



## The Institute of Ismaili Studies

### **“Present-Day Islam Between its Tradition and Globalisation” Mohammed Arkoun\***

#### **Abstract**

What are the forces that shape present-day Islam? Are we to believe the project of capitalist democracy is the most suitable form of social philosophy and practice for Muslim societies? Are there other models, trajectories and epistemological frameworks that have validity? What is the relationship between globalisation, tradition and modernity in Islamic contexts? In this wide-ranging essay, the author addresses these questions through three interrelated key concepts, which he exposes to critical analysis: present-day Islam; Islam as a living tradition; and the phenomenon of globalisation.

#### **Keywords**

Islamic studies, Qur’anic studies, orthodoxy, Islamist, fundamentalism, capitalism, *jihad*, McWorld, Political Islam, radicalism, religion, tradition, modernity, postmodernity, globalisation, democracy, local, global, science, technology, epistemology, Religious Studies, Social Sciences, anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, meaning, power, reason, belief, ideology, Islamic Revolution, contemporary Islam.

#### **Introduction**

*‘The devil hides in the details’*

The title of this essay announces three major fields of enquiry and critical analysis: *present-day Islam*; the *living tradition* dating back to the emergence of the Islamic *fact* between 610-632 and 661; and *globalisation*. My objective in including under the same critical scrutiny themes as complex as these is to set apart, in every possible manner, the *implicits* that are lived but unthought in each of these three areas of individual existence

---

This is an edited version of an article that originally appeared in *Intellectual Traditions in Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2000), pp. 179-221.

\* Mohammed Arkoun is Emeritus Professor of Islamic Thought at the Sorbonne, Paris III and Senior Research Fellow and Governor at The Institute of Ismaili Studies. He is the recipient of numerous accolades and awards. Most recently, he received the 2002 Giorgio Levi Della Vida Award in Islamic Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles and delivered the 2001-02 Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh. Professor Arkoun is also Chair of Islamic Studies at the United States Library of Congress and editor of the journal *Arabica*. His numerous writings in several languages include *L’Humanisme Arabe au IVe/Xe siècle* (Vrin, 1982), *Lectures du Coran* (Maisonneuve et Larosse, 1982), *L’Islam, morale et politique* (Desclée de Brouwer in association with UNESCO, 1986), *Rethinking Islam* (Westview, 1994) and *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (Saqi Books in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2002).

*The use of materials published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies’ Conditions of Use. Each copy of the article must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.*



and historical action, from the *explicit*s that are problematised, thought for the first time or rethought, in the perspectives opened up by the new phenomenon of globalisation.

For methodological and epistemological reasons which will become apparent in the course of the exposé, I will begin by defining the new context created by the forces of globalisation and then tackle the questions of present-day Islam and Islamic tradition.

## 1. What is Globalisation?

Until the years 1960-70, human thought had known a particular idea of the world, or worlds in the plural. This idea itself nourished a large number of representations whose spiritual, artistic and scientific productivity varied according to their cultural environments and historical conjunctures. It is thus that with Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler, one passed '*from the closed world to an infinite universe*'. What has long been called international relations by no means covers the concept of globalisation, the active forces and the realities of which all individuals and societies are discovering or experiencing at the present time.

Globalisation upsets all the known cultural, religious, philosophical and politico-juridical traditions; even modernity that issued from the reason of the Enlightenment does not escape from it. That is why, since the 1980s, various analysts, thinkers and researchers, particularly in the United States, speak of *post-modernity*. I prefer to avoid this term, which refers to a concept badly and little elaborated and which keeps us in the linear historical trajectory inaugurated in Western Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries. Globalisation forces the Europeans themselves to speak of the limits and perverse effects of the reason of the Enlightenment which has allowed, among other things, the construction of the secular, democratic and liberal nation-state, the progress of scientific research, and the transition from the solidarities of clan, blood and confession to the contractual solidarities regulated by the state of law. With the resolute march towards European Union, one crosses a new historical stage in the organisation and widening of the spaces of citizenship, which is at the same time the basis and object of democratic life. The nation-state is in the process of accomplishing its mission in Europe by putting in place civil societies, sufficiently emancipated juridically, to act as effective and necessary partners of the states of law. However, crossing this historical stage proves as difficult and uncertain as that which led absolute monarchies of divine law to become constitutional monarchies and democratic republics. The problems arise, in effect, from diverse European cultures and visions of the world linked to the slow and difficult ascent of nation-states, which reveal their provincial limits, their exclusion of other cultures of the world, their xenophobia and their latent violence, always ready to be exercised against the foreigner, however near geographically (as was the case in the Franco-German wars).

The economic, monetary and technological forces of globalisation have achieved a primacy and priority in the process of history, while snatching from abstract idealism the spiritual, philosophical, ethical, political and juridical values, whose bases or concrete material components are increasingly better explicated. However, political idealism continues to seek refuge in nationalist discourse, as can be noted in the resistance to the progress of the European Union which began as no more than a simple community formed to regulate the production of coal and steel. The claims of national specificity, authenticity and exception curb the advances towards the revision of national



historiographies, intellectual frames of interpretation and re-appropriation of values. The example thus given by the 'old' nations to their former colonies, which became 'emerging nations' without transition, provides dangerous 'arguments' to the *party-nation-states* which assumed power in these countries during the years 1950-70 in conditions that are known to us, and which are leading programmes of 'national construction' in the new context created by globalisation. This remark must be retained for a better evaluation of the role of Islam and its tradition in the mounting tensions between these party-nation-states and societies whose democratic structure and legitimate aspirations towards democratisation are not really taken into consideration.

### **Globalisation in Practice**

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical power, the United States exercises a hegemonic control of all the forces of globalisation. The Europeans, including Russia and its former satellites, rather than nourish rivalries, seek alliances, contracts and collaboration with the United States. Thus, the burden of this hegemony makes itself felt more upon peoples and nations in the process of emancipation and unification. 'The right of peoples to self-determination', which nourished so many illusions about national emancipation in the context of the Cold War, has become an ideological insanity in the face of intolerable civil wars which tear apart so many societies long-seized in the grip of totalitarian nationalisms and projected suddenly into the savage liberalism of *McWorld* (which I discuss in the next section). The latter invented a new concept, 'humanitarian aid for peoples in danger of genocide', which is as vague and illusory as its predecessor. But the economic and monetary forces of globalisation do not today concern themselves with humanitarian aid any more than the bourgeois capitalist conquerors of the 19th century worried about the emancipation of their own womenfolk, the working classes, or *a fortiori* the colonised peoples. Humanitarian aid, the rights of peoples, human rights and democratic sermons form part of the panoply of political slogans, adapted to every geopolitical conjuncture by those who contrive to their advantage the operations of globalisation. It is thus that the nationalist 'elites' — who believed that they were giving real content to these slogans by engaging, in the years 1960-70, with the politics of economic development in the frame of 'cooperation' and 'development aid' — generated, with their statist and economic partners of the West, the riposte of the so-called Islamic Revolution, supported by marginalised social strata which were badly integrated in enclaves of modernity too narrow, and dispossessed (even in the case of rural villagers and forcibly sedentarised nomads) of their languages, cultures, ecological equilibria, customary codes and traditional solidarities — just as the European peasantry had been dispossessed under mounting pressures of industrialisation, but in its case with long transitions and effectively integrated institutions. Globalisation deploys on a planetary scale the strategies of market conquest and multiplication of consumers and their loyalties without any regard for the cultural regression, intellectual misery, political oppression, social tragedy and individual enslavement brought about by this 'unequal exchange' which for so long has been denounced in vain. We know how the strategies of globalisation bring about, on the one hand *interstate* agreements and diplomacy for the flow of goods in exchange for the importation of raw materials, and on the other hand the media which denounce the totalitarian, fanatical and regressive policies of those very states recognised officially as respectable partners and interlocutors.



Let us note here an important political notion rarely highlighted by analysts and almost never included in the themes of electoral campaigns in the most advanced democratic regimes. It concerns the systematic ignorance in which citizens are kept about everything pertaining to interstate diplomacy. That which is called popular sovereignty is unable to exercise any type of control over diplomatic relations, which lie in the exclusive competence of the heads of states and their ministers for foreign affairs. Thus, the responsibilities incurred in conflicts such as those of Algeria, Rwanda, Zaire, Iran, Sudan, Bosnia, etc., are not only dissimulated to those citizens most capable of undertaking juridical, historical and ethical analysis, but are knowingly distorted by the easy indignation generated against the crimes, assassinations and destruction stigmatised every day by the media. On this level, the most pertinent analyses and the most legitimate critiques are brushed aside with repeated appeals to the 'reason' of state security against the 'chattering' of idealist intellectuals.

This functioning of democracy is accepted particularly by civil societies as they are inclined in the first place to defending the 'social gains' which are in themselves brought about by globalisation. This accounts for the development within the European Union of the notion and practice of strikes by proxy — the strike by every sector or professional category, supported unconditionally by all the workers who feel equally threatened with losing the advantages gained, and above all their jobs. One is far from the simplistic frontiers charted by class conflict; but the selfishness of civil societies, necessarily supported by their states, replaces that of the former classes, and it exacerbates the situation of those very people who are at the same time exploited and excluded by the forces of globalisation, especially when delocalisation is involved. One thus finds, once again, a relation of forces comparable to that between the colonising nations-states and the peoples colonised until 1945.

### **The 'Common Space' of Philosophy and Democracy**

It must be admitted that in the current state of the world, the relentless march of globalisation generates more ruptures, tensions, contradictions and collective conflicts than did the exportation of fragments of material modernity to colonies in the 19th and 20th centuries. Neither the researchers and theoreticians with the highest competence and know-how, nor the expanding armies of managers of large multinational firms, nor the politicians who monopolise the use of 'legal violence' (as Max Weber would say) integrate into their analyses, expectations and strategies of development the real problems, the needs and hopes of those peoples who are deprived of adequate representation, as well as possibilities of direct expression and emancipation. The philosophical implications of this global process of change, which relate as much to scientific research as to technological innovation and economic expansion, are not even evoked as one of the decisive parameters which ought to inform decisions at all levels and in every sphere of activity. This is because philosophical thought itself is hardly mobilised by the urgent need to rethink the essential connections which bind together philosophy and democracy. I refer here to the very suggestive report entitled *Philosophie et démocratie dans le monde*, compiled by Roger Pol Droit at the request of UNESCO, on the present state of the teaching of philosophy in member countries. Rare are the countries which have introduced or maintained any serious teaching of philosophy at the high school level. In the Islamic context, the rich philosophical tradition that was developed from the 8th century until the death of Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in 1198 has, since



the 13th century, been lost. Here is how Droit defines the traits of ‘the common space’ fundamental to philosophy and democracy: both bring about a ‘*founding relationship*’ with the following features:

1. *Speech*: for a thought exists only when it is stated, expounded, submitted to discussion, criticism and arguments of others: this remark applies to philosophical thought as well as political positions in a democracy.
2. *Equality*: for one does not ask others ‘by what right’ they intervene in the debate; one does not require by any means that they be provided with any authority or authorisation; it is sufficient that they should speak and argue. [I modify Droit’s remark as follows: In the perspective of globalisation, it is no longer only the citizens of one particular nation who take part in the political debate; for the first time, and in philosophy since the ancient Greeks, the entire human race is concerned as much with the political as with the philosophical debate on the subject, notably the founding conditions of political legitimacy in local regimes and the *governance* of the inhabited planet.]
3. *Doubt*: since immediate certitudes have wavered, in order to ensure that the research of the true as well as general discussion of the subject is open, it is necessary for one to be no longer in a universe of answers and beliefs, but of questions and research.
4. *Self-institution*: for no external decision comes to create the philosophical stage or the democratic community, no authority legitimates it ‘from outside’, nothing guarantees it ‘from above’; they receive their power only from themselves and are not subjected to any authority whose source they would not be.’<sup>1</sup>

I shall return to the critical examination of these definitions when I compare the status of the theologico-political implied by R. P. Droit to that of the philosophico-political which is inseparable from our modernity. This comparison is indispensable for demonstrating the incoherencies, anachronisms and illusions of the contemporary Islamic discourse on Islam and democracy. But first I will put forward three preliminary remarks:

### **The Philosophy of Globalisation**

1. On 25 February 1795, the French Revolution was defined by Joseph Lakanal as this ‘educative utopia’ aiming ‘to put an end to the inequalities of development affecting the citizens’ capacity to judge.’<sup>2</sup> In fact, philosophical teaching organised by the Republic was and still is offered in public and private establishments subsidised by the state. This French tradition may have been able to generate a taste for theoretical speculations; yet one cannot say that political thought in France and the current traits of French-style democracy are more marked than elsewhere

---

<sup>1</sup> Roger Pol Droit, *Philosophie et démocratie dans le monde* (Paris, 1995), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 24.



by a philosophical attitude as just defined. The original harm comes, without doubt, from the tight control exercised by the secular republican state in the French sense, ever since the foundation of technical schools and high schools. In the 17th century, Benedict Spinoza defended rather the right for all men ‘to teach (philosophy) publicly, at their own expense and at the peril of their reputation.’<sup>3</sup>

2. In the perspective of *political reason*, called upon to manage all the processes of globalisation in the real, constant interest of every *person-individual-citizen*, it becomes necessary for the society and the regime, where this reason is called upon, to deploy its existence and redefine the conditions for a concretely universalisable philosophical attitude. It is in this sense that I shall examine the contribution that critical thought can make to this project in concrete Islamic contexts.
3. The concept of *person-individual-citizen* which I have just introduced deserves to be elaborated in the perspectives opened up by anthropology for the exploration and critical analysis of all cultures, and no longer only the ‘great’ cultures which, at various times in history, exercised or still exercise a hegemony. In other words, the classical philosophical attitude is no longer sufficient for rethinking, with all the *descriptive and explicative adequacy* required by globalisation, the status of the *person*, the *individual* and the *citizen* in a political, juridical and cultural space — a space which is no longer only that of the nation-states and still less that of religious communities such as the *umma* which the Islamist movements are trying to set up as a universal model of historical action.

It is to be feared that the call to philosophy, cultural anthropology and critical history of cultures, beyond all the hegemonic frames of realisation of human existence, will draw little attention, even less than in the context of the nation-state, from the economic, monetary and political establishments, from official representatives in large international conferences, and from the variegated protagonists who contribute to the accelerated pace of globalisation. All these actors are generally little prepared to accord a just place to the philosophical implications of the responsibilities that they prefer to exercise as *effective* experts. One follows in them less the historical project of promoting and extending democratic values to all peoples and societies in the world than the conquest of new markets for consumer goods which no longer find enough buyers in glutted markets.

### **Reconciling Philosophy and Theology**

Even if one were to agree to a philosophical and anthropological examination of the problems raised by the expansion of *McWorld*, it would still be necessary in the first place to work towards an indispensable intellectual overtaking of the frame of thought inherited from classical metaphysics. The latter has long remained a prisoner of recurrent interferences, in spite of efforts at distinction which are always invalidated by polemical tensions between theological themes and philosophical categories. What sociologists call the ‘return of the religious’ contributes, even in the most secularised societies, to the

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



obstruction of efforts to elucidate the stakes peculiar to a theology and a philosophy that can be cultivated without polemics, without mimetic rivalry, in accordance with the new scientific spirit and new cognitive systems proposed by biology, linguistics, semiology, psychology, socio-anthropology and the study of historical problems. In other words, the process of economic, technological and monetary globalisation is being deployed in a climate of 'disposable thought', where the crises in the study of man and society stand in sharp contrast to the spectacular advances of technological knowledge which are readily appropriated by the desire for power and profit.

All this shows the need to express clearly the philosophical attitude and the type of cognitive activity which must accompany present-day globalisation as a concrete historical practice. Without minimising, and much less ignoring, either the Greek references of philosophical thought or their journey and expansion in the European historical sphere, one will recognise the distances separating positions linked to precise socio-cultural and political spaces and those related to visions of the world too hastily proclaimed universal. Grammarians, logicians and linguists have long reflected upon this tension: from the famous *disputatio* (*munazara*) between the grammarian al-Sirafi and the logician Matta b. Yunus in 10th-century Baghdad, to the enlightening analysis of E. Benvéniste of the Aristotelian categories articulated in Greek and the linguistic categories, one will grasp the idea that a universalisable philosophical attitude is precisely that which cultivates systematically the aporia of tension between the local and the global. The implantation in the local of the sense of the universal is inscribed, in a more or less insistent manner, in every linguistic experience. This tension has been cultivated as a speculative theme, like the humanism of the lettered which nourished beautiful literary compositions until the Second World War. Only modern social and cultural anthropology furnishes the concrete data peculiar to every socio-cultural construction in a precise time and space, while situating every local type in a global context of political, social, cultural and religious facts. It so happens that, as philosophy and anthropology continue to be taught and practised as distinct and specialised disciplines, the many incursions of philosophers into anthropology remain incidental and cursory, while anthropologists are not always able to go beyond the ethnographic stage of their scientific practice.<sup>4</sup> We also cover here the important question of the reform of education systems in order to adapt them everywhere to the exigencies of globalisation.

## 2. Is Present-Day Islam Impervious to Globalisation?

An American political scientist, Benjamin R. Barber, has recently promoted the Qur'anic and Islamic concept of *jihad* to the rank of a polar figure of contemporary history, dialectically linked to *McWorld*, that is to say, to ongoing globalisation, viewed from the perspective of the United States and Western Europe.<sup>5</sup> The author is not at all interested in *jihad* in order to denounce the expansion of Islam through 'holy war', or to propose a new theory of 'just war', a theological concept elaborated long ago by St Augustine and raised again in the early 1990s by Presidents Bush and Mitterrand during the Gulf War. He considers, correctly, that the violence which tears apart many

---

<sup>4</sup> On connections between philosophy, anthropology and other social sciences, see the works of P. Bourdieu, notably his latest title, *Méditations Pascaliennes* (Seuil, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World* (New York, 1996; French trans. *Djihad vs McWorld: Mondialisation et intégrisme contre la démocratie* (Paris, 1996).



societies called Muslim (I prefer to use, in contradistinction to the custom of all Islamic studies and political science literature, the expression ‘societies moulded by the Islamic fact’, which I shall explain later) is a manifestation of not only serious internal crises, but the protest common to all societies, including those of the West, against the blind forces of globalisation called *McWorld*, characterised by its market economy, monetary system, technology, media and revolution in informatics which affect work and leisure, genetic engineering, etc. This protest opposes the structural violence spread in the world by incomprehensible, anonymous decision-makers with ethically irresponsible, murderous, physical violence; it is a radical rejection in the name of traditional and religious values, not exclusive of the means of effective action obtained by material modernity. *Jihad* and *McWorld* convey much irrational and semantic disorder which remains to be analysed within the critical and cognitive perspectives defined above; they confront each other with very unequal weapons, but with different objectives, both succeeding in perverting the democratic project of emancipation of the human condition. In order to defend democracy, Barber forces the opposition between *jihad* and *McWorld*: the first wants to resuscitate the obscure forces of the pre-modern world such as ‘religious mysteries, hierarchic communities, suffocating traditions, historical torpor’, whereas the second goes beyond modernity by insisting upon the promotion of the market over the rights and spiritual aspirations of mankind.

### **Modernity, Religion and the Secular**

In qualifying negatively the two poles, the political scientist stays in the epistemological frame of the reason of the Enlightenment, whereas globalisation obliges us to revise the cognitive systems bequeathed by all types of reason which respect the rules of critical historical epistemology. Thus, the qualifications applied to the pre-modern world are pertinent if one sticks to the discourse of contemporary fundamentalist movements, but historically incorrect if one refers to the humanist culture (*adab*) of the urban milieus of the Islamic world in the 9th – 11th centuries. The reason at work in this culture anticipated many critiques and cognitive postures, which developed much later the humanism of the Renaissance and subsequently amplified the reason of the Enlightenment in Europe. The latter instrumentalised the Persians, Turks and the Muslims in general, not for enlarging significantly their cognitive field, but in the first place to lead its battle against the main enemy of that time: clericalism. The colonial 19th century developed a historiography, ethnography, sociology and psychology, largely marked by an epistemology which present-day anthropology depicts as an ideology of domination. The argumentation of *Jihad vs McWorld*, although seductive in its resolute option for a universalisable humanist democracy, cannot be retained for the project of a critical history of thought in the Mediterranean space, encompassing the stakes-of-meaning and the wills-to-power which became manifested there since the first emergence of the Islamic fact in Arabia in 610-632. Present-day Islam, in effect, needs to go beyond the sterile and often dangerous protestations of *jihad* to integrate at the same time the positive gains of modernity and the new opportunities of political, economic, social and cultural emancipation opened up by globalisation — the latter to be understood as an extension of the historical project of modernity and also a correction of its errors and injustices.

If modernity is an incomplete project consisting of a determination to push back ever further the limits of the human condition, it must orient globalisation towards a better





integration of values made discordant by the systematic opposition between the visions of traditional religions and the ideological categorisations of secular religions. As a result of this conflict, the secular voices of the prophets, saints, theologians, philosophers, artists, poets and heroes have been relentlessly marginalised, disqualified and driven back to a past relegated to erudite historiography or to definitive oblivion. Our societies produce great captains of industry, bankers who work in secrecy, sports champions and stars who generate ephemeral enthusiasm, and highly specialised scientific researchers; but these people have neither the time nor the sources of inspiration necessary for generating intellectual and spiritual values to mobilise at the level where the economic system of production and exchange engages the ecological future of the planet and the quality of human life. I have deliberately refrained from mentioning politicians here because everywhere they continue to disappoint the people they are supposed to lead — not to mention the corrupt and corrupting leaders, bloodthirsty tyrants and oppressors, obscurantists and absolutists, who enjoy the honours and consideration due to ‘heads of state.’

In these observations there is neither a desire to moralise nor to be nostalgic for a past to be compared with the present in developed or developing societies; they are meant, rather, to define with precision the new functions which the irresistible forces of *McWorld* assign to present-day Islam. The latter continues to guarantee to the social masses, excluded from the liberties and comforts reserved for limited privileged groups, a hope mixed with the traditional expectation of eternal salvation, the possibility of attaining moral dignity in intimate encounter with the Just and Merciful God of the Qur’an, a belief in a promise of imminent justice to be accomplished by their charismatic leader, a ‘modern’ substitute for the ancient *imam-mahdi*. Or it demands obedience to the divine injunction to eliminate by a just and holy war (*jihad*) all the ‘Pharaohs’ who sow disorder and corruption on earth.

### **The Social *Imaginaire***

The historian-sociologist-anthropologist will not enumerate, as I have just done, all these psycho-socio-political components, of what one no longer calls *hope*, but representations of the social *imaginaire*. For the politico-religious vocabulary familiar to the believers of yesterday and today, one substitutes that of the critical analyst for whom *societies produce religions* like ideologies which, once systematised in normative codes, act in their turn upon societies. This epistemological postulate doubtless allows one to deconstruct a joint psychological configuration of the rational, the *imaginaire* and the remembered truths, which are for the most part memorised but not written and are confused in the expressions of belief and conduct. However, in so far as such explicative analysis does not reach the actors to the point of provoking in each of them a better reconstruction controlled by the psychological configuration bound to religious systems through *beliefs and non-beliefs*, the ‘scientific’ theory of religion will merely act as a mental, cultural and political frontier in societies where it is erected implicitly (as in secular republics) or explicitly as a doctrine of state (as in socialist and popular atheistic republics). One understands, consequently, why the liberal secular state loses in philosophical flexibility that which it gains in juridical neutrality, whereas the religious state despises both. The exclusion in French public establishments of all teaching of the comparative history of religions and theological thought illustrates clearly what I mean by philosophical and scientific flexibility. It is significant that this question of philosophical and political essence is not yet being discussed within the European Union with a view to



proposing new academic programmes to reflect, simultaneously, the needs of multicultural societies and the exigencies of scientific knowledge adapted to the progress of globalisation.

### **Intellectual Modernity**

But the perverse effects of the latter must not distract us from the historical advances founded upon the positive experience of intellectual modernity. If the great religions and philosophies have long taught that man is spirit, one must not forget that spiritualism, ontologism, transcendentalism, theologism, essentialism and substantialism are as much rationalising derivatives or dangerous *imaginaires* as those of present-day globalisation, on the real nature of mankind. Drawing on contemporary Islam, I shall attempt to show that the work prescribed by the historical conjuncture of globalisation consists in going philosophically, ethically, juridically and institutionally beyond all the systems of beliefs and non-beliefs inherited variously from the past, towards a better mastery of powers available to man for changing man.

### **3. Rethinking Islam Facing Its Tradition**

Raising the Islamic concept of *jihad* to the rank of a historical figure of resistance to *McWorld* cannot be the basis of present-day Islam if it is to fulfil, as it claims, the role of an alternative model to that of the West for producing more just regimes and better integrated societies. The claim of the West to remain the unique model of reference for all contemporary regimes and societies is equally not acceptable so long as the conditions defined above are not strictly fulfilled to the point of creating, among all the observers and actors of our world, the feeling of a restraining *debt-of-meaning*. Now, one can contract a *debt-of-meaning* only towards the social actors who, like the prophets, saints, heroes, thinkers and artists, are able to demonstrate in their behaviour, and articulate in a discourse accessible to the greatest number, the existential paradigms which encourage free emulation by others. In the democratic and secular Western milieu, the individual, protected by the state of law coupled with a welfare state, tends to be his or her own model, increasingly incapable of recognising a *debt-of-meaning* to a religion, philosophy, nation, community, hero-liberator, thinker or poet. In Muslim contexts, the *debt-of-meaning* towards the Qur'an as the word of God, towards the Prophet as the messenger of God, and towards the 'pious forefathers' (*al-salaf al-salih*) who have ensured the faithful collection and transmission of the founding messages of all truths, of all valid thoughts and all correct norms, continues to play a role so preponderant that there remains no place for the adoption of, or even the mere respect for, an idea, institution, innovation or personality that cannot be integrated into the system of identification and evaluation through which the *debt-of-meaning* is perpetuated. The social and political dialectic which has prevailed since independence from colonial rule has, despite the interlude of the years 1950-60, reinforced the psychological configuration postulated by this *debt-of-meaning*. The politics of traditionalisation and the celebration of Islam as a component of national identities have thwarted the possibilities of modernising tools of thought and institutions for the benefit of a religion which is cut off from both its historical origins and contemporary scientific contexts. It is not rare, therefore, to encounter 'intellectuals', academics and managers of large enterprises, banks and complex administrations, who shelter from all critical intervention in the 'sacred' and sacralising domain of founding texts and beliefs of this *debt-of-meaning* without which social order would collapse.



## Negotiating Meaning, Negotiating Discourse

The critical analyst will explain that all discourse is the bearer of the will-to-power because it seeks to share with others the proposition of meaning that every interlocutor articulates. The more my proposition infringes upon the sphere of meaning already occupied by other social actors, the more the conflict will become rough and lead to violence; and if I enter the mythical and symbolic sphere of their foundational accounts, then a 'holy', 'sacred', 'just', 'legitimate' war becomes inevitable. Consequently, even the most secular republics have their foundational accounts, their symbolic politics, their 'places of memory' constructed by historiography, which are officially and periodically celebrated. It is in these collective representations sacralised by time that national identity takes root; it is here that the 'values' which legitimise patriotic fervour, supreme sacrifices and heroic conduct take shape. I deliberately use this ethico-political vocabulary, from which sermons and official discourses are woven, to recall that at this level of production and consumption of meaning, the interferences between the religious and the political, the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the temporal, are so constant, so inseminating, that it is misleading to stick to the juridical and institutional theme of the separation between church and state.

## Representing 'Truth'

This deconstructive analysis of current terminology also shows another piece of evidence, hardly familiar even to cultivated minds, about what is called *truth* in the functional trilogy of *violence*, *sacred* and *truth*. In the ordinary sense, truth is an immediate sentiment of perfect equivalence between words and deeds, between a statement and its *objective referents*, or more generally between current language and the empirical experience which everyone has of reality. Religions and metaphysics represent this truth as unique, intangible, transcendent and divine. But for the critical analyst, truth is defined as the sum of the *effects of meaning* which authorises for every individual or collective subject the system of connotations represented in its language; it is the totality of representations retained in the living tradition of a group, confessional community or nation which is more or less unified by a common political and cultural history.

These two definitions of *truth* draw an increasingly distinct mental cleavage between two postures of reason itself: the *classical metaphysical posture*, amply described by historians of philosophy, continues to resist the rise of the *new posture* of the so-called exact sciences, the biological and social sciences, which are themselves in disarray by the information revolution. Historians have clearly distinguished between several postures of reason in past epochs which continue to coexist in contemporary discourse without the knowledge of their authors. Clerics, essayists, ideologues, sermonisers and experts, highly specialised experts in activities which do not require know-how grounded in historical culture, express themselves on general problems without regard for the postures of reason and cognitive systems which they use. One finds in them a confusion between theological attitudes and philosophical reasoning, between ideological argument for the invocation of a belief and the historical fact; an ingenious striving to find in the founding religious texts (Bible, Gospels, Qur'an) or the medieval exegeses consecrated as orthodox, teachings on human rights, social justice, democracy, human dignity, etc. Inversely, the pressing needs for ethical principles to regulate, in however small a measure, the confusion and anguish



brought about by discoveries in the life-sciences, force us to speak again about the status of the individual, the spiritual vocation of being human, and the inalienable values which underpin the ethics of conviction and responsibility. One thus perceives that the reason of the Enlightenment has opened up horizons which it had practically abandoned or badly explored, and that theological reason seeks to regain credibility in a context of a generalised crisis of thought. On the other hand, rather than harnessing itself to the conquest of an epistemological status adapted to the pressing challenges of history at the threshold of the third millennium, the reason which claims to be post-modern even indulges in a do-it-yourself kind of individualism and militantism.

#### **4. Towards a Definition of Present-Day Islam**

All this distances us from the definition of present-day Islam. To approach the latter, I want to break as radically as possible from the epistemological attitude and the so-called scientific practice which treat Islam as a domain apart from the history of religions, cultures and civilisations. One cannot deal with present day Islam by simply repeating the linear chronological account of its historical spread, the theologico-juridical frames of its articulation as a *system of beliefs* and *non-beliefs* fixed by God, dedicated to the pious observance of the faithful, and the no less conformist and repetitive transcriptions of the Islamicists which have been adopted by political scientists to describe present-day Islam. It has been shown to what extent Islam is subjected, like all living traditions of thought, culture and beliefs, to the irresistible hurricane of globalisation. There is no need to reinforce ritual expressions extended to an impressive number of the faithful; no need to mobilise and inspire armies of young militants, ready for all sacrifice; no need to retain the attention of all the political strategists who are themselves surrounded by experts more or less sagacious, or by charlatans. The fact remains that the historical test through which Islam has been passing as a religion since the 1970s has already created an irreversible situation which affects all living religions, and beyond religions, the conditions of production, transmission and consumption of meaning in human societies. One understands, therefore, why I have devoted such a long preamble to the question of the metamorphoses of meaning and of what continues to be called the *truth* under the pressures of globalisation.

To encompass the historical situation of what I call present-day Islam, chronology has its importance. Innumerable works, dating back to the 19th century, have dealt with Islamic modernity, modern Islam and Islam facing modernity. Under these titles, the authors are interested, in fact, in the intellectuals and researchers who have tried to apply to the history of societies shaped by the *Islamic fact* decontextualised fragments of modernity from the classical age as they were translated especially in the historiographic and philological works of the 19th century. The orientalist then praised the relative successes of their pupils such as Taha Hussein, Zaki Mubarak, Bishr Faris, Salama Musa and others, who reproduced their methodologies. But Islam and its tradition have been very little affected by those initial, modest essays, even when they gave rise to violent condemnations on the part of the guardians of an obscurantist orthodoxy; the examples of Taha Hussein and 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq are repeated today by other authors with writings no less soothing. Present-day Islam would not have turned to fundamentalist excesses at the end of the 20th century if modernity, even of a historicist and philological kind, had really succeeded in penetrating the frames of traditional thought as it did for Christianity. With the advent of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the 1930s intellectual modernists



rushed to make concessions to apologetic tendencies such as those manifested in the writings of al-Aqqad, Hussein Haykal and even Taha Hussein.

### **Islam and Politics in the Post-1945 World**

After 1945, the political movements of liberation were able to harness to their advantage the mobilising power of Islam, while maintaining a general secular and social orientation, because of the presence of militants inspired by communism, or converts to the political philosophy of the Third French Republic such as Bourguiba, Ferhat Abbas and their disciples. The nationalistic fever, the priority unanimously accorded to political freedom, and the geopolitical strategies used by the two super powers of the time (the United States and the Soviet Union) to attract the emerging nation-states to their spheres of influence, succeeded in maintaining Islamic militancy in a subsidiary role. One had to wait for the great defeat of the Arab armies in 1967, the failure and death of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970, the first symptoms of the demise of Soviet hegemony, the demographic growth which upset the social frames of knowledge and political expression, the revelation of the limits of oil as a weapon, the fallout of the euphoria generated by the independence that had been so dearly achieved and the subsequent erosion of ill-founded legitimacies, for there to emerge on the scene what is today called *radical Islam*, *Islamic radicalism*, *political Islam*, *Muslim rage* (these are typical titles of books or articles on the subject), which assumed power spectacularly in Iran in 1979, and has since then pursued a devastating struggle, ill-adapted to the magnitude and the real scope of the challenges of modernity complicated by those of globalisation, as has been demonstrated.

### **Coming to Terms with ‘Present-Day Islam’**

Present-day Islam is witnessing the end of secular messianic ideologies and the certitudes of a conquering science;<sup>6</sup> it also witnesses the disarray of the legitimacies constructed by and for the nation-states and the concomitant awakening of peoples, ethnocultural minorities and regional communities long marginalised and oppressed by centralising religious or secular states. It refuses nevertheless to record the numerous, repeated disappointments which the *internal* history of all societies called Muslim has inflicted upon the utopia of a ‘revealed divine law’ (*shari‘a*), which continues to be proclaimed and imposed by clerics while political regimes are lacking in legitimacy and there is an upsurge of *populist* Islam claiming to be ‘revolutionary’. To understand the reactivation in contemporary Islamic contexts of a contradiction common to all great religions, we must pause here to reflect on the internal history of the Islamic utopia and the sociology of its current expressions. But how can one proceed without repeating the many exposés which rehash relentlessly the frozen data, lacking critical objectives or explicative intentions?

If one aims to be exhaustive, informative, explicative and critical, one would require a proper frame for further research in a domain as vast and complex as the map of the world. One can obtain an idea of this complexity and its extent by going through the chronological and genealogical survey of the dynasties in the land of Islam, recently

---

<sup>6</sup> I refer to the works of Ilya Prigogine, *La fin des certitudes* (Paris, 1995), Claude Allègre, *La Défaite de Platon* (Paris, 1996) and Alain Finkelkraut, *La Défaite de la pensée* (Paris, 1988). The abundant literature on this theme expresses at the same time the anguish of our time in face of the errancy of our history and the will to clarify new conditions of reflection to prevent as much as possible other totalitarian adventures.



published by C. E. Bosworth.<sup>7</sup> The author enumerates some 186 dynasties scattered over the globe from the Philippines to Morocco and from Central Asia to South Africa. I do not mean, of course, that it is sufficient to go through the chronological history of the dynasties from their origins to our days in order to understand present-day Islam. I propose, rather, to begin with a sociology of contemporary expressions of this Islam to show how, in every socio-cultural and political context, the history of Islam has been solicited and interpreted according to the needs of ongoing struggles. This procedure allows us to distinguish clearly the imaginary productions of contemporary societies, with their manipulations of a multidimensional object which all the actors confusedly call Islam, from the critical, scientific knowledge of the different domains (spiritual, ritual, theological, juridical, political, artistic, etc.) which make up the historical realisation of the same object. There is no question here of conflicts, in the manner of defensive or apologetic theologies, between an ideally constructed 'true Islam' and an imaginary Islam manipulated by actors and therefore *false*. The objective of our analysis remains scientific in both cases. In effect, religions, like all great mobilising ideologies, structure the *imaginaire* of all social groups and thereby contribute to what C. Castoriadis has aptly described as 'the imaginary production of society'. In the case of present-day Islam, the projection of its 'values' and salutary hopes towards an inaugurating age, not just as part of an Islamic era but of a universalisable *existential paradigm*, takes on a psycho-social and political significance in the horizons opened up by the liberation struggles of the years 1950-60. The strong recurrence of the paradigm of historical action put in place already by the Qur'an, together with the teachings and normative conduct of the Prophet, are in themselves a fact which lead us to think about the links between religious and political hope in the historical evolution of societies.

To bring together all these data, I shall now introduce the concept of the dialectic of the local and the global, richly illustrated in the works of Clifford Geertz which from 1967 inaugurated, in contrast to the writings of the Islamicists, an anthropological problematic that has been insufficiently exploited.<sup>8</sup>

## 5. The Dialectic of the Local and the Global

The Islamic fact emerged in the most circumscribed locale: the modest city of Mecca, which after ten years was replaced by the yet more humble agglomeration of Yathrib/Medina. Receiving support, successively, in these two centres, a Meccan, Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah, with some disciples, was able to activate the most pertinent elements of a social, political and cultural dialectic which was sufficiently intense to generate an *existential paradigm* whose expansion raised the unrelenting hostility of some, and the fervent adhesion and inexhaustible hope of others. The Christian fact began in the same manner with Jesus of Nazareth. The passage of the two religions from the local to the global recognised neither the same rhythms nor the same vicissitudes; but in both cases, the same distinction asserts itself between a *prophetic moment* and an *imperial moment*. I reserve the case of Judaism which also inaugurated a prophetic function, but was not linked to an independent state before the creation of the state of Israel.

---

<sup>7</sup> C. Edmund Bosworth, *The New Islamic Dynasties: A Chronological and Genealogical Manual* (Edinburgh, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> See especially C. Geertz, *Islam Observed* (Chicago, 1968).



I call the *prophetic moment* the conjunction of a local historical dialectic with a discourse of mythical structure which transfigures ordinary actors and channels in educative spiritual tensions between man who is called to the exercise of a responsible freedom, and a God who is given to interiorise as a living counterpart, transcendent, demanding, judge, merciful, protector, benefactor, etc.

This definition has no theological objective; it is programmatic in the sense that it introduces tools of analysis and understanding for the linguist, historian, psychologist, psycho-socio-linguist and anthropologist for the purpose of interpreting mythical accounts and identifying the evolving structures of the social *imaginaire*. I have demonstrated elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> with the example of Sura 18 of the Qur'an how three ancient accounts — the Seven Sleepers or the 'People of the Cave' (*ahl al-kahf*), the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Romance of Alexander — illustrate the following three equally programmatic definitions of language, myth and scientific activity:

### **Language, Myth and Scientific Activity**

'Language is in the first instance a categorisation, a creation of objects and relations between these objects.' (E. Benvéniste)

'Myth is an ideological palace constructed with the rubble of an ancient social discourse.' (Cl. Lévi-Strauss)

'Scientific activity is not a blind accumulation of truths; science is selective and seeks truths which matter most, either by their intrinsic interest or as tools for confronting the world.' (W. Van O. Quine)

The type of thought and the epistemological engagement of reason required by these definitions remain inaccessible to all those who have not made the methodological and conceptual journey peculiar to every discipline invoked. The difference between a *mental object* created by language and a *physical object*, whose existence does not depend either on the perception or the name given to it, remains *unthinkable* for all those who perceive, think and express themselves in the cognitive frame established by this verse of the Bible and reiterated by the Qur'an: 'God taught Adam all the names.' Naming possesses not only a power of *existentiation* (*ijad*) of the named objects, but also an ontological guarantee included in the names taught by God. This onto-psycho-linguistic mechanism is a main characteristic of what I call the *prophetic discourse* as embodied in its linguistic manifestations in the Hebrew Bible, the discourse of Jesus of Nazareth articulated in Aramaic and later transcribed in Greek, and the Qur'an, together with their respective expansions in living traditions. The reconquest of the *prophetic discourse* as *linguistic fact* contextualised by the historian-anthropologist is in itself an educative operation that is difficult to achieve, even politically impossible in certain cases, because of the pressures exercised by religious orthodoxy, which is the basis of the legitimacy of power and of the representations which the community of the faithful itself gives to the founding moment of its religion. In the case of Islam, the work of misrepresentation is seen in the transfiguration of the historical actor Muhammad into the prophet-mediator of the 'Word of God', which is conceived as transcendent, normative and immutable revelation,

---

<sup>9</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Lectures du Coran* (Paris, 1982), pp. 69-86.



*uncreated* according to the ‘orthodox’ position that eliminated the Mu‘tazili theory of the *created* Qur’an.

These observations have nothing theoretical or speculative about them; they result from my personal experience with the most diverse Jewish, Christian and Muslim groups. The most patient pedagogical procedures and the most simplified explanations come up against either the opposition of the dogmatic minds, or an *unthinkable* linked to two diametrically opposite formations but leading to the same psycho-linguistic blockage. The ‘orthodox’ religious formation uses a strategy of refusal to rid itself of all the attitudes of thought which would compromise the ideal knowledge of what, without any critical examination, is called faith. In the democratic context, where every citizen is perfectly entitled to his own ‘different’ view, particularly when it is connected to the sacred region of faith, we are witnessing, in Europe notably, an intellectually exasperating and dangerous use of this strategy of refusal. No less exasperating and dangerous is the attitude of minds trained in the *culture* — which is termed modern and secular — of *unbelief*, the dogmatic cult of ‘the death of God’, the rejection not only of the dogmas and catechisms perpetuated by all types of ‘church’, but more seriously of the religious dimensions of all the cultures manifested in history. In this connection, the word of Voltaire is still very enlightening today: to those who were already worried about the void, nay of the ruins, caused by the success of the battles fought by the reason of the Enlightenment, he would reply, ‘I deliver you from a ferocious beast and you are asking me with what I shall replace it!’ Assuredly, the reason worrying about its autonomy in relation to external dogmas could not fight against an all-powerful and obscurantist clericalism and at the same time construct values of substitution. But it is a historical fact that the nation-state, representative democracy, universal suffrage and political philosophy managed by the state, are today showing their exhaustion, just as religious regimes did prior to modern revolutions.

### **The Prophetic Moment and the Burden of History**

One understands in these circumstances why the rare, innovating works on the major questions handed down by the prophetic discourse and its diverse articulations, piously collected and transmitted in every community under the name of a *living tradition*, do not have any *target public* capable of understanding it and making any contributions to it through fruitful debates. Look at the electoral campaigns in democratic societies: the problem of the production, management and functions of meaning and of the effects of meaning are never on the agenda. To say that the average elector would not understand anything of it is incorrect and unjust; the blinding and more frightening socio-cultural truth is that in their great majority, the ‘representatives’ of the people themselves do not have any interest in engaging in such debates. In the case of societies which claim affinity to ‘Islam’, researchers, thinkers, writers and artists who would think of transgressing, however little, the *orthodox living tradition*, are simply forbidden to delve into religious questions. I know a significant number of ‘intellectuals’ and colleagues who contribute to the maintenance of such taboos.

Considering everything that has been said so far, it will be noted that the prophetic moment does not escape the burden of history; it represents the stage of emergence, the socio-political and linguistic construction of a *system of beliefs and non-beliefs* not yet fixed in ritual, ethical, juridical and institutional codes which will intervene in the





subsequent stage of the *imperial* moment when a state apparatus brings religion under its control. In the early Qur'anic stage, the relationship between men who hear the call and God is expressed in the context of an oral culture, outside the intervention of clerics who exercise a power of interpretation in favour of, or in opposition to, the state. Besides, what will later become the *Mushaf* or *Closed Official Corpus* and the orthodox collections of *hadith*, set up equally in the *Closed Official Corpus*, exist and function in this stage only as a form of oral statements open to the questioning and immediate reactions of the actors. I insist upon these historical data, which the normative discourse of belief will efface very quickly by projecting on the prophetic moment of the inaugurating age all the operations of sacralisation and mythologisation effected during the imperial moment.

### **The Imperial Moment and Muslim Historiography**

I call the *imperial moment* the period of formation and rapid expansion of the caliphal state which institutionally lasts from 661 to 1258, despite the political vicissitudes it witnessed from the intervention of the Buyids (932), and then the Saljuqs (1040). The caliphal state is characterised by the construction and maintenance of a politico-religious legitimacy accepted by the Sunnis, but rejected by the Kharijis and the various Shi'i branches. The entire Muslim historiography, following orientalist scholarship since the 19th century, has maintained these political and doctrinal facts without burdening itself with the problems raised by the passage from the prophetic moment to the imperial moment; and of the mythical construction of the former by the latter on the one hand, and by the constant dialectic between the stakes-of-meaning and the wills-to-power engaged in theologico-political debates and confrontations for power in all the spaces administered by the caliphal state, on the other. I am not overlooking the contribution of modern historians to the critical analysis of ancient texts, particularly since the orientalist are more open to the enquiries of the social sciences. But the fact remains that the prejudice of rationality continues to prevail over considerations of the role of the *imaginaire* in the construction of legitimacies, the formation and expansion of orthodoxies, the representations of religious truth, and the discursive strategies of Islamic thought to cover with a sacred divine veil the ethical, juridical, political and economic norms which bring into relief all the activities and profane struggles of the social actors.

### **Rethinking/Rewriting Islamic History**

It is thus that past and present historical writings, reinforced by the literature of political science, have imposed a rigid, immutable, artificially sacralised image of an hypostatic Islam which ignores the local, historical, sociological, psychological, linguistic and mythological factors and assigns a legal status of divine essence to all thoughts, initiatives and productions of men in society. One rarely finds in the most critical writings — in the sense of the social sciences — about this Islam, written with a capital letter, the concepts of state control over religion, sacralisation, transcendentalisation, spiritualisation, ontologisation and mythologisation of religion. All this has made it necessary today for the analyst to undertake the reverse process of de-sacralisation, etc. in other words: *unveiling, deconstruction, de-historicisation*; laying bare the reality which has been constructed by and for the social *imaginaire*, under the cover of a discourse formally critical and rationalised such as that of the *usul al-din* and *usul al-fiqh*; a critique of *hadith* (the 'authentic' collections including the *asbab al-nuzul*, and more generally the *akhbar*, the history of the Qur'anic text and Qur'anic exegesis, the elaboration of juridical



norms (*istinbat al-ahkam*), the putting in ‘historical’ form of the *Sira* of the Prophet, ‘Ali, the Imams, etc. That is the entire history of Islamic thought and the imperial context where it fulfilled, *simultaneously*, functions of ideation and ideologisation/mythologisation — a history that must be rewritten for two main reasons: to acquire a better descriptive and explicative understanding of a domain that is still badly included in the tasks of theoretisation undertaken by the social sciences; and to respond to the vital intellectual and cultural needs of all societies which today depend on false representations and illusory beliefs conveyed by the state-controlled and ritualised Islam, dangerously manipulated in the new contexts of flourishing populism and the disintegration of popular as well as urban cultural codes.

### **The Legacy of the Imperial Moment**

Present-day Islam provides neither the educative and cultural resources nor the political and sociological liberties which are indispensable for dealing successfully with the immense edifice of the ‘orthodox’ islams bequeathed by the imperial moment; the great historical ruptures with their exhaustive traditions and geopolitical and geohistoric environments (the Mediterranean world and modern Europe); and the increasingly more decisive challenges of science and technology, and of economies linked to the revolution in information technology. The long historical period which extends from the 13th to the end of the 18th century is described by historians in terms of *decadence*, *lethargy* and the *retreat of underdeveloped societies*, in contrast to the European societies which, from the same 13th century, commence an irresistible, uninterrupted march towards modernity with its still ongoing developments, under the name of globalisation. If we come back to our dialectic of the local and the global, one can speak of the revenge of the local upon the global after the gradual weakening and final demise of the caliphal state. Doubtless, one must take into account what is called the Ottoman Empire. In the frame of analysis which I have chosen — the dialectic of the local and the global, of the stakes-of-meaning and wills-to-power in the Mediterranean world, including the most dynamic part of Europe, from the 15th to 18th centuries — one can speak of a shrinking of the intellectual and cultural horizons of scholarly Islam, of its ritualisation, its immersion in symbolic and customary local codes with, notably, the wide proliferation of religious brotherhoods to compensate for local deficiencies in different political centres which are too far away or too weak to exercise an effective control upon all ethno-cultural groups and regions. The depredation of meaning and intellectual diligence, the insignificance of literary creativity and scientific innovation, the disappearance of doctrinal pluralism and the humanist attitude (philosophical *adab* of the 10th century), are linked to several facts which dominated the Ottoman period: the imposition of a single official juridical school (the Hanafi) throughout the empire, the total elimination of philosophy, the widespread emergence of a subservient scholastic class which glossed indefinitely over some classical manuals selected to serve their orthodoxy, the absence of doctrinal disputations (*munazara*) between scholars belonging to different schools, and the obliviousness to currents of fruitful thought as well as significant works and authors of the classical period. On the other hand, the Ottoman state always favoured certain works and institutions, such as architecture and the army, which were more directly linked to the glory of the empire, the deployment of its power and the maintenance of its legitimacy. One will note, however, an instance of resistance by the ‘*ulama* who refused to grant to the sultans the coveted title of caliph.



## Renaissance?

Can one then speak of a ‘renaissance’ (*nahda*), as have the ‘Arabs’ — the Arabic-speaking domain of the Ottoman Empire — who suffered a rehabilitated domination afterwards, notably in Algeria, to extol the Turks as the ‘protectors of Islam’ against the colonising enterprises of Christian Europe? This question has introduced a huge problem of historical knowledge: we are, in effect, far from an objective definition of the role and place of the Ottoman period in the wider perspective of a global history of peoples, cultures, religions and hegemonies in the Mediterranean space. This objective implies the renunciation by European peoples and nation-states of a unilateral, self-centred historiography which mentions the Muslims in general and the Turks in particular as negative forces opposed to their expansion. Similarly, the colonised peoples and the party-nation-states which have taken charge of them after independence must cease to write and teach their history in terms of moralising, apologetic and militant categories, which explain their historical stagnation in relation to modern Europe and all their present-day difficulties as a product of savage colonial domination, thus dispensing with the need to examine much older structural mechanisms.

There is a renaissance from the 19th century to the extent that there is a reactivation of the intellectual field, an opening up of cultural creativity and sensibility to the material progress of civilisation on account of a mode of knowledge ignored until then in Islamic contexts. The scientific curiosity for the classical period (the *imperial moment*) welcomes for the first time the methods of philology and the frame of historicist enquiry; one is interested in the critical edition of ancient texts after the manner of the European Renaissance of Graeco-Latin texts. The modern political and juridical institutions are subjected to scrutiny, but not to the point of triggering a current of critical revision of the methodological and cognitive foundations of Islamic thought. Albert Hourani rightly designated this period as the *liberal age*.<sup>10</sup> But from the perspective of present-day Islamist discourse and the return to a disguised locality under the pretext of universality, the *nahda* and even Salafi thought were more charged with hope, with overtures to intellectual, political and juridical modernity, than the Arab Socialist Revolution of Nasser which was too aligned to a communism without critical Marxists, or the present-day Islamic Revolution in Iran which is too dominated by clerics closer to *populist* religion than to an intellectually demanding spirituality.

## Colonial Legacies

Many will reject this proposition because it seems to neglect the colonial domination which weighed until 1945 over all societies with Islamic references. This point is important, because it allows us to measure the responsibility of ‘organic’ intellectuals who, in order to benefit from the privileges of the new *Nomenklatura*, supported ideologies which were as much foreign to the Islamic tradition — considered obsolete and without political relevance — as to the customary and cultural codes of the rural and nomadic worlds. The ‘proletariat’ were the only driving force of a revolution which one can today only denounce for its horrors without relegating it to the camp of absolute evil, that is, colonialism and imperialism. This politico-Manichaeian division, which has long affected the social link in post-war Europe, is being raised again today with more *anti-*

---

<sup>10</sup> Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Oxford, 1962).



*intellectual* radicalism by the militants of the Islamic Revolution. That is because the sociological bases of the socialist-communist ideology of the years 1950-70 have been considerably enlarged since then by population explosions, while the uprooting of rural populations and nomads has led to the expansion of cities which were conceived at the beginning of the century, or even in the 19th century, for more limited urban classes. The rapid development of a populist social force is explained by the conjugation of these factors, to which must be added the system of education conceived and imposed by party-nation-states.

### **Populism**

The separation between the sciences of the engineer and the sciences of man and society has been more radical and even more harmful than in the model systems of the West. If engineers trained in the new faculties of sciences commit themselves more readily to Islamist movements, it is because they are even more deprived than their peers at the faculties of law and social sciences of the tools of thought which are indispensable for receiving or producing the reasoning of a historian, sociologist, linguist, psychologist or anthropologist. These domains of reality are lived and interpreted through the categories of beliefs and non-beliefs taught by religion, with the ideological re-appropriation effected by scholarly discourse, which is itself modelled by the official discourse of national construction (the ministers of education work with their colleagues at the ministries of interior, 'national orientation', religious affairs and information in the line fixed by the party-state). Thus, the populist ideological Maquis find themselves spread in all strata and sectors of society; but it is in the great urban centres that they manifest themselves with the greatest political potency and social pressure. That certain regimes succeed better than others in regulating, diverting and containing these forces of protest and change is undeniable; the fact remains that populism is a structural, sociological phenomenon generated during the course of the years 1960-80 in all societies of the former Third World. This fact conditions the demagogical discourse of the states, weighs upon the manipulation of religious 'values', and reduces the chances of diffusion of critical and disalienating modes of thought.

### **6. The Status of Meaning in Human Society**

I have remarked on the scientific distances, the psychological postures, the objectives of meaning and power, which separate present-day Islam from the historical islams which the critical historian tries to reconstruct. The most valuable lesson of this brief journey concerns not only Islam and its faithful; it also touches the *status of meaning* and of *what makes meaning* in human society. One will recognise, however, an important difference between, on the one hand, the situation of Islam as a *model of historical action* and those Muslims who lay claim to it today, and on the other hand, modernity, its producers and its users. In the first case, at least since the 13th century, generations of social actors allowed an immense to accumulate, generating *unthinkables* which have become more and more burdensome to handle today; in the second, one makes perilous jumps beyond the values, stakes, works, signs and symbols which one has not taken the time to evaluate and integrate into the successive 'paradigms' which only political battles have made to prevail. These paradigms are from then on possessed of philosophical contingency and political arbitrariness; they go even as far as favouring the consumption of what Pierre Bourdieu has recently called 'discardable thought'. Will one take the time to rethink it



and eventually reintegrate it in the more complete, legible and enriching map of the cultures of the world? In other words, modernity has also generated unthoughts and unthinkable by putting the quest for meaning at the service of the will-to-power, whereas it ought to be careful not to bind human destiny to short-lived *effects of meaning*. Julia Kristéva spoke of ‘the destructive genesis of meaning’ at a time when semiotics cultivated the ambition of introducing more effective cognitive strategies for better mastering the conditions of production and consumption of meaning.

### **The Case of Islam**

Having said all this, it is necessary to elaborate further the concept to avoid reinforcing the idea, already too widespread, that Islam is a substantial entity which generates itself from its founding texts and imposes its brand upon societies and cultures which have accepted it. Present-day Islam, like classical Islam and the nascent Islam of the Qur’an and the action of Muhammad, are the evolving and changing products of social actors so diverse and under historical conditions so complex through time and space, that we prefer to speak of a hypostasised Islam of texts and believers rather than one moulded doctrinally and ideologically by concrete forces. Today these forces are termed populism; the uprooting of rural populations and nomads; the disintegration of urban mercantile and cultured milieus — in the sense of the learned written culture<sup>11</sup> — under the combined pressures of demography, the influx of unemployed rural populations, the destruction of cultural codes and systems of traditional solidarity; party-nation-states more concerned with monopolising legal violence than constructing modern legitimacies; social and economic disparities between islets of supra-modernity; the middle classes maintained below their most legitimate ambitions, and the masses doomed to uncertainty, frustration, exclusion and unemployment, that is, to the constitutive situations of the *imaginaire* of revolt. I speak of revolt rather than revolution, because I prefer to reserve this latter concept for popular uprisings supported and legitimised by an ideology heralding imminent and lasting emancipation. That was the case of the Qur’anic discourse which accompanied the concrete organising action of Muhammad while opening horizons of meaning which would allow future generations — particularly those who produced classical Islam under the great ‘Abbasid caliphs — to construct the ideal sacred figure of the mediating-prophet and of a founding revelation as the indispensable reference for the actions and conduct of the faithful.

### **The Qur’anic Discourse and the Prophetic Discourse**

The Qur’anic discourse has neither the same cognitive status nor the same discursive strategies as that which I call the *prophetic discourse*. The latter is not to be confused with the sayings of the Prophet collected in the great ‘closed official corpus’ of *hadith*; for in the orthodox belief the *hadith* cannot be identified with the Qur’anic discourse which is divine. The *prophetic discourse* is that which is memorised,

---

<sup>11</sup> I evoke here a distinction of anthropological scope between learned written culture and oral culture termed ‘popular’; the first is linked to all statist formations from the appearance of writing, the second applies particularly to segmentary societies in tension with centralising powers. The bibliography on the subject is vast; the best introduction remains the work of J. Goody, *The Interface Between the Oral and the Written* (Cambridge, 1987). See the application which I make of it in ‘Transgresser, déplacer, dépasser,’ *Arabica*, 43 (1996), pp. 28-70.



perceived, meditated, commented upon and put to advantage in a vast semantic expansion through sacralisation, transfiguration, mythologisation, ontologisation and transcendentalisation of the interpreting community in the course of centuries. It is the product of the collective *imaginaire* of various social groups; in return, it nourishes, galvanises, stirs up and inflames this very same *imaginaire* which believers call faith. By its enunciation, every believer liberates himself from his ordinary individual self, and from profane time and space, to make himself a contemporary of the Prophet, a witness to the descent of the Word of God; the pious ancients transfigured like the Prophet as models of faithfulness, transmitters by word and action of all the teachings which come to inflate the living tradition and enrich the efficacy of the prophetic discourse. The latter is a homogenous space of articulation of a necessarily true intangible meaning, which applies to all times and places but is itself independent of time and place. It combines the citations of the Qur'anic verses, the *hadith*, the edifying accounts of the lives and deeds of other recognised prophets, and saints who have attained proximity to God with the intercession of the Prophet, and the founder-*imams* of schools acknowledged as orthodox. It excludes, on the other hand, all other human discourses which are not authentically derived from the source-foundation-discourse. The recurrence of this discourse in the most diverse socio-cultural milieus and diverse historical conjunctures is explained by its mythical structure, paradigmatic nature, and its power of intercession, purification and spiritual elevation of the believer. This, definition applies, of course, to all monotheistic religious traditions which link all their discursive productions, and their conducts orientated towards salvation, to their foundational sacred texts (Bible, Gospels, Qur'an)<sup>12</sup> and to their expansion in the living tradition, through complex mechanisms of integration, selection and rejection.

### **The Revolutionary Secularist Discourse**

The revolutionary secularist discourse in the English, American and French Revolutions of the age of the Enlightenment breaks totally with the postulates and religions representations of the prophetic discourse; but it retains of the latter several common traits. It also presents itself as the founder of a new departure of existential code; it sets up a principle of hope for all mankind, paradigms and definitions which inform and govern all productions of human existence. At the same time, it detaches ethics, law and spirituality from explicit references to a living God, revealing Himself to men in history; and it confers to a sovereign and responsible reason the task of defining and evaluating all legitimacies. The rupture with the metaphysical vision of spiritual theologies is therefore not total; there is a substitution of a secularist spiritual power for the power of divine law — it is in this sense that I speak of secularist (laic) discourse. The rivalry between the two discourses has continued until our day; and although the second has had a shorter life span and fewer instances of application than the first, one must recognise that the existential fecundity and promises of emancipation of both have not yet been exhausted. The destiny reserved by history for the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 confirms *a contrario* the validity of the comparative analysis which I have outlined here for better evaluating the status of what is called today, since the rise of Khomeini to power, the Islamic Revolution. One cannot, in fact, speak of

---

<sup>12</sup> I do not overlook the great religions of Asia; but due to a lack of sufficient competence, I cannot pronounce on the linguistic status of their founding discourses.



present-day Islam without reflecting on the significance, scope and limits of this great event.<sup>13</sup>

### Discursive Similarities

Before examining the case of the Islamic Revolution, it is useful to insist upon the ideological derivatives of the two discourses I have just presented as two existential codes which are, at the same time, discontinuous, rival and intricate. The passage from prophetic discourse to theological, juridical and political codifications is comparable to the passage of the revolutionary discourse of the Enlightenment to the philosophical, juridical and institutional codifications which still function in the democratic societies of the West. The believers speak of degradation of the divine revelation in the perverse usages which men make of it in societies; the laic citizens speak of crises, corruption and infidelity to the principles of 1789 (in the French case). It is a fact that the Christian empires of Byzantium and the West, the Muslim empires under the caliphate and then the Ottoman sultanate, developed oppressive clerical systems which obliterated the emancipatory visions of the prophetic discourse and action. There is progress and a new departure of code with the reason of the Enlightenment because it liberated the intellectual field from false knowledge, as well as arbitrary political and juridical orders, accumulated by the clerical institutions of all religions. But in its turn, this liberating reason quickly exhausted its ethical and spiritual ethos by becoming conquering, dominating and dogmatic. Particularly in France, the anti-clerical struggle, which was so necessary and fruitful but also violent and radical, engendered a secularist religion that reveals its dogmatism and incapacity to manage cultural pluralism after two centuries of rich and powerful experiences.

Present-day Islam is engaged in demonstrating the intellectual and cultural limits of the revolutionary discourse initiated and nourished by the *Aufklärung*. I do not mean to say that present day Islamic thought launches intellectual challenges, hitherto unknown, to the reason of the Enlightenment. The Christian counterpart has already made the most of all types and degrees of resistance, rejection and claims which can emanate from a religion of the Book before the rise of modernity in Europe. In any case, the Islamic thought of today is too unprepared in the face of modernity to serve as a fruitful dialectical partner in the ongoing debate on the functions of religion in the context of globalisation. The challenge of present-day Islam to the societies of the West resides essentially in its semiological and sociological presence, which is visible enough to bring forth reactions of fear and rejection in populations reputed to be educated by the Enlightenment. It is a fact that in France the declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen was not followed by women's right to vote until 1945!

Can it be said that the Islamic Revolution, which sustains the political audacities and claims of *Jihad vs McWorld*, has introduced new elements to enrich the typology just outlined by a third type? In the absence of any intellectual challenge on the part of Islamic thought, there would thus exist a historical challenge of paradigmatic scope which would imply stakes-of-meaning not only for the reason of the Enlightenment but, more decisively, for a new, emerging reason.

---

<sup>13</sup> My friend Daryush Shayegan has already reflected upon the general problem of religious revolution in *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution religieuse?* (Paris, 1982).



This question returns under a more programmatic form, but always with a radical and comprehensive critical intention, as I have already said, on the irreversible situation created for Islam and its tradition by the historical test of the 1970s. This time, Islam will not be able to elude, as it did with the alibi of liberation struggles, the major intellectual revolution which bears upon the conditions of production, transmission and consumption of meaning in human societies. At this point in our analytical and critical journey, it is necessary to introduce the problems raised by the attitude of present-day Islam towards its tradition.

## 7. The Approach of Tradition in the Islamic Context

For this part of the exposé, I shall content myself with resuming a long study which I devoted to tradition in 1984 and which was published in 1985 under a title resembling the one I have adopted here by integrating the new data of globalisation and taking into account *jihad* as an ongoing figure of history.<sup>14</sup> One may notice that the critical and constructive objective of my earlier reflections imposes itself with more pertinence and urgency in the present-day context of political and social tensions culminating in the Algerian civil war.

### Towards a Critique of Islamic Reason

At this juncture, I would like to introduce some keys by defining more clearly concepts which have become indispensable tools for any serious contribution to the project of a critique of the Islamic reason, which I have been developing for some forty odd years.<sup>15</sup> I distinguish between two frames of the cognitive activity of this reason, corresponding to two moments in the history of thought: *the frame of the intermediate civilisation* as S. D. Goitein has defined it,<sup>16</sup> and *the frame of modernity* as presented historically and philosophically by F. Braudel and J. Habermas.<sup>17</sup> In the first frame, we have the closed sphere of a reason which is at once theocentric and logocentric but whose sovereignty is

---

<sup>14</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, 'L'Islam actuel devant sa tradition,' in *Aspects de la foi de l'Islam* (Brussels, 1985); also in M. Arkoun, *Penser l'Islam aujourd'hui* (Algiers, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> I published in the Tunisian periodical *al-Fikr* in 1957 a first programmatic text entitled *Maghza ta'rikh shamal Ifrikiya*. Morocco and Tunisia had just regained their independence and the Algerians pursued a tragic struggle which was to last until March 1962. I had already the naivety to believe that the rights of critical knowledge, bearing on vital subjects which the ideology of battle seizes upon, ought to be respected and integrated in the liberation struggle which derived its better legitimacy in the promises of liberty lavished on intellectuals, artists, creators and thinkers. All North Africans of my generation shared enthusiastically this naïve vision. Today the destiny of liberties and rights of the spirit in all societies moulded by the Islamic fact is such that there is no longer any place for naïve projects driven by plausible utopia; but the ever current project of a critical re-reading of the entire North African past inseparable from its African and Mediterranean dimensions, does not allow us to dispose either the social frames capable of supporting and putting it to advantage, or the research duly formed for conducting several sites of exploration and writing with the tools of thought and scientific competency required by what I have called the emerging reason different from all types of reason bequeathed by all types of tradition, including the reason of the Enlightenment.

<sup>16</sup> Solomon D. Goitein, *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden, 1966).

<sup>17</sup> F. Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th to 18th Century* (London, 1981-84), and J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, tr. F. Lawrence (Cambridge, 1987).





exercised in the limits fixed by God; in the second, the open sphere of modernity, an incomplete project in which reason remains logocentric but arrogates to itself a sovereignty whose limits are fixed or raised by its own decisions alone. Between the two frames, there is neither a chronological partition nor an impervious cognitive partition. It is, therefore, very important to be able to identify in the first frame certain postures already anticipated by pre-modern reason, which will be fully deployed only subsequently; inversely, the postures peculiar to pre-modern reason continue to resist all the disappointments raised by modern critical analysis. One witnesses even the failure of this latter before political progress and the social expansion of an aggressive, obscurantist religion because it ignores even the elementary critical preoccupations of pre-modern reason.

To illustrate these quick historical glimpses, it would be appropriate to resume here the analysis of concepts which I have often used elsewhere in the perspective of a critique of religious reason on the basis of the Islamic example. I shall mention the following concepts and say a few words about the first: *Qur'anic fact and Islamic fact; societies of the Book/books; holy, sacred, sacrilege, sacrifice; orthodoxy and heresy; exegesis, interpretation. and critique of discourses; existential; myth, mythify, mythologise, mystify; ideation, ideologisation and critical relation.*

### **The Qur'anic and Islamic Fact**

The concept of the *Qur'anic fact* has been generally understood by my readers as the expression of a fideistic view to preserve the dogma of the divine authenticity of the Qur'an from the reach of modern critique; one can, on the other hand, concentrate upon the *Islamic fact* which is more directly the product of the ideological strategies of social actors. This common misunderstanding informs us more about the cognitive system of the readers who close themselves in positivist historicism than the epistemological posture which I am trying to apply in a new critique of religious reason from beyond the example of the Qur'an and its theological expansions. Lately, Malek Bennabi has used the expression, *phénomène coranique (Qur'anic phenomenon)* in an apologetic perspective which assures great success for his book in the Islamist circles of today. That is why the conquest of a critical operational concept regarding the Qur'an is doomed to failure, for opposite reasons, from the Islamic side as well as from the side of the historians, guardians and administrators of the positivist historicist orthodoxy.

By the *Qur'anic fact* I mean the historical manifestation, at a time and in precise socio-cultural milieu, of an oral discourse which accompanied, for a period of twenty years, the concrete historical action of a social actor called Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah. One sees that this concept aims not to defend or discard the religious dimension of the discourse, but to fix the attention, within a first methodological time-period, on the linguistic, cultural and social conditions of articulation of the discourse by an interlocutor and of its reception by various, explicitly targeted addressees. There is in it a project of investigation which claims to be simultaneously linguistic, semiotic, sociological, psychological and anthropological. All these dimensions are, in fact, present in all units of the discourse which exegetical literature and modern philology have tried to identify. Separating these dimensions, under the pretext of respecting the independence of various disciplines as they are defined by university scholars, amounts to imposing a first choice reducing agent which is no less dangerous than that of the theologians, jurists and, even more so, the



fundamentalist militants of today who only know the arbitrary projections of the oral discourse into text (the famous *Mushaf* which I call the *Closed Official Corpus*).

The linguistic and historical jump from the stage of the oral discourse, articulated in changing situations in the course of twenty years, to that of *Closed Official Corpus* has been considered until now neither by the literature on the juridical objectives of the discourse (the *asbab al-nuzul*, circumstances of the revelation), nor by the historicist and applied philological scholarship which shares with traditional exegesis the reading of the discourse as a sacralised and transfigured text as believers do. I have never come across the concept, however essential, of the *Closed Official Corpus* in the works of any of the most eminent 'modern' Qur'an scholars. The traditional term *Mushaf* is unanimously accepted without commentaries, other than those of textual philology. Under the circumstances, one understands that the concept of the *Qur'anic fact* is not only disdained but interpreted in a 'scientifically' disqualifying sense.

### **The Closed Official Corpus**

The concept of oral discourse, transformed into written discourse and then consigned to a *Closed Official Corpus* by a long series of complex manipulations — which philological enquiry clarified within the limits of its own problematic — is all the more fruitful as it allows us to open up a site of theoretical analysis where all the founding religious texts, and in the first place the Bible and the Gospels, can be taken into account. And one will no longer aim to enquire separately about the authenticity of textual fragments, or even words in a given corpus, which was the object of philological critique. What is at stake in the passage from the oral discourse to a *Closed Official Corpus* (one will note that I never say just 'corpus' because then I would be disregarding, as with the term *Mushaf*, all the problems relating to the notions of corpus, official and closed) is the cognitive status of meaning produced at the linguistic and historical stage of the oral discourse, taking into account all the real situations of discourse and the effects of meaning constructed by the successive exegeses in ideologically difficult contexts, and particularly the exclusive status of a *Closed Official Corpus* resulting in an irreversible fact which can be dated to the orthodox Commentary of al-Tabari (d. 923).

### **Revisiting Jihad and McWorld**

Islam and its tradition have until now encountered modernity as a cultural aggression (*al-ghazw al-fikri*), not as a historical phenomenon local and universal at the same time. It remains to be explained why the intellectual, scientific, cultural and economic advances of the area moulded by the Islamic fact from the 7th to the 13th centuries have given way to the set of regressive forces which have detached the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean from all the historical activities of modernity to the point that at the end of the current century, the rejection of the West has assumed the dimensions of a pole of contemporary history and the rank of a symbolic figure dialectically opposed to the rival figure of *McWorld* in the new historical stage opened by the failure of international communism and the triumph of unbridled libertarianism. Although *McWorld* and *Jihad* translate the eternal dialectic of the dominators and the dominated, they are now united in fettering the very spirit to works which alienate and destroy it.



While sharing the arguments of B. R. Barber on the subject of political, economic and juridical strategies of *McWorld* and the phantasmal proclamations of *Jihad*, I would like to go further than him by taking into account the stakes-of-meaning and culture engaged in the irrational, suicidal confrontation of the two monsters of our contemporary history. I find a theoretical advantage in reflecting upon present-day Islam facing its tradition no longer only from within this tradition, which has been tried too often since at least the *Ihya 'ulum al-din* of al-Ghazali, but from the forces which subvert, for the first time in its history and in an irreversible manner, this very interior, this resistant nucleus upon which *jihad* is believed to lean, and even to seize many tools of *McWorld*, while declaring them to be satanic in its dialectical opposite. In this confrontation with unequal arms, Islam-*jihad*, like yesterday's nationalist discourse of liberation, presents itself as an innocent victim and a saviour-depositary of divine law and promise before an atheistic, materialistic, dominating and radically immoral West. The colonised peoples were promised only civil liberties and social justice in the frame of scientific socialism perfected in popular democracies, the inheritors of the revolution of the Enlightenment. In the confrontation between *Jihad* and *McWorld*, one returns to the Manichaeian struggle between light and darkness after the apparent defeats and irremediable disqualifications of theologies, theocracies, empires and monarchies, as much as that of modern revolutions founded upon the secular cult of sovereign reason.

### **Managing History and its Forces**

Who will take charge of all these sites in ruin? Who will inaugurate the new history after the proclaimed end of a certain history? Will it be religious reason, purified of the errancy, false hopes and oppressive violence of the scientific atheistic reason, at last re-enthroned as in Iran, Afghanistan and the Sudan, in its rank and functions of the 'vicar of God on earth' (*khalifat Allah fi 'l-ard*)? That is the ambition set into motion by *jihad*. Or will the reason of the Enlightenment, correcting its excesses, contradictions, false knowledge and theoretical dogmatism, restart on bases more solid and principles better mastered? That is the thesis of the more or less competent and convinced defenders of postmodern reason. But once again, thought as it is exercised in contemporary Islamic contexts is too caught up in semantic disorder, as generated and widely perpetrated by the conjugated violence of *Jihad* and *McWorld*, too handicapped by the unthoughts accumulated since the 16th century, to contribute to the great open debate on a world scale, other than through the violence of the poor and the excluded, and the support extended to *McWorld* by a greater number of consumers. Participation in the debate at the more essential level of intellectual responsibility is, to a large degree, conditioned by the orientations of philosophical thought within the crisis which moulds *McWorld*.

How do we think about this crisis that includes the radical changes which science and technology impose on all societies as well as the problems peculiar to societies dominated by Islam, be it dogmatic and ritualistic, conservative and traditionalist, or liberal within the non-transgressible limits fixed and supervised by the managers of orthodoxy? The politics of religion pursued in a large number of societies called Muslim make too many concessions to the forces of traditionalism, while favouring the adoption of all the benefits of material civilisation. This results in dangerous mental cleavages, increasing backwardness in the systems of education, fruitless self-censorship, and the impoverishment of creativity in various domains of intellectual and cultural life. Whereas divisions, contradictions and conflicts, individual and collective, become the common lot



of numerous populations, there remain few workers capable of assuming the indispensable tasks of an emancipation which is always aspired, always deferred and sometimes openly rejected (I think of the condition of women and the rights of children). Who is concerned with mastering the frames and tools of thought of the hegemonic powers that set all the agendas of historical outcome, as well as the modes of interpretation of the various epochs, so as to avoid being trapped again by false knowledge, false conscience, mental objects (such as the East, the West, Islam, development, the rights of man, the right to self-determination, etc.), constructed by and for the centres of homologation of 'true' knowledge and meaning which support their wills-to-power? Where are the institutions for training researchers and teachers who would widen the fields of investigation of the human and social sciences, and radicalise their critical questioning of the problems bequeathed to us by the unknown, mutilated and unthought pasts and presents, which blur or smash our visions of the future?

### **Towards a 'Modern Theology' of Islam**

I have long shared the prevailing opinion which reclaims the elaboration of a 'modern theology' of Islam, after the manner of what the Catholics and Protestants have continued to do in the Western milieu since the beginning of what historians call the 'modernist crisis'. The collapse of all ideologies, added to the challenges posed by experimental sciences to the political, juridical, ethical and philosophical reason, have surely increased the demand for solutions in the direction of traditional theologies; but these remain too imprisoned by medievalist cognitive frames and tools to assume with any success the delicate tasks imposed by the ongoing exit of the religious *imaginaires*. With regard to Islam, the discourse of *Jihad* has practically reduced to silence, or struck with derision, every voice which attempts to reactivate theological, philosophical, ethical and juridical thinking, capable of integrating in the same critical movement all the tasks prescribed by the specific historical development which I have called the exhaustive Islamic tradition. An historical outline is necessary here to render more intelligibly these observations on the adventures of meaning in Islamic contexts.

1. The system of thought elaborated in the Islamic context during the phase of emergence and the classical period (661-1258) is totally closed in the antique and medieval cognitive, or pre-modern, space.
2. The long period which extends from the 13th to the beginning of the 19th century has long been passed over in silence, superficially evoked in school textbooks under the headings of decadence, lethargy, oblivion, conservatism and return to popular superstitions. The Turks can pride themselves in the initial success of a vast empire, but they are obliged to lower the tone in view of the irresistible rise of Europe after the defeat of Lepanto in 1571. Now, it was during this crucial historical phase that were programmed the factors, politically, sociologically and culturally important, of the crises, tensions, explosions, state formations and ruptures which characterise the contemporary evolution of all the societies subjected to hasty, arbitrary and uncontrollable reconstructions. It was then, in effect, that two major ruptures were accomplished in these societies which prescribe specific tasks for us today: the internal rupture of Islamic thought with regard to doctrinal pluralism, ethno-cultural



cosmopolitanism and incipient humanism, which constituted the richness of the classical period; and the rupture with the outside, that is to say with Europe, where the great changes and constitutive discoveries of modernity occurred.

3. When the intellectual and cultural movement of the *nahda* engaged in the work of reactivation of the precious legacy of the classical period under the names of *Turath*, the golden age of Islamic civilisation, the two ruptures just mentioned had already created a profound gulf between the revolutionary, euphoric Europe of the Enlightenment and the societies which could no longer benefit either from the tools bequeathed by classical thought, or still less from those proposed in the 19th-20th centuries (1850-1940) in Europe by the practitioners of historicist historiography and the philological reading of the major texts. Thus, the promising efforts of three generations of intellectuals, researchers, writers and artists has instigated, since the 1920s, a rejection leading to more radical political battles during the wars of liberation (1945-1970) and today to *Jihad* versus *McWorld*. Since the 1960s, demography has upset the sociological conditions of political expression, dissemination of learning and manipulation of social *imaginaires*. One can speculate that in these circumstances an unforeseen subterranean evolution will operate towards the worst or the best. The visibility of the nearest horizon, the year 2010 for example, remains blurred so much so that the social sciences confine themselves to the almost journalistic description of superficial events by depending upon the discourse of the most active actors, most directly engaged in the conquest of political and religious power.

I shall end with these brief observations. I know they demand more clarification, critical examination and debate; but this is not possible so long as the great tasks involved in the general history of thought, of all the traditions of thought which seek to take their place and appointment with the generalised quest for one reliable, lasting and universalisable meaning, mobilise only a limited number of exceptional researcher-thinkers.