorced from liberalism—to promote democracy than I think it warrants. Part of this hesitancy comes from the fact that it is not clear that the tolerance produced by "godly nationalism" can survive external shocks or moments of extreme political uncertainty (as indeed they did not during the anticommunist violence supported by the NU and Muhammadiyah in the 1960s). But a broader source of reservation is simply the slipperiness of the concept itself. My own preference runs more toward Adam Przeworski's "minimalist" version of democracy, in which competing forces might not necessarily possess attitudes of tolerance toward each other, but nonetheless invest in institutionalizing elections and the rule of law out of a desire never to be locked out of a chance to compete for power. In this sense, we might think of NU, Muhammadiyah, and other Indonesian Islamic organizations not so much as tolerant or intolerant (thus sidestepping the definitional complexities altogether) but as more or less willing to live with the uncertainty that comes from participating in politics in a culturally plural state. The rhetoric of godly nationalism might have just as much to do with legislating out certain sources of political uncertainty (discursive challenges to the worldviews of Sunni Muslims) as it does with insisting upon the recognition of religious values in the public sphere.

This quibble aside, this is a book that deserves to be widely read and debated not only by Indonesia scholars but also by all who study religion and democratic politics.

Response to Brandon Kendhammer's review of *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism*

— Jeremy Menchik

I am grateful to Brandon Kendhammer for reviewing my book with the same care that he used to map the worldview of Nigerian Muslims. It is humbling to have one's book interrogated with such an extraordinary level of thoughtfulness, and is a credit to Kendhammer's erudition.

Both of our books examine the worldview of moderate Muslims. While Nigerian Muslims seek more state enforcement of Islamic law than do most Indonesian Muslims, they are similar in demanding a nonsecular democracy. We reached that conclusion through markedly different pathways, suggesting an emerging trend in scholarship on religion and politics away from secularization theory. Likewise, both Kendhammer and I aspire to more modest ends, namely, "middle-range" theories about the power of religion in politics. We both find that religion, like other aspects of culture and identity, is heterogeneous over time and space, and that its significance for politics depends on context. Given the move toward the "micro" in comparative politics and international relations, there is reason to believe that this trend will continue. In that respect, political science may be catching up with disciplines that, unlike ours, never stopped studying religion. In sociology there is a movement toward "everyday religion," in history toward "lived religion," and in anthropology toward the deconstruction of the concepts and assumptions underlying world religions.

That said, unlike in sociology, history, and anthropology, there is a durable, normative bias toward secularization in political science. Given the rise of global populism in recent years, we may soon see a return to scholarship rooted in secularization theory due to a belief that it provides the sole pathway to democracy. Kendhammer and I both believe that such a reversion would be a mistake. Scholars investigating the interconnections between religion and democracy would be better served by continuing to explore religious actors' visions for more enchanted variants of democracy, investigate how non-Western democracies govern religion, and assess the costs *and the benefits* of public religion.

My review opened with questions that are worth revisiting here. Are demands for Sharia compatible with religious pluralism? Kendhammer's answer is "no," while mine is "partially, as long as we look beyond secular democracy." How do Islamic political movements affect

the interreligious bonds and social capital that are necessary for civil society? His refreshingly honest answer is "negatively," while I argue that the result is a form of truncated pluralism. If successful, is state application of Islamic law compatible with the differentiation of state and religion that is essential for making democracy work? We both follow Alfred Stepan in arguing that democratic institutions have a remarkable capacity to accommodate diverse visions of human flourishing. Yet in his review, Kendhammer also notes the fragility of such forms of social tolerance and state toleration.

Recent evidence suggests that on this last point, Kendhammer may be right. In the past 15 years, Stepan directed research projects on Islam and democracy in Turkey, Senegal, Indonesia, India, and Tunisia. Of those cases, Turkey is fully authoritarian, Senegal is sliding into authoritarianism, and Indonesia's democratic progress is stalled. It is unclear that state institutions can absorb moderate Muslims' demands for either Sharia or group rights based on religion. In this respect, he may be more prescient than the rest of us in seeing the limitations and fragility of postcolonial democratic institutions.