



**RELIGION, POLITICS, AND DEVELOPMENT? LESSONS FROM
EUROPE AND THE LANDS OF ISLAM**

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EUDN/WP 2006 - 11

RELIGION, POLITICS, AND DEVELOPMENT? LESSONS FROM EUROPE AND THE LANDS OF ISLAM

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September 2006

Abstract: *The question as to whether religion can block economic development and institutional change or is a purely endogenous factor is at the heart of an old controversy dating back to Max Weber. It assumes particular importance today because of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and prolonged economic stagnation in the Middle East. This paper rests on a critical examination of two opposite views. On one side, lies the thesis of Bernard Lewis according to whom certain specific features of the Islamic world –the lack of separation between religion and politics–creates particular difficulties on the way to modern economic growth. And, on the other side, we find the approach of Fareed Zakaria for whom the problem of the Islamic world essentially originates in the sphere of politics. Using a comparative approach that also looks at materials drawn from the historical experiences of Western Europe and Russia, the present contribution stresses the need to adopt an intermediate approach allowing for path dependence and the specificity of the Islamic “institutional complex”. In the light of the work of Timur Kuran, it also suggests that the view according to which Islam is largely instrumentalized by the political elite is not incompatible with the reckoning of Islam as a (partly) autonomous factor influencing economic performance.*

Keywords: Culture, religion, Islam, Christianity, Middle East, Russia, political economics.
JEL classification codes: Z12, P16, A13

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* I want to express my thanks to Timur Kuran who offered me detailed and pertinent comments on a previous version of the paper. My gratitude also goes to participants in various seminars where this paper was presented and, in particular, to the Arab colleagues who have manifested a great deal of interest in the ideas treated in it, and discussed them with me.

1. *Introduction*

Whether cultural factors can be an obstacle to economic growth and development is one of the most controversial issues in the field of development studies. On the one hand, there are people who believe, in the wake of the sociologist Max Weber, that some countries are endowed with a culture that is inimical to growth (see, e.g., Putnam, 1993; Fukuyama, 1995). Religion being an important part of a cultural endowment, it suggests itself as a possible factor promoting or hindering growth. Recently, there have even been a spate of econometric attempts to measure the impact of religion on performances that matter for growth and development. On the whole, these cross-country regressions lead to the conclusion that religion does, indeed, affect growth or growth-related performances. 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), the conclusion emerges that Protestants, Catholics, and Hindus, unlike the Muslims, tend to be favorably disposed toward private ownership. And from that of Barro and McCleary (2003), Hinduism, Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and Protestantism appear to be negatively associated with per capita income growth relative to Catholicism, while Sala-i-Martin *et al.* (2004), who use a larger sample, find the opposite result 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. In fact, the null hypothesis that religious affiliation is uncorrelated with 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.

On the other hand, there are those who reject that view and consider cultural explanations as a priori dubious and ad hoc ways of accounting for poor growth performances. Many economists actually belong to this second category. 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 inconclusive (North, 2005: 136). As a matter of principle, they are deeply suspicious about endogeneity in the relationship between culture and development: rather than blocking development, a particular culture may evolve in a nasty direction as a result of a lack of growth. Such a bias creates insuperable empirical problems as it is practically impossible to find variables that influence culture without affecting growth performances in one way or another. Cross-section econometric procedures are therefore precluded. The endogeneity bias is not the only serious problem that plagues cross-country econometric studies. Measuring and aggregating religious affiliations are quite tricky operations, and it is not at all clear how we must interpret the coefficients associated with religious variables, given the problem of missing variables. Because of the aforementioned problems and because the effects of culture on development and of development on culture carry long time lags, we believe that we can learn much more from a historical foray of the issue than from cross-country regressions. In this paper, we have chosen to adopt the historical approach and to focus on the case of Islam. Such a choice is justified by the fact that the Arab world seems to be stuck in a deep and prolonged crisis while witnessing the ominous rise of fundamentalist movements. It is therefore interesting to ask the question whether the radicalization of Islam is the cause or the consequence of the crisis (see Section 3). Before turning to the case of Islam, however, a brief exploration of the role of religion in Western Europe is attempted (see Section 2) with a view to answering the

following question: have the intellectual revolutions undergone by Europe in modern times helped to spark the economic modernization process or have they instead been induced by this process? The rest of the analysis essentially rests on a critical examination of two opposite views. On one side, is the thesis of Bernard Lewis according to whom certain specific features of the Islamic world –the lack of separation between religion and politics–creates particular difficulties on the way to modern economic growth. And, on the other side, we find the approach of Fareed Zakaria for whom the problem of the Islamic world essentially originates in the sphere of politics. Section 4 summarizes the main conclusions of the paper which stress the need to adopt an intermediate approach allowing for path dependence. In the end, the need is stressed to adopt an intermediate approach allowing for path dependence and the specificity of the Islamic “institutional complex”. It is also emphasized, in the light of the work of Timur Kuran, that the view according to which Islam is largely instrumentalized by the political elite is not incompatible with the reckoning of Islam as a (partly) autonomous factor influencing economic performance.

2. *Some lessons from the history of Western Europe*

The role of the Protestant Reformation

The usual point from where to start a discussion of the role of values and religion in Western European development is, of course, the work of Max Weber *The Ethics of Protestantism and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). To the question as to why did capitalist economic development break through in Northwest Europe and not, say, in China, he found the answer in the Protestant (mainly Calvinist) revolution. He was, indeed, impressed by the fact that the countries of Europe where capitalism broke through were strongly influenced by Protestantism in contrast to the other countries (see also Tawney’s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926)).¹

Protestantism (especially the Calvinist brand), as it is stressed by many scholars, had the effect of “privatizing morality”, placing an ever-increasing stress on the individual, the individual conscience, and the realm of the private as *the* arena of religious activity (Seligman, 1997: 138-141). It implied the rejection of the authority of ecclesiastical institutions and the grounding of religious life in the inner ability of the individual believer to know religious truth. This required that believers read the Bible by themselves instead of listening passively to the truth interpreted and explained by ecclesiastical authorities. A critical mind was also needed which could come only with the development of a scientific spirit. Protestant exploitation of printing actually linked the Reformation to early modern science in diverse ways and, in particular, scientific publication was increasingly taken over

¹ Surprisingly, Karl Marx also emphasized the role of the Reformation –surprisingly because many authors tend to view Weber’s contribution “as a response to the Marxist disregard of culture as an independent force in development” (Szirmai, 2005, p. 489). According to Marx, indeed, the growth of capitalism in Western Europe can be traced back to a trio of key inventions, namely gunpowder (which “blew the world of knighthood to pieces”), the compass (which “discovered the world market and established the colonies”), and the printing press (which “furnished Protestantism with the tools it required and paved the way for the regeneration of science in general”). Contrary to all expectations given his professed adherence to the approach of historical materialism, Marx regarded this last invention as the most important of the three: “it was the most powerful instrument with which to build the essential intellectual foundations” of capitalism (cited from Elster, 1985, p. 287). The important fact about the Protestant Revolution is that it helped to emancipate the individual from the tutelage of the the traditional community, to supply him with a personal identity distinct from the group in which he was born and brought up.

by Protestant printing firms (Eisenstein, 2005: 298). The highest rates of literacy in Europe were attained in Protestant areas, and literacy increased significantly after the Reformation in the areas which adopted the new creed (Todd, 1990).² Another consequence of the Reformation was that new social identities stretching beyond the traditional confines of the neighbourhood, the village, or the parish could be gradually constructed (Platteau, 2000: 302).

Weber particularly stressed that the Protestant ethic promoted the ideal of sober and disciplined pursuit of one's profession in society, as well as the rejection of a submissive attitude vis-à-vis authority and religious hierarchy. He moreover added that the belief in predestination for eternal salvation or damnation created a strong motivation for effort and risk-taking because economic success is a sign of election.

Two strands of criticism can be directed at Weber, and they both lead us to call into question the autonomous character of the Reformation implicit in his thesis. The first line of criticism is the most well-known. It lays emphasis on the fact that many entrepreneurs in the Protestant Low Countries which Weber singled out in support of his theory were actually of Catholic origin. Catholic cities such as Antwerp (or from Northern Italy) were major centres of economic activity and trade prosperity even before Amsterdam became one, and migration provided a direct link between the presence of entrepreneurship in Catholic and Protestant cities. As a matter of fact, in the 16th and 17th 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.³ Many of these migrants later converted to Protestantism.

This sequence of events strongly suggests that, rather than being the driving force of capitalism, the rise of Protestantism has been induced by emerging capitalist entrepreneurship. In other words, 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.⁴ Thus, Luther's initial call for reform found a strong resonance in the provinces of the Low Countries, a region (like Germany) with "proud and prosperous urban communities eager to sponsor a renovation of religious life". There, the articulate, highly literate populations welcomed the printed literature of the

² According to David Landes, in Ottoman Turkey, unlike what was observed in Protestant areas, the printing press was hardly used because the power elite and the clerics feared that books would question their authority. There was an authority able to impose censorship and there were not enough centres of resistance to it. Constantinople acquired a printing press in 1726, that is, almost three centuries after the Gutenberg press, but closed it down from 1730 to 1780 and again in 1800. Between 1726 and 1815, that press brought out only sixty-three titles! Between Europe and Turkey, the gap in publication rates was a factor of 10,000 to one (Landes, 1998: 67). As for Egypt, "the intellectual soul of the Arab world", it now produces just 375 books a year, compared with 4,000 from Israel, which has one-tenth of Egypt's population (Zakaria, 2003: 135, 154). Landes' thesis is nevertheless disputable. Berkes (1964) has thus shown that the restricted volume of printing in the Ottoman empire was largely due to a confluence of non-religious factors, such as limited availability of papers and lack of essential technical infrastructure (cited from Kuran, 1997: 52-53).

³ As a reaction to the Reformation, the Catholic church reinforced its vertical chain of command (Council of Trent), so that "the catholicism of the Counter-Reformation became the religion of princely courts and bureaucratic and hierarchical societies" (Moore, 1981, p. 89). Religious wars proved disastrous and the victories of Catholicism pyrrhic ones: in the decades of persecution, the Catholic princes of Europe expelled the Calvinists and with them their financial reserves and mercantile and manufacturing skills. The industrial heart of Europe was displaced.

⁴ Emmanuel Todd (1990) leans toward Weber's approach when he stresses that the dimension of metaphysical inequality implied in the predestination theory made Protestantism unacceptable in some parts of Europe where the idea of social equality was deeply rooted and manifested in equal inheritance practices. In other areas where exclusive inheritance was the norm, and on the condition that people were politically free to change their religion, Protestantism was easily adopted and gave rise to changes conducive to economic growth.

Reformation, including Dutch translations of the Bible (Pettegree, 2003: 68).⁵ 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: 163-64).

Growing emphasis on the individual and individual liberties therefore appears to have been the result, as much as the cause, of increasing economic liberalization. Walker, a contemporary critic of Weber, was therefore right to blame the latter for taking the Reformation as a datum rather than inquiring into the causes that lay behind it (Walker, 1937). To the extent that economic liberalization and the rise of capitalism required the intervention of path-breaking innovators, the latter seem to have been supplied by migrant minority groups with very different religious backgrounds and a strong spirit of dissent (see, e.g., Meier and Baldwin, 1957: 168; Szirmai, 2005: 490).

Following the second line of criticism, Weber's emphasis on the role of Protestantism in the advent of modernity in Western Europe was probably exaggerated: the Reformation of the 16th century was less a revolution than a prelude to one.⁶ As stressed by a forceful critic of the Weber-Tawney thesis, differences between Protestantism and Catholicism was overplayed by both authors: for example, Calvin's attitude toward interest and usury was essentially the same as that of the Catholic Church (Robertson, 1933). It must also be reckoned that the Reformation gave rise to enormous confessional tensions and an acute competition among rival religious denominations, and these actually resulted in an abrupt raising of moral standards imposed by austere moralizing creeds and an extension of the sacred into all areas of life.⁷ At least, this was true for a minority of enthusiasts, but more tolerant Christians found it difficult to resist them openly (Briggs, 1999: 174-76, 191). The explosion of sectarianism led to sharp divisions within Christianity at the popular level and attested that "any idea that conformity and orthodoxy can be inculcated through the Bible and the catechism could hardly withstand this practical evidence to the contrary" (ibidem: 181; see also Koenigsberger et al., 1989: 222-25, 351-54). Movements such as the Puritans in England displayed attitudes of moral rigour and intolerance that evoke present-day attitudes of Islamic fundamentalists.⁸

⁵ The direction of the causality underlying the relationship between the Reformation and literacy is far from clear, however. Sweden provides a striking illustration that the Reformation may have had an autonomic influence on literacy. Here is a largely rural kingdom with much dispersed populations where the Lutheran church, backed by the state, embarked on highly successful literacy campaigns resulting in an overall rate of literacy probably higher than 80% by the end of the 17th century. By contrast, the much more urbanized and commerce-oriented England (except the area of London) remained a laggard in matters of literacy compared not only to Sweden but also to Germany and the Low Countries (Todd, 1990: 137-38). The picture is, therefore, complex and the role of the state cannot be ignored.

⁶ Schumpeter's critique against Weber deserves to be noted at this stage. Indeed, he finds fault with Weber for having misused the approach of Ideal Types. In his own words: "So soon as we realize that pure Feudalism and pure Capitalism are equally unrealistic creations of our own mind, the problem of what it was that turned the one into the other vanishes completely. 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: 80-81).

⁷ Robin Briggs remarks 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" (Briggs, 1999: 182-83).

⁸ "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: 354).

According to Jonathan Israel, it is the period 1680-1750 which was the most “dramatic and decisive period of rethinking” since it is during those years that “the mental world of the west was revolutionized along rationalistic and secular lines” (Israel, 2001: 20). Before this period, and despite the profound disarray and distress caused by the Reformation, hardly anyone shared the view that “the individual should be free to think and believe as he or she thought fit”. Education and any expression of opinions were closely supervised and controlled “by an elaborate apparatus of royal, ecclesiastical, and academic authority” (ibidem: 16-17). Toward the late seventeenth century, however, “the old hierarchy of studies, with theology supreme, and philosophy and science her handmaidens, suddenly disintegrated” (ibidem, p. 10). This was to lead into the more radical movement of the 18th century Enlightenment.

The role of the Early Enlightenment revolution

Perhaps surprisingly, this subservient status of philosophy and science was not questioned by the Reformation. If it caused a deep split in western Christendom that resulted in a confessionalization of the European societies (see supra), the Reformation did not eventually amount to a genuine challenge of “the essentials of Christianity or the basic premises of what was taken to be a divinely ordained system of aristocracy, monarchy, land ownership, and ecclesiastical authority” (Israel, 2001: 4). Oleg Kharkhordin (1999) has perhaps expressed the limitation of the Reformation in the most cogent manner. For him, indeed, if the Reformation stressed the notion of individual conscience thus ceasing to see conscience as a common capacity, it did not separate the notion of ‘conscience’ from that of ‘consciousness’. The Protestant understanding of Conscience is that of “an individual, and yet undifferentiated capacity of moral and factual judgment, exercised in accordance with the Holy Word”. It is only later, with the advent of modernity, that Consciousness “became the site of the cognitive capacities and judgments of fact, while conscience became a purely moral faculty, robbed of any pretensions of giving objective information on the external world” (p. 57).

For Israel, the advent of modernity coincides with the intellectual upheaval of the Early Enlightenment in the late 17th century (Spinoza, Bayle, Locke, and Leibniz), a movement that reflected a deep crisis of elites but quickly made an impact on ordinary men’s attitudes. In its most radical version, it combined “immense reverence for science, and for mathematical logic, with some form of non-providential deism, if not outright materialism and atheism along with unmistakably republican, even democratic tendencies” (Israel, 2001: 4-5, 12). Based on the idea that Nature is self-moving (motion is inherent in matter), it led to the rejection of a providential God governing the destinies of man, while emphasizing the existence of a rational principle inherent in the physical and social universes which then started to appear as intelligible concepts for the reasoning man (ibidem, p. 160).

Radical Enlightenment thus “aspired to conquer ignorance and superstition, establish toleration, and revolutionize ideas, education, and attitudes”. It denied the possibility of miracles, as well as that of punishment and rewards in an afterlife, “scorning all forms of ecclesiastical authority, and refusing to accept that there is any God-ordained social hierarchy, concentration of privilege or land ownership in noble hands, or religious sanction for monarchy” (ibidem, pp. 11-12).⁹ To sum up, it caused a profound and decisive shift towards rationalization and secularization. In particular, the new perception of the working of the socio-economic universe gave birth to economics as a new field of study. For the Physiocrats,

⁹ For Spinoza, the leading philosopher behind the whole movement, “Nothing is based on God’s Word or commandment so that no institutions are God-ordained and no laws divinely sanctioned: hence the only legitimacy in politics is the self-interest of the individual” (Israel, 2001: 5; see also Chap. 8).

it was thus clear that a natural harmony regulated the creation and circulation of wealth and that “Man, by the application of his reason, could align his institutions with the law of nature so as to achieve, not indeed utopian perfection, but at least a progressive improvement in his standard of living” (Hampson, 1968, p. 118). Adam Smith and his followers of the Political Economy school, while rejecting the agrarian bias of Physiocracy (creation of wealth is entirely due to the work of Nature), retained the idea of an in-built, automatic mechanism that allows the social and economic system to reproduce itself harmoniously through time.

Although the overthrow of the traditional social order and hierarchy was no plan of the mainstream Enlightenment thinkers, and their ideal was mainly to spread enlightenment, tolerance and humanity amongst the educated, changes caused by the gradual diffusion of the ideas of the New Philosophes across all strata of European societies, including their establishment, proved to be of a much more radical nature than everything which they had ever imagined. Even though they could think of a political revolution of the kind observed in England (the so-called Glorious Revolution), they did not anticipate the far-reaching social and economic consequences that their teachings were to entail (Hampson, 1968, pp. 155-61).

Here is precisely the respect in which the above account of the emergence of modern Europe proves unsatisfactory: it suggests that the intellectual revolution of the Early Enlightenment is autonomous in the sense of having arisen independently of material forces or determinants. To see why such a view is incomplete, one just need to bear in mind that the Glorious Revolution occurred in England in 1688, that is, right at the beginning of the period of intellectual crisis referred to by Israel. From the works of historians such as Richard Bonney (1991) and Charles Tilly (1992), we know that this political revolution has been the outcome of a protracted struggle in the course of which the most influent sections of the society (including big merchants in large and prospering cities such as London) gradually asserted themselves by confronting a strong state power naturally bent on further entrenching its supreme position.

Economic forces were not absent from the scheme since the political struggles between rulers and citizens concerned the linkage to be established between taxation and representation. Owing to his dependence on economically prosperous individuals (the landed aristocracy, the gentry, merchants, etc), particularly so in times of fiscal crisis, the British monarch was thus compelled to grant them the representative institutions which they required in exchange of their financial contributions. The Glorious Revolution initiated the era of parliamentary supremacy, implying that the Crown could no more claim to be above the law, and “could no longer capriciously make, and break, promises” (Bates, 2001, p. 80; see also North and Weingast, 1989).

In fact, as early as in 1628, all Englishmen were granted a set of rights protected by law (a law enacted by Parliament) thanks to the so-called Petition of Right (North, 2005: 145). This major change in the perceptions about the rights of individuals, from the medieval views of status (those at the bottom of the hierarchical structure of the society were excluded from access to liberties) to the modern view of Englishmen as freeborn, can only be understood if it is placed in the context of incremental changes in “an institutional/organizational path that permitted and led to more complex trade and exchange” (ibidem: 136). Considerable institutional changes took place first and ideological changes followed. Moreover, Israel’s thesis does not account for the diverging economic and political evolutions of different European countries in spite of their initial common belief structure inherited from the Enlightenment Revolution. To understand these divergent paths, one must agree that the initial belief structure evolved differently in various parts of Europe as a consequence of diverse experiences on the levels of the economy and the polity.

Finally, the radical character of the intellectual changes that took place in the 17th century ought not to be overemphasized. Exaggerating the speed and initial impact of the

intellectual changes of the 17th century creates a misleading impression. The striking fact is that of “the durability of conventional religious beliefs and the multiple limitations of early modern natural philosophy... 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” (Briggs, 1999: 204-205). In particular, 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” (ibidem: 171). The gradualness of ideological and intellectual transformations in Europe had already been stressed by Joseph Schumpeter when he wrote that: “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” (Schumpeter, 1954: 80, 82).¹⁰

The central lesson to draw from the above short foray into Western European modern history is the following: Western Europe appears to have been on a virtuous path along which important growth-promoting institutional changes have given rise to significant ideological changes that helped further propel economic growth and the emergence of effective institutions. In turn, the latter had the effect of causing still more radical ideological transformations. Just the opposite scenario has happened in Russia, to which attention is now turned.

The case of Russia

Neither the Protestant Reformation nor the Enlightenment Revolution actually occurred in the eastern part of the European continent. Christianity had evolved differently in the western and the eastern parts of Europe after its heart gradually shifted toward the east after the disintegration of the Roman Empire. Byzantium had become the capital city of eastern Christianity and developed a different tradition from the West, influenced by the Greeks. First, there was a strong tradition of mysticism and emphasis on spirituality in the world of Byzantium. Second, the church was subordinated to political power (church was ‘the arm’ of the state) following a tradition of so-called caesaro-papism in which the emperor (the *Basileus Autokrates*) was a sort of pope (Moore, 1981: 48; Le Goff, 2003: 86-87).

When Byzantium came under the serious threat of invasion by the Seljuk Turks (11th century), Emperor Alexius I called on the West to come to his help. The crusades were the response to that call, yet instead of saving Byzantium the crusaders pillaged it, and created a Latin Empire which was resented by its Greek-speaking subjects and fell soon afterwards under the attacks of the Ottoman Turks. The eastern tradition of Christianity was nevertheless preserved in Russia and other Balkan regions (such as Bulgaria) which missionaries from Byzantium had penetrated (Moore, 1981: 41-60). Moscow thus came to see itself “as the last surviving centre of the Orthodox religion, as the heir to Rome and Byzantium, and as such the saviour of mankind”. The imperial title claimed by Moscow’s princes was that of the ‘Tsar’ (a Russian derivation of ‘Caesar’), and the backing of the Church was fundamental to Moscow’s emergence as the mother city of Holy ‘Rus’, with Moscow’s enemies being branded the enemies of Christ. The Old believers, in particular, “pinned their faith on Moscow’s messianistic destiny as the Third Rome” and regarded all reforms as sheer heresy, “a sign that the Devil had gained a hold on the Russian Church and state”. To them, Peter the Great was an Antichrist and Petersburg the city of the apocalypse (Figes, 2002: 152-53).

¹⁰ 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: 82).

During the early part of Catherine the Great's reign, however, Russia absorbed a lot of French Enlightenment thought (Diderot visited Russia in 1773). Even the Decembrists' movement which was receptive to Romantic ideas was strongly influenced by these Enlightenment ideas. This said, the strong mystical aspirations of the Russian society continued unabated and even permeated the Freemasons. Their persecution by Catherine the Great and her successor, Paul, did not actually succeed in halting the growth of these aspirations which greatly accelerated during the subsequent reign of Alexander I. Napoleon's defeat at the hands of the Russians was considered by Russian mystics as proof that Russia had been entrusted with a holy mission, being chosen by the divine Providence to oppose the Antichrist and bring about a rebirth of Christianity. Such outburst of mysticism contributed a great deal to a severe anti-Enlightenment backlash which was to be later pursued by the Slavophiles and their conservative utopianism grounded in a romantic critique of capitalist civilization and a radical antithesis of Slavdom and Western Europe (Walicki, 1979, Chap. 4-6; Hosking, 2006). It is not Russia, but Europe, the Slavophiles insisted, that was the land of disinherited people, of people deeply alienated by their individualism, unconnected by any bonds, and with no tradition to lean on. Russian people, by contrast, if the Westernized elite are excluded, are strongly anchored in their Orthodox faith and erstwhile village institutions (Walicki, 1979: Chap. 6; Kitching, 1982: Chap. 1-2). Even in the early years of the 20th century, under the combined influences of Dostoïevsky and Soloviev, there was a resurgence of interest in religion among many educated Russians. Mysticism remained a strong ingredient of this so-called "religious renaissance", as attested by Vladimir Soloviev's view (1853-1900) that "the idea of a nation is not what she thinks of herself through time, but what God thinks of her in eternity" (cited from Chichkine, 2000: 328 –my translation).

It would be wrong, however, to view Russian history as a doomed destiny blocked by strong ideological/cultural barriers. Instead, the most fateful impediment to Russia's progress toward modern economic growth is to be found in a powerful autocratic political tradition dating back to the 15th century when the Muscovy princes began to dominate the country at the expense of the more liberal rulers of Kiev and Novgorod. As a result, "all Russians lived in a servile condition", and Russian society was subjected by the tsarist government from top to bottom, with 'Nobles' being "transformed into nothing less than the serfs or servants of the sovereign". (Pipes, 1995: 105; Raeff, 1984: 10; Riasanovsky, 1993 : 183-95).¹¹ Russia has thus been put on a vicious path in which a repressive, "coercion-intensive" state (Tilly, 1992) has sparked reactionary ideological doctrines that found a wide echo among illiterate and downtrodden masses. In turn, by justifying the established autocratic order, these ideas have complicated the task of reformers and retarded the modernization of Russian society and economy. Till the middle of the 18th century, well after the period of reforms of Peter the Great, prominent Russian intellectuals had a deep-seated belief in the civilizing mission of autocracy, in its inner ability to awaken the Russian nation and lead it forward toward progress: "It did not occur to them that the political and social system might require thorough reform" (Walicki, 1979: 1). And, during the second half of the 18th 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

¹¹ Denis Fonvizin (1744-92), an outspoken enlightenment thinker living during the reign of the empress Catherine, wrote an influential *Discourse* depicting graphically the despotic nature of the Russian state: Russia is a country "where the arbitrary rule of one man is the highest law", "there is a state, but no fatherland; there are subjects, but no citizens"; the human faces of the peasants "are the only thing that distinguishes them from cattle"; the throne is dependent on a "band of rioters"; men are owned by men; and almost everyone is both tyrant and victim. As for Nikolai Novikov (1744-1818), a renowned freemason, Russia was a country in which people could be "buried alive for a deviation in their way of making the sign of the cross" (quoted from Walicki, 1979: 18, 33).

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* (ibidem: 2-8).¹²

When Russia eventually embarked upon rapid and sustained industrialization, it was propelled by a powerful “catching up” determination of the new autocratic rulers who replaced the Tsars, but also by an ideology, communism, which is an odd mixture of rationalistic trends and Messianistic-utopian elements inspired by the old conservative doctrines. Thus, the idea persisted that there is something distinctive in Russian society and history, and that the Russian vision of modernity embodies higher moral principles than those of the West. On the basis of these higher moral principles, Russia had a claim to lead the world on the spiritual plane although it was compelled to follow the West on the more superficial, material/technological level.¹³ Russia had invented for herself a mission in the world while embarking on the path of modernity as a laggard, and this was reflected in its activation of the Communist International. This ‘Russian idea’ was bound to give rise to innumerable tensions and dilemmas in the society because it conflicted with many of the fundamental imperatives of modern society. In the end, with the collapse of communism, it precipitated the Russian society into a profound moral crisis (McDaniel, 1996: Chap. 1).

3. *Lessons from the lands of Islam*

The thesis of Bernard Lewis

Islam is considered by some influential authors –such as the American historian Bernard Lewis in his New York Times Bestseller *What Went Wrong?* (2002)– as an obstacle to development. This is because, unlike 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 Muhammed 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: 23 –cited from Hassan and Kivimäki, 2005: 125).

The first Christians built up a Church structure to defend themselves against a state which oppressed them (till Constantin converted himself to Christianity) and adhered to the principle “render unto God that which is God’s and unto Caesar that which is Cesar’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 11th century. These reforms, initially intended for shielding the Roman papacy from the political ambitions of the German emperor, ended up causing “a genuine separation between

¹² Diderot was not fooled since he wrote after his stay in Russia that: “A long tradition of repression has resulted in a general atmosphere of reticence and distrust, a recollection of terror in the mind, as it were, that is in complete contrast to the noble openness characteristic of the free and self-confident mentality of the Frenchman or Englishman... individual freedom is reduced to zero here, the authority’s of one’s superiors is still too great and the natural rights of man are as yet too restricted” (cited from Walicki, 1979: 5).

¹³ Khomiakov thus wrote: “We make progress, audaciously and infallibly, by borrowing superficial discoveries from the West, yet imparting on them a deeper meaning and seeing in them those human principles that remained concealed to the Western eyes...” (cited from Chichkine, 2000: 324).

the clergy and the laity, between God and Caesar, between the pope and the emperor” (Le Goff, 2003: 86). For Bernard Lewis and for Jacques Le Goff, the 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). “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: 113, 115).

There is actually no such thing as a laity in the lands of Islam. In the words of Lewis:

“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: 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: 229).¹⁴ 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: 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 (*ibidem*).

For Lewis, therefore, Muslim believers directly refer to God and its law on earth, the *shari’a*. It must nevertheless be emphasized at this stage that 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. During the period running from the 8th to the 10th 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 *ulama* 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 *ulama* establishment thus comprises the scholars who compiled the *shari’a*, the judges who applied it in the Islamic courts, and the legal experts who advised the judges (Cleveland, 2004: 27-28).

¹⁴ The indictment of apostasy can even be turned against Islamic people. Thus, belief in Shi’a perfidy has recently led ultra-puritan Sunnis, known as *takfiris*, to denounce the Shi’as as apostates from Islam, and claim that it is therefore legal to kill them (The Economist, 2006, March 4-6: 22).

As for the sovereign, he 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: 7 –quoted from Hassan and Kivimäki, 2005: 127).¹⁵

For Lewis and others, a direct consequence of the Muslim refusal to admit that faith is a private matter is a continuous meddling of religion in political affairs that stifles private initiative. This is how, for example, the development prospects of the Ottoman Empire, for example, have been undermined by a pervasive current of obscurantism which fostered a climate of deep insecurity and hostility to new ways: “The Turks’ powerful Muslim Institution, whereby the Sheik of Islam or his mufti could declare any act of the sultan religiously unacceptable worked against novelty and western influence” (Jones, 1981, p. 183).

Whichever the consequences, the lesson to draw from the above diagnosis is that 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 the existence of individual rights, the Muslims oppose an all-encompassing view of the 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: 91; Miller, 1993: 45-51; Kepel, 1994: 194; Pipes, 1994: 63; 1995: 192).

A prelude to a critique of Lewis

In his last book, Lewis thus offers us a neat and challenging thesis about the nature of Islam and its fundamental differences with Christianity (in preceding books, some of the statements are qualified in important ways). As will be stressed at a later stage, there is an important difference between the two cultural worlds, indeed, and its historical root 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 hand (Kuran, 2004b; Greif, 2006: 206). My main difficulty with the above thesis of Lewis lies in his unsatisfactory treatment of the role of politics in the lands of Islam. As a result of this weakness, it is not clear how Lewis accounts for the fact that the Muslim lands had come to form one of the most economically prosperous regions of the world around the 10th century (second, perhaps, only to China). Before elaborating this point, I would like to return to the critical question as to how the *shari’a* is supposed to be interpreted by the believers, given that there is no ecclesiastical structure with the required authority to enforce uniform interpretation. As we have seen above, Lewis has provided a clear answer to that question: in the lands of Islam, just a “minimum of belief” is required that essentially amounts to recognizing the unity or existence of God.

There is a good deal of truth in the statement that no priesthood exists in the Islamic world, if we mean that there are no human intermediaries between the individual believer and God. It is also correct to say that one of the strengths of Islam during the times of conquest,

¹⁵ Think of the Palestinian Islamist movement, Hamas, which is severely blamed by Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda 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.

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*.

At the same time, it is hard to deny that Islam owed much of its vitality to the existence of a body of learned scholars, the *ulama*, who were able to provide a measure of unity to law and doctrine by codifying and transmitting religious knowledge (see supra). In actual practice, the religious establishment has always exercised substantial control and influence over how Muslims interpret Islam. Moreover, the *madrasas*, these schools of instruction created in Baghdad in the 11th century, helped a great deal to maintain a certain unity in the Islamic scholarly tradition (Kuran, 1997: 52; Cleveland, 2004: 28-29). On the other hand, although acknowledged by Lewis, the Iranian exception deserves to be stressed: there is ample ground to regard the *djomehs* imams as abbeyes, 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: 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 (The Economist, 2006, March 4-6: 22).

Bearing these qualifications in mind, it is important to recognize that, compared to Christianity at least, Islam leaves a rather ample margin of freedom for the interpretation of the Qur'an.¹⁶ If there are numerous *madrasas* and mosques where religious dignitaries (e.g., the *imams*) may indulge in preaching and teaching the faithful, the fact remains 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 *madrasa*. Moreover, the militant and sectarian teaching is transmitted orally and depends very much on the political affiliation and personality of the preacher (Piquard, 1999: 76). In Islam, there is thus no religious establishment that can declare by fiat which is the correct interpretation of the Qur'an and no central power structure resembling the Vatican has ever existed to lead the Muslim world community (if one excepts the first Caliphate). A major implication of this observation has been aptly drawn by Fareed Zakaria: "the decision to oppose the state on the grounds that it is insufficiently Islamic belongs to anyone who wishes to exercise it" (Zakaria, 2003: 124-25).

Such a conclusion provides an important link to the main argument that will follow. In other words, it is possible to construct a critique of Lewis' *What Went Wrong* based on a logical implication of the central thesis put forward in this book. The role of politics and its relation to religion in the actual history of the lands of Islam has not received the attention it deserves in the analysis of Lewis. Is it true that states and political authorities have been subsumed or merged into the religious realm of Islam? Or is the reality more complex and the reverse relation plausible? Furthermore, to what extent is religious meddling the cause or the consequence of economic backwardness and political corruption or incompetence in the Islamic countries? In *What Went Wrong?*, the relationship appears to be linear and it runs from religion to economics and politics.

The role of political economics and the instrumentalization of Islam

From a foray into the history of the Islamic world, a number of important trends emerge that shed considerable light on the above debate.

As attested from the very beginning by the murders of three of the four caliphes who succeeded Muhammad, the history of Islam is full of violent confrontations between various

¹⁶ Christianity, however, has shown more flexibility than is usually thought, such as when women (including Mary, the mother of Christ) were ushered in the new gospel's story so as to accommodate the aspirations of the Gallic people whom it wanted to convert (.....).

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 (Abou Bakr), the converts from Medina claimed that political power should be made accessible to 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 Qoraichis clan (Muhammad's tribe). Under the third caliph (Othman), the best state positions were earmarked for his own clan and the first Ommeyyad caliph (who transferred the capital city from Mecca to Damas 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.¹⁷ A complete dissociation between politics and religion ensued and the function of the caliphate was emptied of all its sacred content, mainly due to the merchant aristocracy of Mecca who actually fought against prophetic preaching. For this reason, the seizure of power by the Meccan clan of the Omeyyads may be seen as an usurpation. The Abbasids (from Bagdad), who destituted the Ummayyads, attempted to revitalize the sacred function of the caliphate but did not quite succeed. As early as the middle of the 10th century, the institution declined after less than two centuries of glory (see Meddeb, 2002: 96).

What the history of Islam thus shows is that what appears 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 dressed themselves as emirs, Baybars, the great Mameluk 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 (Meddeb, 2002: Chaps 16-17).

The above applies not only to Arab countries but also to other lands of Islam. The example of Mali is instructive in this regard. An ambitious warlord, Askia Mohamed 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 "Calife of the Soudan". Using his new Islamic credentials, he embarked upon a *jihad* and quickly displaced political contenders (Milet, 2005: 41-42). In fact, the history of the Songhai empire of Gao (1528-1591) was one of continuous struggle between two political groups, "one with colours

¹⁷ Iraqi Shi'ism (the movement supporting Ali's descendants who were expected to rule from Kufa in Iraq) united with the Khurasani 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: 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 Mamoûn 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 Mamoûn was compelled to revise his plan and most likely ordered the poisoning of Ali Reza. As for the *Mutazilis* 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 11th century (Adler, 2005: 110; Hourani, 1991: 63-64).

that were Songhai, pagan and nationalist, and the other proclaiming a Mali-type Muslim universalism” (Fage and Tordoff, 1995: 79). In early 17th 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: 189). Two centuries later, El Hadj Oumar Tall, at the age of 23, went on pilgrimage to Mecca and came back with the title of “Calife of the brotherhood *Tidjaniya* for the Soudan”. In the Fouta-Djalon (in today’s Guinea) where he took temporary refuge, he founded a *zaouïa*, 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: 209-11; Milet, 2005: 50).

Present-day realities in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan or Somalia also remind us of the importance of political economy considerations and the instrumentalization of religion in the lands of Islam. Thus, in the city of Basra in southern oil-rich Iraq, power is contested between two Shi’a parties, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which dominates the provincial council, and the small but well-organized Fadila party, which holds the province’s powerful governorship. While the former is strongly tied to the clergy, the latter follows the radical ideology of the late Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr. The most significant aspect, however, is that both parties have built their own power base and webs of patronage, implying that they award jobs, perks and subsidies in accordance with party loyalty while their militias often run local rackets, especially of oil smuggling (*The Economist*, August 12th 2006, pp. 31-32). 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 centre, he even decided that he was the only person habilitated to declare the *jihad* (Nahavandi, 1999: 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 variety of tribal laws. In this sense, the *Taliban* did not depart from the practices of previous Afghan rulers.

The above account suggests that, unlike what Lewis seems to contend, political rulers tend to have the upper hand in their dealings with religious authorities.¹⁸ According to Hourani, indeed, if rulers had to negotiate with the *ulama*, a powerful tradition among the *ulama* (among both the *Sunni* and the *Shi’ite* Muslims) provided that “they should keep their distance from the rulers of the world”, not linking themselves too closely with the government of the world while preserving their access to the rulers and influence upon them (Hourani, 1991: 144-45, 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” (Hourani, 1991: 144). Anarchy is the most abhorred state and, to prevent it from emerging, despotism is justified (*ibidem*).

¹⁸ If Lewis correctly pointed out that, in Islam, religious agents never really succeeded in imposing ecclesiastical constraints on political and military rulers, he is less convincing when he describes as rare the attempts made by Muslim sovereigns to bring religion under control (Lewis, 2002: 135-36).

As attested by the experiences of Iran and Turkey, the relationship between the two powers was sometimes more complicated. Under the Ottoman empire like under the Seljuks and the Abbasids, tensions frequently prevailed between the two laws: sometimes the *seyhulislam* (the chief religious dignitary of the empire) controlled the sultan, and sometimes it was the other way round (Inalcik, 1973). This is despite the fact that “to a degree unprecedented in the classical Islamic empires, the Ottomans endeavoured to establish *shari’a* norms of justice by organizing the *qadhis* (judges) into an official hierarchy...”, and that sultans were recognized as *imams*, leaders and protectors of the religion of Islam (which implied that their orders had to be obeyed by the *ulamas* in matters of the interpretation of the Holy Law), and as *gazis*, or “warriors of the faith” (Cleveland, 2004: 48; Shaw, 1976: 164-65).¹⁹

In Iran, likewise, at least since the demise of the Safavids and the rise to power of the Qajar shahs in the late 18th century, a division between a religious power (the supreme judge, the *sadr*, who governed the courts and pious foundations) and a civilian Prime Minister (the *wakil* or the *vizir*) who administered the country, came to be accepted throughout the country. There then occurred a succession of periods of mutual balancing of, and alliances between, the two agencies followed by periods during which the royal military power exercised by the Qâjar and the Pahlevis, first from Tabriz and then from Teheran, dominated, or was dominated by, the religious power of the *mollahs* exercised from the sacred city of Qôm (Cleveland, 2004: 52, 110-11; Adler, 2005: 119-35).²⁰ The important point to bear in mind, and to which we shall return, is that assertion of the religious power always corresponded to periods of decadence of the political ruling elite. Interestingly, the debate about the relation between religious hierarchy and the state in Iran has persisted in modern times. Thus, when Ayatollah Komeini, the father of the Iranian revolution, declared the rule of the jurispudent (a ruling that only learned religious scholars are qualified for worldly power), he aroused fierce opposition from other religious dignitaries. Many clerics, indeed, believed that closeness to power has tainted rather than embellished their reputation (The Economist, 2006 March 4-6: 23). Others, however, followed suit and some of them were Islamist purists rejecting any compromise with the United States and Israëel, the powers of evil, and had to be later tamed by Khomeini himself (Rahnema and Nomani, 1990: 341-49).²¹

Fundamentalist thinking in Islam

In the course of history, there have been two distinct reactions to the baleful realities of power game, violent conflicts, and instrumentalization of religion in the lands of Islam. The first one implied a withdrawal from society and politics through some form of mysticism or theological quietism (particularly pregnant among the oppressed Shi’ites who took refuge in Messianistic expectations, the New Messiah being supposed to reincarnate Ali).²² As for the second one, it consisted of a radicalization of the Islamic message, and it was to be pursued by several thinkers in the course of centuries although there is no basis to contend that it ever assumed clear predominance in Muslim societies.

¹⁹ Cleveland’s view that “the entire religious establishment held office at the pleasure of the sultan”, and that the *seyhulislam* “who dared to issue an opinion that contradicted the sultan’s wishes was likely to be dismissed, no matter how well founded his opinion may have been in Islamic legal doctrine” (Cleveland, 2004: 48), is therefore, exaggerated.

²⁰ Incidentally, the precept that the sovereign is “the shadow of God on earth” belongs to the *Shi’ite* but not to the Sunnite universe of concepts.

²¹ One of the foremost ‘purists’, Mehdi Hashemi, and two of his associates, were executed in 1987.

²² This is a reaction similar to that of the Pharisees under the Roman Empire.

At this juncture, it is useful to mark off a few essential landmarks in the evolution of Islamic radical thinking.

(i) As early as the first quarter of the 9th century, Ibn Hanbal, who created one of the four juridical schools of sunnite Islam, emphasized 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. Much later came Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) from Damascus and one of the foremost religious writers of the Mamluk period. He was even more radical than Ibn Hanbal. For him, indeed, 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. The sovereign has two important duties. On the one hand, he must impose virtue on its people through the use of physical punishment (the just exercise of power is a kind of religious service) and, on the other hand, he must disseminate the Muslim faith beyond the confines of the existing Muslim community, and this proselytizing must have recourse to the *jihad*, the holy war.

In short, every Muslim believer must be a fighter for his faith. The holy war is as important as prayer in his conception. Two pitfalls must be avoided: that of a prince who does not use his wealth, army and power to strengthen religion (the way of Christianity), and that of a powerless religion which is deprived of financial and monetary resources (see Hourani, 1991: 179-81; Meddeb, 2002: Chap. 9). Ibn Taymiyya was actually a rather poor philosopher, who was far from being unanimously approved by other religious intellectuals. Yet, he was quite successful among the (illiterate) masses.

(ii) Again, one had to wait several centuries before another influential fundamentalist thinker came to the fore. This thinker is Ibn al-Wahhâb (1703-1792) who propounded a mix of Taymiyya and Hanbal's doctrines, which was to become the Wahhabite doctrine. It could have remained a rather insignificant and innocuous strand of Islamic thought, yet it so happened that al-Wahhâb was linked to the Seoud tribe which was striving to take hold of power by conquering the Arabian deserts. For the rest, he was a poor thinker without an ounce of originality. To preserve his creed, the Wahhabite does not hesitate to destroy the relics of the past so that any confrontation between myth and historical document can be avoided. The eventual conquest of Arabia by the Seouds and their support to the puritanical doctrine of al-Wahhâb proved to be a decisive factor in modern Muslim history.²³ As a matter of fact, the wealth of Saudi Arabia, thanks to the abundance of oil, allowed it to play a major role in the Muslim world and even beyond. Many Muslims migrated to Saudi Arabia to work as migrants and later returned to their country of origin, while the government of Saudi Arabia used its immense wealth to disseminate Wahhabism throughout the Muslim world and beyond. The Saudi elite can be portrayed as a bunch of hard-nose businessmen (more exactly, rentiers) ultimately motivated by religious proselytism and eager to provide an Islamic façade behind which to hide their unrestrained capitalist practices (Meddeb, 2002: 125). This is quite expedient in so far as this elite is concerned, since their active support for Wahhabism allows them to keep people's frustrations in check, frustrations which are otherwise unavoidable given the autocratic nature of the regime.

(iii) Lastly, about two centuries after al-Wahhâb, there was Abû al-A'lâ Mawdûdi (1903-1979) in Pakistan, and his fervent disciple, Sayyid Qutb (1929-1966), in Egypt, revived the fundamentalist doctrine. These two thinkers had a deep influence on today's fundamentalist movement, in particular, on Ussama ben-Laden (Saudi Arabian) and his lieutenant in *el qâ'ida*, Ayman al-Zawahri (Egyptian). While the former did not call for war,

²³ From the very beginning of Saudi Arabia, the king 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: 137-140).

even though his writings lead to the conclusion that war is required, the latter clamoured 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 ethics 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. Note carefully the striking similarity of this doctrine with the thinking of the Slavophiles in Russia (see supra).

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 (Meddeb, 2002: 114-15). 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: 445-46; Meddeb, 2002: 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. Dissatisfaction of the Egyptian masses with their corrupt and despotic regime led some of them to become followers of this new radical creed and, when the opportunity arose, to volunteer to fight for Islam in distant places (Afghanistan).

(iv) It is thus in continuous go-and-return movements from one bank of the Red Sea to the other that the first operational link between radical fundamentalism and Wahhabism has been 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. It is, however, interesting to note that, even among the *Mujahiddin* who fought against the Soviet troops, there existed various contending factions with different sorts of Islamic creed. They united together to oust the Soviet troops yet tensions among them have always been serious and immediately resurfaced as soon as victory was obtained. The unfortunate event is that the most radical extremist faction of the *Mujahiddin*, that led by Gulbuddin Hekhmattyar, was heavily supported and financed by the US (through the CIA), Pakistan (through the ISI, the Intelligence Service that rules Pakistan behind the screen), and Saudi Arabia. When the Russians were out, Hekhmattyar became the prime minister of the Afghan government. Since internal confrontations between the contending factions of the victors did not cease, the government soon collapsed and a new radical movement, that of the *Taliban*, came to power. Strongly supported by the ISI-Pakistan, it was quickly joined by the extremist Islamist factions of the *Mujahiddin* (Meddeb, 2002: 122). Like Ibn Hanbal twelve centuries earlier, the *Taliban* were convinced that a uniform, rigid interpretation of the Qur'an is the only way of bringing unity among the feuding local tribes and warlords.

There are several instructive lessons to draw from the above brief historical survey of fundamentalist thought in Islam. First, if fundamentalist thinking can be traced far back into the history of Islam, it has never represented a continuous or a dominant trend. Second, most of the fundamentalist teachers were rather poor thinkers prone to extreme simplification. Their most ardent followers of present times, the "self-proclaimed *mollahs*", form an Islamic "lumpen-intelligentsia" made of ill-educated, ignorant people who misunderstand Islam

owing to their lack of historical culture (Roy, 1990: 73)²⁴. Third, the fundamentalist doctrine appears to have been an expression of disarray in a context of acute crisis of the society and the polity. In particular, the idea of establishing the unity of the Muslim community through a strict adherence to the words of the Qur'an was seen as the way of restoring order and cohesion in a divided society. Fourth, the context of international alliances and rivalries may increase the strength of a fundamentalist movement that would otherwise have remained of marginal importance.

In the following, the latter two themes will be explored in more detail so as to have a better understanding of the nature of the interaction between religion and politics.

Islamic radicalization as a response to a severe crisis

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. Upon reading the works of many Arab thinkers, 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 away 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 the acute awareness of the reality of decadence of 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 strand of thought from envisaging progress, modernization and development in terms of a rupture with the past, such has happened with the Enlightenment Revolution 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: 133-34 –my translation). This 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: 189-212).

Other regions of the world have actually gone through such a modernization crisis (see 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 persisting and vicious is the fact that it is sustained by humiliating military setbacks and an openly declared support of the Western superpower (the United States) in favour of a small-sized enemy embedded in the body of the Arab world. In the words of Hourani: “The events of 1967 [a 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

²⁴ The young *mollahs* have passed sufficient time in the school system to consider themselves as educated persons and to refuse to go back to the land or enter into a factory, yet they have not succeeded in going beyond the secondary school (Roy, 1990: 73). On the other hand, a *qadhi* (islamic judge) trained in Faisalabad (Pakistan) can get his diploma after a six-week period considered equivalent to a master in law (Piquard, 1999: 73).

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, *ibidem*, p. 442; see also Kassir, 2004).

To the extent that the first option appears as a surrender of independence to the external world²⁵, 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, *ibidem*). 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: 325).

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 worshipping of saints, the singing of religious hymns, or the cherishing of art –all activities formally disallowed in Islam. In Afghanistan, for example, the village *mollah* 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: 86). Islam appeals to "the educated hordes entering the cities of the Middle East or seeking education and jobs in the West" (Zakaria, 2003: 143-44). Also, being cut off from the ties of kinship and neighbourliness to which they were accustomed in their village, rural migrants found a sort of compensation in strong Muslim urban organizations. In the words of Hourani, the sense of alienation 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: 452).²⁶

This process of identification with Islamist groups among urban alienated people has been further aided by the fact that in many countries Islamist movements were able to capitalise on the lack of legitimacy of weak 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. Thus, in Egypt, the number of Muslim NGOs increased from 600 in the early 1970s to 2,000 in the mid-1980s, and the number of private mosques grew from 14,000 to 40,000 from the early 1960s to the early 1980s (Huuhtanen, 2005: 78-79). Typically, a

²⁵ The surrender is deemed all the more unacceptable as the dominant superpower of the world sides with the victorious party and imposes humiliating clauses on the vanquished one. Thus, for example, access of Egyptian goods to the US market has been conditioned on the inclusion of a minimum level of Israeli content in Egypt's exports (The Economist, 2005, November 19-25: 16).

²⁶ Naipaul's account of Malaysia and Indonesia goes very much in the same direction. For him, indeed, the problem is that people are cut off from their native rural communities whose customs are the outcome of 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 urban, modern life, rural migrants face the threat of 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: 369, 387).

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 (*ibidem*).

Let us now consider the behaviour of power elites in the above-described context of acute crisis. A typical feature is their use of Islam and the language of religion in self-defence 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).²⁷ Bear in mind that governments in Arab countries are made especially vulnerable by the fact that in the lands of Islam anyone can oppose the state on the grounds that it is insufficiently Islamic (see *supra*). This characteristic accounts for the tendency of fundamentalist thinkers to pronounce harsh judgements as to whether their rulers are ‘good Muslims’, and to excommunicate those whose Islam they deem too lenient or too liberal (Zakaria, 2003, p. 144).

For example, in Egypt, the Muslim Brothers, of which the leaders were articulate and educated men, appealed strongly to those who were shut out of the power and prosperity of the new societies. To defuse these criticisms and appeal to a wider segment of the nation, the regime began to rest its legitimacy in religion (Hourani, 1991: 452). In Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (executed in 1977) had been a modern secular politician with social democratic ideas, yet as a prime minister, and out of political expediency “he increasingly appealed to Islam and advocated the Islamisation of the country” (Nomani and Rahnema, 1994: 121).²⁸ General Zia ul-Haq was to push the Islamization of the Pakistanese state much further. 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, the dictator chose to present the military as “the ideological vanguard of an Islamic state”. He 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 the *shari’a*. He thus 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 *madrasas* throughout the country, and thus helped to create a basis from where the *Taliban* government could later develop (see *supra*). Zia’s embrace of Islam brought him a lot of support in rural areas, but at the huge cost of destroying

²⁷ 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, *ibidem*, p. 454).

²⁸ 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 (quoted from Naipaul, 1982: 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 wouldn’t be swamped by non-Muslims (*ibidem*: 90).

the social fabric of his country. It bears emphasis that the *ulama* played a very minor role in the Islamization of Pakistan (ibidem: 126-29; Zakaria, 2003: 145-46; Piquard, 1999).

In Sudan, President Jaafar Nimeiri, who seized power in 1969, was at the command of a deeply corrupt patrimonial system which could not prevent the outburst of the deadly famine of 1983-1985 and aroused bitter political opposition. In response to his critics, Nimeiri, like Zia ul-Haq, sought legitimacy in political Islam, declaring Islamic law in September 1983 and proclaiming himself as 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. Even more strikingly, the most influential of the Sudanese Muslim Brothers, Dr Hassan al Turabi, was elevated to a prominent position (that of Attorney General) from which he embarked upon Islamizing the legal system and allowed Islamic banks to operate with tax privileges (de Waal, 1997: 88, 91).

He also drafted 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. Nimeiri's execution of Mahmud Muhammad Taha, the founder of the Republican Brothers, on the charge of apostasy (1984) offers a perfect illustration of the cynical use that can be made of it. The fact is that "opposition to an Islamic government can be, and has been, defined as an act of apostasy", not only against secular Muslims and other political opponents (e.g., communists) but also in the harassment of other Islamic sects (such as the Khatmiyya, Ansar and Ansar-Sunna) that were regarded as a threat to the ruling power (Johnson, 2003: 129).

Brigadier (later General) Omer el Bashir, who seized power in 1989, immediately professed his goal of creating a theocratic rather than a democratic state, in the mist of the mounting influence of the party of the Muslim Brothers, the National Islamic Front. The important point is that in no time he re-created the apparatus of Nimeiri's police state in more extreme form, and he promulgated the Sudanese Penal Code of 1991, which included the aforementioned provision on the crime of apostasy. A major famine again occurred in 1990-91 (Johnson, 2003:128; de Waal, 1997: 98). More recently, after the bloodshed in Darfur, the government of Khartoum damned the idea of a UN involvement, presenting it as a "conspiracy against the Arab and Islamic world" (The Economist, March 4-10: 39).

Revealingly, even the most secularist of ruling groups, those of Syria, Iraq and Algeria, had taken to using the language of religious Islam more or less convincingly, in one way or another, to maintain and strengthen their power (Hourani, 1991: 452-53). In Iraq, Baathist ideology has been based on pan-Arabism "whose spirit is Islam". It emphasized the exceptionalism of the Arabs, rooted in the fact that their national awakening was bound up with a religious message and a religious obligation (Makiya, 1989: 198-211). Even more recently, the support given by the Syrian regime to "popular" demonstrations against Muhammad-deriding cartoons stands in stark contrast with the savage manner in which this regime (then headed by Assad senior) put down the Muslim Brothers in the early 1980s. Such a turnaround is easily explained by the difficult position of Syria on the international scene, since it stands accused of having engineered a string of political assassinations of anti-Syrian leaders in Lebanon. The fact of the matter is that the whole Baathist regime, including the family of President Bashar Assad, feels threatened as it has never been before.²⁹

The case of Algeria deserves special attention because, there, the radical Islamist movement known as the FIS (the Islamic Salvation Front) has actually been prompted by President Boumediene when his hold on political power was seriously challenged in 1968 by

²⁹ Assad's brother-in-law, Asef Shawkat, head of Syrian intelligence, and Assad's brother, Maher Assad, a leader of his Presidential guard, have both been marked down as leading suspects in Mr Hariri's murder case by the UN commission in charge of the inquiry (The Economist, 2006, February 11-17: 41-42).

a rising opposition made up of intellectuals, students and trade unions represented, in particular, by the UGTA (Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens) and the UNEA (Union Nationale des Etudiants Algériens). As early as 1965, on the occasion of the state coup which brought him to power (by overthrowing the charismatic leader of the anti-colonial revolution, Ben Bella), a bizarre alliance was sealed between the new socialist, anti-imperialist regime and the *ulama*, granting to the latter the right to lead the arabisation of the country and to manage the education system (including the right to rewrite the school textbooks). It is therefore 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 were diffused in all legality and an idea which gained increasing currency is that colonization of Algeria had been possible only because of the degeneration of the pre-colonial state. The solution, therefore, had to 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 *ulamas* and to the more reactionary forces among them. This was reflected in the growing assertiveness of the latter which started meddling openly in matters of social policy (such as dressing codes, amount of brideprices, etc.). The above idea of a “renaissance” of the country based on the Islamic tradition was explicitly taken over by the government. 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: 163).

It is interesting to note that the Islamic character of the Algerian state has been embedded most explicitly into the National Charter considered as the ideological and political programme of revolutionary Algeria:³⁰

“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 endeavour, of rigour, justice and equality, that the Algerian people returned to 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 the 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: 161 –my translation).

In Algeria, therefore, Islam was “nationalized” and cynically used by the state for the legitimization of repressive policies and mobilization (Layachi, 1995: 180; Owen, 1992: 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 political opponents threatening them. That such a cool-blooded logic can also be applied to international relations is witnessed by the support given by the Israeli government to *Hamas* in order to counteract the influence of *Fatah* in Palestine. In both the Algerian and the Palestinian cases, as in so many others (see supra, the cases of Sudan and Egypt), the political rulers (internal or external) undertook to harass and crush the fundamentalist movement as soon as they began to perceive it as a threat to their power.³¹

³⁰ It is revealing that this passage of the 1976 version of the charter has not been 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: 161-62).

³¹ It bears emphasis that circumstances of different Arab countries vary greatly. An Islamic movement in one country can have a different meaning and represent a different stake than what is observed in another. For instance, the Iranian revolution had taken a certain form because of factors specific to Iran: “certain powerful social classes were particularly responsive to appeals expressed in religious language, and there was a religious

Again, the above feature is not specific to the Arab world. In Malaysia, resentment among Malays against the economically successful Chinese community took the form of an appeal to Islam (unlike the Chinese, Malays are Muslims) and a claim for establishing an Islamic state in the country. If this outcome was eventually avoided, it is because a political compromise could be found whereby, at the urging of the dominant (non-Islamist) party in power, the Chinese accepted to support a policy of positive discrimination in favour of the Malays (Horowitz, 1985; Matthew, 1990).

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 groups of the population and, often in self-defence, by political rulers themselves. Radicalization is more tempting when people can associate the failure of their governments in meeting the challenges of modernity with the failure of secularism and the Western path (as the cases of Egypt, Syria and Iraq attest, socialism, nationalism and secularism have failed in this regard), and when military defeats are added to poor economic performances, corruption and inefficiency of the rulers.³² One form taken by the failure of secularism lies in the fact that Islam has little competition when it comes to articulate 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, 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: 142-43; see also Kassir, 2004: 39; Hassan and Kivimäki, 2005: 133).

Path dependence and religious beliefs

A central policy implication that some authors have drawn from the above diagnosis is, as Zakaria (2003) put it bluntly, that “the key is not religious reform, but political and economic reform... if you get the politics and economics right, culture will follow” (p. 150). That this doctrine of passive cultures is problematic is evident from the recent experiences of failure in countries where it was actually implemented. For example, organization of democratic elections in Iraq (2005) has had the effect of putting in power political parties whose ideological platform is based on religious rather than secular principles. The rise of Hamas to power as a result of free elections in Palestine (2005), or the electoral victory of the FIS in Algeria (of which this Islamic party was deprived by a military coup) are other examples that spring to mind.

What is essentially wrong with the above doctrine is that it misses the dynamic dimension of the interaction between institutions and culture (religion). The relationship

leadership which was able to act as a rallying point for all movements of opposition; it was relatively independent of the government, generally respected for its piety and learning, and had always acted as the spokesman of the collective consciousness” (Hourani, 1991: 457-58). To take another example, the Muslim Brothers in Syria 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 (ibidem).

³² Instead of counter-attacking by using the same tactic as their opponents, rulers may brandish the threat of Islamic terrorism to increase political repression. They tend to use the latter tactic when they are ready to ally themselves with the USA in order to obtain increased material support and legitimacy from abroad.

between culture and institutions is, indeed, a dialectical relationship involving feedback effects along a complex dynamic path, hence the possibility of path-dependent trajectories. As testified by the Western European historical experience, a virtuous path is initiated when growth-promoting institutional changes encourage suitable adjustments in beliefs and values that, in turn, favour further economic progress. Thus, if the intellectual revolution that took place during the end of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century was the outcome of changes that occurred previously in the economic and political spheres, by articulating powerful ideas questioning the existing social order, the New Philosophes gave a major impetus to new economic and political upheavals that were to have a profound impact on the modern European society. Still, it is noteworthy that all the major intellectual figures who contributed to the new ‘scientific revolution’ did so “in a distinctly religious spirit”, which reflected “the continuing vitality of religion” during this period (Briggs, 1999: 171, 191; see also Collins and Taylor, 2006: 155-59). In fact, the understanding of the world in rational, analytical and quasi-scientific terms remained the attribute of a small elite till well into the 19th century, the outlook of the majority remaining traditional and largely rooted in religion (Anderson, 2003: 381).

On the contrary, as argued in the case of Russia, a vicious circular causation mechanism is set into motion when economic stagnation and political stalemate cause beliefs to evolve in a reactionary way, which makes the overcoming of the crisis even more difficult. In the case of Islam, too, economic, political and social disastrous conditions have led to ideological radicalization with the consequence that the transformation of Islamic institutions was slowed down in spite of their inefficiency. It is actually hard to avoid the conclusion that the lack of a full-fledged movement of secularization and rationalization in the history of Islamic countries (with the exception of Turkey where a government can be accused not of being insufficiently Islamic, but of being too Islamic, by the secular press) is responsible for self-reinforcing effects that make the present crisis so hard to disentangle. This crisis appears especially vicious precisely because opposition to corrupt, inefficient and repressive political regimes cannot root itself in secular, non-puritanical, non-romantic ideologies and belief systems. As a consequence, the needed reforms cannot be undertaken and the crisis deepens.

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*³³, a number of thinkers and philosophers of Islam have undoubtedly stridden along toward a kind of European Enlightenment –think of Rumi and Yünüs Emre (the Soufist Spinoza) in Turkey, Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Sorawardi in Persia, or (Ibn Rushd) Averroes in Andalus. Even among progressive philosophers, though, the ultimate reference to God and the divine world has never been abandoned. (For Averroes, for example, if there is no incompatibility between faith and human reason, the latter remains inspired by God). 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, such as expressed by Hanbal and Al-Ghazali –“Muslims should observe the laws derived from the Will of God as expressed in the Qur’an and Hadith” (Hourani, 1991: 168).

The persisting need to refer to God in the Islamic world is apparent not only in the writings of progressive philosophers, but also in those of 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 that of a religious system the

³³ 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: 175).

objective of which is “to serve God on earth”. Therefore, the above-mentioned institutions and processes “must be structured according to and operate within the framework of the *Shari’a*” (Rahmena and Nomani, 1990: 160). As a consequence, the conditions are not met under which equitable, welfare-increasing policies are followed over a sufficiently long period of time to cause religious tenets and social norms to adapt in a direction suitable for economic growth and social modernization.

Timur Kuran has pointed to an additional reason why the growth-inhibiting effect of Islam may be hard to counteract: the Qur’an carries an especially strong authority in some important matters, including civil matters, that it addresses explicitly. At this juncture, the distinction between the Muslim and the Christian civilizations, or what Avner Greif calls institutional complexes, deserves to be emphasized. As Lewis has indicated, the origin of the Muslim civilization differs from that of Christianity. In the words of Greif:

“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: 206).

It is not coincidental that, in contrast to the *shari’a*, the sacred texts of Christianity are framed in general and allegorical terms that lend themselves to flexible interpretations. True, quite a number of provisions contained in the Qur’an are contradicting each other, thus making a universal interpretation impossible (provisions about the Muslims’ duty to engage in the holy war, the *jihad*, is a case in point). Yet, there equally exist other provisions, such as the banning of interest and inheritance rules, which have a unique, and directly operational interpretation. The illustration chosen by Lewis (1990) is that of slavery, a growth-retarding institution that was eliminated in Europe during the late medieval period, yet survived until after the second world war in the Muslim world. The cause of this different evolution is that slavery was permitted by the God of the Muslims, so that abolishing it would have challenged the legal authority of the *shari’a* and questioned the moral authority of the faith.

Kuran has focused attention on a number of central institutions born of the classical Islamic system (whether based on the Qur’an or not)³⁴ 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, 2005). Critical among these institutions is the inheritance system (actually based on the Qur’an), which actually prevented the Islamic contract law to evolve as it has done in Western Europe where people found it relatively easy to modify inheritance practices in response to changing needs (because the Bible did not prescribe rules for transferring wealth across generations). As a result, a whole series of organizational challenges that proved essential for the development of a modern economy did not arise in the Muslim lands. The fact that, from the 8th century onwards, 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

³⁴ 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 19th century (Kuran, 2004b: 72).

of these minorities were free to choose their law system). At the start of the 20th century, as a result, almost all large commercial enterprises in the Middle East were owned by either foreigners or local religious minorities (Kuran, 2004b: 72, 84-87; 2004c).

Under a congenial political environment, however, even precise prescriptions by the Qur'an could be somehow bypassed. Thus, 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. The fact of the matter is that "the jurists of Islam supported credit markets by devising, as in European territories under Christian rule, stratagems that allowed Muslims to circumvent Islam's presumed interest ban without violating its letter" (Kuran, 2004b: 73).³⁵ 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: 122). In these countries, indeed, Islamic banks have emerged through efforts aiming 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. Interestingly, 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: the market share of the latter is a tiny 1% (ibidem: 123; see also Rahnema and Nomani, 1990; Kuran, 1998; Tripp, 2006).

My own field investigations into rural West Africa, where 'village Islam' prevails, has shown that, although precise Qur'anic prescriptions are explicitly referred to by many people, they are commonly circumvented in everyday practice. In particular, they do charge interests, albeit under concealed forms (typically, gifts in kind, or commissions offered to the lender), and women do not inherit land in most cases, despite the prescription of the Qur'an that they should inherit half of their brothers' share. Of course, people feel somewhat embarrassed when this contradiction is brought to their attention. However, they emphasize that, as a matter of principle, it is always possible to follow the Qur'anic norm (e.g., a woman may choose to go to the local marabout and ask for the respect of her religious right), yet they are used to follow customary (pre-Muslim) inheritance practices. In fact, according to an erstwhile tribal logic, they are not prepared to see some family land fall under the control of strangers. These observations are easily replicated elsewhere in Africa, including in countries of the Maghreb (e.g., in Kabylia, Algeria).

In puritanical environments or in countries dominated by Islamic orthodoxy, –such as happens when political rulers instrumentalize Islam to maintain themselves in power in the face of strong opposition–, considerable amounts of effort may have to be spent to overcome Qur'an-inspired objections, even when the initiative rests with rulers.³⁶ For instance, upon the request of Abdul Aziz, king of Saudi Arabia, the *ulama* had to struggle hard 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: 139). In other, less puritanical countries, photography was not considered by the *ulama*

³⁵ According to Kuran, the institution of the *waqf* itself –which consists of a private immovable property turned into an endowment intended to support any social service permissible under the Islamic law– was conceived as a device to shelter personal assets and enhance the material security of the high officials: it actually represented "an implicit bargain between rulers and their wealthy subjects" (Kuran, 2004b: 75).

³⁶ In the rather exceptional case of Saudi Arabia, the king has always been regarded as the guardian of Islam, in charge of maintaining Islamic values in the community and throughout the world (Nomani and Rahnema, 1994: 137-40).

as a problematic innovation against which the accusation of idolatry could be pronounced (only representations of the divine are forbidden).

Clearly, the transaction costs and the risks to be incurred to permit growth-promoting institutional or technical innovations that might be considered as anti-Islamic considerably differ depending on the context in which they arise. If the influence of Islam is strong, and especially if a puritanical atmosphere holds sway, such costs are prohibitively high. True, institutional changes may take place through surreptitious modifications, exploitation of ambiguities, and corruption of rule enforcers, yet these changes are bound to be rather marginal and, moreover, the essentially illegal practices which brought them have the unfortunate effect of reducing pressures for fundamental institutional reform while generating vast constituencies with a vested interest in the status quo (Kuran, 2003: 428-31; 2004b: 81).³⁷ On the other hand, if the context is more liberal, costs of institutional change are expected to be comparatively low and Islam should not constitute a serious obstacle to reform. In the end, the second line of argument, which stresses the specificity of Islam, complements and reinforces the first one based on the idea of path dependence.

Now, to the extent that there exists a link between Islam and the prevailing political regime, it is somewhat spurious to argue that the cost of institutional change differs considerably depending upon the general atmosphere. As a matter of fact, a liberal atmosphere would never arise with the type of despotic rulers that Islam tends to foster, and a particularly nasty institutional trap would therefore be established. Such a link is precisely posited by Kuran when he contends that the prevalence of autocratic rule in the Middle East “stands among the continuing legacies of traditional Islamic law” (Kuran, 2004b: 87), and that it is no coincidence that the first parliament of the Middle East –the Ottoman parliament in Istanbul– was established only in 1876, and under western influences (ibidem: 82).³⁸ There are two main channels through which Islam exerted its adverse influence on political freedom. First, there is the strength of the institution of the *waqf* which benefited the economic elite and simultaneously discouraged them from antagonizing the state authority (indeed, “by drawing people into structures that preserved some of their wealth, the *waqf* system dampened the demand for constitutionally enforced private property rights”, and like the prevailing inheritance law, it became “an institutional trap”). Second, by preventing the emergence of large commercial enterprises, Islam made potential opposition to autocratic rule more fragmented and less effective (Kuran, 2004b: 80-83). If Kuran is correct, it must be stressed, the idea that Islam is often largely instrumentalized by political rulers ceases to be incompatible with the contention that Islam is a somewhat autonomous factor that tends to discourage the sort of institutional changes required by modern economic growth.

Finally, the afore-described framework allows for an explanation of the varying economic and technical performances of the Muslim lands throughout their history. Indeed, institutions that were adapted to the ruling economic conditions at the time of their emergence have proven a barrier at a more advanced stage of economic development, when Western societies had undergone basic transformations (Jones, 1981; Landes, 1998; Kuran, 2004b; Greif, 2006).

³⁷ 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: 430).

³⁸ There are two main channels through which Islam exerted its adverse influence on political freedom. First, there is the strength of the institution of the *waqf* which benefited the economic elite and simultaneously discouraged them from antagonizing the state authority (indeed, “by drawing people into structures that preserved some of their wealth, the *waqf* system dampened the demand for constitutionally enforced private property rights”, and like the prevailing inheritance law, it became “an institutional trap”). Second, by preventing the emergence of large commercial enterprises, Islam made potential opposition to autocratic rule more fragmented and less effective (Kuran, 2004b: 80-83).

4. Conclusion

For Douglass North, prevailing cultural norms and beliefs –including religions which were the dominant organized belief systems of the pre-modern world– necessarily enter into any explanation of a society’s capacity to change and adjust. Yet, their explanatory role is complementary to the most immediate source of change which lies in the bargaining strength of political rulers vis-à-vis constituents (North, 2005: 136, 145). When discussing the role of religion in the lands of Islam, Bernard Lewis is also guided by the idea that belief structures matter, yet his analysis has led him to a radical conclusion: owing to a lack of separation between religion and politics, Islam appears to be a serious obstacle to economic growth and political progress.

At the other extreme, we find the approach of Fareed Zakaria for whom Islam is a faith that rulers and their political opponents could easily manipulate in order to serve their own ends, at least in ordinary circumstances. According to him, “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 legitimize them, and rebels could find inspiration in the words of others” (Zakaria, 2003: 147). The underlying idea is that a religious creed is sufficiently flexible or malleable to allow for substantial adjustments through evolving interpretations of the sacred texts. To the extent that they exist, religious authorities can be mobilized in varying directions and, in particular, different clerics can provide support to antagonistic political actors, for example, rulers and their political opponents.³⁹ In short, religion does not constitute an autonomous force that is, by itself, susceptible of promoting or retarding economic growth and development.

The problem in the lands of Islam lies in the fact that the rulers’ interests and objectives have not coincided with the public interest, and with the exigencies of modern economic growth and political liberalization, in particular. Politics, rather than religion, is thus the genuine obstacle to modernization and progress. In support of such an approach, the history of Western Europe or Japan attests that religious doctrines have the ability to evolve significantly under the influence of changing economic and social realities, provided that the political elite does not oppose these changes. Upon careful examination, the Protestant Reformation and the Early Enlightenment appear to have been more the consequence than the cause of growth-promoting transformations in behavioural patterns and institutions. In Japan, while during feudal times Confucianism and Zen Buddhism were the religions and ideologies of the ruling warrior class only, new sects of Confucianism and Zen Buddhism developed among traders to preach moral values such as honesty, industriousness, and frugality as commercialization progressed in the late Tokugawa period (Platteau, 2000: 311).

Zakaria’s approach to the relationship between religion and politics is not satisfactory, though. Indeed, stressing that religion is often instrumentalized by key political players does not imply that it may not hamper economic development and modernization. First, beliefs do not change as rapidly and as abruptly as consumption habits regarding ordinary goods and services. They are prone to inertia and, when they do change under the influence of technical, economic and other changes, they tend to do so in a gradual manner. This is especially true in

³⁹ Note incidentally that what has just been said about religion also holds true of myths in tribal societies: myths are often stories (histories) constructed or fabricated to vindicate a viewpoint favourable to the interests of a chieftaincy and its social group or followers. Firmin-Sellers thus uses the expression “reinventing tradition” to describe the process whereby the elites in the Ga state (in the colonial Golden Coast) tried to strengthen their rights over large land domains by manipulating local history so as to make their claims appear reasonable. The institutions of the traditional state were thereby reinvented and a biased version of custom was put forward to promote the interests of the dominant families (Firmin-Sellers, 1996: 40-44).

the case of religious beliefs as attested by their continuing vitality in Western Europe until well into the 19th century. Hence, there is a risk that, if progress is not sustained during a sufficiently long period of time and/or if a society faces a severe crisis on the levels of economics and politics, reactionary forces that appeal to conservative, often puritanical interpretations of a religious creed succeed in asserting themselves and in undermining the prospects of necessary institutional changes. The absence of a tradition of secularized and rationalistic thinking deprives the progressive elements of the society of any possibility to confront the reactionary forces with an alternative ideology. The present-day experience of many countries where Islam is the dominant religion illustrates this baleful possibility.

Second, and relatedly, a difficulty specific to the Islamic creed is that the Qur'an addresses a number of important matters in an explicit and unambiguous manner. As a result, any behaviour that does not conform to a Qur'anic prescription appears as an outright violation of a sacred command. In conditions where religious authorities hold sway and the political elite is weakened or on the defensive, such violations are liable to be considered as tantamount to a betrayal of the faith. Any deviant behaviour is then strongly deterred with all sorts of adverse consequences on the dynamic of social and economic change. The departure of most members of the progressive intelligentsia from countries like Algeria is one of the most serious consequences of the rise to power of reactionary religious forces.

In conclusion, if the Islamic faith, like other religions, is often instrumentalized by the political elite, it can also create special difficulties arising from the circumstances that surrounded its foundation. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Islamic world has pursued a different path from that of the Christian world. It also becomes evident that the problem of development in the Islamic world is more complex than just 'getting politics and economics right'. This is especially so if, as argued by Kuran, there is a link between Islam and the autocratic nature of political regimes in the Middle Eastern countries, that is, to use North's language again, if the bargaining strength of political rulers vis-à-vis constituents is itself largely determined by the prevailing system of beliefs. Under such circumstances, a nasty institutional trap obtains which is difficult to escape in the absence of changes occurring on several fronts simultaneously (economic, political, and symbolic). One thing is certain, however: rather than trying to impose democratic regimes from without, Western countries should put an end to the present asymmetrical balance of powers at the international level in which many Muslim people find a fertile ground to feel victimized. Such feeling, indeed, is easily exploited by radical Islamist leaders and the political elites that instrumentalize Islam.

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