
IN MEMORIAM: HERBERT FEITH, 1930–2001

The following tribute to Herb Feith was written by Ruth McVey. It is followed by a short piece composed by Feith himself, with an introductory letter by Samsuri bin Rusnali.

In Melbourne, on the afternoon of November 15, 2001, Herb Feith bicycled homeward after a lunch with John Legge and Wang Gungwu. The three scholars had engaged in a lively discussion of Legge's proposed revision of his biography of Sukarno, and no doubt Herb's mind was fully occupied with new ideas on this subject as he approached the level crossing near his home. The train killed him instantly.

The manner of Herb's death was a great shock, as was testified by the messages of stunned grief that arrived from all over the world. Yet somehow it also fitted him. The bicycle, in the first place: Herb had long given up on the automobile as environmentally unfriendly, ostentatious, and unnecessary for most purposes. It was probably just as well, as those who had ridden in his car in the days when he drove knew what true fear was. Once Herb plunged into a discussion, he would completely forget about his surroundings. Generations of students benefited greatly from this intellectual enthusiasm, as they found their half-developed ideas being taken seriously, teased out, and turned into far more searching observations than they had originally imagined possible. It made for a great teacher, if not a safe driver nor, alas, a safe cyclist.

Most of us lose our intellectual liveliness as we age, replacing it with self-satisfaction or indifference. But Herb, who was born in 1930, never lost his humility or his intellectual verve. Indeed, if anything his enthusiasm became more marked in his later years, and made one think of him as much younger than he was. The expressions of grief that followed his death reflected a feeling that Herb's departure had not only removed an icon of Indonesian studies but also a warm and still-evolving participant in the discussion of Indonesian affairs.

Herb Feith was part of the first generation of foreign scholars to study Indonesia following its independence, having gone there in 1951, when still a student, to work as a volunteer in the Indonesian Ministry of Information. Indeed, it was largely due to his efforts that volunteer work in Indonesian public agencies became institutionalized in the highly successful Volunteer Graduate Scheme (later the Australian Volunteers International). When Herb went on to pursue a doctorate at Cornell, he was recognized by colleagues and teachers as already possessing a profound understanding of contemporary Indonesia. None of us would have wanted to present an analysis of Indonesian politics without first having run it by Herb.

Indonesia's struggle for independence spoke profoundly to Herb's desire to combat injustice and prejudice, a concern that no doubt owed much to his own background as a refugee from oppression (his family, of Jewish origin, had fled Austria to escape

advancing Nazism when Herb was still a child). It also reflected the deep Christian religiosity which he shared with his wife Betty and which inspired the spartan simplicity of their lifestyle and their dedication to helping others.

Herb continued to see Indonesia in the light of a struggle between reason and unreason, tolerance and intolerance, though he was acutely aware of the need to understand the deeper reasons for social conflict, economic injustice, and bureaucratic decay. When he wrote his doctoral thesis, which became the classic *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*, he thought he had found in the then-new behavioralist approach of American political science an organizing principle that could contain his moral understanding in a scientific framework. He soon became disabused of behavioralism's superficiality, however, and although he experimented with other analytical approaches he never found one which provided him with an intellectual guideline adequate for comprehending Indonesia. At the same time, he was fully aware of the potential for scholarship to mislead and to discourage, and as his stature as an authority on Indonesia grew he felt ever more acutely his own responsibility to avoid this danger.

As a result, Herb wrote less and less, and what he did commit to paper tended increasingly to be analyses of current events meant as background material for colleagues rather than as studies in their own right. He threw his energies into teaching, with the aim of getting his students to think for themselves. Discussions, not lectures, were what he loved, and he brought to them enthusiasm and patience as well as deep knowledge. He was particularly dedicated to teaching Indonesian students, seeing in them the hope for their country's future. After his retirement in 1990 from Monash, where he had taught since 1962, he spent as much time as possible in Indonesia, particularly at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, which he made his second home. Not surprisingly, students played a major role in organizing the several memorial services held in Indonesia following the news of his death. Their expressions of grief were mixed with fond reminiscences of Herb on his bicycle, his cheery greetings, his enthusiastic and searching discussions, his humility and dedication, and his significance for their lives.

Ruth McVey

The following piece written by Herb Feith was posted on the list serve run by Ed Aspinall by Samsuri bin Rusnali in Indonesian. The editors publish it here in English with the introductory letter by Pak Samsuri. We thank Pak Samsuri and Betty Feith for their kind permission to do so.

Dear Friends,

It's been two weeks now since Pak Herb, as I called him, passed away, leaving us all forever to face his Creator. Each of you will have your own perspective on Pak Herb, stemming from your experience of knowing him and reading his work. Islamic morality, which I have studied, says that when one speaks of those deceased one should cite those qualities which are most fit to become models for others. Javanese culture has the adage, "*Mikul dhuwur, mendhem jero.*" (Hold high the virtues, bury deep

the mistakes.) For myself, Herb Feith made very strong impressions on me when I met with him in Jogja. What I say below will touch on something perhaps considered quite private, especially for the deceased and his family, i.e. religion. I am only now aware of how complicated it is for a person to immerse himself in a society filled with prejudice and strong *a priori* in regard to those who are called JEW. Pak Herb was an ordinary human being who by chance was fated by God to be of Jewish descent. For most Indonesian Muslims, Jews are negatively stereotyped either on religious or on "socio-political" grounds, rather like the ways in which Chinese Indonesians are often characterized. I became especially close to Pak Herb when he returned to Jogja with Bu Betty in order to serve as guest lecturer at Gadjah Mada University for the second semester of 1998. But I had already seen a lot of him on an everyday basis over the two years 1996 and 1997. In those days, I did not yet understand what Pak Herb meant when he described himself as a "Jewish *Abangan*." But on November 29, 1998, at a meeting of the interfaith study group on religion held at the Institut Dian, which I attended along with Pak Lance Castles, he explained what he intended by the term. To prevent any bias in interpreting Pak Herb's religious identity as a "Jewish *Abangan*,"¹ it's best if I quote the whole of his explanation, as he wrote it down. I think there are many lessons to be learned from Pak Herb's experience, something I observed while being with him in daily life, when I felt his pluralism and his humanism in his interactions with everyone, no matter what their religious faith, and regardless of their ethnicity or their descent. Of course this is my subjective impression after having been "rather close" to him for a certain time in Jogja and having corresponded with him by e-mail.

Astaghfirullah rabbal baroya
Astaghfirullah minal khataya

Ya Allah, Ya Rahmat
Ya Allah, Ya Tawwab

Ya Lathif, Ya Karim
Ya Quds, Ya Salam

Om namo Buddha ya, Om namo Buddha ya
Om namo Buddha ya, Om namo Buddha ya

Ke-Ayal ta arog
ala fi qemayin,
ala fi qemayin
Ke-nafsi ta arog,
elekha adonay
elekha adonay
elekha adonay
elekha adonay

Shiwa, shiwa shankara hara parameswara,
Om nama Shiwa ya, Om nama Shiwa ya

¹ *abangan*: one who does not adhere strictly to the tenets of a particular religion.

Om nama Shiwa ya, Om nama Shiwa ya
Om nama Shiwa ya

Ubi caritas et amor
Di dalam cinta, dan kasih
hadirlah Tuhan

Salimna salam alaikum
Salimna salam alaikum
Salimna salam alaikum
Salimna salam, salam, salam alaikum
Kubawa damai bagimu
Kubawa damai bagimu
Kubawa damai bagimu
Kubawa damai, damai, damai bagimu

(dari KIDUNG DAMAI Komunitas Tikar Pandan Jogja)
14 Ramadhan 1422H / 29 November 2001

Wassalam,
SAMSURI

THE EXPERIENCE OF A "JEWISH ABANGAN":
MY EFFORT TO MAKE JUDAISM THE POINT OF DEPARTURE IN LEARNING
TO LIVE IN A RELIGIOUSLY PLURAL WAY

Herbert Feith

1. My youth and my family

I was born in 1930 in Vienna, Austria. At that time about 20 percent of Vienna's population was Jewish. The political life of Vienna and of Austria in the 1920s and 1930s set the Catholic Party against the Socialist Party. Almost all Jews supported the Socialist Party. In 1934, there was a major conflict between the government of Austria, headed by the Catholic right, and the government of the city of Vienna, headed by the Socialists. The Viennese city government was wiped out by the army. My parents, it could be said, were from the lower-middle class. My father ran a small shop selling bags; my mother worked as a nurse assisting a doctor, a radiologist. Both my parents were Jews, but very assimilated. My father claimed to be an agnostic in religious matters. My mother held to Judaism, but in a passive way, going to the synagogue only infrequently. The person who was pious and faithful in religion was her mother. So long as she was alive, the food at home was always kosher, that is to say, prepared according to traditional Jewish laws. The relationship between my father and mother was very good, but they differed vastly on the question of religion. My grandmother was not allowed to say the word "God" in my presence before I was six years old. My consciousness of being Jewish became strong after Austria was invaded by Germany in March, 1938. We lived for a year under the Nazi government. I remember the constant conversations between my parents and their friends, whom they often met. They

talked all the time about which country was likely to give them a visa so they could settle there. My father was good at English because he had lived in England during World War I. Consequently, he was often asked to write letters for friends of our family who applied to various countries hoping they would be accepted as refugees. In March 1939, the three of us succeeded in leaving Austria. We took the train to Belgium via Germany. My memory of our relief as we passed the German-Belgium border is still very fresh. My parents said thanks a thousand ways. They would often remind me of the Jewish story celebrated every year at Passover about God's deliverance of the Jews, guided by the Prophet Moses, from slavery in Egypt. We arrived in Australia in May 1939 and settled in Melbourne. Not long after, my mother began going to a liberal synagogue, and I went with her. As well as attending synagogue on Saturday mornings, I went to Sunday school on Sunday mornings. Mother became more pious than she had been in Vienna. She said Hitler made her a Jew again.

One thing I remember well is the role of the cantor in the rites at that synagogue. He had already been a well-known cantor in Germany, before he emigrated to Australia. I remember the cry he repeated every Saturday, the Shema, which can be called the Jewish profession of faith. "Hear O Israel, Our God is One." I will sing it. (*And then Pak Herb sang the prayer very expressively. Samsuri*) When I was thirteen, I was Bar Mitzvahed and was asked to read the Torah in Hebrew in front of the congregation in the synagogue. This meant I was received as an adult Jew. After that, I began as a teacher in the Sunday school. But that lasted only two years. By the time I was fifteen, I began separating from the religious community. At that time, I read many books that made me a humanist. I began to think of Judaism as an obstacle. Bored and rebellious, I called myself a socialist and an internationalist. And I was angry with those Jews who said I should only have Jewish girl friends. They were very frightened by what was called inter-marriage! In 1947, I fell in love with Betty Evans, who became my wife six years later. She was a socialist and also an enthusiastic Christian, a Methodist. We were both students at Melbourne University, and she led me to become a member of the Student Christian Movement. For three years I was quite influenced by the Movement, whose intellectual level was very high indeed. I was impressed by the quality of the intellectual life and also by the moral seriousness of the members, especially by their concern with the problems of social justice and international peace. I was struck by theologians such as Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. One thing that much attracted me was the admiration of the Christian Social Movement for Gandhi. In 1951, I began to work in Jakarta as an aide, an English language translator, in the Ministry of Information. From there I had many connections with the GMKI (Gerakan Mahasiswa Keristen Indonesia, Indonesian Protestant Student Movement) and also with several Dutch and Swiss ministers who taught at the Sekolah Theologia Tinggi (Theological College).

2. Why did I distance myself from Judaism?

In practice because I wanted to marry Betty. But that decision was also tied to:

The dislike I felt for Judaism's hostility to marriages outside the faith, and its insistence on the Jews' absolute duty to survive as the Chosen People; and for Zionism's exclusivism, Israel's aggressive nationalism, and the moral pressure exerted on Jews in the diaspora to give Israel active support.

My admiration for Gandhi, particularly for his universalism and for his character . . . (*the manuscript breaks off here. Samsuri*)

The poverty of Asian nations as a moral challenge. For me, the suffering of the Third World (and especially Indonesia) was much more important than the subjects of the sermons in the synagogue when I went there. My friends who remained faithful to Judaism seemed to pay no attention to the Third World. Or if they did, they were antipathetic to what was called the Third World because most of it was on the side of Palestine rather than Israel. In Australia, as also in America, Jews became richer as time went on—much richer than forty years earlier—and tended to become more conservative. I was often angry about arguments used by the defenders of Israel in Australia, particularly, when they tended to use the Holocaust [capitalized in the text] for propoganda. They seemed to feel it necessary to claim that case of genocide as unique, worse than any other.

2. What remains of my Jewish identity?

I go more often to church than to the synagogue. Few religious books I read are by Jews. But I have never been baptized. So I am still a Jew. But I like to call myself “Jewish *abangan*” because I am attracted to the possibility of being tied to more than one religious tradition, something that one can say is particularly Asian (South Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia—not West Asia). My Gandhi was a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, a Sikh, a Parsi, and a Jew. Bung Karno called himself a nationalist, a Muslim, and Marxist. I was much influenced by Soedjatmoko’s way of thinking. Arnold Toynbee, a well-known English historian, predicted that historians of the future might well consider the most important uniqueness of the twentieth century to be not the atomic bomb or the concentration camps, but rather the first intensive encounter between Christianity and Buddhism. In Indonesia these days, many people are not happy to use the word *abangan*. But I am still attracted to its basic idea, that is, that we can learn from various religious traditions. I respect the attitude of many Christians, Jews, and Muslims who think that we have to deepen our understanding of our respective religions before we enter into a dialogue with those of other religions. But I am not happy if they demean syncretism as something that is in conflict with their religion. That seems exclusivist. And for me, the aim of establishing a dialogue between adherents of “religion A” and “religion B” has to be studied. Thus, it is not just a question of cooperation in face of a third party. And not merely in order to distance oneself from the danger of mutual conflict. And not only to learn more about others. It is more important to deepen our own faith and enrich the spirituality of each of us.

I am grateful that, in the last three or four decades, there have been many Westerners who have allowed themselves to study the traditions of the East. Among them have been Christians and Jews, and Jews who have distanced themselves from their religion. I have been inspired by the writings of an American Jew who once was named Richard Alper and now is called Baba Ram Dass. I have been attracted to a book entitled *The Jew in the Lotus*, which relates the visit of a group of Western Jews to the seat of the Dalai Lama in India. That theme has also been analyzed by the American Jewish novelist Chaim Potok. And I am very pleased with the writings of

Charles Durack about "Cultivating Oneness," published in the Jewish-American magazine *Tikkun*. I have to admit that I have never tried to penetrate the Jewish mystical tradition. Perhaps if I paid attention to it, I might well meet things which would enrich my spiritual life as well. But for me it is not the only possibility.

That's enough for now.

Herb Feith
November 29, 1998