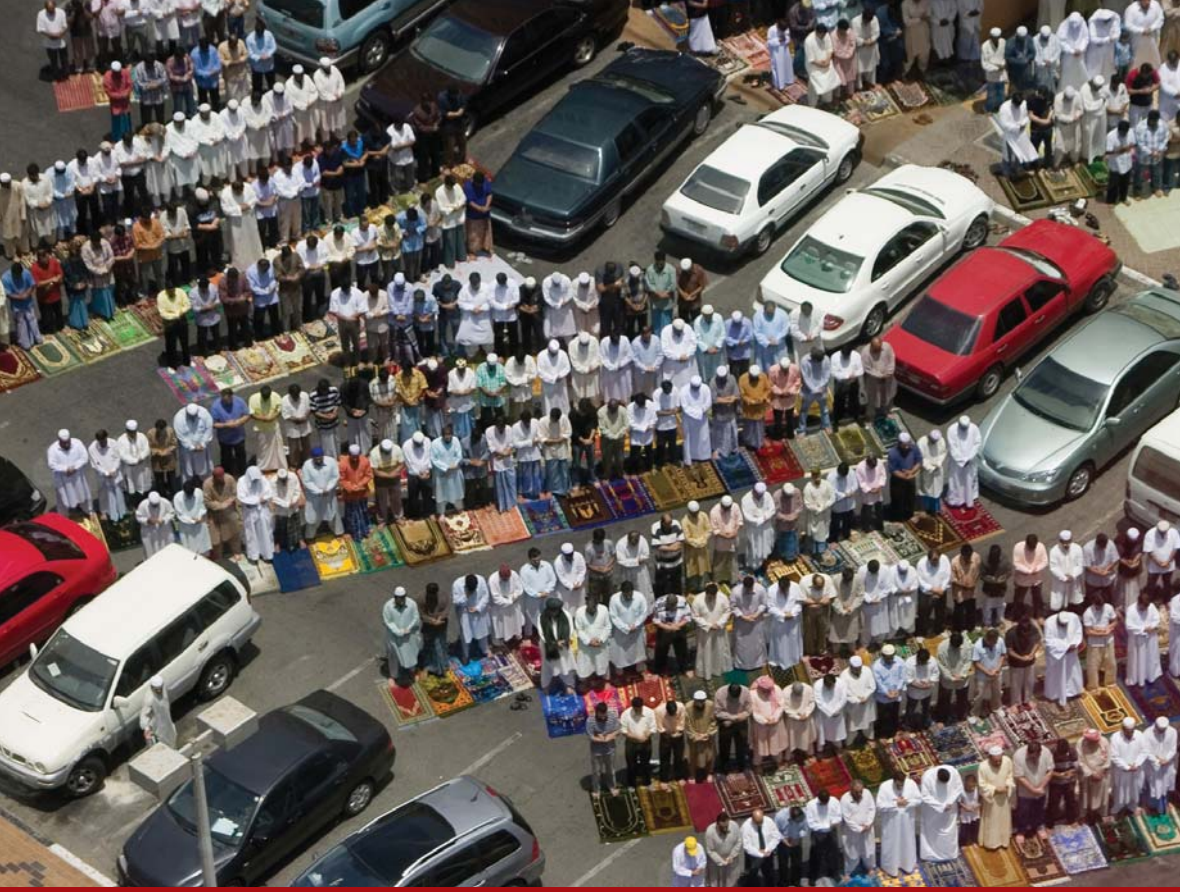

Islam and Modernity

KEY ISSUES AND DEBATES

Edited by Muhammad Khalid Masud,
Armando Salvatore and Martin van Bruinessen

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Preface

The idea of the present book emerged in 2002 when the editors began developing a postgraduate course on Islam and modernity at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) in Leiden, The Netherlands. Our aim was to engage with Western social thought as well as with the ideas and visions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers in the Muslim world concerning the political, socio-economic and cultural transformation of their societies. We found that there was no single book we could use to introduce the range of subjects that we thought essential for such a course. The scholarly literature on various aspects of Islam and modernity is rich and complex and rapidly expanding, but there is a dearth of general works that offer an interdisciplinary perspective and overview of the major questions and debates in this literature. We convened a workshop at ISIM on 'Islam and Modernity, Key Issues and Debates' in October 2004. The present book is an outcome of continued deliberations and revisions of the papers presented at the workshop.

The book aims to provide reflections on major debates that have taken place within and between the various scholarly disciplines that have addressed questions of modernity in connection with Islam and Muslim societies. The book is organised in three parts. The first part, 'Conceptualising Modernity', consists of two chapters that introduce theoretical and general issues in modernity studies. The four chapters in the second part, 'Negotiating Modernity', offer an analysis of the processes of modernisation of Muslim societies, focusing on certain specific aspects of their social and political dynamics. The four chapters in the third part, 'Debating Modernity', survey how Muslim scholars and intellectuals have perceived and responded to issues of modernity. The contributors to the book are drawn from among the best-known scholars in the field, whose earlier work we found most seminal and stimulating in our teaching.

The immediate background to the importance of producing such a textbook is under everybody's eyes. Dramatic events have focused public attention on the potential tensions between the Muslim world and the modern West. Are such tensions rooted in real differences or in distorted perceptions? Compared to the other world religions, Islam appears either more resistant to internal development, with less prospect of change or, in spite of all efforts at reform, inherently pre-modern. Islam, it is frequently claimed, has experienced neither a major reformation, as has Christianity, nor been touched by Enlightenment. Or, paradoxically, as some observers would have it, Islam would no longer be Islam if truly reformed.

The new Islamist movements that emerged in the 1970s out of earlier reform trends and forms of socio-political mobilization (most notably the organization of the Muslim Brothers that saw the light in the late 1920s) appear to be primarily directed against the modernising secular elites that have dominated most Muslim societies during the first decades of post-colonial independence. Some observers (for example, Bruce Lawrence) have described these movements as a 'revolt against modernity'. Other scholars, on the other hand (notably the British philosopher John Gray, but also many others), have commented on the essential modernity of these same movements

Muslim societies have been subjected to most of the structural changes that have also impacted upon other societies in the world – such as massive urbanisation, mass education, dramatically increased communication, the emergence of new types of institutions and associations, erratic yet at times powerful waves of political mobilisation and major transformations of the economy. These developments have been accompanied by the emergence of a wide range of new social movements, often matched by heated religious and ideological debates that were more complex and varied than is commonly assumed in Western public discourse. The academic literature on such topics is extensive and rapidly growing. One of the most contentious issues being debated concerns the idea of the uniqueness and singularity of Western modernity versus the notion of inherently multiple modernities unfolding through a variety of trajectories. Yet both the literature and the debate are still fragmented and inaccessible to a wider public. No consensus has emerged even about the terms in which the debate should be carried on; the concept of modernity remains ambiguous and risks becoming hostage to opposing paradigms.

Each of the chapters in this volume deals with some specific aspects of the encounter of Muslim societies with modernity. Although each of the contributors is inevitably more familiar with particular societies and regions than others, and individual chapters may have a certain regional emphasis, the volume as a whole does not privilege the Middle East or any other region but covers the entire Muslim world. The chapters are thematically organised, and we have made an effort to ensure that developments in all major regions are represented.

We wish to acknowledge ISIM's financial support for the initial workshop and part of the editing process and thank especially Sanaa Makhlouf for her editorial help. We take this opportunity to express our gratitude to all our colleagues who supported this project, especially David Waines for his invaluable cooperation at the initial stages of this project. Lastly we wish to thank the students at ISIM, whose participation in the course and discussions helped in the development of this project.

Muhammad Khalid Masud
Armando Salvatore
Martin van Bruinessen

PART 1

Conceptualising Modernity

CHAPTER 1

Tradition and Modernity within Islamic Civilisation and the West

Armando Salvatore

The Islamic civilisation in the modern world

'In the sixteenth century of our era, a visitor from Mars might well have supposed that the human world was on the verge of becoming Muslim' (Hodgson 1993: 97). With this statement, the comparative historian Marshall Hodgson suggested that at the dawn of the modern era Islam was the most vital civilisation in the world and that it held a hegemonic potential over East and West. Hodgson called Islamic civilisation 'Islamdom', in analogy with 'Christendom', which is different from Christianity, intended as a religion. Islamdom was the civilisation that had inherited and creatively recombined the cultural characters and the political specificities of a vast and more ancient geo-cultural unit, the Irano-Semitic area. According to Hodgson, at exactly the time of inception of the modern era Islamdom reached the zenith, not only of its political power, but also of its cultural creativity (ibid.: 100).

This particular strength of Islamic civilisation at the dawn of modernity did not suddenly evaporate at the moment West European powers affirmed their primacy in long-distance maritime trade and discoveries, in particular with the opening of transatlantic routes and the creation of colonies in the East and West of the enlarged globe. The specific ways of blending power and culture that constitute a civilisation continued to bring fruits well into the modern era in the case of Islamdom's three different, yet equally flourishing, empires: the Ottoman, in a large area covering Anatolia, the Near and Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans and other European regions; the Safavid, in Iran; and the Mughal, in South Asia. Their models of state centralisation, control of territories and populations, and styles of ruling and administration partly survived the traumas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during which Western Europe turned around the power balance with the Muslim world and gained a hegemonic position over the Euro-Mediterranean area and into the Eurasian depths. Yet, at least in the Turkish and the Iranian cases, the long-term, relative strength of their socio-political formations can be measured by the degree of resistance of their centres to the ongoing process of Western colonial encroachment, which started to exhaust its impetus only between the two world wars of the twentieth century.

In spite of this historical setting and of the early modern configuration of

Muslim power, a host of historians and social theorists – from Ernest Renan (1862), through Max Weber ([1922] 1968), up to Bertrand Badie (1987), Marcel Gauchet ([1985] 1997), and Rémi Brague ([1992] 2002) – have theorised about specific cultural factors to be held responsible for the blockage or delay of the rationalisation of social relations and political and economic development inside Muslim lands. Within this variegated body of Western scholarship, the argument gained currency (and is still popular today) according to which an all-encompassing doctrine of divine authority proclaimed by Islam decisively contributed to withhold a full legitimisation of political power and so prevented a truly modern state formation. Similarly, the presuppositions necessary to capitalist growth that enlivened the early modern socio-political formations of Western Europe were absent or weak within the above-mentioned Muslim empires because of in-built mechanisms of cultural self-limitation allegedly inherent in the religious orientation of Islamic civilisation.

Along this line of argument, the mismatch between Islam and modernity appears to reside in a purportedly doctrinal limitation of factors of cultural creativity and political autonomy, which are considered the necessary ingredients for the constitution of a modern society, economy and polity. Accepting this approach, the Western colonial encroachment upon Muslim lands might be interpreted as a necessary consequence and a deserved outcome of the imbalance of power between the Western and Islamic civilisations, measured in terms of their ability to produce modern standards of social and political power and cultural hegemony via a process of emancipation from the self-limiting patterns of transcendent authority.

Against this background of Western theorising about the allegedly deficient capacity of Islamdom to fit into a modern world – not to speak of its ability to initiate autonomous modern transformations – stands the observation by historians of the Islamic civilisation and in particular of the modern Muslim empires that a differentiation of state power and religious authority was integral to their development. Neither Islamic traditions and their upholders, the ulama, nor the centres of power and power-holders (whether they were endowed with a specifically religious legitimacy, like the caliphs or the Shiʿi rulers of Safavid Iran, or not, like amirs, sultans etc.) obstructed such a process of differentiation. Since the 1970s and 1980s civilisational analysts have started to revise the older bias of Western social theorists. As unequivocally stated by a leading scholar in the field, Johann P. Arnason (2001: 399):

> The belief that Islamic traditions excluded any differentiation of religion and politics has not quite disappeared from public discourse, but scholarly debates have effectively demolished it; it is now widely accepted that Islamic history is characterised by specific forms and trajectories of differentiation, neither identical with those of other civilisations nor reducible to a lower degree of the same dynamic.

Bernard Lewis (2002) was not the first author to ask the question *What Went Wrong?* with regard to Islam. The limits of the arguments inhere in the question itself, which is formulated and asked from the specific viewpoint of a long-term Western hegemony extended over the entire modern world. It is a question that already presupposes the uniqueness of the Western path to modernity.

There are two strategies that can challenge this entrenched bias. One approach lays the stress on the importance to theorise about tradition before analysing patterns of modernity. The other option reframes the issue of modernity in terms of partly competing and partly overlapping patterns of modernity, or 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt 2000a). Under specific conditions, which I will attempt to spell out, the two strategies might converge in delivering a different view on the potentials and limits of an 'Islamic modernity'. This is the combined approach pursued in this chapter and more broadly in the book, an approach that is largely indebted to comparative civilisational analysis, an emerging branch of study that tries to create a meaningful nexus between the work of historians and the reflections of social theorists (Arnason 2003).

Let us start with the notion of 'tradition'. Recuperating a viable concept of tradition is a necessary condition for overcoming the reductionist, evolutionist and Eurocentric viewpoint that has marred most of the analyses of the relationship between Islam and modernity. Tradition is a more specific concept than the more general idea of 'culture'. Tradition should not be understood as non-reflexive, primordial culture but, more dynamically, as the ensemble of practices and arguments that secure the social bond and provide cohesiveness to human communities of varying scale. We need to disentangle the notion of tradition from its lopsided identification with all manifestations of socio-economic stagnation and blind dependence on unquestioned authority. In this sense, tradition is not the opposite of modernity intended as the manifestation of human autonomy and creativity.

Yet the idea of tradition as a static, primordial culture is widespread in the social sciences. Tradition thus conceived represents the internal limit of modernity, what modernity falls back upon when it fails to deliver its promises of political autonomy and cultural creativity. Accordingly, tradition is described as an almost inertial terrain of human action. Depending on whether tradition nests in non-Western communities or in civilisations of the past, its investigation is consigned to ethnographic research or to philological analysis. Such a negative notion of tradition has often been identified with 'religion', which then happens to be viewed in its most archaic forms. In this perspective, tradition is nothing more than the iteration of the ritual constitution of communities, a mechanism that excludes a capacity of innovation and prevents a transformation of communitarian cohesion into more abstract and differentiated forms of the social bond, those considered proper of modern societies. In contrast to this approach, I propose an understanding of tradition and modernity neither as antithetical modes of social

being, nor as typologically distinct social formations, but as forms of the social bond that are different but can become organically connected in various ways. It is the combination of certain types of tradition with given processes of transformation that produces distinctive societies that we call 'modern'. Modern societies can be related to each other and form civilisational clusters to the extent they are premised on similar combinations of traditions and modern patterns.

I propose to see traditions as bundled templates of social practice transmitted, transformed and reflected upon by arguments and discourses across cultures and generations. The cultural codes of traditions are administered by cultural elites but also depend on the active role played by practitioners, who are primarily the common people or 'commoners'. In this sense, traditions are relevant both within pre-modern communities and – in a starkly mutated form – within modern or modernising societies. Some authors have appreciated the importance of cultural traditions for the formation of the collective identity of social groups at the moment they attempt to enter modern society and fit into its rationalising parameters. This argument originates in some currents of social theory, most notably, yet not exclusively, located in North America (Bellah 1970; Shils 1981; Taylor 2004). A simplified variant of this approach has been also adopted within development-oriented studies, also with regard to Muslim majority societies, since the 1980s, basically as part of a larger trend of disillusionment with earlier approaches to economic and political development formulated within the paradigm of modernisation theory. Accordingly, traditions should be considered as resources within processes of social and political change that help prevent the spread of individual anomie, collective de-acculturation, and their related, multiple backlashes afflicting various levels of social and political life. Cultural traditions are thus considered potential assets for activating the motivational prism of local actors and helping the work of those modernising agents (including NGOs) that intervene from the inside or outside of a given society in order to improve the well-being of populations.

Perhaps this perspective is not completely satisfying to our aims, since it still retains a thrust of functionalism inherited from modernisation theory. Where tradition was once considered the backward culture to be overcome via modernisation processes, it now bifurcates into a 'good' and a 'bad' tradition: the type of tradition that prevents development and access to modernity is contrasted with a tradition that facilitates avenues of social progress. The line of demarcation between a tradition doomed to reiterate its cycles of stagnation and rituals of confirmation of authority and a tradition that provides cultural orientation and moral guidance to both elites and common practitioners through the uncertainties of modern life and the abstractions of modern norms is reminiscent of an idea that was already present in classic authors of social theory: think of Weber's emphasis on cultural and more specifically religious traditions as engines for the rationalisation of life conduct (Weber [1920] 1988), or of Durkheim's

appreciation of pre-modern religion for providing fundamental, though still defective, notions of solidarity (Durkheim [1912] 1967). By conceiving of tradition either as an impediment to modernisation or as a resource to it, traditions are conceptualised from the viewpoint of a preconfigured path to modernity. Their viability is subjected to the parameters of judgement (nowadays often called 'conditionalities') of modernising agencies linked to states, international organisations and capitalist markets.

The necessary condition for overcoming these limitations and opening up a path for appreciating the culturally pluralistic dimension of modernity and in particular the specific way Islamic civilisation has engaged with modernity is to deepen the attempt to reformulate the notion of tradition. We can benefit from an understanding of tradition as a bundle of arguments, concepts and practices motivating the social agents (MacIntyre 1988). Tradition thus conceived is essential to social action, communication and even cultural and institutional innovation. It would be difficult to conceive of the social bond without referring to the working of tradition demarcating a field of practice whose maintenance depends on adequate mechanisms of transmission and renewal of knowledge through generations (Calhoun 1992; Salvatore 2007a).

This view of tradition can be enriched with Jürgen Habermas's understanding of the connective tissue linking social agents, which is integral to their life-world and fosters their mutual recognition (Habermas [1981] 1987). Habermas's focus is on the sharing of motivations to action via patterns of communication and understanding. The least common denominator between the approaches of MacIntyre and Habermas – two among the leading social thinkers of the last third of the twentieth century – provides us with a view of tradition that lays stress on the communicative competencies that agents acquire by their engagement with a set of practices and the corresponding learning processes activated via communication and reflection (Doody 1991). Here lies the bottom line for a definition of tradition rooted in the micro-dimension of social action and social relations. We thus avoid falling back onto a minimalist notion of tradition of the type illustrated above, a view that is negatively charged by its unilateral emphasis on a macro-sociological dimension of socio-political change that is basically blind to human difference.

Yet our goal to create a more equitable ground to assess Islam's relations to modernity cannot renounce capturing a macro-sociological dimension of tradition that avoids the above-mentioned pitfalls. Not surprisingly, this is possible through a theoretical opening to the long under-theorised concept of civilisation. Johann P. Arnason's civilisational theory is key in this respect. Arnason's approach strikes a balance between civilisation in the singular, that is, modernity as a global civilising process in the sense highlighted by Norbert Elias ([1939, 1976] 1982) – a process that also configures the programme to overcome civilisational differences – and civilisation in the plural, that is, a world of diverse

civilisations facilitating the emergence of multiple modernities (Arnason 2003). The macro-sociological dimension of tradition becomes the cultural component of a specific civilisation. A civilisation always combines power and culture in original ways; therefore, the constitution and mutual relations between political and cultural elites are crucial to the working of civilisations. A civilisation transcends the closed boundary of a specific, national society and articulates across time (epochs) and space (geo-cultural units) the spectrum of possibilities of societal organisation allowed within culturally specific notions of power and within power-determined configurations of cultural traditions. The way power is exercised and legitimised is therefore dependent on cultural traditions: on the codes of legitimacy elaborated by cultural elites, but also on the concrete, everyday practice and judgement of the commoners. The dialectic of power and culture is specific to each civilisation. Such dialectic also determines the specificities of Islamic civilisation, as we will see in more detail.

The cultural dimension of civilisation, represented by traditions, is highlighted by Arnason's interpretation of Marshall Hodgson's understanding of tradition, developed in the latter's study of Islamic civilisation (Hodgson 1974) and in his comparisons between the Western and the Islamic civilisations (Hodgson 1993). This approach helps specifying the relation between the micro- and the macro-dimensions of a civilisation, between a tradition of practice and communication and its structural underpinnings. Not by chance were Hodgson's ideas developed in the context of his study of Islam and therefore critical of the prevalent, trivialised notions of tradition developed and used within the modernisation theory circles. Instead he stressed creative action and cumulative interaction as essential traits of traditions. In this sense, civilisations by necessity rely on traditions and are defined by them (Arnason 2006a), via their capacity to support the social bond at a micro-level (Salvatore 2007a).

In order to understand the dimension of power inherent in Islam as a tradition or as a set of bundled traditions, we can refer to some interventions by Talal Asad (1986), who responded to the functionalism still at work within the approach of several anthropologists and sociologists of Islam. Re-evaluating tradition does not mean to obliterate structures of – or constraints upon – actions, which are ultimately determined by how power works and is instituted in a given social context. It should not lead to neglect power and the accumulation of wealth as a specific means to – and effect of – power as major factors impinging on how traditions are articulated in a concrete social setting. Yet the pursuit itself of power and wealth is to some extent dependent on how cultural traditions frame their desirability and on how social actors pursue their benefits: on how material and immaterial 'goods' are culturally defined. The working itself of power depends on how power is conceptualised and put into practice within specific civilisational contexts, which are in turn influenced by cultural traditions (Arnason 2003).

Moreover, through their underlying web of practice and communication, traditions have the potential to tame indiscriminate, arbitrary power. Its practitioners struggle to prevent the unfolding of blindly functionalistic rationalities within society, mainly finalised to the maximisation of efficiency, the accumulation of wealth, the centralisation of power and the optimisation of control. Traditions also facilitate the transmission, and when necessary contestation, of patterns of authority in any given social formation. In a modern setting, they might survive and sometimes thrive. As a result, authority can be legitimate only if it is able to govern, practically and cognitively, the web of practices and communication – given certain flows of resources and their distribution among the practitioners. For sure, the creation and contestation of the types of authority that hold together traditions can also, simultaneously, affect the flow and distribution of resources and create unjust social relations. Traditions are not power neutral or blind, since they also provide orientation to the shaping of power patterns and legitimacy to power holders.

This principled openness of tradition vis-à-vis power creates occasions and provides justifications for a contestation of authority by practitioners who protest the extent to which power is unwarranted by authority, or authority is exaggeratedly upheld by the sheer exercise of untamed power. While looking at traditions, we should consider the mechanisms through which their working immunises their practitioners – and to some extent also those who hold authority – from seeing power as an end of social action in itself. Such a syndrome of a fully autonomous power has usually been associated with the power machinery of modern states. Michel Foucault (1991) best described it in his works on Western modernity, which emphasise the productivity of power in constituting subjectivities that fit into that power machinery. The mechanism of immunisation against a full autonomisation of power at work within traditions has to perform decently well for the tradition to thrive or at least to survive under modern conditions. The price a tradition has to pay for an enduring failure in this immunisation effort is a state of disturbance, a deep crisis, an outright collapse and dissolution. The alternative is, as in the trajectory of Western societies, a mutating implosion of tradition and the creation of a new, autonomous form of power, culminating in the machinery of the modern state (Salvatore 2007a). The ordeal of the ongoing, civilisation-building tension between culture and power is solved via the affirmation of a culture of power or of a 'civilised power'. Here is where the approaches of Elias on the civilising process and of Foucault on the building of modern subjectivities and disciplines seem to converge. Commenting on such views, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (2006) has recently reaffirmed the higher malleability of Weber's notion of the relations between culture and power for a comparative approach valuing civilisation-specific combinations and trajectories.

The conceptualisation of tradition that I have just proposed can be used to

inoculate us against a too one-sided identification of a Western and modern pattern of solution to the crucibles of culture and power with modernity *tout court*. This is why an adequate conceptualisation of traditions – not only of their plurality but also of their internal contestability and their entangled dynamics – is essential to open up horizons for theorising and comparing multiple modernities. In this fashion, we might attain a more nuanced and plastic variant of the previously mentioned approach to tradition as a resource that the social actors employ for interpreting social situations and gaining orientation in the world, or as a resource for institutional solutions to social problems. Yet we should eschew the macro-sociological simplification luring behind an approach to 'tradition as resource', which can reintroduce a functionalism in disguise, instead of keeping us focused on the degree of openness of traditions and the contestability of their interpretations.

The risk of a new functionalism is particularly visible within a trajectory of reflection attempting to reformulate the Durkheimian heritage – which laid a privileged emphasis on religion as a crucial provider of social integration – into an approach that attempts to reconcile the modern notion of religion with the dynamics of tradition, now condensed in the form of the 'shared values' of a given society. The result is a reduction of religion to a subjective search for meaning that is exposed to intersubjective understanding and communication. Leading social theorists like the sociologist Robert Bellah and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz supported this view and elaborated on it, albeit from different angles. Most notably, Geertz tried to reconstruct a viable notion of culture, not in the form of a cultural tradition, but understood as a 'cultural system', variably rooted in religion, and at work in various forms of Muslim practice in such distant places as Morocco and Indonesia. Accordingly, as a system of meaning, religion might be shaped in culturally variable ways in different parts of the world, but its functions of stabilising the lifeworld and providing cohesion to society remain basically the same anywhere (Geertz 1973: 87–125). Through this reconceptualisation of culture, we gain the view of an impersonal system of social power seconded by a variety of local cultural practices, while the interpretative openness of wider cultural traditions is questioned: in Geertz's neofunctionalist view of culture – and of religion as culture – there is no such thing as an Islamic tradition, even less an Islamic civilisation. Talal Asad has been the most uncompromising critic of this view of religion as culture, which understates the character of tradition as an ensemble of practices subject to scrutiny through intersubjective argument and collective endeavours to revision, contestation and innovation. Asad has convincingly exposed the monolithic and clear-cut notion of religion, shared by sociologists and anthropologists alike, demarcating a field radically severed from the connectedness of both cultural practice and institutional power. He has denied the possibility of defining religion in universal terms, 'not only because its constituent elements and relationships are

historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes' (Asad 1993: 29).

'Religion' between tradition and modernity

Asad's critique has not spared Weberian social science. However, we should acknowledge that Max Weber provided precious elements for defining tradition while steering clear of an essentialising and transhistorical definition of religion. He was not interested in drawing general anthropological conclusions from the observation of man's experience of religious awe mediated by a feeling of alienation from the powers of this world, but rather focused on reconstructing how different religious ways to relate to the world contributed to ground specific forms of life conduct. Weber focused especially on the elaboration of life conduct performed by specific social 'carriers' of religious orientations and wider cultural values. This approach yielded a focus on the formation of criteria of rationalisation of daily affairs though a privileged attention devoted to the work of cultural elites (see Sadri 1992).

Weberian theory is important, since it provides a basic repertoire for the formation of the toolkit of categories we still use for making sense of the relationship between Islam and modernity. But we should also be aware that this Weberian repertoire is itself incorporated in the historical process through which Western civilisation gained the upper hand over against Islamic civilisation. Yet one should not fall victim to a conspiracy theory viewing Orientalism as a discourse on the Orient in general and on Islam in particular, which merely reflects the process of constitution of a Western hegemonic subjectivity. The categories deployed in the process have been subject to a relentless contestation, and it is to be welcomed that, especially since the 1960s, this critique has helped to widen the horizon of analysis to include more fairly balanced comparative views: of civilisations, of traditions and, lastly, of modernities (Salvatore [1995] 2007b). In particular, the observations stressing the difference of the Islamic concept of *din* from its convenient but reductive translation as 'religion' has also contributed to the expansion of the critical horizons on comparative analysis. Such a critique has itself a rather Orientalist origin and structure of argument, to the extent that it is grounded on a view of Islam's 'difference' (Salvatore 1997).

The problem of Orientalism and of the Western study of Islam, evidenced by the work of Edward Said (1978), should be situated in the wider context determined by the politically overloaded character of the study of religion, which occupied the central stage in the genesis of the social sciences in the longer nineteenth century in Europe. In the framework of a hardening competition among various disciplines and approaches that attempted to locate the sources and explain the modes of human sociability and the nature itself of the social bond, religion was identified as a key sphere of human endeavour, whose emergence

basically coincided with the formation of organised community life. In countries like France and Germany, comparative linguistics and comparative mythology competed with text criticism and history in situating the forces of religion in the constitution and reproduction of human society. Anthropology and sociology finally joined in the field of exploration and definition of the overlapping dimensions of religion. In the emerging paradigm of the sociology of Emile Durkheim and his school, religion became the overarching category for investigating the nature of the collective forces providing cohesion to society via successive – ever more abstract and in this sense rational – models of solidarity (Durkheim [1912] 1967; Tarot 1999).

The development and institutionalisation of the academic study of Islam and the rise of Islamic Studies throughout Europe was integral to this development (Stauth 1993). Biblical criticism played an additional role in this trajectory, providing the model for the study of the texts of the Islamic tradition (Asad 2003; Johansen 2004). Yet the definition and typologisation of Islam as the cultural source of a distinctive civilisation also played an explicit or implicit role in the work of several social theorists who were not specialists of Islamic Studies. Thus the study of Islam became integral to the concerns not only of language and area specialists, but also of scholars within social-science disciplines, who considered Islam as the closest unity of comparison for the definition of the parameters of the social theory of religion. These parameters have since the nineteenth century been moulded by reflections on the long-term trajectory of the civilisation of Latin Christendom in Western Europe, often starting from Late Antiquity, passing through the Middle Ages and reaching up to the early modern Reformation and Wars of Religion and the gradual affirmation of largely secular states and secularised societies via the Enlightenment. The emerging parameters for the study of religion were part and parcel of the definition of the identity of Western Europe, or even of the 'West' or 'Occident'.

The genealogy of religion within the Western path to modernity reached as far back to the Roman civilisation: not surprisingly, since *religio* is not only a Latin word, but also one imbued with a specifically Roman idea of what is due to the gods by the Roman citizens in exchange for the function played by the gods in the ritual constitution of both authority and community. As a specific word and as an increasingly important concept, *religio* underwent far-reaching transformations within Latin Christendom after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Yet the seeds of its originally functionalist meaning have been retained to our days. In a modern context the function of religion can be flexibly shifted back and forth between the religion of the state and the religion of the subject, between publicness and inwardness (Tenbruck 1993).

It is important to note that neither the Greeks nor the Hebrews – mostly invoked as the two civilisations of the ancient world that have provided the key sources to the identity of the West throughout the long-term trajectory

that culminated in its hegemony over the modern world – had such a clear-cut notion of religion. If Islam also lacks a comparable word or idea, it shares a noble company. The Islamic keyword *din*, usually considered the closest equivalent to 'religion', is more complex and diffuse and less functionally streamlined than its Latin counterpart. Instead of designating a functional bond between men and gods beneficial to the health of the state, *din* indicates the somewhat open partnership between man and God and the potentially constructive moral tension emanating from it. Starting from this basic meaning, *din* also encompasses other layers of signification, one of which denotes the way to be followed for human beings to reach God (a meaning close to *shari'a*), while another meaning focuses the moment of judgment, as in the Qur'anic notion of *yawm al-din*, the Day of Judgment.

In Western Europe the tension between the focus on a state function and the insistence on the soul's privileged relation to God and its salvation was left unresolved, until, with the constitution of the modern state a compromise was struck between the state's control of the religious field and the sovereignty of the soul, between publicness and inwardness. This normative arrangement is, however, unnecessary from the viewpoint of the historic dynamics through which the Islamic *din* was incorporated within socio-political structures. The *din* ('religion') and the *dawla* ('state') designed distinct though at times overlapping fields of social activity and production of human value. Interestingly, perhaps, the conceptual pair comes close to the way culture and power are conceptualised within comparative civilisational analysis: not as the facing of church and state intended as two separate institutions, nor of the private and the public as two distinct spheres, but as two poles of activity and sources of value that permanently contribute to each other's definition while retaining their principled autonomy.

The reasons why Islam has often represented a civilisational model neatly contrasting with the European historical trajectory of transformation of religion and of its relations to the state cannot be reduced to cultural asymmetries, to a divergence of linguistic sensibilities or even to an alleged deficit of Islamic traditions to turn the tension inherent in the God–man relation into a socially fruitful and politically progressive differentiation of societal spheres. The West European tendency to insulate Islam as a convenient Other within easy grasp has paradoxically to do with the closeness and density of interaction and competition with the Islamic civilisation and the related political centres more than to any purported cultural distance or radical civilisational alterity. As much as it denies mutual interaction and exchange, essentialism is the product of them. Therefore, if the sociology of religion of European origin is intimately connected with the sociology of modernity, which has been primarily understood as a distinctive product of European civilisation, then Islam is both internal and external to this historical trajectory: while it constitutes an ensemble of social and

cultural potentialities that never became 'Europe', and, so, truly modern, it has posed a permanent challenge to European modernity through the development of a lively and for a long time (as we saw, well into the modern era) powerful counter-model.

Denouncing the views of Islam's defective relation to modernity as the product of essentialist misconceptions does not do justice to the mechanism of essentialisation. The form of essentialism here at play is deeply rooted in the general conception of 'religion', presented as universal while being part and parcel of a European trajectory of modernisation, and in the general understanding of 'tradition', intended as the antithesis to that trajectory of modernisation. In other words, essentialism is not necessarily the maligned tool of the instrumentalisation of the Other for maintaining the hegemony of the Self, as Orientalist critique often purports. It is the methodologically tempting sharp edge separating a view of civilisation and modernity conceived as singular, and the counterview of civilisation and modernity as not only plural but also as inherently open to contact, interaction and exchange – however conflicted they be.

No doubt Islam was particularly prone to become the object of a kind of social-scientific essentialisation as a 'traditional religion' preventing a modern societal differentiation and the autonomisation of political power from the tutelage of religious authority. What from this perspective 'went really wrong' with Islam (to use Lewis's simplistic terminology) is related to the divergent development of state–society formations between Western Europe and the Muslim world more than to inherently deficient cultural fundaments of the latter. If we register the importance of diverging political developments, we cannot frame the issue in terms of deficits to be considered essential to the Islamic civilisation as such. One should rather focus on the lopsided character of the pretended universal character of Western civilisation and of its key categories, premised on a unique view of economic rationalisation, social differentiation and political integration. Such categories affect both real politics and the social sciences. They are expressed via a monocivilisational discourse of modernity centred on Western supremacy and the apparatus of concepts used to make sense of an increasingly dichotomous world where modernity triumphant faces resisting traditions.

My previous detour on tradition as not merely the backdrop of modernity but as a force of history on its own right should now give way to a more specific analysis of Islam as a bundle of traditions striving to give coherence to a composite world, and the result of which is an 'Islamic civilisation' – itself quite unique, and which some authors such as Hodgson have preferred to conceptualise as a uniquely transcivilisational ecumene originally amalgamating 'Occident' and 'Orient' more than as a compact civilisation such as Western Europe, India or China.

The breakthrough of prophetic religions and the rise of Islam

Locating Islam within the field of civilisational analysis might be greatly facilitated by referring to the approach thus far known as 'Axial Age theory'. This strand of theory was initiated by such scholars – variably linked to Max Weber and Weberian circles in Heidelberg – as Karl Jaspers, Alfred Weber and Eric Voegelin. The theory rests on the hypothesis of a radical transformation of social life facilitated by the first basic differentiation of social fields out of archaic, holistic communities regulated by cyclical patterns and mythical views of the cosmological order, and out of the archaic states that took shape in some regions where irrigated agriculture flourished in organised forms, such as Egypt and Mesopotamia. This approach is particularly suitable to explain the invention or discovery of 'transcendence' across various civilisations in ways that highlight their plural and interactive dimension. The qualification of this historical, comparative and theoretical approach as 'axial' and its original reference to a specific 'age' are due to the fact that the philosopher of history Jaspers wanted to revise Hegel's dictum defining Christ as the 'axis' of human history. Jaspers overcame this euro-(Christo)-centric approach by considering not the advent of the Christ, but an epochal upheaval, cutting through the first millennium BCE and spreading across various Eurasian civilisations, as the axis of human history, and thus deserving to be called 'axial' (Jaspers [1949] 1953).

Especially in its Western components – intended as embracing the wider Euro-Mediterranean area and its adjacent civilisational cradles of the Fertile Crescent, and therefore also embracing what is conventionally designated as the Near and Middle East, including the Irano-Semitic region – a new type of religion emphasising a transcendent God became a key arrow of the axial transformations and of the civilisational impetus originating from them. This is clearly the case for Hebrew prophecy, but it also concerns Greek culture, including philosophy, which articulates transcendence in original ways (Eisenstadt 1982). Transcendence matters here, sociologically and not theologically, for facilitating the emergence of human agency through what is conventionally identified as the transition from *mythos* to *logos* or the emergence of human reflexivity out of a holistic and symbolically dense view of cosmic order. The idea of transcendence associated in particular with monotheistic religions helps in constructing values that transcend the human activities tied to the daily necessities, the 'world' as it appears: it projects beyond it another possible world. The main novelty of the axial breakthrough resides in 'the capacity of human beings to reflect upon and give expression to an image of the world as having the potential of being different from what it was perceived to be here and now' (Wittrock 2005: 262).

In this approach the religious dimension of civilisation is spelled out in terms that are familiar to social-science categories, without becoming squeezed into the narrower paradigms of the sociology of religion. The Axial Age theory

is itself the manifestation of the process through which a long-term essentialist and Eurocentric trend in describing the purportedly 'normal' trajectory of differentiation between society and religion becomes open to contestations, revisions and variations, by taking into account the formative experience of non-European civilisations. Accordingly, the crucial breakthrough in human history that is common to the civilisations of the West and East lies in a tension between the mundane world of material needs and power drives, on the one hand, and another world, indicated in the Western–Abrahamic, prophetic manifestations of the axial breakthrough as the 'hereafter', on the other. Value is constructed as an immaterial source of power facilitating repertoires of intersubjective understanding and connectedness between *ego* and *alter* basically alternative to those taking form within the mundane sphere and that are mainly identified with structures of domination and modalities of accumulation of wealth: the field of material power at large. In many ways, the problem of how *ego* has to relate to *alter* is reflected in the problem of how the world has to be related to the afterworld. The inscription of ties of brotherhood and solidarity into the social bond necessitated the projection of the human *alter* onto a transcendent *Alter*, usually defined, within Western axial civilisations, as God. In this frame the transcendence of *Alter* secures a permanent translation of the intersubjective tension inherent in human action into generalised values and categorical obligations. In a further step, transcendence also facilitates the construction of a public realm where individual action is judged by criteria of accountability measured by its fitting into the common good of a given community or of humanity. Caring for *alter* as manifested in the so-called Golden Rule summarising a human ethic of reciprocity (from Leviticus to the teachings of Confucius) is the solution to a tension that is perpetually recreated in human and social life. This tension is ever and again framed in fresh narrative forms, as in prophetic speech or in the teaching of sages, but also via philosophical reflection that, most notably in its Platonic orientation, also made use of symbols and narratives, reframed in a dialogically reflexive fashion.

We can thus decouple transcendence from a cosmological typology and consider it the engine of a specific type of discourse proclaiming the incompleteness of the mundane order and the need to transcend it. In particular, the axial discourse makes the power holders accountable to a transcendent power or divinity, which takes over the traits of unitary and supreme majesty over the cosmos, over human society and over the individual soul. The emergence of this pattern of accountability was accompanied by an institutionalisation of theological, juridical and philosophical discourses, and therefore by the crystallisation of a basic differentiation in the leadership of socio-political communities. This differentiation separating priests, scribes and scholars from the ruling class was not unknown to pre-axial formations. But the novelty of the axial breakthrough is that the cultural elites, which do not control the means of coercion and of

production, now wield a moral power over the ruling class, based on a competence to formulate general paths of virtuous life conducive to human welfare both in this world and in the hereafter. This specific type of power also became binding for the rulers. The proclamation of the hereafter and of related paths to salvation was necessary to impose a generalisation of human value, via the injunctions for *ego* to connect to the human *alter* and to behave well and fairly to him or her.

The axial separation of functions between rulers and clerics was nonetheless a tumultuous process. Most notably, the transformative character of the prophetic discourse that triggered off the differentiation in the Hebrew case – starting from Moses and the Exodus of the Hebrews from the tyranny of the Pharaoh in Egypt – lies in a continual reformation of the double idea of order as simultaneously mundane and ultramundane. This permanent instability was facilitated by the prophets' stubborn warnings that pushed forward the boundary between the two levels. The mundane shape of the order is here permanently subject to reflection, critique and reform as a consequence of the fact that it is always an imperfect match to the transcendent, more comprehensive order. While Isaiah was one major hero of the Axial Age, along with Zarathustra and Socrates, in the wider West, Siddhartha Gautama (Shakyamuni), Laotzi and Confucius were the leading personalities in the East.

While the original body of scholarship on the Axial Age fixes the period of the breakthrough around the middle of the first millennium BCE, later revisions suggest an ongoing process of axial transformations encompassing subsequent breakthroughs (Arnason 2005). The relationship between the mundane and the ultramundane orders was further redefined in the post-prophetic era that characterises each of the two major religious traditions of the Western area of the Afro-Eurasian landmass that was invested by axial transformations. With Christianity, the process of creating a new orthodoxy revolved around the first coming of the Messiah, who became the person of the Son in a trinitarian scheme of the Godhead. In Islam, the messianic impulse was strong at its inception but was effectively tamed within the emerging Sunni orthodoxy; the era of crystallisation of doctrine started right after the Qur'anic revelation given to Muhammad, the seal of all prophetic chains.

The axial framework helps avoiding the anachronism of dealing with 'religion' as a given sphere, field or system within society. With the help of this approach, we no longer need to presuppose the existence of specifically religious forms of social action, to be contrasted with those based on a civic or secular understanding of social and political life. At stake is rather the ongoing dialectic between the strength of cultural orientations – to which the idea of transcendence gave an unprecedented impulse – and institutional crystallisations. The specifically religious factor, rooted in the way it concurs to reforming the social bond, is then subsumed under the more general cultural impetus that moulds institutions.

'Religion' and 'politics' are two poles of human endeavour constantly implying – and impinging on – each other. To sum up, while the axial breakthrough dissolves the archaic unity of religion and politics (Gauchet [1985] 1997), 'the civilisational potential of religious traditions and transformations is most effectively realised in conjunction with political structures' (Arnason 2006b: 104).

In this sense, all civilisations that claim an axial pedigree, including Islam, are structured via a differentiation between the two realms and reinstitute a much more dynamic relationship between the sphere of culture, now centred on transcendent visions, and the power incorporated in institutional arrangements. In this framework, momentous new foundations of religions like the rise of Christianity and the emergence of Islam should be considered as re-combinations and new systematisations of older axial repertoires. These legacies provided patterns for distinguishing, and yet reconnecting, the realms of religion and politics. Religion is here not an autonomous sphere, bur rather a meta-institutional source of a new, immaterial dimension of human power and a field for its contestation. The way power is related to its ideational underpinnings and modes of cultural articulation is subject to variation across different religious traditions. The emerging authorities within the newly instituted religious traditions – church leaders in the Christian case, more diffuse and less institutionalised authoritative roles in the Islamic case – struggled against heterodox challenges via the creation of more solid orthodoxies than it had been possible in the original axial breakthrough. In this way, they were able to upgrade the universalistic potential of older traditions and effectively transcend consolidated civilisational boundaries.

The consolidation of Islam and the emergence of the commoner as the carrier of the common good

A balanced assessment of Islam's specific contribution to the axial framework could be that, for being the last and most consciously managed manifestation of the axial civilisational breakthrough within the Western part of the Afro-Eurasian hemisphere, Islam also marks the triumph of the 'commoner'. This motif had already been central to the preaching and teaching of key axial characters such as Isaiah and Socrates but had remained underappreciated in further developments. Islam incorporated from its origin the idea of a new, synthetic re-pristination of key aspects of those axial features that promoted a human orientation to the 'common good'. It brought about their, so to speak, mainstreaming and universalisation across a broad transcivilisational ecumene cutting through Europe, North Africa, the Near and Middle East and other regions situated further east and south-east across the depths of the Eurasian continent. The Greek philosophical heritage had a substantial influence on key aspects of Islamic traditions and was more harmoniously amalgamated with the

prophetic components than it was the case within Latin Christendom, where prophecy and philosophy remained in a state of principled, though also productive tension (Brague [1992] 2002). Several scholars (e.g. Nallino 1942; Hallaq 1989) have also taken the impact of Roman law on Islamic law and jurisprudence into consideration, although the issue remains controversial. As a result, it is fair to say that Islam has attempted to bring to perfection a crucial feature of axial civilisations in the reconstruction of the social bond – namely, the overcoming of pre-axial ties of authority, the taming of unbridled mythological imagination and the construction of an uncontaminated triad between *ego*, *alter* and God. As aptly formulated by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (2002: 148–9):

> [T]he emphasis on the construction of a political-religious collectivity was connected in Islam with the development of a principled ideological negation of any primordial element or component within this sacred political-religious identity. Indeed, of all the Axial Age civilisations in general, and the monotheistic ones in particular, Islam was, on the ideological level, the most extreme in its denial of the legitimacy of such primordial dimensions in the structure of the Islamic community . . . In this it stood in opposition to Judaism, with which it shared such characteristics as an emphasis on the direct, unmediated access of all members of the community to the sacred.

Though it arose, and always kept its main centre of gravitation, in the Irano-Semitic civilisational area, Islam has played the role of a creative synthesiser and diligent incorporator of the heritage of several civilisations whose only common denominator up to Islam's inception had been their dispersed axial dimension. The Qur'an gives prominence to the earlier chains of prophets, from Noah through Abraham to Jesus, and lays a strong emphasis on the opposition they met in their call to submission to God's will, which is condensed in the meaning of the Arabic word *islam*. In this sense, Muhammad's message was conceived as a restoration, completion and renaissance of the authentic Abrahamic faith through a final and unequivocal revelation of God's word and will to humankind. Not only the content of the Qur'anic message but the communicative and authoritative infrastructure of prophetic discourse and its means of inculcation were made particularly effective by Muhammad and the generations of Islamic scholars who came after him. God's message, revealed through the earlier prophets, had been received and incorporated in Judaism and Christianity in imperfect ways – according to the message of the Qur'an – because of the prevalence of sectarian passions and human ambitions over a pious concern for the truth and the common good. Islam, the new–old call to submission to God, was due to overcome divisions and manipulations and to embrace mankind in a truly universal *umma*: that is, a community of all believers, superseding all sectarian splits and tribal particularisms.

The sweeping success, after initial resistances, of Muhammad's preaching and proselytising between Mecca and Medina favoured a swift turn from

parabolic exhortation to an activist reconstruction of the social fabric and the political community. While it is an exaggeration to state that Muhammad was a conscious empire-builder (Fowden 1993: 138–52), his practice and judgement as the seal of all prophets and as the first leader of the new *umma*, committed to regulating human relationships, acquired paradigmatic value beyond the new text of revelation, the Qur'an. This scripture, centred on the call to conversion and on the retelling of several biblical and other narratives, dealt only – unlike the encompassing Deuteronomic Torah – with a limited number of issues immediately related to the ordinance of social life. The bulk of the new regulations was carried by the 'traditions' of Muhammad and his companions (*hadith*). The rise of Islam completed the transition from the empires of antiquity to the civilisational idea of a 'commonwealth' as a wider community whose cohesion does not depend on autocratic rule. In this sense, the advent of Islam brought to full fruition the axial power through which prophets, spiritual leaders and reformers had shaped patterns of the social bond that were potentially alternative to the logic of accumulation of sheer power characteristic of empire building. For sure, these patterns and the corresponding ideas of 'commonwealth' (now incarnate in the *umma*) were not in themselves opposed to empire building: in the classic age of Islam, they even fed into it.

The most salient originality of the new faith, which will bear a particular weight within intercivilisational dynamics and later in the encounter with modernity, was the growing strength of the carriers of Islamic civilisation in streamlining several theological nodes of Abrahamic and prophetic discourse directly affecting the double tension between this world and the other world – and between *ego* and *alter* – and in meeting the aspiration to a greater adherence of doctrine to practice. The main scheme of classification of action within Islamic legal–moral traditions (as inspired by God's law or *shari'a*) consists in the five categories of *wajib* (mandatory), *mandub* (recommended), *mubah* (permissible or indifferent), *makruh* (reprehensible) and *haram* (illicit, forbidden). It offers a sophisticated yet handy tool of orientation of moral action accessible to all practitioners and facilitates determining the degree of permitted creative interpretation versus undue innovations.

The Latin Christian primacy of inwardness is conventionally opposed to the Islamic centrality of *shari'a*. The elaboration on the notion of *shari'a*, at first a concept not essential to the repertoire of the jurists, was a prerogative of the theologians, who were often engaged in tense contentions with the custodians of the law. *Shari'a* developed in parallel with speculations on *din*, which unlike *shari'a* features quite centrally in the Qur'an. *Din*, usually yet imperfectly translated as 'religion', embraces the partnership itself between man and God. The new community of the faithful, the *umma*, was constructed on the basis of equal dignity among human beings, in their double identity as subjects and objects of *din*. *Shari'a* was framed – starting from its rare use in the Qur'an – as emanating

from God as commander. The articulate yet flexible meaning of this conceptual pair witnesses how an essentialised, modern Western notion of religion, as discussed above, can be only inadequately applied to Islamic tenets.

Theologians tended to see *din* and *shari'a* as two sides of the same coin, the former identifying the intimate link between creator and creature, the latter the path of rules and disciplines, concerning both the man–God relationship and the ego–alter intercourse. The synthesis of the leading theologian and Sufi Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111) showed that *shari'a* without *din* is an empty shell (Rahman [1966] 1979: 106). Before al-Ghazali authoritatively intervened in defining the link between *din* and *shari'a*, during the last period of the formative phase of canonisation of the Sunni way – that is, in the ninth century CE – theologians and jurists had fought a major battle that enduringly influenced the Muslim understanding of Islamic normativity. A school called Mu'tazila, which enjoyed a hegemonic position at the time, subsumed the idea of God under the notion of cosmic justice. The consolidating Sunni consensus (rather than 'orthodoxy') opposed this attempt and reaffirmed the centrality of the Qur'an and revelation.

In the perception of some leading jurists, theological speculation threatened to erode the piety enjoined by the God of the living tradition, who is the compassionate commander of good, among other numerous attributes. The Mu'tazila thinkers aimed instead to obliterate all such attributes, since they feared that they would diminish the notion of God as a pure essence of justice, as an Aristotelian prime mover. This ninth-century clash was the only moment in Islamic history where one major part in a dispute tried to eradicate disagreement and win a contest through the use of inflexible judicial means against not just the one or the other thinker suspected of heterodoxy, but against a whole class of scholars, here the jurists and in particular the traditionists (scholars of *hadith*). The Mu'tazila succeeded in inciting the Caliph al-Ma'mun to institute the *mihna*, a sort of inquisition through which numerous scholars were interrogated and punished because of their doctrines: among them the founder of the most radically anti-theological and anti-philosophical among the four canonical Sunni schools, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780–855). The population of Baghdad supported the persecuted scholars against the Caliph and the Mu'tazila. This was a decisive battle to affirm the centrality of the Sunni mechanism of tradition-building pivoted on a diffuse science of *hadith* against any temptation to establish a centralistic orthodoxy based on a control over dogma (Hurvitz 2002).

Islamic philosophy (called *falsafa*), which flourished right after the epoch of canonisation of Qur'an and *hadith*, established a dual relation of absorption and rejection between Islamic high culture and the Greek philosophical heritage. Muslim philosophers confronted the main theoretical thrust of the contentions of the jurists, the theologians and the mystics. Unlike thinkers such as Aquinas within Latin Christendom, the practitioners of *falsafa* identified themselves

explicitly as philosophers, and by this very identification they put at least one foot out of the Sunni 'orthodox' consensus. Yet philosophy influenced even some key thinkers who directly clashed with philosophers, whose dialectic role in the process of reshaping the consensus is quite evident. In particular, Islamic philosophy contributed key elements to a theory of prophetic discourse that not only affected the most penetrating reflections provided by Islamic legal theory, but also contributed invaluable seeds to later discussions on religion and scripture within European modernity. The leading Islamic philosopher, Ibn Sina (980–1037), known in Europe as Avicenna, formulated the path-breaking hypothesis that prophetic speech receives its strength and persuasiveness from mythical imagery. According to him, such discourse was optimally shaped to match the imagination of the commoners and induce them to perform good deeds. Yet prophetic discourse is not 'untrue', since the use of imaginative symbols is necessary for effectively communicating the truth of religion (Rahman [1966] 1979: 119–20). The work of the philosophers evidenced the existence of a gulf between popular and intellectual cultures in spite of the importance of the commoners in Islam. This is why their interpretation was of limited practical use in reconstructing the doctrinal bases of the Sunni consensus. The contribution of philosophy to the redefinition of public reasoning within Islamic jurisprudential traditions will leave enduring traces. Many among those scholars who confronted themselves with the rational methods of *falsafa* – like Fakhr-al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209) – or even some among those who vehemently opposed these methods – like al-Ghazali – or took a prudent distance from them – like Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi (d. 1388) – contributed to introduce philosophical rigor into theology, Sufism and, finally, the theory of jurisprudence and law. As a result of these combined developments, a concern for the 'common good' through a focus on the 'commoner' – one crucial potential of axial transformations – became a central concern for Islam as a discursive tradition and for key Muslim actors, thus influencing some key presuppositions for Islam's own dealing with modernity at later stages.

Björn Wittrock (2001) has proposed the term 'ecumenical renaissance' to define the period of spiritual ferment and institutional crystallisations across the Afro-Eurasian civilisational area that occurred at a moment of maturity of Islamdom, around the turn of the first millennium CE, and reached its climax in the middle of the thirteenth century. These transformations, like the original axial breakthrough that brought about Hebrew prophecy and Greek philosophy, also embraced civilisations situated outside the Euro-Mediterranean area, such as China and India. Some scholars have attributed an increasing significance to the transformations of this age within Western Christendom, in some cases considering them no less important than the sixteenth-century Renaissance and Reformation, conventionally identified with the beginnings of European modernity (Arnason 2003). During this era Islamdom incorporated key cultural

components of Persian and Turkic origin. This period also witnessed the unfolding of the heterodox challenges of Shi'i groups and potentates towards the Sunni 'orthodoxy'. This dynamic will be carried over into the modern era with the rivalry between the Sunni Ottoman empire and Safavid Iran, which became the new stronghold of Shi'a.

The most significant commonality between Latin Christendom and Islamdom during the ecumenical renaissance was represented by the rise of mystically oriented movements drawing on the imagination and needs of the commoners, including city-dwellers. These movements, though potentially heterodox, were for the most part integrated into the orthodox mainstream and affected its institutional configuration both within Latin Christianity and Sunni Islam, with enduring consequences lasting till our days. They were equally significant, in both civilisational realms, in their work finalised to enhancing the social salience of the commoners and their desires for a renewal of norms and lifestyles within wider socio-economic trends spurning urban economies and cross-regional trade (Arjomand 2004; Rahimi 2006). More than highlighting the divergent paths of Western Europe and the Muslim world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we should stress the importance of a comparative view of this age of ecumenical renaissance between both civilisational areas. A better perspective for illustrating the paradigm of 'multiple modernities' can be the result of this analysis, which outlines a significant background to the investigation of the relations between Islam and modernity provided in the following chapters.

In Europe the rise of heretical movements and the simultaneous emergence of radical mendicant orders – in particular during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – manifested the pressures, on ecclesiastical institutions, of the practical necessities and aspirations of renewal that spread among the popular classes and the rising urban middle classes. A similar role was played within Islam by Sufism and the struggles surrounding its co-optation into the new forms of orthodoxy. Through subsequent waves, not only of military conquest, but also of religious conversion (that were in most cases temporally dissociated from each other), Islamdom became during this epoch a simultaneously Euro-Mediterranean and Asian ecumene, building a strong presence in Central Asia, in parts of China and especially in India, while also reaching out as far as South East Asia. On account of political and economic power, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the cumulative result of the transformations that took place during this period of renaissance prepared the terrain for a peak of Muslim ascendancy on a world scale in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Hodgson 1974, 1993).

During the ecumenical renaissance Sufism became ubiquitous in the Muslim world thanks to a fresh wave of diffusion and institutionalisation of mystical paths as practised in the brotherhoods (*turuq*). Sufism increasingly represented the most powerful challenge to the hegemony of the jurists. Later it will become

one key factor in Islam's confrontation with modernity. Sufis regarded *shari'a* as a suitable framework for governing the *ego–alter*–God relationship in routine, daily situations and common practice. Alongside, it was felt that a deepening of piety required a commitment to the inner truth of Islam or *haqiqa*. The competition between Sufism and jurisprudence not only helped redefining the place of *shari'a* within the Sunni consensus, but also highlighted the ongoing tension between the spiritual dimension of speculation and doctrine, on the one hand, and its practical and juridical implications, on the other. Unlike the philosophers, the Sufis did not raise the banner of rational speculation in the first place. They appropriated and sedated the tension between the spiritual and the practical levels of faith through distinctive practices and the construction of suitable associational forms. The Sufi challenge became particularly powerful in the last phase of the ecumenical renaissance, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, corresponding to the last phase of what Hodgson called the 'Early Middle Period' of Islamic history, which witnessed a deepening of Islam's cosmopolitan orientation and cultural expansiveness, a period terminated by the Mongol conquest.

The advantage of the orientation to piety of organised Sufism, compared to the scholarship of theologians and philosophers, consisted in the fact that Sufis anchored their spiritual claims within ritualised collective practices that facilitated building intersubjective connectedness by integrating the triadic matrix of the social bond (*ego–alter–Alter*) into cohesive groups, so avoiding both a dogmatist impasse and an elitist backlash. Starting from a first nucleus of Medinese piety and asceticism based on the Qur'anic notion of faithful trust in God (*tawakkul*) and of love for God – which was neither conflicting with, nor integrated into, the Medinese proto-state nourished by the charisma of the prophet Muhammad – the Sufi path first thrived because of the widespread sentiment that the process of canonisation of the law led by the jurists could not exhaust the truth of Islam, and that therefore a parallel tradition of piety immune from formalistic fixings was needed (Rahman [1966] 1979: 130). This approach was favoured by the fact that the absence of priesthood in Sunni Islam facilitated from the beginning an equation between the sincere faithful, the practitioner and the commoner (Hoexter and Levtzion 2002: 12). The enduring strength of Sufism is due to the fact that its remote roots are as old as the translation of Muhammad's message into pious practice by his companions, yet it is also particularly capable of adapting to changed socio-political circumstances, like the increasingly important role of non-Arab populations in the expansion of Islam during the ecumenical renaissance. Moreover the organised Sufism of the *turuq* responded to the resurfacing need for charismatic mediation that the absence of priesthood could not erase for ever.

The path of Sufism was quite innovative in that it formulated a solution to the problem of the relationship between rational speculation, on the one hand,

and prophetic discourse, on the other. This tense relationship reached a grave stalemate in the Sunni world with the work of Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), known in Europe as Averroes. His rationalist philosophy became the object of attacks by the *fuqaha'* (the practitioners of *fiqh* – that is, jurisprudence), though he was himself an active jurist. Sufism exploited the tension to its advantage in order to show its commitment to orthodoxy, by focusing on the exemplary value of the Sunna (the canonical practice) of the Prophet. Sufi leaders proved that the Sunna was a path of pious imitation of the Prophet's virtuous life that the single faithful had to practise via a disciplined training under the guide of a master, in order to gain access to the essential truth of faith, the *haqiqa*. This inner truth could be achieved only through establishing a close relationship to the human being who is particularly close to God, the prophet Muhammad, and to the other 'friends' (*awliya'*) of God, the new Sufi 'saints'.

Similar to the new monastic movements of the ecumenical renaissance in Latin Christian Europe, the consolidation of Sufism took on the form of a socio-religious movement of the commoners laying a claim to grasp the essence of the transcendent truth. This basic similarity is matched by clear differences with the European experience at the level of the institutional environment and with regard to the organisational form of the movements, as well as in terms of the required – individual and collective – disciplines. The most salient aspect of the wave of institutionalisation of Sufism during the ecumenical renaissance is that, while the new monastic orders in Europe influenced the renaissance of civic life while coming from outside the urban communities, the Sufi orders entered an almost symbiotic relationship with urban associations and especially with the craftsmen guilds, by providing them with ties of trust underpinned by the authority of the shaykhs (the masters) of the brotherhoods (see Gerber 1994: 113–26).

In this institutional environment, the leaders who cared for the consensus of the commoners were, and could only be, the ulama. It is important to provide a profile of their social skills and institutional rooting, in order to understand how the Islamic community was staffed at both a micro- and a macro-level of social organisation. As summarised by Eisenstadt (2002: 151):

> this highly autonomous religious elite did not develop into a broad, independent, and cohesive ecclesiastic organisation, and the religious groups and functionaries were not organised as a distinct, separate entity . . . It was the '*ulama*' who created major networks that brought together, under one religious – and often also social-civilisational – umbrella, varied ethnic and geopolitical groups, tribes, settled peasants, and urban groups, creating mutual impingement and interaction among them that otherwise would probably not have developed. And it was the '*ulama*', acting through different, often transstate, networks, who were the crucial element forming the distinctive characteristic of public spheres in Islamic societies.

The category of the ulama (or 'men of knowledge') should be understood in broader terms than being equal with the category of the jurists (the *fuqaha*'). The ulama also encompass Sufi leaders and cannot be reduced to a corporate group or to a professional identity. They represent those cultural elites who, basing their credentials on some 'orthodox' form of knowledge and leadership, are best positioned – thanks not only to their education but also to their social prestige – to shape a public space by providing services of various kinds. The diversity of opinions among them on various issues of both practical significance and conceptual relevance and the ensuing disagreements made them compete for the support of the restricted public of their peers (*al-khassa*) on the more theoretical questions, and of the commoners (*al-ʿamma*), on the questions of public interest (Rahman [1966] 1979: 261–2).

The modern state facing 'religion'

The dominant model of modernity – combining economic factors linked to the rise of capitalism, socio-political dynamics related to the formation of increasingly centralised and bureaucratised states, and cultural orientations putting a premium on individual and collective autonomy – reflects the historical experience of European societies or, better, of some key fragments of north-western Europe. The same applies to the concept of religion, which, in the form inherited from different branches of the social sciences – chiefly from the sociology of religion – took sharp contours in the course of the same modern political transformations and happened to refer to a differentiated – mostly though not always privatised – sphere. These processes set the West European pattern of political modernity apart from any alleged 'alternative modernity', Islamic or otherwise.

It suffices here, in the last part of this chapter, to sum up the peculiar relationship between tradition and modernity in the crystallisation of the European hegemony over the modern world. The genesis of European modernity was characterised, not by a sudden collapse, but rather by an implosion and radicalisation of key motives of axial traditions. At first, this process consisted of attempts to revitalise tradition. Yet most such attempts quickly exhausted the internal resources of tradition and provided impetus to fresh visions that fed into newly emerging power formations directly or indirectly tied to the modern state. In particular, the radicalisation of the social and political transformations initiated during the ecumenical renaissance led the religious reformers of the early modern era to stress the innerwordly components of traditions. These movements launched political challenges to institutional authority on the basis of reasons of the 'spirit'. In the process of upholding such reasons in a world that increasingly recognised the autonomous sovereignty of politics as incarnated in the modern state, the seeds were laid for fundamentalism, which emerged as an essential component of the antinomies of the modern order (Eisenstadt 2000b).

In other words, axial categories were not erased but were reinterpreted, radicalised and turned upside down by the new movements of the age, by instigating new visions of a kingdom of God on earth governed by the vanguard of the faithful, the 'people of God'. The religious reformers of the sixteenth century, led by Luther and Calvin, opted for a drastically new foundation of the order of the fading church institution. Yet the most striking example of a radical transformation based on the vision of an immanent shift of axial values previously oriented to transcendence was the revolution of Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) in England. This was not by chance the first revolution that has been considered as modern, and one that occurred in the cradle itself of economic and political modernity. The call for a kingdom of God now breaks the axial tension between immanence and transcendence and becomes a tool for their ultimate fusion, via programmes that bring immanence to the horizons of salvation. This outcome of the new breakthrough is a new type of civilisational power that becomes condensed in the machinery of the modern state (Voegelin 1998: 217–68).

Both the revolution of Cromwell as an instrument for instituting the unlimited sovereignty of the commoners via the state and Weber's idea of a Protestant ethic as an engine of unlimited capitalist development show that significant religious minorities now played radically innovative roles in core domains of society. A positive relationship emerged not only between religious disciplines and the transformations of the commercial and, later, industrial society, but also with the imperatives of regulation of action and concentration of power in the hands of the modern state. The process is well exemplified by the brutal simplification of the formulas of management of the formerly triadic relationship underlying the social bond via the emergence of a 'contract law' in England during the seventeenth century: the dealings of *ego* with *alter* were facilitated by a reduction of their tension according to notions of economic interest and business profit, thanks to the support of a benevolent Leviathan, the monster-like modern state depicted by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), upholding the observance of the now sacred law of contract (Hobbes [1651] 1996).

An important collateral effect of the process was a growing pressure to redefine the proper realm of religion. A drastic redefinition was achieved through the consecration of the political principle of *cuius regio eius religio*, a pillar of the emerging European international law with the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. This principle drastically reduced the instability of religiously motivated conflict by sanctioning the religion of the ruler in each and every state as the only legitimate one. This compressed religious realm came to be governed also from within, through rendering religion a matter of personal belief and sovereignty of the self within the 'inner forum'. The emerging states not only gained a legal legitimacy in governing the religious field, but also operated as the collectors of the surplus of meaning left uninvested by religious traditions and ungoverned

by the forms of authority they used to produce. Contestation is now polarised by the emerging centres of power and is no longer dissipated within the chasm that once separated the immanent and transcendent spheres.

The emerging secular thinkers of the epoch contributed to give meaning to the process by defying any resurgent temptation of a compromising of religious reformers with power, which would support theocratic forms of government – a temptation that was very much alive through the entire era of the Wars of Religion, was ignited by the Protestant Reformation and was terminated by the Peace of Westphalia, and whose most powerful incorporation, apart from some examples from the experience of leading reformers (like Calvin's Geneva), corresponds to the first stage of the 'puritan revolution' of Oliver Cromwell. In order to pursue this goal, first Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), then Thomas Hobbes, and finally, with more sophisticated tools, Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) attempted to re-create a principle of social cohesion that was no longer dependent on the cycles of upheaval and restoration, which had endangered the existence itself of the order of Latin Christendom at a time when the Ottoman threat was becoming most acute. Hobbes was a lucid theorist of the ultimate meaning of the sacralisation of national kingship that, originating in the period of the ecumenical renaissance in parallel with the erosion of the dual authority of pope and emperor, reached its apogee with the rise of absolutist monarchic rule in the seventeenth century. Hobbes delivered the image of the Leviathan, originally a biblical monster, as a direct metamorphosis of the Christ and his body, the church, now being transformed, in the shape of the absolutist state, into a mortal God or supreme super-person. This is evident from the frontispiece of the original edition of Hobbes's Leviathan, where this is represented, not as a biblical monster, but as a giant holding the pastoral staff on his left and the sword on his right – exactly in the inverted posture of the medieval representation of the dual yet converging spiritual and temporal powers as a unified body, whose head is the Christ (Taubes 1983). According to this Hobbesian representation and related theory, the state represents an inversion of the hierarchy of powers of the church, spiritual and temporal.

While the rigorous diagnosis of Hobbes singularises Western modern political theory and leaves no space for seeking patterns of cross-cultural comparisons and intercivilisational dynamics, Spinoza offers a more open approach, since he was heir to a more composite philosophical heritage, not anchored in the exclusive myths supporting the cohesion of Latin Christendom. The son of a Sephardic Jewish family that had resettled in Amsterdam because of the Catholic persecutions in the Iberian peninsula – formerly al-Andalus – he unsettled the Western trajectory of modern thought through the injection of motives drawn from other traditions. Spinoza pieced together distinct elements, some of which echo the most daring visions of Islamic philosophy and rationalist speculative theology, to deliver a highly original reinterpretation of the relation

between the individual and society, religion and the state. For Spinoza, God is the all-encompassing substance and is thus deprived of any anthropomorphic attributes, while man can realise his nature and pursue the good only in company with other men, since they are all equally empowered by God and equally benefit from combining their powers. *Acquiescentia* is the keyword of his recipe of good life. It cannot be properly translated in any modern European language. As suggested by Voegelin (1999: 129), it simply means *islam* – that is, trustful surrender to God – though this is certainly closer to the Islam of the philosophers and of the Sufis than to the Islam of the jurists.

While by nature men are multitudes of monads individually empowered by God, the traditional moral problem of performing good deeds for the benefit of *alter* and the wider community cannot be solved by implementing preordained catalogues of injunctions, but only when individuals pool in their fragmented powers into a common power. Thus they create rules governing the relation between multiple *ego*s and *alter*s, which so regulate the collective life of wider multitudes. Therefore, Spinoza delivers a view of the common good as the product of a conscious option for power-sharing, while renewing, not rejecting, the idea of a shared higher good, consisting in a good life of reason, solidarity and *acquiescentia* (Voegelin 1999: 126–32). Spinoza's approach carries the seeds for a comparative view of the modern fundaments of political association. It is particularly suitable to an analysis of multiple modernities, since it is not based, like Hobbes's model, on the idea of a metamorphosed Christian myth as the basis of the modern polity but draws from a variety of sources.

The socio-political conditions and intellectual environments that favoured the emergence of the radical views of Spinoza and of other thinkers variably inspired by him took form in Western Europe during a period of intense socio-political and economic transformations and political–military rivalry with the Ottoman Empire. Yet the broader theoretical framework of this specific type of Enlightenment, and the axial traditions from which its most advanced versions were derived, were the product of a longer-term intercivilisational exchange nurtured by bloody and genocidal conflicts, as in the epilogue of the Spanish Christian *reconquista* that is at the root of Spinoza's diasporic displacement. This displacement facilitated his drawing from a variety of traditions and their combination into an original perspective. In particular for Spinoza, religion, properly understood, is ethical speech, an axial discourse that formulates shared values in order for human powers to create rules of connective justice and to support stable socio-political orders. The influence of the Islamic philosophy's idea of prophecy is here unmistakable. Spinoza contended that the authority used in this conversation is legitimate if it adheres to the ethical frame of religious discourse and does not degenerate into the manipulative activity of stirring up wrong beliefs, which he calls superstition and which can be the source of fanaticism. Spinoza's rejection of priesthood in all religions was due to his conviction

that this form of consecration of authority fosters superstition. Prophecy, on the other hand, is to be taken seriously in that it 'really includes ordinary knowledge' (Spinoza [1670] 1951: 13). Here we find another clear echo of the approach of the Islamic philosophers. In his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Spinoza attempted to show – echoing the Islamic Muʿtazila thinkers and philosophers like Ibn Sina – that scriptures (*pace* all theologians) are not about any speculative knowledge of God or his attributes. Prophetic discourse, nourished by imagination, was not speculative but parabolic and enigmatic, dense of bodily language, and finalised to admonish commoners to right behaviour and the observance of divine law. In this way the prophets communicated the imperatives of piety and justice to the masses.

Conclusion

Facilitated by a critical exploration of the ambivalent resources of Western thought, I have proposed a transculturally open analysis of tradition and modernity's entwining and intertwining. I have then historically situated the case of Islam's entanglement with tradition and modernity, before providing examples of how the Western modern transformation favoured both Eurocentric views of modernity and encouraged more open visions, which can fit a framework of multiple modernities.

In particular, I have attempted to lighten up the theoretical burden of modern Western, sociologically reductive views of 'religion' as applicable to Islam. On the other hand, I have emphasised the fact that it was exactly the dynamics of radicalisation of Western religious movements that has laid the basis, simultaneously, for political modernity and for religious and political fundamentalism (or for what Voegelin called 'political religions'). In this sense, the fundamentalism of 'political religions' is a genuinely modern – and predominantly Western – phenomenon (Voegelin 1998: 131–214).

In contrast to the radicalisation, in the Western path, of the antinomy of innerwordliness and publicness, of culture and power, of the autonomy of the subject and the sovereignty of the state, I have emphasised instead the more flexible capacity of distinction and amalgamation that the discursive traditions of Islam – enlivening a composite civilisation that Hodgson called 'Islamdom' – have retained at the passage from an epoch of political expansion and cultural florescence, through the era of ecumenical renaissance and early modernity, to an epoch of subordination and resistance to an encroaching Western colonial modernity. In particular, the synthesis of Jewish prophecy and Greek science-*cum*-philosophy performed by Muslim traditions remains over the long term a key trait of their outlook and of the potential resources for their further development, differentiation and hybridisation with other traditions under modern conditions.

Summary of chapter

A major assumption running through the social-science literature, from the founding fathers onwards, has been that modernity occurred only once, in the West, because of specific conditions that did not exist in other civilisations. The latter, including Islam, were implicitly characterised by the absence of one or more crucial features. According to this approach, non-Western civilisations could at best achieve modernity through its introduction from outside. More recent theoretical work has questioned both this assumption of the uniqueness of the West and the corresponding conception of modernity as singular. Informed by these theoretical advances, this chapter takes a new look at modernity and at what precedes it or inhibits its emergence: tradition or traditions. The latter have often been considered, from the viewpoint of Western modernity, as little more than remnants of earlier societies and cultures, which would have to be either absorbed or destroyed in the course of modernisation.

In this perspective, the relation between Islam and modernity can be only one of deficiencies (measured by Islam's alleged insufficient capacity to supersede traditions), dependencies (on Western modernity) and idiosyncracies (in terms of distorted outcomes of a dependent modernisation). Questions such as *What Went Wrong?* with Islamic civilisation vis-à-vis the modern world hegemonised by the West inevitably come up as a result of static and unilateral views of tradition and modernity and their relations.

The attempt to overcome an approach dominated by the measurement of deficiencies, dependencies and idiosyncracies is aided by a conception of civilisations as unique constellations of culture and power, in which a tradition is the dynamic cultural dimension of a civilisation. This definition helps overcoming Eurocentrism and allows us to conceive of different pathways to modernity in the form of multiple modernities. Facilitated by the findings of historians and social scientists who have demonstrated the dynamism of Islamic civilisation well into the modern era, the chapter points out the distinctive factors of strength of Islamic civilisation, alongside features that in the historical process turned out to be weaknesses vis-à-vis the encroaching West. Its (relative) strength consisted in more inclusive patterns of trans-civilisational encounters and networking, and its (relative) weakness lay in a limited capacity to enable the autonomy of the political process vis-à-vis traditional authorities, and as a corollary to legitimize the unlimited sovereignty of the modern state.

Questions

1. What is the relation between modernity, understood as a socio-political order based on differentiated rationalities (most notably, between politics and religion), and the world of cultural and religious traditions?
2. In which ways does the concept of tradition expounded in this chapter differ from the previously widespread perception of traditions as backward looking and as barriers to social and cultural change?
3. What is the contribution of Axial Age theory to an understanding of power configurations in post-axial civilisations? What does this mean for the claim, made by some scholars, that Islam is not secularisable?
4. What does the author mean when he writes that Islam marks the triumph of the commoner? What does this imply for the position of religious elites in Islam? How is it related to the salience of Sufism?

5. What is distinctive to the Western articulation of modernity vis-à-vis tradition?
6. Is it possible to conceive of Islamic civilisation as specifically characterised by the strength of its tradition, and, if so, why?
7. To what extent is a peculiarly restrictive definition of religion responsible for the specific outcome of Western modernity?
8. Can we speak of an Islamic modernity in spite of the enduring patterns of dependency of the Muslim world on Western power and culture?

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