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RELIGION, POLITICS, AND DEVELOPMENT:
LESSONS FROM THE LANDS OF ISLAM

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Abstract

The question as to whether religion can block economic development and institutional change, or is a purely endogenous factor, assumes particular importance today because of the rise of Islamist movements and the disappointing economic performances in the lands of Islam. This paper starts from a critical examination of the thesis of Bernard Lewis according to which the lack of separation between religion and politics creates particular difficulties on the way to modern economic growth in these lands. It will be argued that (1°) Lewis' thesis conceals the critical fact that, even when political and religious functions appear to be merged, religion is the handmaiden rather than the master of politics; (2°) the influence of religion increases when the state falls into crisis, owing to its impotence or excessive absolutism; (3°) because the Islamic frame of reference provides political rulers with a cheap default option when they are contested, they rarely undertake the much-needed reforms of the country's institutions; (4°) this way of escape is all the more attractive to contested rulers as Islamist movements, born of the internal situation as well as of the international environment, accuse them of un-Islamic behaviour; (5°) as argued by Timur Kuran, by creating an "institutional trap", the legacy of the Islamic classical system also makes institutional reforms more difficult to achieve.

ملخص

ينطوي السؤال المتعلق بما إذا كان الدين يعوق مسيرة التنمية الإقتصادية والتغيير المؤسسي أو ما إذا كان الدين عاملاً باطنياً للنمو - على أهمية خاصة هذه الأيام في ظل صعود الحركات الإسلامية والاداء الإقتصادي الغير مرضي في البلاد الإسلامية.

وتنطلق هذه الورقة من تحليل نقدي لنظرية برنارد لويس التي تفترض أن عدم الفصل بين الدين والسياسة يتسبب في ظهور معوقات معينة في طريق النمو الإقتصادي الحديث في تلك البلاد الإسلامية. وسيتم التطرق إلى نقاط منها (1) أن نظرية لويس لا تعلن الحقيقة الأكيدة بأنه على الرغم من أن الوظائف السياسية والدينية تبدو متداخلة فإن الدين هو خادم السياسة وليس موجهها، (2) أن تأثير الدين يتزايد حينما تواجه الدولة الأزمات بسبب عجزها أو الإفراط

في الإستبداد، (3) ونظراً لأن إطار المرجعية الإسلامية يوفر للحكام السياسيين إختيار وحيد غير مكلف إذا كانوا في حالة منافسة فإنهم نادراً ما يقومون بتنفيذ الاصلاحات الأكثر إلحاحاً في مؤسسات الدولة، (4) وهذه الطريقة في الهروب هي الأكثر جاذبية للحكام الذين يواجهون منافسة لأن الحركات الإسلامية والتي ولدت من رحم الأحداث الداخلية والبيئة الدولية تتهم الحكام بالنهج الغير إسلامي، (5) وكما أثير بواسطة تيمور فوران الذي صاغ مصطلح "الفخ المؤسسي" فإن تراث النظام الإسلامي التقليدي يجعل أيضاً الإصلاحات المؤسسية صعبة التنفيذ.

1. Introduction

Of late, we have witnessed the rising preoccupation of economists about the possible role of religion (and ethnicity) in fostering or impeding economic development and growth. The main picture that emerges from a quick overview of the econometric literature aimed at identifying the main determinants of inter-country variations in long-run growth performances is the following: the null hypothesis that religious affiliation is uncorrelated with economic performances can frequently be rejected (i.e. religion matters), yet the regressions do not yield a robust pattern of coefficients with respect to particular religions, Islam included.¹ On the other hand, El Badawi and Makdisi (2007) have attempted to measure the impact of the Arab dummy on political performance measured by the widely quoted Polity IV index (which provides ratings of the standards of democracy). Their conclusion is that the Arab dummy has a negative and highly significant effect even after controlling for a host of economic, social and historical variables. However, the Arab dummy ceases to be significant as a stand-alone effect once it is also interacted with a variable measuring regional conflicts. The coefficient associated with the interaction term is strongly significant and suggests that in the Arab world, unlike what is observed in other parts of the world, interstate conflicts and wars tend to promote authoritarianism rather than a shift toward democracy. Religion (whether Islam or Christianity prevails) does not account for the lack of Arab democracy. Conclusions along the same line have been reached by Noland (2006) and Tessler (2002), yet not by Fish (2002). Also deserving special emphasis is the recent finding by Pryor (2006) that no special Islamic economic system can be isolated on the basis of a cluster analysis and data on forty-four economic institutions used to define economic systems. Moreover, the share of Muslims in the population is unrelated to the presence or absence of most particular economic institutions.

Many economists who believe that cultural explanations are *a priori* dubious and *ad hoc* ways of accounting for poor growth performances, will not be surprised by such an agnostic conclusion. They are prone to emphasize that, since it is possible to pick out specific aspects of almost any religion that are antithetical to economic growth, testing the impact of religion on economics is bound to be inconclusive (North, 2005: 136). On the other hand, estimating the impact of culture on economic and other performances is extremely difficult because of the well-known endogeneity problem: rather than blocking development, a particular culture may evolve in an undesirable direction as a result of a lack of growth. The endogeneity bias is very hard to surmount since it is practically impossible to find variables that influence culture without affecting growth performances in one way or another. Little can therefore be learned about causal effects from cross-sectional results. But another, equally serious problem plagues cross-country econometric studies, and it is especially evident in the case of the religious component of a cultural endowment. Owing to the paucity of data available, the

¹ For example, La Porta *et al.* (1997) found that countries with more dominant hierarchical religions (Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and Islam) “have less efficient judiciaries, greater corruption, lower-quality bureaucracies, higher rates of tax evasion, lower rates of participation in civic activities and professional associations, a lower level of importance of large firms in the economy, inferior infrastructures, and higher inflation” (pp. 336-37). From the study of Guiso *et al.* (2003), Protestants, Catholics, and Hindus, unlike Muslims, appear to be favorably disposed toward private ownership. Barro and McCleary (2003) find that Hinduism, Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and Protestantism are negatively associated with per capita income growth relative to Catholicism, while Sala-i-Martin *et al.* (2004), who use a larger sample, reach the opposite conclusion that Islam is a positive rather than a negative factor for growth. Such a result is confirmed by Noland (2005) for whom the notion that Islam is inimical to growth is not supported by his data. Still more recently, Pryor (2006) comes to the conclusion that the presence of Islam has very little influence on twenty-three indicators of economic and social performance.

measurement and aggregation of religious affiliations which form a highly delicate part of the whole exercise are typically done in an extremely crude manner.²

Because of these problems and because the reciprocal effects between culture and development carry long time lags, more reliable lessons can presumably be learned from a historical foray into the issue than from cross-country regressions. The fruitfulness of the historical approach is illustrated in the present paper with specific reference to the case of Islam. Such a choice is justified by the fact that the Arab world has gone through a prolonged period of low growth and democracy deficit while witnessing the ominous rise of radical Islamist movements. We are interested in knowing whether and to what extent this predicament can be attributed to intrinsic features of Islam, and what are the origins of the Islamist movements.

The inquiry below rests on a critical examination of the elegant and attractive thesis recently put forward by Bernard Lewis in his book *What Went Wrong?* (2002). In a nutshell, a specific feature of the Islamic world—the lack of separation between religion and politics—creates particular difficulties on the way to modern economic growth (see Section 2). What is argued in the paper is the following: (i) Lewis’s thesis conceals the critical fact that, even when political and religious functions appear to be merged, religion is the handmaiden rather than the master of politics; (ii) the influence of religion increases when the state falls into crisis owing to its impotence or excessive absolutism (Section 3); (iii) because no vertical chain of command exists that can impose a uniform orthodoxy in the lands of Islam, the Islamic frame of reference provides political rulers with a cheap default option when they are contested, as a result of which they rarely undertake the much-needed reforms of the country’s institutions (Section 4); (iv) this escape route is all the more attractive to contested rulers as Islamist movements, born of the internal situation as well as of the international environment, accuse them of un-Islamic behavior: a serious risk of obscurantist deadlock is thereby created; (v) as argued by Timur Kuran, by creating an “institutional trap,” the legacy of the Islamic classical system also makes institutional reforms more difficult to achieve (Section 5).

In conclusion (Section 6), we require a dynamic framework to understand satisfactorily the path-dependent trajectory followed by Islamic countries. For long-term progress to be possible, the escape valve of Islamist outbidding ought to be made more costly for inadequate rulers. However, such an outcome can happen only if people are able to challenge their leaders with the help of secular-rationalistic systems of ideas, and this requires, in turn, that behavioral and institutional changes have taken place on the level of the economy, and that merchants dare break out of their alliance with religious authorities where it has been traditionally strong. If an “institutional trap” exists, such changes will be especially difficult to achieve. Bringing into the picture the complex interaction and feedback effects existing between culture and institutional change enables us to draw an insightful contrast between the “virtuous” development trajectory of Western Europe in modern times and the “undesirable” path trodden by the lands of Islam during the same period.

2. The challenging thesis of Bernard Lewis

2.1 A background view of Western Europe as successful path-dependent development

Careful examination of the historical evidence pertaining to Western Europe suggests that the relationship between culture and institutions is dialectical, involving feedback effects along a

² Thus, how do we have to interpret the effect of religion when denominations are aggregated into such broad categories as Protestantism or Islam, thereby ignoring the multiple and subtle subdivisions and sects into which they have split over the course of their history? Moreover, two persons who declare themselves Christian Catholic or Muslims may mean different things and behave according to different interpretations of the religious doctrine invoked.

complex dynamic path. Contrary to the well-known thesis of Max Weber (1905), for whom the Protestant Reformation was a critical moment conducive to modern capitalist growth in Europe, and to the more recent view of Jonathan Israel (2001), for whom it is the early Enlightenment (1680-1750) which played that role, it seems that systems of ideas have largely adjusted to changes occurring on the level of the economy and the polity. It would be difficult to otherwise explain how dynamic Catholic merchants could operate in prosperous North Italian and Flemish cities even before the advent of Protestantism;³ or how such important steps as the Petition of Rights (1628), whereby all Englishmen were granted a set of rights protected by a law enacted by Parliament, or the abolition of the Star Chamber (1641) and the concomitant ruling requiring that all cases involving property be tried at common law courts, or the Glorious Revolution (1688), which initiated the era of parliamentary supremacy, implying that the Crown could no more claim to be above the law, could take place so early in the history of modern England (North and Weingast, 1989).⁴

A valid point can nevertheless be made that by articulating powerful ideas which questioned the existing socio-political order (including the old hierarchy of studies) and shook the mental world of the west along rationalistic and secular lines, the new Philosophes gave an impetus to new economic and political changes that were to have a profound impact on contemporary European society. In other words, Western Europe was placed on a “virtuous path” trajectory that triggered self-reinforcing modernizing changes on multiple levels. It bears emphasis that ideological and intellectual transformations in Europe were much more gradual than is usually thought. In the words of Joseph Schumpeter:

“There is little if anything to the saga of a new light that had flashed upon the world and was bitterly fought by the powers of darkness, or of a new spirit of free inquiry that the henchmen of hidebound authoritarianism vainly tried to smother . . . the authority of the Church was not the absolute bar to free research that it has been made out to be . . . The society of the feudal ages contained all the germs of the society of the capitalist age. These germs developed by slow degrees, each step teaching its lesson and producing another increment of capitalist methods and of capitalist ‘spirit’ . . . [Weber] set out to find an explanation for a process which sufficient attention to historical detail renders self-explanatory” (Schumpeter, 1954, pp. 80-82).⁵

Moreover, it is too easily forgotten that the Reformation eventually gave rise to enormous confessional tensions and an acute competition among rival religious denominations or sects, and these actually resulted in an abrupt raising of moral standards imposed by austere

³ Migration actually provided a direct link between the presence of entrepreneurship in Catholic and Protestant cities. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Low Countries, dynamic people, merchants in particular, fled from southern areas (Antwerp, most notably) to northern Calvinist-controlled areas in order to escape the oppressive climate of the counter-Reformation. Many of these migrants later converted to Protestantism. Rather than being the driving force of capitalism, the rise of Protestantism seems to have been induced by emerging capitalist entrepreneurship: dynamic individuals did not become merchants or capitalist entrepreneurs because of their (Protestant) beliefs but, instead, they adopted a religion that was compatible with their economic aspirations and their interests. Interestingly, Tawney himself was more inclined than Weber to reckon that the Reformation stimulated a movement already under way: it is striking that the more highly developed districts were those which gave most support to the Reformation, finding its creed more suitable to aggressive and progressive ways of life (Higgins, 1968, pp. 163-64; Pettegree, 2003, p.68).

⁴ Maxime Rodinson (1966) correctly points out that “Weber describes substantial features of higher rationality existing in Europe only in the modern age, the age when modern capitalism was already predominant, so that it is impossible to prove that these features were not created by the economic regime they accompany” (cited from the English translation, 2007, p. 157).

⁵ For Schumpeter, interestingly, the conflict was political in nature: “The laical intellectuals, Catholics no less than Protestants, were often opposed to the Church as a political power, and political opposition against a church very easily turns into heresy” (Schumpeter, 1954, p. 82).

moralizing creeds and an extension of the sacred into all areas of life. At least, this was true for a minority of enthusiasts, but more tolerant Christians found it difficult to resist them openly (Briggs, 1999, pp. 174-76, 181, 191; see also Koenigsberger *et al.* 1989, pp. 222-25, 351-54). English Puritans, or Dutch Protestant soldiers, displayed attitudes of moral rigor and intolerance (including rejection of every representation of God in a church, and reaction against cults of saints in an attempt to purify the house of God from intrusive idols) that were a direct consequence of the Protestants' paramount objective, namely to return to the pristine practice of the primitive church (Toynbee, 1972, pp. 475-76; Strong, 2007). In some cases these attitudes, which strikingly evoke present-day postures by Islamists,⁶ led to the worst forms of persecution as attested by the massacres of Anabaptists in Germany and the Netherlands. In the words of Fernand Braudel: "Inaugurated under the banner of liberty and revolt, the Reformation soon lapsed into the same degree of intransigence of which it accused its enemy. It built a structure as rigid as medieval Catholicism" (Braudel, 1995, p. 353).⁷

Also supporting the idea that changes were slow, especially in the sphere of ideas and beliefs, is the durability of conventional religious beliefs and the fact that almost all the major intellectual figures who contributed to the new philosophical and scientific revolution did so "in a distinctly religious spirit": "Religion still provided the framework within which everything was set, so that there appeared to be little difficulty in absorbing new intellectual trends within Christian doctrine." Science and religion were not seen as being in direct conflict inasmuch as "knowledge of the natural world was also knowledge about the divine purpose" (Briggs, 1999, pp. 171, 191, 204-205; see also Collins and Taylor, 2006, pp. 155-59). The understanding of the world in rational, analytical and quasi-scientific terms remained the attribute of a small elite till well into the nineteenth century, the outlook of the majority remaining traditional and largely rooted in religion (Anderson, 2003, p. 381).

What is remarkable in the modern history of the most advanced parts of Western Europe, however, is that, although necessarily slow and progressive, the shift towards rationalization and secularization was pursued in a more or less continuous and sustained manner. This provides a striking contrast to Russia, for example, where a long autocratic political tradition dating back to the fifteenth century—when the Muscovy princes began to dominate the country at the expense of the more liberal rulers of Kiev and Novgorod, two prosperous cities thriving at the edge of the Western European merchant-capitalist world⁸—prevented the Enlightenment ideas from striking deep roots, even when they were systematically imported during the reign of Catherine the Great.⁹

2.2 A condensed view of "What Went Wrong?"

In the light of the above lessons from the Western European experience, the thesis expounded by Bernard Lewis in his New York Times Bestseller *What Went Wrong?* (2002) appears all

⁶ "Puritans demanded a new moral discipline, not only of themselves, but of the whole community as well. They were opposed to many folk customs as well as amusements such as May-poles, morris dancing, ballad singing and plays. They wanted a clear line to separate the sacred from the profane, calling for an end to Sabbath breaking, elaborate funerals, and the use of churchyards as places for public gatherings and festivities . . . they wanted to stamp out semi-magic rituals . . . (Koenigsberger *et al.* 1989, p. 354).

⁷ Robert Briggs (1999) writes in the same vein that, "despite its initial appeal to the laity, Protestantism rapidly evolved into a new and highly demanding form of clericalism, whose rigid doctrines and intense moralism were ill-suited to win general support" (pp. 182-83).

⁸ See, for example, Pipes, 1995, p. 105; Raeff, 1984, p. 10; Riasanovsky, 1993, pp. 183-95.

⁹ During the second half of the eighteenth century, the empress Catherine reinforced her autocratic authority, denied the necessity of providing legal guarantees to protect subject people, and passed repressive laws (such as the 1765 law that forbade peasants to make complaints against their masters but granted to the gentry the right to punish their serfs by exiling them to Siberia) while professing hypocritically to adhere to the liberal philosophy of the French *Encyclopedists* (Walicki, 1979, pp. 2-8).

the more challenging. What Lewis contends, indeed, is that Islam is a genuine obstacle to development, and that it differs radically from Christianity. In other words, religion is not necessarily an obstacle to development but, in the specific case of Islam, it appears to be so.

Lewis's argument rests on the contention that, unlike in Christianity, the separation between politics and religion, God and Caesar, church and state, spiritual and temporal authority, has never really occurred in the Islamic world. As a consequence, individual freedom, social pluralism, civil society, and representative government, were prevented from evolving in Muslim societies. The reason for the lack of separation between the religious and the political spheres in the Muslim world is argued to be historical: the Prophet Muhammad became the political leader of his own city (Medina), causing a complete merging of religion and politics and suppressing any move toward building a religious establishment. In the words of Ali Shari'ati, "the Prophet of Islam was the only one who simultaneously carried the sword of Caesar in his hand and the heart of Jesus in his chest" (Shari'ati, 1986, p. 23—cited from Hassan and Kivimäki, 2005, p. 125). Naturally, the succeeding caliphs held both temporal and spiritual powers.

The first Christians built up a church structure to defend themselves against a state which oppressed them (till Constantine converted to Christianity) and adhered to the principle "render unto God that which is God's and unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21). According to an authoritative voice, the separation between the state and the church in Western Christianity did not seriously start until the Gregorian reforms during the eleventh century. These reforms, initially intended to shield the Roman papacy from the political ambitions of the German emperor, ended up causing "a genuine separation between the clergy and the laity, between God and Caesar, between the pope and the emperor" (Le Goff, 2003, p. 86). The critical point is that Muslims had no such need to isolate the religious sphere from the political one. In Islam, there is no ecclesiastical body nor is there any vertical chain of command to direct the believers (except in Iran where the Shi'a tradition prevails and a clerical establishment exists which has been expanded after Komeini's revolution): Muslim believers directly refer to God and its law on earth, the *shari'a*. "Since the state was Islamic, and was indeed created as an instrument of Islam by its founder, there was no need for any separate religious institution. The state was the church, the church was the state, and God was head of both, with the Prophet as his representative on earth... From the beginning, Christians were taught, both by precept and practice, to distinguish between God and Caesar and between the different duties owed to each of the two. Muslims received no such instruction" (Lewis, 2002, pp. 113, 115).

In the same logic, there is no such thing as a laity in the lands of Islam:

"The idea that any group of persons, any kind of activities, any part of human life is in any sense outside the scope of religious law and jurisdiction is alien to Muslim thought. There is, for example, no distinction between canon law and civil law, between the law of the church and the law of the state, crucial in Christian history. There is only a single law, the *shari'a*, accepted by Muslims as of divine origin and regulating all aspects of human life: civil, commercial, criminal, constitutional, as well as matters more specifically concerned with religion in the limited, Christian sense of the word... One may even say that there is no orthodoxy and heresy, if one understands these terms in the Christian sense, as correct or incorrect belief defined as such by duly constituted religious authority . . . Even the major division within Islam, between Sunnis and Shi'a, arose over an historical conflict about the political leadership of the community, not over any question of doctrine" (Lewis, 2002, pp. 111-12).

The only vital division in Islam is between sectarian and apostate: "Apostasy was a crime as well as a sin, and the apostate was damned both in this world and the next. His crime was

treason–desertion and betrayal of the community to which he belonged, and to which he owed loyalty. His life and property were forfeit. He was a dead limb to be excised” (Lewis, 1995, p. 229). For the rest, “The absence of a single, imposed, dogmatic orthodoxy in Islam was due not to an omission but to a rejection—the rejection of something that was felt by Sunni Muslims to be alien to the genius of their faith and dangerous to the interests of their community . . . The profession of Islam . . . is that God is one and Muhammad is his Prophet. The rest is detail” (Lewis, 1995, pp. 229-30). In other words, tolerance must be extended to all those who “reach the required minimum of belief,” while intolerance is required toward all those who deny the unity or existence of God, the atheists and polytheists (*ibid.*).

The sovereign is just the “shadow of God on earth,” in charge of enforcing yet not interpreting the words of God. There is actually no concept of nation or people in the Islamic world, only that of the community of believers (the *umma*) which transcends physical boundaries. This is best expressed by Hassan al-Banna (more about him later) when he states: “Islam is a comprehensive system which deals with all spheres of life. It is a country and a home or a country and a nation” (al-Banna, 1996, p. 7—cited from Hassan and Kivimäki, 2005: 127).¹⁰

To sum up, the difference between Christianity and Islam is so radical that it reflects a clash of cultures and civilizations: to the Western perception of the separation of religion from political life and the assertion of individual rights, the Muslims oppose an all-encompassing view of divine law that implies the amalgamation of religion and politics and the recognition of collective rights for all the Muslim faithful. From there, it is just a short step to contend that “Islam and democracy are antithetical,” since obedience to religious tenets is inherent in Islamic religious doctrine (Lewis, 1993, p. 91; see also Miller, 1993, pp. 45-51; Kepel, 1994, p. 194; Pipes, 1995, p. 192). As underlined by Karl Marx, a modern market economy cannot develop in the absence of a civil society understood as an autonomous sphere of economic activity, unimpeded by political and religious restrictions (see Avineri, 1968, pp. 154-55). For Lewis, it is precisely this sort of emancipation that is prevented from occurring in the lands of Islam.

2.3 A clarification

From Lewis’s account, it is evident that the distinction between the Muslim and the Christian civilizations, or ‘institutional complexes’ (Avner Greif), dates back to the critical moments of the foundation of the faiths: the rise of Christianity within the Roman Empire, on the one hand, and the rise of Muhammad in a context where he had to construct a political, economic and social order, on the other. This idea has been forcefully restated by Avner Greif who even establishes a parallel between Islam and Judaism in this regard:

“Because the Roman Empire had a unified code of law and a rather effective legal system, Christianity did not have to provide a code of law governing everyday life in creating communities of believers. Christianity developed as a religion of orthodoxy and proper beliefs; in earthly matters, Christians followed Roman law and later other secular laws. . . . Islam rose through a very different process, in which Muhammad established both a religion and a political, economic, and social unit. Islam therefore had to provide, and emphasize the obligation of adherents to follow, the Islamic code of law, the *shari’a*. Like Judaism, therefore, Islam, is a religion that regulates its adherents’ behaviour in their everyday, economic, political, and social life” (Greif, 2006, p. 206; see also Kuran, 2004b).

¹⁰ It is thus revealing that the Palestinian Islamist movement, Hamas has been severely blamed by Usama bin Laden and his *al- qâ’ida* movement for having accepted to run for a national election (January 2006). Following its victory, Hamas has been led to rule over a national territory instead of fighting on behalf of the whole world Muslim community.

As Lewis is aware, the behavior of Muslims could not be governed only by reference to texts, however sacred, elaborated during the times of the founder of the faith: the *shari'a* cannot be reduced to the Qur'an. As a matter of fact, the words of the Qur'an were not deemed by Muslim thinkers to be a sufficient guide for an empire stretching from Spain to Central Asia, and one of the strengths of Islam during the times of conquest, when it came into contact with peoples of diverse local cultures and religions, was the recognition that different manifestations of popular piety would have to be tolerated within the *umma*.¹¹

During the period running from the eighth to the tenth centuries, it became increasingly recognized that a uniform code of conduct defining what is absolutely true and eternal could be devised and enforced only by complementing the Qur'an with three other

sources of law that would come to form the *shari'a*. These supplementary sources were: the tradition of the Prophet (known as the *sunnah*), which comprises his sayings and actions (the *hadith*); analogy based on precedents; and the consensus of the community (*ijma*), as determined by the decisions of the *ulema* who are the jurists-cum-theologians in charge of interpreting the intent of God's revelations and assessing "the legality of the actions of individuals on the basis of their compliance with God's commands." The *ulema* establishment comprises the individuals trained in the Islamic law, that is, the scholars who compiled the *shari'a*, the judges who applied it in the Islamic courts (the *qadis*), the legal experts who advised the judges (the *muftis*), and the teachers who educate the Muslim community (the *mudarris*) (Cleveland, 2004, pp. 27-28; Gleave and Kermeli, 1997).

The question then arises as to whether the *ulema* fulfills a function more or less equivalent to the ecclesiastical structure in the Christian world where it has the authority to enforce uniform interpretation of God's message. Admitting such an equivalence would obviously undermine Lewis's argument that, unlike what is observed among Christians, Muslim believers directly relate to God and just a "minimum of belief" (to recognize the unity or existence of God) is required of them. The crucial importance of this point will become more evident later.

Leaving aside the particular case of Iran,¹² Lewis is essentially correct in saying that no priesthood exists in the Islamic world, if we mean that there are no human intermediaries between the individual believer and God. At the same time, the *ulema* was able to provide a measure of unity to law and doctrine by codifying and transmitting religious knowledge, and they have always exercised substantial control and influence over how Muslims interpret Islam. Moreover, the *madrasas*, those schools of instruction created in Baghdad in the eleventh century, helped a great deal to maintain a certain unity in the Islamic scholarly tradition (Makdisi, 1981; Berkey, 1992, 2007; Kuran, 1997, p. 52; Goffman, 2002, p. 72; Cleveland, 2004, pp. 28-29).

Bearing the above qualification in mind, a significant difference subsists between Islam and Christianity: in spite of the presence of the *ulema*, Islam leaves a rather ample margin of freedom for the interpretation of the Qur'an. This is because rules tend to be scattered throughout the works of the *ulema* which, moreover, does not form a religious establishment that can declare by fiat which is the correct interpretation of the Qur'an, and because no central power structure resembling the Vatican (with its ability to excommunicate) has ever

¹¹ To some extent, this was also true of Christianity. It is thus easy to find in the rituals of the Catholic Church erstwhile pagan customs borrowed from the Celtic culture (feasts, sacred places, sacred women figures, etc).

¹² There is ample ground to regard the *djomehs* imams as abbots, the *hodjatoleslams* as bishops, the *ayatollahs* as archbishops, the *grand ayatollahs* as cardinals, and the *marjâya tabligh* as a sort of patriarch which the khomeynist revolution has tended to transform into a unitary Shi'ite papacy (Adler, 2005, p. 122, footnote). In fact, all Shi'a sects retain relatively defined clerical hierarchies and the *Jaafaris*, the dominant branch of Shi'ism, sustain a loosely church-like clergy.

existed to lead the Muslim world community, if one excepts the first Caliphate. Muslim believers, therefore, appear to be both more and less constrained than their Christian counterparts. They are more constrained insofar as all aspects of their lives fall under the purview of the *shar'ia*, yet they are less constrained insofar as, in strictly religious matters, they are generally not subject to precise and rigid rules.

Furthermore, Islamic legal practice was defined by a combined interpretation of the *shari'a* law and the classic sources of Islamic jurisprudence, on the one hand, and local customary law, on the other hand. The latter was called on when the former failed to provide answers or simply when the “law of the land” prevailed. By its very nature, Islamic legal practice was therefore a “cultural hybrid,” and legal service providers had to know local cultural norms in addition to Islamic codes (Lydon, 2007, p. 19). This applies especially well to the Ottoman state which drew upon all four schools of Islamic law in its law-making, institutionalized various systems of Sufism (Islamic mysticism) within its urban communities and military organizations, and did not hesitate to use customary law in order to placate its disparate population of Christians, Jews, and followers of different schools within Sunni Islam (Goffman, 2002, p. 73).

In the lands of Islam, religious dignitaries (e.g. the *imams*) may indulge in preaching and teaching the faithful in the numerous existing *madradas* and mosques, and this typically means that the messages conveyed can vary considerably from one place to another. In Pakistan, for example, the content of the syllabi differs according to the *madrada*, and the militant and sectarian teaching is transmitted orally and depends very much on the political affiliation and personality of the preacher (Piquard, 1999, p. 76). A major implication can be drawn from the foregoing discussion—“the decision to oppose the state on the grounds that it is insufficiently Islamic belongs to anyone who wishes to exercise it” (Zakaria, 2003, pp. 124-25, 144)—which provides an important link to the main argument developed in the subsequent sections of the paper. Since Muslims can turn to preachers of their own choice, and these preachers are not subject to the rigid ruling of a priestly caste acting as the representative of God, could not religion be manipulated by politics? Such possibility is normally precluded in Lewis’s scheme of analysis where states and political authorities appear to be largely subsumed or merged into the religious realm.¹³

3. The role of politics and the instrumentalization of Islam

3.1 *First insights drawn from the early history of Islam*

A good starting point to explore the relationship between religion and politics in the lands of Islam, and to illustrate the point that religion is easily manipulated by all political actors, is the history of the first centuries of Islamic rule. As attested from the very beginning by the murder of three of the four caliphs who succeeded Muhammad, the history of Islam is full of violent confrontations between various factions vying for power and adhering to different interpretations of the Qur’an, each claiming legitimacy for its own version of inheritance from the Prophet. During the times of Muhammad, already, there was continuous competition and warfare not only between the merchant dynasties of the cities and the Bedouin coming from a rugged desert terrain, but also within each of these groups. Under the first caliph (Abu Bakr), the converts from Medina claimed that political power should be made accessible to

¹³ Oddly enough, Lewis points out that, in Islam, religious agents never really succeeded in imposing ecclesiastical constraints on political and military rulers. He also describes as rare the attempts made by Muslim sovereigns to bring religion under control (Lewis, 2002, pp. 135-36). One wonders how the first statement can be reconciled with his central thesis about the lack of separation between religion and politics. As for the second statement, it is questionable in the light of the evidence adduced below that political rulers often succeeded in instrumentalizing religion in the lands of Islam. Whether this amounts to saying that they succeeded in bringing it under control is an open question which is largely semantic.

all Muslims whereas the caliph argued contrariwise that it should remain the exclusive preserve of the original group of believers, meaning the members of the Quraysh clan (Muhammad's tribe).¹⁴ Under the third caliph (Uthman), the best state positions were earmarked for his own clan, and the first Ummayyad caliph (who transferred the capital city from Mecca to Damascus in 657) won power after having defeated Ali, the fourth caliph and the religious Shi'a hero.

Rather than originating in a doctrinal conflict, Shi'ism thus began as a movement of support for the leadership of certain Arab candidates in the caliphate, in opposition to the hegemony of Syrian Arab tribes ruling from Damascus.¹⁵ A complete dissociation between politics and religion ensued and the function of the caliphate was emptied of all its sacred content. The merchant aristocracy of Mecca, in particular, actively fought against prophetic preaching. For this reason, the seizure of power by the Meccan clan of the Ummayyads may be seen as an usurpation. The Abbasids (from Bagdad), who destroyed the Ummayyads, attempted to revitalize the sacred function of the caliphate but did not quite succeed. As early as the middle of the tenth century, the institution declined after less than two centuries of glory (see Meddeb, 2002, p. 96).

The central lesson to draw from the above cursory account is the following: what appear at first sight as conflicts between various religious factions or interpretations of the faith often conceal more down-to-earth struggles between different clans or tribes over access to political power and the economic privileges that go with it. Religion was a legitimizing instrument in the hands of established rulers in need of popular support, or in those of contending political rulers. Initiating a long tradition in which political power is exercised by militaries who dress themselves as emirs, Baybars, the great Mamluk ruler, used the prestigious figure of the *caliph* to sanctify his own worldly glory, in the same way that Friedrich II (1194-1250), a Hohenstaufen, obtained the title of King of Jerusalem to enhance his powers in Europe (Meddeb, 2002, Chaps 16-17).¹⁶

The aforementioned conclusion fits well with what we know not only about Arab countries but also about other lands of Islam. The example of Mali is instructive in this regard. An ambitious warlord, Askia Muhammad, became one of the most renowned rulers of the Songhai Empire. To succeed in his military campaigns, he went to Mecca in 1496 and, upon his return, he took the title of "Caliph of the Sudan." Using his new Islamic credentials, he embarked upon a *jihad* and quickly displaced political contenders (Davidson, 1991, p. 106; Milet, 2005, pp. 41-42). In fact, the history of the Songhai empire of Gao (1528-1591) was

¹⁴ This requirement was to be reasserted in the most famous theoretical exposition and defense of the caliphate, that of al-Mawardi (d. 1058) (Hourani, 1991, p. 142).

¹⁵ Iraqi Shi'ism (the movement supporting Ali's descendants who were expected to rule from Kufa in Iraq) united with the Khorasani tribes from the Iranian northeastern highlands and with the underground Abbasid movement whose claim to rule also originated in Muhammad's broad tribal family. Upon overthrowing the Ummayyads, the Abbasids pushed away their allies to build a broad base of Islamic clerical wisdom (Makiya, 1989, p. 213). As a result, the Abbasid caliphs coexisted with increasing difficulty with the Shi'ite imams (all direct descendants of the Prophet via Fatima, and of Ali, the fourth caliph) whom they controlled from close quarters and often ended up assassinating. The only real attempt at reconciliation occurred when Al Mamûn allied himself with the progressive, eighth imam, Ali Reza, and tried to propagate the rationalist doctrine of the *Mutazilis* (according to which truth can be reached by using reason on what is given in the Qur'an) as the official philosophy of the state. He went so far as planning to make Ali Reza his successor. Following a revolt of part of his army in Baghdad, Al Mamûn was compelled to revise his plan and most likely ordered the poisoning of Ali Reza. As for the *Mutazili* thinkers, they gradually ceased to be important within the emerging Sunni community, but their influence remained strong in the Shi'ite schools of thought as they developed from the eleventh century (Adler, 2005, p. 110; Hourani, 1991, pp. 63-64).

¹⁶ To assert and to maintain their monopoly over the right to rule, the Ottomans also laid claim to several honorary titles that had spiritual significance among the subjects (see below).

one of continuous struggle between two political groups, “one with colours that were Songhai, pagan and nationalist, and the other proclaiming a Mali-type Muslim universalism” (Fage and Tordoff, 1995, p. 79).¹⁷

In early seventeenth century, the Massassi, a people of mixed Soninke and Fulani descent, “had Muslim clerics in their entourages and, when it suited their interests, acted in Islamic ways.” Yet, “their political actions were in no way Islamic; they were concerned with converting the clan and age-grade structures of traditional Bambara society into associations of serfs and clients subordinate to their will as war-leaders” (Fage and Tordoff, 1995, p. 189).¹⁸ Two centuries later, El Hadj Oumar Tall, at the age of twenty-three, went on pilgrimage to Mecca and came back with the title of “Caliph of the brotherhood *Tidjaniya* for the Sudan.” In the Fouta-Djalon (in today’s Guinea) where he took temporary refuge, he founded a *zawiya*, which was successful in attracting numerous young Toucouleurs willing to learn the new religious doctrine and to embark on a *jihad* which ended with the destruction of the Muslim kingdoms of the Khasso and the Masina (Fage and Tordoff, 1995, pp. 209-11; Milet, 2005, p. 50).

3.2 *The dominant politico-religious equilibrium in the lands of Islam*

As the foregoing account suggests, and unlike what Lewis contends, political rulers tend to have the upper hand in their dealings with religious authorities in the lands of Islam. The principle of non-attachment to worldly affairs seems to have prevailed throughout most of the history of these countries. According to Albert Hourani, if rulers had to negotiate with the *ulema*, and if their authority was legitimate only if used to maintain the *shari’a*, and therefore “the fabrics of virtuous and civilized life” (a caliph’s main duty was to watch over the faith), a powerful tradition among the *ulema* (among both the *Sunni* and the *Shi’ite* Muslims) provided that “they should keep their distance from the rulers of the world.” This implied that they ought to avoid linking themselves too closely with the government of the world, while preserving their access to the rulers and their influence upon them (Hourani, 1991, pp. 143-45, 458). Even if the ruler was unjust or impious, “it was generally accepted that he should still be obeyed, for any kind of order was better than anarchy.” As the traditionalist and most influential philosopher al-Ghazali (1058-1111) said, “the tyranny of a sultan for a hundred years causes less damage than one year’s tyranny exercised by the subjects against one another.” “Revolt was justified only against a ruler who clearly went against a command of God or His prophet.” Anarchy is the most abhorred state and, to prevent it, despotism is justified (Hourani, 1991, p. 144). Note carefully that this tradition developed in spite of the professed aim of Islam to establish a righteous world order and to provide guarantees against despotic rule.

The story of precolonial Morocco, as reported by Mohamed el Mansour (1979), is illustrative of the sort of politico-religious equilibrium referred to by Hourani. The rule of Moroccan sultans was generally strong, reflected in authoritarian and centralizing policies. At the heart of the prevailing equilibrium lay an institution called the *hurm*, a sacred place or sanctuary in which everyone living was considered to be holy and all forms of violence were prohibited.¹⁹ As a shelter for those seeking God’s protection it was inviolable, implying that the sultan’s

¹⁷ The renowned Sunni Ali, who initiated the systematic conquest of their neighbors by the Songhai (1464), tended to rely on the support of farmers rather than city dwellers and merchants. As a result, he was “much more a potent force in Songhai traditional religion than a good Muslim” (Davidson, 1991, p. 105).

¹⁸ This is about the same story as that of the marabouts of the Sine-Saloum (Senegal), who came to play in their Mouride sodality the dual roles of religious leaders and dynamic patrons exercising authority over highly submissive disciples-cum-clients (the *talibé*) (Cruise O’Brien, 1971, 1975; Boone, 1992, pp. 106-9).

¹⁹ The idea of sanctuary is as old as religious belief itself, and it was certainly an integral feature of Semitic religious tradition (el Mansour, 1979, p. 50).

men could not invest it and any fugitive was immune from pursuit. Each *hurum* had well-defined limits, was the property of a religious group, and carried a number of economic and social privileges (tax exemptions, in particular) in addition to moral benefits.

The granting by the sultans of considerable privileges to those holding the sanctuaries actually reflected a power distribution between the temporal authorities and the religious groups. In some sense, the *hurum* served as a buffer institution between the central government and the various loci of religious power, since the sovereign was in no position to monopolize religious legitimacy in spite of his special relationship to God under Islam (pp. 69-70). Yet cooperation between political rulers and religious authorities and groups was the dominant pattern observed in precolonial Morocco. When the sultan's power was contested, and when the use of sheer force was rather ineffective in curbing rebellious movements (such as in his relations with the powerful urban community of Fez), the sultan co-opted the local religious elite and granted them privileges in the form of donations, tax exemptions, decrees of distinction, land grants, and the right of sanctuary. Potential opponents were thus confined to the religious sphere and persuaded that "spiritual leadership of the universe was more important than worldly dynastic rule" (pp. 58, 61-62).

Revealing of the lack of absolute power in the hands of the sultans is the following fact: the gradual erosion of *hurum* privileges during the nineteenth century was made possible only because (reformist) *ulema* themselves decided to attack popular religion as practiced by the *zawiya* and the religious brotherhoods, and thereby played a significant role in delegitimizing the *hurum* institution. Sultans then succeeded in obtaining *fatwas* from the *ulema* authorizing them to invade the territory of a *hurum* with a view to arresting a mutinous governor, on the grounds that he was using it as a means to transgress the divine law (pp. 65-67).

3.3 *Politics and religion under a state crisis caused by lawlessness*

This relationship between politics and religion could be deeply disturbed when the state fell into a state of prolonged crisis, which typically happened under the two polar circumstances of lawlessness and unrestrained despotism: (i) a political vacuum created by weak central power, and (ii) a despotic rule resulting in acute oppression of the people and deeply entrenched corruption of the leadership. Under such circumstances, there is a tendency for religious authorities and groups to play a more active role in politics, and to reassert themselves as the most effective shield against the vicissitudes of power. Let us consider the two situations in turn in this and the subsequent subsection.

In periods of a power vacuum, contending political factions vie for political power, causing a state of anarchy and lawlessness under which people endure many hardships. Religious figureheads are then tempted to come out of their seclusion in order to substitute for missing central power or to help people in distress. To return to our Moroccan example, it is a well-substantiated fact that in periods of political vacuum, sanctuaries became more numerous and were more frequently solicited. This is not surprising since in an environment characterized by instability and violence, they became more useful both as islands of peace and as sites through which conflicting tribes and other social groups were able to work out non-violent solutions (el Mansour, 1979, pp. 57, pp. 69-70).

In Ottoman Turkey, a state in which the sultan held considerable powers and succeeded in incorporating the entire *ulema* into the state bureaucracy after the fifteenth century,²⁰ his control over the *ulema* tended to decline during periods of state crisis. Thus, dervish orders were spawned by the chaos of cultural and physical frontiers that accompanied the waves of Turkoman migrations. These fraternities, which existed "in bewildering variety," could

²⁰ In the words of Cleveland, "the entire religious establishment held office at the pleasure of the sultan" (Cleveland, 2004, p. 48; see also Inalcik, 1973; Inalcik and Quataert, 1994; Goffman, 2002; Imber, 2002).

represent “exceptional sensibility to political and social injustices” (Goffman, 2002, pp. 73-74). They came to form an extensive network of deviant Sufis, occasionally operating as centers of opposition to the Ottoman state and its policies. When the regime was fragile, such as was certainly the case under Mehmed I, they could even gather a wide range of disgruntled Ottoman subjects into a massive rebellion (1416) (*ibid.* p. 75).

The case of Iran is equally interesting, and deserves special attention in the light of the comparatively large influence exerted by the religious authorities in modern times and up to the present day. While the Safavids largely succeeded in making religion subservient to their own ends and in building a strong and centralized state that created political stability and economic prosperity, the situation radically changed after their demise as a result of the rebellion of an Afghan chieftain in 1722 (Algar, 1969; Keddie, 1969, 1971, 1999; Abrahamian, 1982; Arjomand, 1984; Floor, 2000; Cleveland, 2004, pp. 51-55, 109-116; Martin, 2005; Gleave, 2005). There followed a long period of chaos dominated by tribal warfare and weak, short-lived states until the Qâjar dynasty was eventually consolidated (1794) to remain (nominally) in power until the 1920s. The Qâjars, however, “never succeeded in recreating the royal absolutism or the bureaucratic centralism of the Safavids” (Cleveland, 2004, p. 55). In actuality, powerful centrifugal forces had taken root in Iran during almost the whole eighteenth century, and the Qâjar shahs were never able to mobilize sufficient resources to bring them under control. Administrative instability, insecurity and low legitimacy were the hallmarks of most of their rule.

Of more direct relevance to us is the rise into prominence of the Shi’a religious establishment during those chaotic times. The *ulema* began to function independently of the government and, backed by a population which granted them extensive authority in religious and legal matters, they constituted a powerful force of support of, or opposition to, the policies of the shahs. According to William Cleveland (2004), popular belief held that the rulings of *mujtahids* (learned individuals qualified to exercise *ijtihad*, that is, to interpret the *shar’ia*) were more authoritative statements of the will of the Hidden Imam than the proclamations of the shahs who made no claims to divinity. Thus, “if a *mujtahid* denounced a royal decree as incompatible with the teachings of Islam, then believers were enjoined to accept the *mujtahid’s* decision. In this way, the *ulema* gained a powerful voice in Iranian political life” (p. 111).²¹ The growing importance of religious courts (the *shar’*) was reflected not only in their rising number, but also in their rather wide area of competence (they could deal with commercial and many other matters), and in the preference given by many people (when the choice was possible) to religious over official courts, whose judges were considered particularly corrupt and unreliable (Floor, 1980; 1983; Gleave, 2005).

Worthy of special attention is the strong alliance that gradually developed between the merchants and the *ulema*. Resistance against inept and corrupt political rulers in Tehran and against unfair accommodation of European economic interests actually united these two classes of the population. The first great popular demonstration, known as the Tobacco Protest, was directed against a particularly unjust concession granted to foreign interests (Keddie, 1966; Rodinson, 1966, p. 166; Cleveland, 2004; Gleave, 2005).²² Significantly, the

²¹ An intense debate took place between the *Akhbari* and the *Usuli* schools regarding the role of the *ulema*. Whereas adherents of the former hold that Muslim believers are quite able to interpret the Qur’an and the sayings of the Prophet themselves, adherents of the latter think that only the *ulema* are qualified for that purpose. In the course of the eighteenth century, the *Usuli* school won a decisive victory over the *Akhbari* school.

²² In 1890, the corrupt and inefficient government of Nasir al-Din, who wanted to open Iran to foreign economic exploitation, awarded a British capitalist (G.F. Talbot) the exclusive right to produce, sell, and export the country’s entire tobacco crop. Since tobacco was such a vital commodity in the economy, this decision immediately aroused tumultuous mass protests.

mass protests were organized and led by members of the Shi'a *ulema* who "urged the population to join them in preserving the dignity of Islam in the face of growing foreign influences; they portrayed the shah's concession as a transgression of the laws of Islam and used their independent power base to denounce the government" (Cleveland, 2004, p. 115). In 1891, a *mujtahid* from Shiraz issued a decree (*fatwa*) declaring tobacco consumption as an impious act (an offence to the Hidden Imam) that would be considered as unlawful till the cancellation of the concession. The Iranian people responded by boycotting all tobacco products and, after huge demonstrations in Tehran and other important cities, the government was forced to backtrack in 1892. Considerably weakened by this event, it completely reversed its policy and became openly hostile to contact with the West. The essential lesson to draw from this example is that a religious authority could use its power of interpretation (*ijtihad*) to confront a government's economic policy. To the class of the *ulema*, it had become clear that "the Iranian people were receptive to calls for political activity based on Islamic frames of reference" (ibid. p. 115).

Frequent abuses committed by government agents thus largely explain why Iranian merchants continuously sought the protection of a conservative religious class and refrained from demanding serious reforms. It is only at the beginning of the twentieth century that some of them actually dared provide funding to reform movements (Keddie, 1999). On the other hand, a crucial factor behind the religious establishment's independence of the central government lay in its financial autonomy. This is partly the consequence of the fact that in Shi'a Islam the *ulema* rather than the temporal authority are entitled to receive the charitable donations Muslims must pay (the *zakat*). In addition, the *ulema* received income from teaching, administering *waqfs* (Muslim charitable institutions),²³ registering deeds and titles, and maintaining mutually advantageous ties with urban merchants. Since these incomes were largely used to provide educational services and social assistance to the needy, the influence and popularity of the *ulema* were growing: their image as the true protectors of the people was all the more attractive as the government was increasingly viewed as corrupt and impious (Cleveland, 2004, p. 113).²⁴

3.4 Politics and religion under a state crisis caused by unrestrained despotism

In pre-colonial Morocco and in Safavid Persia, politico-religious equilibrium obtained in which a powerful ruler had the upper hand and a religious institution played the role of a buffer against his potential abuses and of a mediation mechanism through which political conflicts could be resolved. By tolerating such an institution and respecting its autonomy, the ruler thus committed himself to moderating his actions and negotiating with political opponents rather than crushing them. Note that this equilibrium is different from the political equilibrium of representative democracy in which the buffer, instead of consisting of a shelter, a refuge or an asylum, takes on the form of a body, the parliament, endowed with genuine decision-making powers in critical matters.

In the end, it is the legitimacy of the Islamic faith in the people's eyes which confers credibility upon a strong ruler's promise of moderation: in the absence of it, he could always choose to invade the sacred sites (a sanctuary or a mosque) whenever it suited his purpose. The importance of religious beliefs is, therefore, the answer to Acemoglu and Robinson's question as to why do institutions—in this case, religious institutions—provide commitment (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006, p. 177-79). The politico-religious equilibrium thus obtained

²³ More precisely, a *waqf* consists of a private immovable property turned into an endowment intended to support any social service permissible under the Islamic law (Kuran, 2004b, p. 75).

²⁴ Thanks to their financial independence, stresses Ayatollah Motahhari, the *ulema* are able not only to respond to the demands of the people, but also "to stand up to governments and fight against their excesses and their cruelty" (Rahnema and Nomani, 1990, p. 46).

is nonetheless more inherently unstable than might appear at first sight. Using his double quality as both a political leader and the guardian of the faith, the ruler may be tempted to confer upon himself the legitimacy accorded by Islam with a view to getting rid of countervailing powers, institutional buffers and ways of expressing political dissent. True, to acquire sufficient religious credentials, he needs to secure the cooperation of at least some prominent *ulema* (like in the aforementioned case where Moroccan sultans strove to undermine the privileges of the sanctuaries), but this may not be too difficult given the absence of a strictly uniform interpretation of the Islamic law. Obviously, as attested by Egypt (under Mubarak) and the Saudi royal family, the more divided the religious class, the easier for the political ruler to have his own way without incurring the risk of having to contend with significant religious forces.

An obvious instance of such a concentration of religious and political powers occurs when an ambitious ruler uses the banner of Islam to extend his control over a rebellious territory, or to unify a fragmented political space. For example, when Timur (1336-1405), known as Timur Lane or Tamburlaine, began to reconquer the old Mongol territory, he not only claimed Mongol descent, but also developed a bigoted version of Islam that bore little relation to the conservative party of the *ulema*: “he saw himself as the scourge of Allah, sent to punish the Muslim emirs for their unjust practices” (Armstrong, 2000, p. 91). On the other hand, the first internationally recognized king of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman (1880), worried about the threats to his central power coming from the main tribes of the country, constantly referred to Islam as a way to establish his authority. In order to pacify the northern opposition and to extend his authority to the east and the center, he even decided that he was the only person empowered to declare the *jihad* (Nahavandi, 1999, p. 89). Motivated by the desire to establish central law and order in the country, rulers from Kabul have always tried to use the *shari’a* as a substitute for a plethora of tribal laws.

Rahman was thus following the route pointed a long time ago by Ibn Hanbal, the first Islamist thinker and the founder of one of the four juridical schools of Sunni Islam (first quarter of the ninth century), who reflected upon the best ways to avoid the violent upheavals and murderous tribal rivalries which Islam had witnessed during its first centuries (see above). Unlike those who argued for a retreat from the ugly realities of world politics through some form of mysticism or theological quietism (particularly prevalent among the oppressed Shi’ites who took refuge in Messianic expectations, the New Messiah being supposed to reincarnate Ali),²⁵ Hanbal stressed the need to follow the letter rather than the spirit of the Qur’an. To reconcile the contending factions and reach a large consensus among the Muslims, he proposed to ban all personal opinions and to rally the whole community of believers around a unique truth. Reading of the Qur’an had to be literal, avoiding any allegorical exegesis. Indeed, strict adherence to the Islamic law had to replace adherence to particularized tribal laws so that segmented ties based on kinship could give rise to harmonious relationships grounded in a religion of universal brotherhood.

Several centuries later, Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) from Damascus, one of the foremost religious writers of the Mamluk period, followed in Hanbal’s footsteps. Like him, he was preoccupied by the divisions within the Islamic world, and believed that the unity of the *umma*—a unity of belief in God and acceptance of the Prophet’s message—is what matters most, even if this principle does not imply political unity. His views were even more radical than those of Hanbal, in part because he believed it was an important duty of the sovereign to disseminate the Muslim faith beyond the confines of the existing Muslim community, and to have recourse to the *jihad*, the holy war, toward that purpose. In short, every Muslim believer

²⁵ This is a reaction similar to that of the Pharisees under the Roman Empire.

must be a fighter for his faith, and the holy war is as important as prayer in his conception (Hourani, 1991, pp. 179-81; Meddeb, 2002, Ch. 9).²⁶

Even when a country is politically integrated, instrumentalization of Islam may be an attractive option for contested rulers willing to suppress dissent and establish an autocratic system free from all genuine countervailing powers or buffers. To some extent, such a possibility reminds us of the political situation that prevailed in the period preceding the formation of the Islamic law and the establishment of the legal community when rulers were very autocratic, such as was observed during most of the rule of the Ummayyads and the early Abbasids (Cosgel *et al.* 2007, p. 18).

What needs to be emphasized is that in these circumstances the growing role of religion is the outcome of a deliberate strategy of the political ruler. Recent history actually offers us many striking examples to the effect that cynical political rulers, often with a secular background, use Islam as a readily available ideology and instrument of legitimacy to deflect criticisms and entrench their power and privileges. They are thus able to escape the consequences of their misrule, and to avoid the hard task of trying to understand the causes of their country's predicament and undertake the necessary reforms, or else quit power. When political opposition takes on the form of Islamist movements which question the legitimacy of the ruler on religious grounds, such as is observed when secular-rationalist ideologies remain weak, the strategy of rulers using Islam as a counter-attack device appears to be the most cost-effective.

In Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (executed in 1977) had been a modern secular politician with social democratic ideas, yet as a prime minister, out of political expediency "he increasingly appealed to Islam and advocated the Islamization of the country" (Nomani and Rahnema, 1994, p. 121).²⁷ The same move was pursued by General Zia ul-Haq: to consolidate his power and restore the legitimacy of the military after the humiliating defeat of the army in the 1971 war against India and the secession of Bangladesh, he chose to present the military as "the ideological vanguard of an Islamic state," and did not hesitate to declare "that he was not responsible to anyone except Allah." After proclaiming himself president of Pakistan (September 1978), he vowed to bring the economy, judiciary, and education further in line with *shari'a*. He announced the enforcement of Islamic penal laws, introduced the Islamic tax, and created Islamic banks. With the aid of Saudi financiers and functionaries, he established numerous *madradas* throughout the country, and thus helped to create a basis from where the Taliban government could later develop. Interestingly, the *ulema* played a very minor role in the Islamization of Pakistan (Nomani and Rahnema, 1994, pp. 126-29; Zakaria, 2003, pp. 145-46; Piquard, 1999).

In Sudan, which was established as a secular state after the terms of the 1973 constitution, Gaafar Numeiri initiated a rapprochement with Islamic factions as soon as his deeply corrupt

²⁶ For Taymiyya, two pitfalls must be avoided: that of a prince who does not use his wealth, army, and power to strengthen religion, and that of a powerless religion which is deprived of financial and monetary resources.

²⁷ The idea of creating a separate Indian Muslim state was first put forward by Sir Mohammed Iqbal (1876-1938) in 1930. Characterization of the difference between Christianity and Islam in the thought of Iqbal is very close to the account given by Bernard Lewis. Unlike what is observed in Christianity, religion for a Muslim is not a matter of private conscience or practice. There never was a specifically Christian polity and, in Europe after Luther, the "universal ethics of Jesus" was "displaced by national systems of ethics and polity." In Islam, there cannot be a Luther because there is no Islamic church order for a Muslim to revolt against. Muslims, to be true to Islam, need a Muslim polity, a Muslim state in which to enforce their religious ideal. This ideal, indeed, is organically related to the social order which corresponds to it so that the rejection of the latter will eventually lead to the rejection of the former (the quotations of Iqbal in this note are from Naipaul, 1982, pp. 88-89). What needs to be emphasized, however, is that the political founder of Pakistan, Mr. Jinnah, was driven by secular ambitions and only wanted a state where Muslims would not be swamped by non-Muslims (*ibid.* p. 90).

patrimonial policies aroused bitter political opposition in both the north and the south of the country. Two prominent Islamic politicians, including Hassan al-Turabi (leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and founder of the National Islamic Front, whom Numeiri had previously imprisoned), entered his government in 1977. Appointed attorney general, Turabi exerted steady pressure for the Islamic reform of the legal system, and in 1983 Numeiri completely reversed his previous policy by declaring an “Islamic revolution” and transforming the Sudanese state into an Islamic republic to be governed by Islamic law. He even attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to proclaim himself an imam accountable only to Allah. Moreover, he demanded an oath of unconditional allegiance from all members of the civil service and judiciary, thereby causing the departure of prominent secularists and the dominance of the civil service, the army, and the financial sector by Islamists.

He also let Turabi draft the Criminal Bill (presented to parliament in 1988) which included an ominous provision for outlawing apostasy sufficiently vague to allow its application to be politically determined (de Waal, 1997, pp. 88, 91; Meredith, 2005, pp. 356-57). Numeiri’s execution of Mahmud Muhammad Taha, the founder of the Republican Brothers, on a charge of apostasy in 1984, offers a perfect illustration of the cynical use that can be made of the bill. The fact is that “opposition to an Islamic government can be, and has been, defined as an act of apostasy,” not only to target secular Muslims and other political opponents (e.g. communists) but also to harass other Islamic sects (such as the Khatmiyya, Ansar and Ansar-Sunna) that were regarded as a threat to the ruling power (Johnson, 2003, p. 129).²⁸ Omar el Bashir did not depart from the line adopted by his predecessor. In particular, he promulgated the Sudanese Penal Code of 1991, which included the aforementioned provision on the crime of apostasy,²⁹ and he made training in Islam compulsory for civil servants, teachers, students and higher education candidates. (de Waal, 1997, p. 98; Johnson, 2003, p. 128; Meredith, 2005, p. 589).

The case of Algeria deserves special attention because there, the radical Islamist movement known as the FIS (the Islamic Salvation Front) has actually been encouraged by President Boumedienne when his hold on political power was seriously challenged in 1968 by a rising opposition made up of intellectuals, students, and trade unions. As early as 1965, on the occasion of the state coup which brought him to power, a bizarre alliance was sealed between the new socialist, anti-imperialist regime and the *ulema*, granting to the latter the right to lead the Arabization of the country and to manage the education system (including the right to rewrite the school textbooks). It is thus in complete agreement with the regime that the religious dignitaries started to spread the message of a conservative Islam through the creation of a wide network of Islamist institutes directly governed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Radical views inspired by Taymiyya, Qutb and Mâwdudi (see below) were diffused in all legality, and an idea that gained increasing currency was that colonization of Algeria had been possible only because of the degeneration of the pre-colonial state. The solution must rest on a return to the sources of Islamic culture (Bouamama, 2000: Chap. 3).

When secular, democratic opposition intensified, the regime gave more leeway to the *ulemas* and to the more reactionary forces among them. They started to assert more aggressively and to meddle openly in matters of social policy (such as dress codes, the amount of bride prices, etc.). The idea of a “renaissance” of the country based on the Islamic tradition was explicitly

²⁸ That the charge of apostasy can be leveled at Islamic people is also attested by the attitude recently displayed by ultra-puritan Sunnis, known as *takfiris*, whose belief in Shi’a perfidy prompted them to denounce the Shi’as as apostates from Islam, and to claim that it is therefore legal to kill them (“Sunnis and Shi’as,” *The Economist*, 2006, March 4-10, p. 22).

²⁹ In addition, a presidential decree in 1991 limited women’s activities and imposed strict dress codes to be enforced by the Guardians of Morality and Advocates of the Good (Meredith, 2005, p. 589).

taken over by the government,³⁰ and the Islamic character of the Algerian state was embedded most explicitly in the National Charter, considered as the ideological and political program of revolutionary Algeria.³¹

“The Algerian people is an Arab and Muslim people. Islam is the religion of the state, and one of the fundamental components of the national Algerian personality . . . It is to Islam, the religion of militant endeavor, of rigor, justice, and equality, that the Algerian people returned in the darkest times of the Crusades and colonial domination, and it is from Islam that they drew the moral force and spiritual energy required to sustain hope and achieve eventual victory. Islam has shaped Algerian society and made it a coherent force, attached to the same land, the same beliefs, and the same Arab language that enabled Algeria to start again contributing to the works of civilization” (cited from Bouamama, 2000, p. 161—my translation).

In Algeria, therefore, Islam was “nationalized” and cynically used by the state for the legitimation of repressive policies and mobilization (Layachi, 1995, p. 180; Owen, 1992, p. 41). This is the usual story of authoritarian rulers who do not hesitate to discreetly support or co-opt extremist movements, whose ideological platform is often based on religion or ethnicity, as a way to fight the threat of political opponents. Power elites used Islam and the language of religion in self-defense against opposition groups that were frustrated at the failures of corrupt, secretive, authoritarian, and ineffective states which did not deliver on what they promised (Hourani, 1991, pp. 452-53).³² They were particularly vulnerable to attacks coming from Islamist movements since, in the lands of Islam, anyone can oppose the state on the grounds that it is insufficiently Islamic (see supra): Islamist clerics may decide that a ruler is not a “good Muslim,” and does not deserve to rule. This largely explains why secular regimes, including that of Egypt, began to rest their legitimacy in religion (Hourani, 1991, p. 452).³³ The same principle applies to the secular regimes of Syria and Iraq (Hourani,

³⁰ Thus, the Minister of Information and Culture, Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, declared that “a cultural revolution implies a return to the sources,” and that Islam represented the central value upon which to build the new Algerian society: “the other values owe their importance, their existence and their prestige only to their articulation with Islam or to the fact that they are inspired by or subordinated to Islam” (cited from Bouamama, 2000, p. 163).

³¹ It is revealing that this passage of the 1976 version of the charter was not amended in 1986 when the so-called liberal regime of President Chadli decided to revise it, mainly to suppress all references to socialism (Bouamama, 2000, pp. 161-62).

³² The support given by powerful segments of society to governments has very often been passive in Arab countries, partly because they did not participate actively in the making of decisions. “In most regimes this was done at a high level by a small group, and the results were not communicated widely; there was a tendency for rulers, as they settled into power, to become more secretive and withdrawn—guarded by their security services and surrounded by intimates and officials who controlled access to them—and to emerge only rarely to give a formal explanation and justification of their actions to a docile audience. Beneath this reason for the distance between government and society, however, there lay another one: the weakness of the conviction which bound them to each other” (Hourani, 1991, p. 454).

³³ Malaysia attests to the continuing risk of political instrumentalization of Islam, even in comparatively developed Asian countries. There, indeed, resentment of the economically successful Chinese community took the form of an appeal to Islam (Malays are Muslims, unlike the Chinese) and pressure to establish an Islamic state. That this outcome was eventually avoided, was due to a political compromise whereby, at the urging of the dominant (non-Islamist) party in power, the Chinese accepted a policy of positive discrimination in favor of the Malays (Horowitz, 1985; Matthew, 1990). This delicate balance seems to have been recently disturbed, as attested by inflammatory speeches at the annual congress of the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in mid-November 2006. In these speeches, the necessity to defend the race and religion of the Malay Muslim majority against the ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities was overly stressed, and no less than the education minister brandished a *keris* (traditional dagger), only to be asked by another delegate to start using it (*The Economist*, December 2, 2006, pp. 57-58).

1991, pp. 452-53). In Iraq, Baathist ideology was based on pan-Arabism “whose spirit is Islam.” It stressed the exceptionalism of the Arabs whose national awakening was bound up with a religious message and obligation (Makiya, 1989, pp. 198-211; Dawisha, 1999).

As is evident from the above accounts, radical interpretations of Islam may be encouraged by political rulers eager to suppress dissent and achieve absolute power. Radicalization then occurs as a movement born of the spontaneous articulation of popular discontent to which the political elite then respond by themselves using Islam as a counter-attack tactic, or as a movement stimulated from above in order to quash opposition. When both opposition groups and the state thus invoke Islam as the main justification for their actions, an obscurantist deadlock is created in which all political opinions and judgments have to be expressed in the language of religion. Rather than a merging of religion and politics, the problem appears to be the easy manipulability of religion by the state.

To understand the emergence of Islamist movements in the present-day Islamic world, it is not enough to cite the inept and corrupt character of most prevailing political regimes, as well as the cynical manipulation of religion by some despotic rulers. A conjunction of historical circumstances, political or military events, and power games at the international level have obviously complicated the task of Middle Eastern countries confronted with the challenge of modernization and economic progress in the face of powerful external competition. This international context is highlighted in Section 4 below.

Afterwards, the natural question to be asked is: why did changes in institutions, norms, and behavioral patterns not take place in the lands of Islam so as to allow them to compete effectively with the fast-growing countries of the leading core of the world? Part of the answer has been provided in the above analysis: in the Middle East, the cost and risk of reforming institutions are particularly high because of the ease with which Islam can be opportunistically invoked to block movement toward progress, not because of any intrinsically retrograde aspect of the faith, but rather because of the absence of a religious hierarchy able to impose an Islamic orthodoxy. In the words of Zakaria, “The Muslim caliph was first and foremost a prince; he was not a pope, and he did not have to contend with one . . . rulers could always find some priest to legitimate them, and rebels could find inspiration in the words of others” (Zakaria, 2003, p. 147). In the Christian world, instrumentalization of religion by political rulers also occurred, yet the presence of a strong church structure responsible for enforcing a uniform interpretation of the faith had the effect of limiting the powers both of the rulers and of their contenders to manipulate doctrinal tenets at will.

There is another reason why the cost of institutional reforms (including reforms of the political system) has been comparatively high in the lands of Islam in modern times. As argued by Timur Kuran, reforms in a number of key areas are especially hard to achieve because they would run counter to the legacy of the classical Islamic system, hence the existence of an “institutional trap” impeding modernization in Middle Eastern countries. The diffusion of modern ideologies grounded in secularist and rationalistic worldviews is thereby made more difficult. Kuran’s approach is presented and discussed in Section 5.

4. The rise of Islamist movements

4.1. Revived Islamist doctrines and unique diffusion opportunities

Guiding present-day Islamist movements is the thinking of a few religious reformers who drew inspiration from the writings of both Hanbal and Taymiyya. The first of them is Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) who preached the return to the teaching of Islam as understood by the followers of Hanbal in the context of central Arabia in the early eighteenth century. This meant strict obedience to the Qur’an and hadith as they were interpreted by responsible scholars in each generation, and rejection of all that could be

regarded as illegitimate innovations, including reverence to dead saints as intercessors with God, and the special devotion of the Sufi orders (Hourani, 1991, pp. 257-58). To preserve his creed, the Wahhabi does not hesitate to destroy the relics of the past so that any confrontation between myth and historical document can be avoided.

The movement created by al-Wahhab was not important in his own time (he was actually a poor philosopher, not well regarded by Arab colleagues), but was to have wider significance later. This is because he was linked to the Saud tribe which was striving to take hold of power by conquering the Arabian deserts. The eventual conquest of Arabia by the Saudis and their support of the puritanical doctrine of al-Wahhab proved to be a decisive factor in modern Muslim history.³⁴ Much in line with what has been said before about political instrumentalization of Islam, the Saudi royal family is essentially a secular polity which has co-opted a religious elite and used Islam in order to consolidate a Saudi national identity and thereby reinforce its own legitimacy (al-Rasheed, 1996, 2002, 2006; Nevo, 1998). Abdelwahab Meddeb portrays them crudely as a bunch of hard-nosed businessmen (more exactly, rentiers) eager to provide an Islamic façade behind which to hide their unrestrained capitalist practices (Meddeb, 2002, p. 125). In the context of the present discussion, the key point is that the wealth of Saudi Arabia, thanks to the abundance of oil in its soil, allowed it to play a major role in the lands of Islam. Many Muslims migrated to Saudi Arabia to work and later returned to their country of origin, while the government of Saudi Arabia used its immense financial resources to disseminate Wahhabism throughout the Muslim world and beyond.

About two centuries after al-Wahhab, the puritanical interpretation of Islam was revived by Abû al-A'lâ Mawdûdi (1903-1979) in Pakistan, and by his fervent disciple, Sayyid Qutb (1929-1966), in Egypt. These two thinkers had a deep influence on today's Islamist movement, in particular on Osama bin-Laden (a Saudi Arabian) and his lieutenant in *al-qâ'ida*, Ayman al-Zawahri (Egyptian). While Mawdûdi did not call for war, even though his writings lead to the conclusion that war is required, Qutb clamored for the reactivation of the *jihad* and the use of sheer violence to achieve the aims of the movement. For Mawdûdi, there is legitimacy in God only and the whole political realm must be reduced to the divine realm: the religious principle must be put back at the heart of social life and there is no room for anything else. For Qutb, the Islamic society is one which accepted the sovereign authority of God, and regarded the Qur'an as the source of all guidance for human life. The struggle should aim at creating a universal Muslim society, thus marking the end of the Western world which cannot provide the values needed to support the new material civilization. To the moral decay of the Western civilization, Muslims must thus oppose an ethic reconstructed on the basis of Islam's own origins. It is only after having completely submitted to God, as God required, that man will be emancipated from all the servitudes of the present century.

In Egypt, Qutb joined the Muslim Brothers, an Islamist movement created by Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), who was himself deeply influenced by his master, Rashid Ridha. Followers were to live according to the *shari'a*, purify their heart, and form the nucleus of dedicated fighters of the Islamic cause, which implies their readiness for violence and martyrdom (Hourani, 1991, pp. 445-46; Meddeb, 2002, pp. 114-15, 121-22). Qutb had a decisive influence on this movement and led it into open opposition to Nasser. He was himself arrested, tried, and executed in 1966. The initial program of the Islamists was thus to overthrow the corrupt regimes prevailing in Arab lands. It is under peculiar circumstances—the refusal of the U.S. government to honor its promise to remove its military bases from Saudi Arabia after the end of the Kuwait war—that bin-Laden decided to re-frame the

³⁴ From the very beginning, the king of Saudi Arabia was regarded as the guardian of Islam and was supposed to maintain Islamic values in the community and throughout the world (Nomani and Rahnama, 1994, pp. 137-140).

priorities of *el-qâ'ida* by targeting the United States and the Western world as the principal enemy. Since he brought with him most of the financial resources of the movement, other leaders such as al-Zawahri had to give in, albeit reluctantly.

It was thus, in continuous to and fro movements from one bank of the Red Sea to the other, that the first operational link between radical fundamentalism and Wahhabism was woven during the 1970s. Yet a second, far more critical conjunction of events was to happen in the early 1980s in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in the very country where Mawdûdi propagated his ideology among his own brethren, and in their own language (Meddeb, 2002, p. 122). It bears noticing that, even among the *Mujahiddin* who fought against the Soviet troops, there existed various contending factions with different sorts of Islamic creeds. They united to oust the Soviet troops, yet tensions among them had always been serious and immediately resurfaced as soon as victory was obtained. With the Russians out, Gulbuddin Hekhmattyar, the leader of the most extremist faction among the *Mujahiddin*, became the prime minister of the Afghan government.³⁵ Since internal confrontations between contending factions of the victors did not stop, the government soon collapsed and a new radical movement, the Taliban, came to power, quickly joined by the extremist Islamist factions of the *Mujahiddin*. Like Ibn Hanbal twelve centuries earlier, and like king Rahman toward the end of the nineteenth century (see above), the Taliban were convinced that a rigid, uniform interpretation of the Qur'an was the only way of bringing unity and restoring order among the feuding local tribes and warlords.

We have still gone only halfway to answering our first question, since it remains to be explained why the puritanical interpretation of Islam has fallen on so compliant ears. This query is particularly pertinent in the case of Egypt, traditionally one of the major sources of deep Muslim philosophical thinking, where the movement of the Muslim Brothers played a major role in spreading such a radical version of the faith.

4.2 A modernization crisis compounded by military defeats

What is it that recently caused the Islamic world to turn more radical? The answer seems to be that radicalization of Islamic ideology is a consequence of a deep economic, social, and military crisis faced by Muslim societies. This crisis has its roots in the decline of the Arab civilization and its failure to meet the challenge of modernization posed by the Western world. Thus, according to Mohamed Chérif Ferjani, the Arabs are torn between two models of civilization, the European civilization which challenges them, and the Arab-Muslim civilization which provides them with a response to that challenge. The choice between the two models is made especially difficult because of a “psychic tension” amplified by acute awareness of the reality of decadence in the Arab world. A fundamental trait of most contemporary political Arab writings, whether left- or right-oriented, is thus their “obsession with past grandeur,” which prevents any envisaging of progress, modernization, and development in terms of a rupture with the past, such as happened with the Enlightenment in Europe. Instead of “progress,” Arab authors prefer to think of a “renaissance” (“reviving the past grandeur”); that is, they prefer to think “in magical and mythical terms”: “It is as though the present and the future cannot have legitimacy if they are not rooted in the historical and cultural patrimony” (Ferjani, 1991, pp. 133-34—my translation; see also Meddeb, 2004). Note that the above analysis also applies to the deceptively secular ideology of Baathism in which “Arabism’s most basic model always resided in its own past,” and the consciousness of pan-Arabism has been ideologized in such a way as to borrow virtually nothing of the constellation of values associated with the European Enlightenment (Makiya, 1989, pp. 189-212).

³⁵ Ironically enough, he was strongly supported and financed by the U.S. (through the CIA), Pakistan (through the ISI, the Intelligence Service that rules Pakistan behind the scenes), and Saudi Arabia.

Other regions of the world have actually gone through such a modernization crisis (see, e.g. Janos, 1982), and eventually succeeded in resolving it (think of the changes undergone by Japan while shifting from the Tokugawa to the Meiji era). What makes the present predicament of the Muslim world, and the Arab world in particular, so persistent and crippling is the fact that it is sustained by humiliating military setbacks (which actually form part of a long tradition, since the Arabs have gone from defeat to defeat since the victory of the Mongols over the Abbasids in 1258), and by the Western superpower's openly declared support of a small-sized enemy embedded in the body of the Arab world. In the words of Hourani:

“The events of 1967 [the crushing military defeat of the Egyptian Army at the hands of the Israelis], and the processes of change which followed them, made more intense that disturbance of spirits, that sense of a world gone wrong, which had already been expressed in the poetry of the 1950s and 1960s. The defeat of 1967 was widely regarded as being not only a military setback but a kind of moral judgement. If the Arabs had been defeated so quickly, completely and publicly, might it not be a sign that there was something rotten in their societies and in the moral system which they expressed? . . . the problem of identity was expressed in terms of the relationship between the heritage of the past and the needs of the present. Should the Arab peoples tread a path marked out for them from outside, or could they find in their own inherited beliefs and culture those values which could give them a direction in the modern world?” (Hourani, 1991, pp. 442-43; see also Kassir, 2004).

To the extent that the first option appears as a surrender of independence to the external world, preference tends to be given to the second option. In the words of Galal Amin: “To be healthy, their political and economic life should be derived from their own moral values, which themselves could have no basis except in religion” (cited from Hourani, 1991, p. 443). In the same vein, Peter Mansfield wrote that after 1967 there was a sudden reversal of the common opinion that the Arabs were determined to catch up with the West's material and technical progress. As a matter of fact, “secular Arab nationalism had been proved a failure and was dead; the masses would reject Western progress and turn to fundamentalist Islam as their only hope” (Mansfield, 2003, p. 325; see also Dawisha, 2003). This fundamentalist Islam provided a kind of escape valve, allowing political rulers to eschew reforms of their country's economic and political system, an observation that dovetails with the above-reported finding of El Badawi and Makdisi (2007) that in Arab countries interstate conflicts and wars tend to promote authoritarianism rather than a shift toward democracy.

All this is strangely reminiscent of the rebellion led against the Ottoman government in the early seventeenth century by young and idle students from religious schools. Their leader was a gifted preacher, Kadizade Mehmed, whose sermons emphasized the evils of innovation (“every innovation is heresy, every heresy is error, and every error leads to hell”). His followers considered the Ottoman military and high Ottoman society as “inept and morally bankrupt,” and they “envisioned the recurring debacles on the battlefield as well as the persistent palace scandals as manifestations of a turn away from true Islam.” As pointed out by Daniel Goffman: “In important ways, they constituted a forerunner to Islamic reformers in later centuries who, whether Ottoman, Egyptian, Wahhabi, or Iranian, consistently have argued that the West has defeated Islamic states only because their ostensibly Muslim leaders have forgotten their religious roots. Bring back the Muhammedan state, they all argue, and Islam will again take up its leading rank in the world order” (Goffman, 2002, pp. 118-19).

To whom does the new literal and puritanical Islam appeal most? Not to the poorest of the poor, for whom Westernization is magical since it means an abundance of food and medicine. Nor to the rural dwellers, who are immersed in “a kind of village Islam that had adapted itself to local cultures and to normal human desires,” an Islam that is pluralistic and tolerant,

allowing the worship of saints, the singing of religious hymns, or the cherishing of art—all activities formally disallowed in Islam.³⁶ Religious and cultural syncretism was thus an hallmark of most rural societies in the lands of Islam (see above, Section 2).³⁷ The people to whom Islam appeals most are “the educated hordes entering the cities of the Middle East or seeking education and jobs in the West” (Zakaria, 2003, pp. 143-44). Also, being cut off from the ties of kinship and neighborliness to which they were accustomed in their village, rural migrants found a sort of compensation in strong Muslim urban organizations. In other words, the sense of alienation or loss of identity which they experienced in the cities “could be counterbalanced by that of belonging to a universal community of Islam, . . . and this provided a language in terms of which they could express their grievances and aspirations” (Hourani, 1991, p. 452).³⁸

Identification with Islamist groups among alienated urban people has been further aided by the fact that in many countries Islamist movements were able to capitalize on the lack of legitimacy of poorly performing states and their failure to integrate the entire population and to increase political participation (many regimes have had only narrow support within particular ethnic, religious or tribal minority groups). They have also filled the gap left by the retreat of the state from the distribution of essential services, such as health, education, and childcare. In Egypt, for example, the number of Muslim NGOs increased from six hundred in the early 1970s to two thousand in the mid-1980s, and the number of private mosques grew from fourteen thousand to forty thousand from the early 1960s to the early 1980s (Huuhtanen, 2005, pp. 78-79; see also Harik, 2005, for a detailed review of the Hezbollah’s social activities in Lebanon). Typically, a privately funded Islamic charitable institution provides a range of services that are organized around a private mosque, including donations for the poor, a clinic for health care, a kindergarten, and a primary school. Often, these institutions have also founded religious schools, orphanages, and homes for the elderly.

In certain contexts, it must be noted, Islamist doctrines are used by middle class people who want to oppose social groups considered to enjoy undue privileges owing to their close connection to the regime. In Syria, for example, the Muslim Brothers did not have the same role as those in Egypt: to a great extent they served as a medium for the opposition of the Sunni urban population to the domination of a regime identified with the *Alawi* community (Hourani, 1991, pp. 457). In Côte d’Ivoire, the rise of Wahhabism occurred during a period of increasing disruption of traditional society under conditions of fast- growing urbanization and migration movements after World War II. The Wahhabi doctrine attracted rich merchants whom it supplied with an ideology that was both anti-establishment and “bourgeois.” It was anti-establishment in the sense of being opposed to the feudal-like elite of the marabouts, who are at the heart of traditional Islam, but are viewed as impostors illegitimately interposing between God and the faithful. And it was “bourgeois” in the sense of being emancipated from the constraints of the traditional aristocratic system (Miran, 2006, p. 250).

³⁶ Revealingly, a recent study has shown that in Morocco rural women are more open than more educated urban women to the new Family Code, which contains provisions calling into question traditional interpretation of the Islamic law regarding men-women relations (Aquil, 2006).

³⁷ In Afghanistan, for example, the village *mullah* has no relation to the superior clergy: he is the employee of the village community in which he exercises the functions of a rite performer (Nahavandi, 1999, p. 86).

³⁸ Naipaul’s account of Malaysia and Indonesia takes very much the same view. For him, indeed, the problem is that people are cut off from their native rural communities whose customs are the outcome of a subtle blending of pagan, archaic rites (or Hindu ones) with Islamic tenets, that is, Islam adapted to everyday village realities. Lacking solid landmarks in their new modern, urban life, rural migrants face a loss of identity. It is in Islam, and in the life of the mosque, with its rules and rituals, that “they found again, or reconstructed, something like the old feudal or rural community that for them no longer existed.” After having been exposed to radical Islamic teaching, these new urban dwellers want to purify their native villages, which means cleansing them of pagan (and Hindu) customs (Naipaul, 1982, pp. 369, 387).

It is true that its egalitarian discourse also appealed to low-caste people willing to liberate themselves from the yoke of the traditional system of hierarchy, but it is only in the 1980s that it started recruiting into the urban poor. For them, Wahhabism offered a partial response to their quest for social protection and spiritual advice in a context of urban economic precariousness (p. 285).³⁹ What bears most emphasis is that behind the screen of religious antagonisms lay genuine social and political conflicts:

“ . . . the battleground was less religious and doctrinal than social and political. As a matter of fact, the recourse to the religious sphere through Wahhabi sectarianism allowed dissatisfied people to express differences that could not be overtly declared in the political realm. Accusations of intolerance, dogmatism and narrow-mindedness against the Wahhabis were therefore partly correct: since their separatism was grounded elsewhere, no discussion of a doctrinal nature was possible and no practical compromise could be reached with traditionalist Muslims” (Miran 2006, p. 259–my translation).

By the same logic, educated and urbanized women wearing the Islamic veil may do so as a manner of escaping traditional norms that control their physical movements outside the family space. By manifesting their belief in a pure Islam, they claim the right to relate directly to God, so as to be dispensed from the need to follow repressive rules enforced by men in the name of Islam, and thereby obtain access to public life: the wearing of the veil is “the sign of submission to God and not to men” (Boubekur, 2004, p. 151; see also Adelhah, 1991; Göle, 1993). The very fact that the veil allows them to conceal their body more completely provides an astute rebuttal of the argument according to which women’s free movements out of doors threaten the honor of the whole family. As a final example of the importance of the socio-economic context for a proper understanding of the precise meaning of Islamist movements, it is worth remembering the peculiarity of the Iranian case. In that country, the responsiveness of certain powerful social classes, including business people, to appeals expressed in religious language is particularly strong because in the country’s history, there was a religious leadership able to act as a rallying point for all movements of opposition: relatively independent of the government, and generally respected for its piety and learning, it had always acted “as the spokesman of the collective consciousness” (Hourani, 1991, pp. 457-58).

To sum up, in a situation of protracted crisis such as that experienced by the Muslim world, a radicalization of religious beliefs has taken place at the urging of frustrated urban groups, and often, as we have seen earlier, by political rulers themselves. Radicalization is more tempting when people can associate the failure of their governments to meet the challenges of modernity with the failure of secularism and the Western way (most notably in Egypt, Syria, Sudan, and Iraq, where socialism, nationalism, and secularism were the dominant ideologies of the post-independence ruling elites), and when military defeats are added to disappointing economic performances, and the corruption and inefficiency of the rulers. In the process, the achievements of Arab secularism in such fields as education and legal development (civil and commercial laws were made secular toward the end of the nineteenth century in countries like Egypt and Syria) are ignored or, worse, they are considered to be a liability. An important outcome of the perceived failure of secularism is that Islam has little competition in articulating popular opposition to authoritarian and corrupt regimes. In the words of Zakaria:

“The Arab world is a political desert with no real political parties, no free press, and few pathways to dissent. As a result, the mosque became the place to discuss politics. As the only place that cannot be banned in Muslim societies, it is where all the hate and opposition toward the regimes collected and grew. The language of opposition became, in these lands,

³⁹ Until political liberalization began in 1969, Houphouët-Boigny’s authoritarian rule succeeded in suppressing the Wahhabi movement rather effectively.

the language of religion. This combination of religion and politics has proven to be combustible. Religion, at least the religion of the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), stresses moral absolutes. But politics is all about compromise. The result has been a ruthless, winner-take-all attitude toward political life. Fundamentalist organizations have done more than talk. From the Muslim Brotherhood to Hamas and Hizbullah, they actively provide social services, medical assistance, counseling, and temporary housing. For those who treasure civil society, it is disturbing to see that in the Middle East these illiberal groups *are* civil society... If there is one great cause of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, it is the total failure of political institutions in the Arab world” (Zakaria, 2003, pp. 142-43; see also Kassir, 2004, p. 39; Hassan and Kivimäki, 2005, p. 133).

Islamist opposition is all the more intransigent as many Islamist teachers are rather poor thinkers prone to extreme simplification: self-proclaimed mullahs form an Islamic “lumpen-intelligentsia” made of ill-educated, ignorant people who misunderstand Islam owing to their lack of historical culture (Roy, 1990, p. 73).⁴⁰ In some places, important official positions can even be awarded to ill-trained people, such as in Faisalabad (Pakistan) where a *qadi* (Islamic judge) can get his diploma after a six-week period considered equivalent to a master’s degree in law (Piquard, 1999, p. 73). It was a military despot, General Zia ul-Haq, who conceded to the *ulema* (in exchange for their support) that the degrees awarded by the *madrasas* could be recognized as the equivalent of university degrees provided some portions of the general curriculum were also taught in them (Zaman, 2007, p. 78).

We are now ready to address our last question: why have Islamic countries been rather ineffective, historically, in meeting the challenges of modern economic growth and in gradually moving toward a more secular approach to social order and the role of individuals in it?

5. Path dependence and the Islamic “institutional complex”

5.1 Statement of the problem

Part of the answer to the above questions has already been suggested earlier. Emphasis was there laid on the cost of reforming societies where religion can easily be manipulated by political rulers and their contenders. Moreover, as attested by the historical experience of Iran, middle class people may choose to ally themselves with religious leaders in order to achieve better protection against the behavior of greedy state officials and the unfavorable policies of an incompetent and corrupt state. In these conditions, it is difficult for progressive elements of society to call for reforms which religious authorities could consider impious, or to resort to secular concepts and language in support of the desired changes. What needs to be added now, in the light of Kuran’s work, is that the legacy of the classical Islamic system may have given rise to an “institutional trap,” impeding both economic development and the rise of civil society.

5.2 The institutional trap inherited from the classical Islamic system

According to Kuran, a direct consequence of the historical context in which Islam was born is that the Qur’an contains rules prescribing the rightful behavior to follow in a number of civil matters (see above, Section 2). In matters that it addresses explicitly, the Qur’an carries an especially strong authority, a feature absent from Christianity, whose sacred texts are framed in general and allegorical terms. Kuran focuses attention on a number of central institutions

⁴⁰ The young mullahs have passed sufficient time in the school system to consider themselves as educated persons and to refuse to go back to the land or work in a factory, yet they have not succeeded in going beyond secondary school (Roy, 1990, p. 73).

born of the classical Islamic system (whether based on the Qur'an or not)⁴¹ that had the effect of blocking critical institutional changes, including in modern Turkey: the Islamic law of commercial partnerships, which limited enterprise continuity and inter-generational persistence; the Islamic inheritance system, which encouraged wealth fragmentation and restrained capital accumulation by creating incentives for keeping partnerships small; the *waqf* system, which inhibited resource pooling; and Islam's traditional aversion to the concept of legal personhood, which hampered the emergence of private corporate organizations (Kuran, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2004d, 2005, 2006). Critical among these institutions is the inheritance system (based on the Qur'an), which actually prevented the Islamic contract law from evolving as it has done in Western Europe, where people found it relatively easy to modify inheritance practices in response to changing needs (since the Bible did not prescribe rules for transferring wealth across generations).

As a result, a whole series of organizational changes that proved essential for the development of a modern economy did not occur in the Muslim lands. The fact that, from the late eighteenth century onward, the indigenous Christians and Jews came increasingly to dominate the most lucrative sectors of the Middle Eastern economy bears witness to the adverse role of Islamic institutions since, unlike the Muslims, members of these minorities were free to choose their law system (Kuran, 2004c; Goffman, 2002, p. 73). At the start of the twentieth century, as a result, almost all large commercial enterprises in the Middle East were owned by either foreigners or local religious minorities (Kuran, 2004b, pp. 72, 84-87; 2004c; Issawi, 1971, pp. 67-69). The example of Turkey is particularly interesting. Islamic law was abrogated there when the Young Turks seized power from the Ottomans and accelerated the country's move along the Westernizing secular path. It thus shows that the lingering effect of erstwhile Islamic institutions inspired by the *shari'a*, rather than the Islamic law itself, may be the real stumbling block to modern economic growth. In this way, institutions that were adapted to the prevailing economic conditions at the time of their emergence have proven a barrier at a more advanced stage of economic development, by which time Western societies had undergone basic transformations (Jones, 1981; Landes, 1998; Kuran, 2004b; Greif, 2006).

Recently, Ghislaine Lydon (2007) has lent further support to Kuran's thesis by arguing that a basic flaw in Islamic legal systems lay in their failure to invest paperwork with legal personality. Paradoxically, while Qur'anic verses placed great emphasis on the importance of writing and documenting credit transactions, written documents such as debt contracts and even *fatwas* had no value in and of themselves, and could not therefore be used as legal evidence in a court of law. This lack of faith in paper stemmed from the belief that documents can easily be tampered with or simply forged, whereas oral testimonies given under an oath by witnesses are quite reliable. This limitation constituted a serious obstacle to the modern development of Muslim economies because it inhibited the growth of "paper companies," such as joint-stock companies or corporations, as well as the development of complex and large-scale enterprise in commerce, industry, and the key sector of banking.⁴²

⁴¹ As noted by Kuran, the central economic institutions of the Middle East evolved over the three centuries following the 'age of felicity' (the period of Muhammad and his first four successors). They were firmly in place around 1000 and were to persist up to the nineteenth century (Kuran, 2004b, p. 72).

⁴² In another recent paper, Hania Abou al-Shamat (2007) examines the effects in Egypt of the legal reforms of 1883 which established native courts based on the Napoleonic code of law to deal with civil, commercial and penal disputes. All Egyptians, regardless of religion, had equal access to and representation in the courts, and documentation requirements were incorporated into the system (written documents could be used as evidence in legal proceedings). The author finds that it was more than a third a century after the legal changes were made that national business interests responded to them by creating large enterprises and increasing investment in the industrial and banking sectors. She mentions a number of reasons for this delayed response, including poor

In contrast to the above, Maxime Rodinson (1966) contends that Islamic rulings, such as *fatwas*, “represented a formality that was obtained without difficulty from accommodating theologians, in order to put in the clear religious opinion leaders who had already decided to adopt a certain measure for reasons that were strictly economic and political” (p. 193). He delves extensively into the case of the interest rate and argues that Islamic prohibitions in this matter have always been circumvented: interest was usually charged under forms considered legitimate, such as commissions or salaries (pp. 179-200). If the argument is historically correct, the example is ill-chosen because Islamic law does not prescribe a penalty for dealing in interest, and because, as pointed out by Rodinson himself, it aims at curbing excessive interest rates rather than prohibiting the practice altogether (p. 189). In fact, the claim that Islam categorically prohibits all interest, regardless of form, purpose, or magnitude, on the ground that it violates a sacred Islamic command, has encountered strong resistance from the earliest days of Islam, and in all large communities Muslims have never stopped dealing in interest.⁴³ In this, they were aided by the jurists of Islam who devised, as in European territories under Christian rule, stratagems that allowed people to circumvent Islam’s presumed interest ban without violating its letter (Kuran, 2004b, p. 73).⁴⁴

A number of important implications can be drawn from Kuran’s analysis. First, the reform of key institutions appears especially difficult in the lands of Islam because they are part of a legacy anchored in sacred texts or in the sacralized period of the caliphate. The only way to modify or replace these institutions is to propose a new interpretation of Islamic law, which would require quite a strong authority. Such a move has actually taken place in a few countries recently, yet interestingly, it was initiated by an enlightened despot in the absence of real pressures from the civil society. In Morocco and Tunisia, autocratic rulers have, indeed, succeeded in holding traditionalist religious forces in check so as to enact progressive legislation dealing with personal and family matters. The case of Tunisia is particularly interesting because the new code of personal status, enacted immediately after national independence (in August 1956), is remarkably progressive (e.g. the practices of polygamy and repudiation are forbidden).⁴⁵ It was essentially the work of President Bourguiba who was eager to legitimize his project of social and political reforms by referring to a modernized version of the discourse of Islam, stressing the need for a new *ijtihad* and the role of reason in interpreting Islamic laws and prescriptions.⁴⁶ According to him, indeed, the main cause of the

enforcement of the new laws by the native courts, shortage of Egyptian judges and lawyers qualified to serve in them, low trust of Egyptians in the mixed courts competent to deal with cases involving both indigenous and foreign interests, and unfair competition from foreign countries (under the capitulations, foreigners enjoyed lower tariffs and exemption from taxes). She concludes, rather sensibly, that reform in law is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of new business forms and increased investment in Muslim countries.

⁴³ In Iran, for instance, interest rates averaged 12.50 percent around 1850 but could vary between 18-30 percent when money became scarce (Issawi, 1971). Under the Safavids, the *ulemas* themselves developed various subterfuges to make commercial habits compatible with Islamic precepts, particularly in the matter of interest rates (Floor, 2000).

⁴⁴ Revealingly, it is only with the present-day radicalization of Islam that we observe an energetic campaign against conventional banking in countries formally committed to Islamization (Kuran, 2004a, p. 122). In these countries, indeed, Islamic banks have emerged through efforts aimed at differentiating the ‘Islamic way of life’ from other lifestyles, particularly from those identified with the West. Muslim piety is thus increasingly regarded as involving the shunning of interest. It bears noticing that, in countries where Islamic banks coexist with conventional banks, and where people have the freedom to choose between them, only a minority of the Muslim population maintains accounts at Islamic banks, whose market share is a tiny 1percent (*ibid.* p. 123; see also Rahnema and Nomani, 1990; Kuran, 1998; Tripp, 2006).

⁴⁵ The same cannot be said of the 1984 family code of Algeria, which appears to uphold the traditional view of women within society and the family (Mitchell, 1997).

⁴⁶ The concept of *ijtihad* points to the process through which a jurist apprehends God’s law and can turn it into a legal ruling.

backwardness of the Muslims during centuries of protracted decadence lay in their refusal to accept the necessity of reason, and their imprisonment in tradition and imitation (Camau and Geisser, 2004).

Second, we have already noted that in some countries a reform movement is hampered by a strong tradition of cooperation between middle class people (including merchants and business people) and religious scholars, against the arbitrary rule of corrupt state officials. The absence of key reforms then appears as the price that those people are willing to pay in order not to antagonize key allies in their struggle against tyranny. What must be added now is that, even when there is no such strong alliance, a civil society able to push reforms and confront the state is hard to come by for reasons that have again to do with the legacy of traditional Islamic law. According to Kuran, there are two main channels through which Islam exerted its adverse influence on political freedom. For one thing, because the institution of the *waqf* benefited the economic elite (since they could thereby protect their wealth), it discouraged them from demanding the constitutional enforcement of private property rights.⁴⁷ For another thing, by preventing the emergence of large commercial enterprises, Islam made potential opposition to autocratic rule more fragmented and less effective (Kuran, 2004b, pp. 80-83; 2006, pp. 819-23). It is, therefore, no coincidence that the first parliament of the Middle East (the Ottoman parliament in Istanbul) was established only in 1876, and under Western influences (Kuran, 2004b, pp. 82, 87).

Third, because economic and political reforms did not occur owing to the peculiar legacy of Islam, modern values and ideas of the kind propounded by the European Enlightenment could not take strong roots in most of the lands of Islam (with the exception of Turkey). True, by emphasizing the possibility of attaining the truth through the use of human reason as well as the need for liberty in the interpretation of the *shari'a*,⁴⁸ a number of thinkers and philosophers of Islam have undoubtedly pursued a kind of European Enlightenment—think of Rumi and Yünüs Emre (the Sufi Spinoza) in Turkey, Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Sorawardi in Persia, or Averroes (Ibn Rushd) in Andalus. Yet, even among progressive philosophers, the ultimate reference to God and the divine world has never been abandoned⁴⁹ and, in any event, the momentum which they initiated was not strong enough to alter in a durable manner the traditionalist perceptions about the role of religion in social and political life.⁵⁰

5.3 A qualifying remark

Kuran has stressed that it is only a few, but admittedly critical, institutional legacies of the classical Islamic system which are problematic for modern economic growth. In many matters, especially in economic matters, the Islamic principles, whether contained in the Qur'an or in the hadith, are stated so vaguely or so ambiguously that they can be interpreted

⁴⁷ According to Kuran, the institution of the *waqf* itself was conceived as a device to shelter personal assets and enhance the material security of high officials: it actually represented “an implicit bargain between rulers and their wealthy subjects” (Kuran, 2006, pp. 799-802).

⁴⁸ Averroes thus believed that not all the words of the Qur'an should be taken literally: “When the literal meaning of Qur'anic verses appeared to contradict the truths to which philosophers arrived by the exercise of reason, those verses needed to be interpreted metaphorically” (Hourani, 1991, p. 175).

⁴⁹ For Averroes, for example, if there is no incompatibility between faith and human reason, the latter remains inspired by God.

⁵⁰ The persisting need to refer to God in the Islamic world is apparent in the writings not only of progressive philosophers, but also economic thinkers. For example, ‘authentic’ economic *Shi'ite* writers maintain that private ownership of the means of production is respectable, that rent and profit are legitimate pursuits, that trade and commerce are to be encouraged, and that the market is “the basic economic institution for the provision of the needs of the Islamic community.” Yet their vision is of a religious system whose objective is “to serve God on earth.” Therefore institutions and processes “must be structured according to and operate within the framework of the *Shari'a*” (Rahmena and Nomani, 1990, p. 160; see also Haenni, 2005).

in many diverse ways (Kuran, 2004d). In matters of inheritance, however, the statements are extremely precise (see *sura* IV “About women,” verses 7-176), and it is this inflexibility which caused Islamic contract law to freeze. It must now be pointed out that, even in these matters, the manner in which the Islamic law is interpreted and enforced depends to a large extent upon the prevailing configuration of social and political forces, including the degree to which a society has absorbed Islamic tenets and the context of historical constraints and opportunities.

Thus, in old Islamized communities of rural West Africa and some regions of the Maghreb (e.g. in Kabylia, Algeria, or among the Berbers in Morocco), it is the customary rather than the Islamic inheritance law that tends to be enforced. In the Juula and Hausa lands, religious leaders did not always demand strict religious adherence on the part of the local lay Muslim community. In particular, descent rules could be manipulated so as to avoid dispersal of business assets by selecting one unique successor among slaves/clients (rather than relatives) recruited into the trading organization as junior partners. In fact, specific arrangements “depended almost entirely upon arrangements made within a modified version of the secular kinship idiom” (Austen, 1987, pp. 43-44). The major social function of Islam in these territories was “to provide merchants with an identity which reinforced their occupational role,” allowing them to act as “representatives of a cult that had material and spiritual connections to a universe larger than the parochial world of local villages, or even savanna empires” (pp. 42-43).⁵¹

In northern Senegal, Islamization dates back to the colonization of the (middle) valley of the Senegal river by successive waves of foreign conquerors since the tenth century, and maraboutic power used the 1776 revolution to assert itself and establish the Almaami regime based on Islamic law (Minvielle, 1977). My own field investigations in the area showed that the Qur’anic prescriptions regarding inheritance are well-known by local rural inhabitants who often refer to them as “the rule governing the behavior of Muslims.” When their actual rule-breaking behavior is pointed to them (since they tend to follow the custom according to which women do not inherit land), they feel somewhat embarrassed. They are keen to remark that (i) nothing prevents a woman from calling the local marabout and requiring the enforcement of the Islamic norm, and (ii) daughters often receive some sort of compensation from their brothers (e.g. in the form of harvest shares).⁵²

In general, it can be confidently asserted that the Islam of the villages is rather flexible compared to the more tightly controlled Islam of the cities. It is actually in cities that puritanical expressions such as are found in Islamist movements have been born, and it is in cities (and rural areas nearby) that strict interpretations of Islam hold sway. Since modern economic growth is typically anchored in urban environments, the institutional flexibility of “village Islam” is of not much help when the problem is to develop sophisticated forms of economic organizations.

It is true that, even in cities, Islamic rulings can be circumvented, yet there are costs involved and those costs are higher if a puritanical atmosphere prevails. Changes in institutions may occur through surreptitious modifications, lengthy negotiations and casuistry, legal fictions, exploitation of ambiguities, and the corruption of rule enforcers. The Islamic prohibition of

⁵¹ In the words of Aboubacar Fofana, an influential reformist Muslim cleric of Côte d’Ivoire, “what matters is not where an individual comes from, but what he or she does.” Muslim brotherhoods put emphasis on personal merit and commitment, not on social status and ethnic identity: they are based on elective membership (Miran, 2006, pp. 450, 472-73).

⁵² For a similar observation in Niger, see Cooper, 1997. See also Bedoucha, 1987, for another illustration of the flexible interpretation of Qur’anic inheritance law among the Tuaregs, based on a subtle blending of written tenets, oral tradition and tacit understanding.

innovations (*bid'a*) offers a good illustration. The systematic prohibition of all techniques and practices differing from those prevailing in the times of the Prophet has been quickly abandoned, and the distinction, introduced in the Middle Ages, between what constitute “good” and “bad” innovations was a useful compromise, enabling rulers and scholars to escape absurd situations (Rodinson, 1966, pp. 180-81). The fact remains, however, that the notion of harmful innovations has persisted, and can be potentially used by a conservative *ulema* to block useful changes, or increase their cost. For instance, upon the request of Abdul Aziz, king of Saudi Arabia, *ulema* close to him had to exert themselves to find in the sacred texts a proper justification for an innovation as fundamental as photography. This innovation was eventually accepted, despite the idolatry of pictorial art, on the ground that it brings together light and shadow, which are both divine creations (Nomani and Rahnema, 1994, p. 139). In most other Arab countries where such a puritanical atmosphere did not prevail, the transaction costs involved in constructing a religious justification of photography were saved.⁵³

Furthermore, when changes are brought through essentially illegal practices, pressures for fundamental institutional reform are reduced, and vast constituencies with a vested interest in the status quo are generated (Kuran, 2003, pp. 428-31; 2004b, p. 81).⁵⁴ Thus, centuries of efforts to overcome the inflexibility of institutions such as the *waqf* system have bred a culture of corruption and nepotism in state circles. This, in conjunction with the deep-rooted habit of personalizing exchanges and attributing responsibility for an adverse externality to a natural person or group rather than to a legal person, makes the establishment of the rule of law such a hard challenge in the Middle East today (Kuran, 2004b, pp. 86-87).

6. Conclusion

In the light of historical evidence, it is hard to sustain that politics and Islam have been systematically merged together, or that politics has been the handmaiden of Islam. In ordinary times, even after the legal community of Islamic scholars (judges, teachers, legal advisers and jurisconsults) was set firmly in place during the early Abbasids, political rulers have had the upper hand. (The same holds for Western European history, where in fact, separation between the state and the church has been historically sparked by the church rather than by the state, and this was because the church wanted to avoid being an instrument in political games played by ambitious rulers.) Islamic religious authorities and groups typically played the role of a buffer between the state and the people, often providing shelter against the ruler's abuses and a mediation mechanism to encourage negotiation with political opponents. In times of crisis, however, when the state was either impotent or excessively tyrannical, such politico-religious equilibrium broke down and religion gained greater significance. Yet the growing role of religion could also be the result of a strategy of political instrumentalization whereby the political ruler used his Islamic credentials to tame opposition and crush dissent.

⁵³ Another interesting illustration of both the ingenuity of the jurists in adapting the Islamic law (in this case, the absence of recognition of human groups as legal entities, and the Hanafi law of inheritance—inheritance is not confined to direct descendants and each heir has a canonical right to a fixed share of the deceased's property) and the ultimate constraints set by it, has been provided by Kermeli (1997) while dealing with the treatment meted out to church *waqfs* under the Ottoman empire. By redefining the monks of a monastery as a family, Ebu's Su'ud (who became *seyhulislam* in 1545) recognized their collectivity, and enabled them to receive the property belonging to a deceased monk (since they were considered as his offspring). However, he ordered them to make *waqfs* in their own names, and not in the name of the monastery, since monastic *waqfs* were not permitted in Islamic law. Realizing the pitfalls of this legal fiction used for the benefit of the monks of Mount Athos, Ebu's Su'ud quickly issued a *fatwa* restricting similar claims from other monasteries.

⁵⁴ In the words of Kuran: “to identify opportunities for circumventing a law is not to establish that law's irrelevance or to prove that the opportunities were available to everyone” (Kuran, 2003, p. 430).

Lewis thus appears to have the wrong diagnosis when he contends that the root cause of the existence of illiberal regimes in Middle Eastern countries lies in politics being the handmaiden of Islam. The opposite appears much closer to the truth. Moreover, he does not explain satisfactorily—unless one is convinced by his argument about the critical moment of the foundation of the faith—why the separation between state and religion has not occurred at some time in their history, as happened in Western Europe. This lapse is not accidental, since Lewis is convinced that the merging of state and religion is an intrinsic feature of Islam, i.e. a situation that cannot be remedied. (Incidentally, he does not explain why separation between the two entities took more than ten centuries to occur in Western Christianity, while in Eastern Christianity the process does not seem complete even now.

According to Timur Kuran and Avner Greif, a critical obstacle to essential economic and political reforms (and, it can be added, to changes in ideas and values that would justify the need for an autonomous sphere of economic activity, unimpeded by political and religious restrictions) lies in some elements of the “institutional complex” inherited from the classical system of Islam. These caused the emergence of institutional traps at the time when Western Europe was making rapid and sustained advances built on critical institutional innovations. A legacy of the Islamic civilization, which was well suited for progress in pre-modern times, thus came to hamper economic achievements equaling those of Western Europe when modern times arrived.

If we follow such a dynamic approach to the present crisis of Islamic societies, we have to admit that culture in general, and religion in particular, can be an impediment to progress. By way of consequence, to stress that religion is often instrumentalized by key political players does not imply that it may not hinder the modernization of a country: there is, indeed, a core institutional legacy of Islam that imposes an ultimate set of constraints upon the range of feasible policies and reforms. Maxime Rodinson and Fareed Zakaria have argued that religion, because it is easily manipulated by political actors, does not constitute an autonomous force that is, by itself, susceptible of promoting or retarding economic growth and development. But the independent impact of Islam cannot be altogether dismissed; and a statement like “the key is not religious reform, but political and economic reform . . . if you get the politics and economics right, culture will follow” (Zakaria, 2003, p. 150) is too simple.

Even if one disagrees with the theory of the “institutional trap” propounded by Kuran (and Greif), there remains the fact that, in Islam, no clear chain of command exists that is able to enforce a strict, uniform interpretation of the message of the faith. The consequence of this situation is that socio-religious movements eager to block progress toward individual emancipation have numerous possibilities open to them, and elites are provided with a rather cheap default option whereby they can escape the effects of their misrule and suppress political opposition. An intractable obscurantist deadlock may thus be created in which puritanical interpretations of Islam—emphasizing the letter rather than the spirit of the Qur’an—as well as mythical appraisals of early achievements of the Islamic civilization (during the caliphate period) emerge and gain ground.

The central question then arises as to how politics can be made right in such conditions. In particular, given the high costs and risks of undertaking the reforms necessary for effective competition with advanced countries in the modern age, how can more democratic institutions be established and how can political integration be achieved without reference to Islam? The task is all the more daunting as international events have considerably increased the temptation to instrumentalize Islam for rulers who have suffered a series of humiliating defeats or setbacks at the hands of advanced countries, which often had a poor understanding of, and paid insufficient attention to Arab interests and problems. Had the Western powers

taken, early on, a more enlightened route in dealing with the Palestinian question, perhaps the nascent Arab secular movements in the fifties and sixties would have been given a better opportunity to take root. Given the highly explosive circumstances prevailing in the Middle East today, it is perhaps not coincidental that enlightened despots such as Ataturk or Bourguiba, determined to embark upon a new interpretation of the Islamic law that would leave ample room for the role of reason, might appear to hold the best prospects for breaking out of the obscurantist deadlock. If such an implication is correct, advanced countries, which proclaim their willingness to promote democracy in this part of the world, are confronted with a strange paradox which they should ponder.

There are obviously complex interactions and feedback effects between culture and institutional change that are ignored by both Lewis and Zakaria. When they are taken into account, a basic contrast emerges between the “virtuous” development trajectory of Western Europe in modern times and the “vicious” path trodden by Islamic countries. In the former countries, institutional and ideological changes have reinforced each other in a beneficial manner, deriving much of their strength from more or less continuous improvements in living standards; whereas in the latter, economic performance and social progress have remained hampered by a long tradition of despotism and insufficient competitiveness with the advanced part of the Western world, coupled with an adverse international environment tainted by a crippling regional conflict at the heart of the Middle East.

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