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Political Instrumentalization of Religion: The Case of Islam

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Abstract

The question as to whether religion can block economic development and institutional change assumes particular importance today because of the rise of Islamist movements and the disappointing economic performances in the lands of Islam. This paper starts from a critical examination of the thesis of Bernard Lewis according to which the lack of separation between religion and politics creates particular difficulties on the way to modern economic growth in these lands. It is argued that (1) Lewis' thesis conceals the critical fact that, even when political and religious functions appear to be merged, religion is the handmaiden rather than the master of politics; (2) the influence of religion increases when the state falls into crisis, owing to its impotence or excessive absolutism; (3) because the Islamic frame of reference provides political rulers with a cheap default option when they are contested, they rarely undertake the much-needed reforms of the country's institutions; (4) this way of escape is all the more attractive to contested rulers as Islamist movements, born of the internal situation as well as of the international environment, accuse them of un-Islamic behaviour. An obscurantist deadlock is thereby created, which is aggravated by the inability of major Western countries to take an enlightened route in dealing with major issues confronting Middle Eastern countries.

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Of late, there has been renewed interest in the question as to whether religion is susceptible of hindering economic development and progress. No doubt the predicament of many countries with large Muslim populations and the rise of fundamentalist or revivalist movements have contributed a great deal to bringing this question back to the foreground. By contending that Islam, unlike Christianity, constitutes a serious obstacle to development, Bernard Lewis (2002) has focused the debate and put forward a challenging thesis. In the following, I want to assess it critically and to argue that, instead of being merged with religion, politics has largely instrumentalised it.

It is only under conditions of crisis that the influence of religious authorities rises and effectively counteracts the power of political rulers. When such counterbalancing occurs, and strong opposition movements develop that use puritanical interpretations of Islam, rulers are often tempted to have themselves recourse to Islam as a way of legitimising their power and actions. An obscurantist deadlock is thus created that prevents the reforms needed for effective competition of Middle Eastern countries with the West. This is all the more likely to happen if the international environment has been conducive to radical interpretations of the message of Islam.

The paper proceeds in three steps. In Section 1, the ideas of Lewis are summarily presented. In Section 2, the dominating role of politics in the lands of Islam is highlighted. The nature of the relationship between religion and politics is successively examined under two sets of circumstances: the ordinary pattern and conditions of crisis of the state. In Section 3, the role of the international context is highlighted together with the circumstances in which Islamist revivalist movements have risen. In Section 4, which is also the concluding section, the distinctive character of Islam, to the extent that it exists, is emphasised.

1. The thesis of Bernard Lewis

In his New York Times Bestseller *What Went Wrong?* (2002), Lewis contends that Islam is a genuine obstacle to development, and that it differs radically from Christianity. In other words, religion is not necessarily an obstacle to development but, in the specific case of Islam, it appears to be so. His argument rests on the idea that, unlike in Christianity, the separation between politics and religion, God and Caesar, Church and State, spiritual and temporal authority, has never really occurred in the Islamic world. As a consequence, individual freedom, social pluralism, civil society, and representative government, were prevented from evolving in Muslim societies. The reason for the lack of separation between the religious and the political spheres in the Muslim world is argued to be historical: the Prophet 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.

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 Caesar’s” (Matthew 22:21). According to an authoritative voice, the separation between the state and the Church in Western Christianity did not seriously start until the Gregorian reforms during the 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 the clergy and the laity, between God and Caesar, between the pope and the emperor” (Le Goff, 2003, p. 86). The critical point is that

Muslims had no such need to isolate the religious sphere from the political one. In Islam, there is no ecclesiastical body nor is there any vertical chain of command to direct the believers (except in Iran where the Shi'a tradition prevails and a clerical establishment exists which has been expanded after Komeini's revolution): Muslim believers directly refer to God and its law on earth, the *shari'a*. "Since the state was Islamic, and was indeed created as an instrument of Islam by its founder, there was no need for any separate religious institution. The state was the church, the church was the state, and God was head of both, with the Prophet as his representative on earth... From the beginning, Christians were taught, both by precept and practice, to distinguish between God and Caesar and between the different duties owed to each of the two. Muslims received no such instruction" (Lewis, 2002, pp. 113, 115).

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

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

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

The sovereign is just the "shadow of God on earth", in charge of enforcing yet not interpreting the words of God. There is actually no concept of nation or people in the Islamic world, only that of the community of believers (the *umma*) which transcends physical boundaries. This is best expressed by Hassan Al-Banna (more about him later) when he states: "Islam is a comprehensive system which deals with all spheres of life. It is a country and a home or a country and a nation" (Al-Banna, 1996, p. 7 –cited from Hassan and Kivimäki, 2005: 127).¹

To sum up, the difference between Christianity and Islam is so radical that it reflects a clash of cultures and civilizations: to the Western perception of the separation of religion from political life and the assertion of individual rights, the Muslims oppose an all-encompassing view of 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

¹ It is thus revealing that the Palestinian Islamist movement, Hamas has been 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.

is just a short step to contend that “Islam and democracy are antithetical”, since obedience to religious tenets is inherent in Islamic religious doctrine (Lewis, 1993, p. 91). As underlined by Karl Marx, a modern market economy cannot develop in the absence of a civil society understood as an autonomous sphere of economic activity, unimpeded by political and religious restrictions (see Avineri, 1968, pp. 154-55). For Lewis, it is precisely this sort of emancipation that is prevented from occurring in the lands of Islam.

2. The role of politics

2.1 *The dominant model of state-religion relation in Islam*

A good starting point to explore the relationship between religion and politics in the lands of Islam is the history of the first centuries of Islamic rule. 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 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 Quraysh clan (Muhammad’s tribe).² 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.³ A complete dissociation between politics and religion ensued and the function of the caliphate was emptied of all its sacred content. The merchant aristocracy of Mecca, in particular, actively fought against prophetic preaching. For this reason, the seizure of power by the Meccan clan of the Ummayyads may be seen as an usurpation. The Abbasids (from Bagdad), who

² This requirement was to be reasserted in the most famous theoretical exposition and defence of the caliphate, that of al-Mawardi (d. 1058) (Hourani, 1991, p. 142).

³ 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, p. 213). As a result, the Abbasid Caliphs coexisted with increasing difficulty with the Shi’ite imams (all direct descendants of the Prophet via Fatima, and of Ali, the fourth caliph) whom they controlled from close quarters and often ended up assassinating. The only real attempt at reconciliation occurred when Al 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 Baghddad, 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, p. 110; Hourani, 1991, pp. 63-64).

destituted the Umayyads, 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, p. 96).

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

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

2.2 *The state-religion relation in times of crisis of the state*

The above relation between politics and religion could be deeply disturbed when the state fell into a state of prolonged crisis. This typically happened under the two polar circumstances of lawlessness and unrestrained despotism: (i) a political vacuum created by weak central power, and (ii) a despotic rule resulting in acute people’s oppression and deeply entrenched corruption of the leadership. Under such circumstances, there is a tendency for religious authorities and groups to play a more active role in politics, and to reassert themselves as the most effective shield against the vicissitudes of power. First, in periods of a power vacuum, contending political factions vie for political power causing a state of anarchy and lawlessness under which people endure many hardships. Religious figureheads are then tempted to come out of their seclusion in order to substitute for missing central power or to help people in distress. In the sultanate of pre-colonial Morocco, for example, it is a well-substantiated fact that in periods of political vacuum, sanctuaries, the shelters of religious influence, became more numerous and were more frequently solicited. This is not surprising since in an environment characterized by instability and violence, they became more useful both as islands of peace and as sites

through which conflicting tribes and other social groups were able to work out non-violent solutions (el Mansour, 1979, pp. 57, pp. 69-70).

In Ottoman Turkey, a state in which the sultan held considerable powers and succeeded in incorporating the entire (religious) legal community into the state bureaucracy after the 15th century⁴, his control over the *ulema* tended to decline during periods of state crisis. Thus, dervish orders were spawned by the chaos of cultural and physical frontiers that accompanied the waves of Turkoman migrations. These fraternities, which existed “in bewildering variety”, could represent “exceptional sensibility to political and social injustices” (Goffman, 2002, pp. 73-74). They came to form an extensive network of deviant Sufis, occasionally operating as centres of opposition to the Ottoman state and its policies. When the regime was fragile, such as was certainly the case under Mehmed I, they could even gather a wide range of disgruntled Ottoman subjects into a massive rebellion (1416) (ibidem, p. 75). In Persia, to take a last example, while the Safavids largely succeeded in making religion subservient to their own ends and in building a strong and centralized state that created political stability and economic prosperity, the situation radically changed after their demise as a result of the rebellion of an Afghan chieftain in 1722 (Keddie, 1969, 1971, 1999; Cleveland, 2004, pp. 51-55, 109-116). There followed a long period of chaos dominated by tribal warfare and weak, short-lived states until the Qâjar dynasty was eventually consolidated (1794) to remain (nominally) in power until the 1920s. The Qâjars, however, “never succeeded in recreating the royal absolutism or the bureaucratic centralism of the Safavids” (Cleveland, 2004, p. 55).

The *ulema* began to function independently of the government and, backed by a population which granted them extensive authority in religious and legal matters, they constituted a powerful force of support of, or opposition to, the policies of the shahs. According to William Cleveland (2004), popular belief held that the rulings of *mujtabids* (learned individuals qualified to exercise *ijtihâd*, that is, to interpret the *shar'ia*) were more authoritative statements of the will of the Hidden Imam than the proclamations of the shahs who made no claims to divinity. Thus, “if a *mujtabid* denounced a royal decree as incompatible with the teachings of Islam, then believers were enjoined to accept the *mujtabid's* decision. In this way, the *ulema* gained a powerful voice in Iranian political life” (p. 111). The growing importance of religious courts (the *shar'*) was reflected not only in their rising number, but also in their rather wide area of competence (they could deal with commercial and many other matters), and in the preference given by many people to religious over official courts (when the choice was possible) whose judges were considered particularly corrupt and unreliable (Floor, 1980; 1983; Gleave, 2005). Especially after the well-known tobacco protest, in which massive popular demonstrations led by members of the Shi'a *ulema* were directed against the abusive privileges granted by the ruler to foreign (British) interests (Keddie, 1966), it became clear that “the Iranian people were receptive to calls for political activity based on Islamic frames of reference” (Cleveland, 2004, p. 115).

Second, there are the circumstances in which political power is despotic, such as when an ambitious ruler uses the banner of Islam to extend his control over a rebellious territory, or to unify a fragmented political space. For example, 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

⁴ In the words of Cleveland, “the entire religious establishment held office at the pleasure of the sultan” (Cleveland, 2004, p. 48; see also Inalcik, 1973; Inalcik and Quataert, 1994; Goffman, 2002; Imber, 2002).

his authority to the east and the centre, he even decided that he was the only person habilitated to declare the *jihad* (Nahavandi, 1999, p. 89). Motivated by the desire to establish central law and order in the country, rulers from Kabul have always tried to use the *shari'a* as a substitute for a variety of tribal laws.

Rahman, but also the Seouds when they established their power over Saudi Arabia, were thus following the route pointed a long time ago by Ibn Hanbal, the first Islamist thinker and the founder of one of the four juridical schools of sunnite Islam (first quarter of the 9th century), who reflected upon the best ways to avoid the violent upheavals and murderous tribal rivalries which Islam had witnessed during its first centuries (see supra). Unlike those who argued for a retreat from the ugly realities of world 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)⁵, Hanbal stressed the need to follow the letter rather than the spirit of the Qur'an. To reconcile the contending factions and reach a large consensus among the Muslims, he proposed to ban all personal opinions and to rally the whole community of believers around a unique truth. Reading of the Qur'an had to be literal, avoiding any allegorical exegesis. Indeed, strict abidance of the Islamic law had to replace particularized abidance of tribal laws so that segmented ties based on kinship could give rise to harmonious relationships grounded in a religion of universal brotherhood.

Several centuries later, Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) from Damascus and one of the foremost religious writers of the Mamluk period, followed in Hanbal's footsteps. Like him, he was preoccupied by the divisions within the Islamic world, and believed that the unity of the *umma*—a unity of belief in God and acceptance of the Prophet's message—is what matters most, even if this principle does not imply political unity. His views were even more radical than those of Hanbal, in part because he believed to be an important duty of the sovereign to disseminate the Muslim faith beyond the confines of the existing Muslim community, and to have recourse to the *jihad*, the holy war, toward that purpose. In short, every Muslim believer must be a fighter for his faith, and the holy war is as important as prayer in his conception (Hourani, 1991, pp. 179-81; Meddeb, 2002, Chap. 9).

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

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

⁵ This is a reaction similar to that of the Pharisees under the Roman Empire.

In those cases (think of Algeria, the Sudan, Pakistan, for example), Islam has been “nationalized” and cynically used by the state for the legitimization of repressive policies and mobilization (Layachi, 1995, p. 180; Owen, 1992, p. 41). This is the usual story of authoritarian rulers who do not hesitate to (discreetly) support or co-opt extremist movements, whose ideological platform is often based on religion or ethnicity, as a way to fight political opponents threatening them. Power elites used 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). They were particularly vulnerable to attacks coming from Islamist movements since, in the lands of Islam, anyone can oppose the state on the grounds that it is insufficiently Islamic (see supra): Islamist clerics may decide that a ruler is not a ‘good Muslim’, and does not deserve to rule. This largely explains why secular regimes, including that of Egypt, began to rest their legitimacy in religion. The same principle applies to the secular regimes of Syria and Iraq (Hourani, 1991, pp. 452-53). In Iraq, Baathist ideology was based on pan-Arabism “whose spirit is Islam”. It stressed the exceptionalism of the Arabs whose national awakening was bound up with a religious message and obligation (Makiya, 1989, pp. 198-211; Dawisha, 1999).

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

To understand the emergence of Islamist movements in present-day Islamic world, it is not enough to cite the inept and corrupt character of most prevailing political regimes, as well as the cynical manipulation of religion by some despotic rulers. A conjunction of historical circumstances, political or military events, and power games at the international level have obviously complicated the task of Middle Eastern countries confronted with the challenge of modernization and economic progress in the face of powerful external competition. This international context is highlighted in Section 3 below.

3. The rise of Islamist movements

3.1 Revived Islamist doctrines and unique diffusion opportunities

Guiding present-day Islamist movements is the thinking of a few religious reformers who drew inspiration from the writings of both Hanbal and Taymiyya. The first of them is Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) who preached the return to the teaching of Islam as understood by the followers of Hanbal in the context of central Arabia in the early eighteenth century. This meant strict obedience to the Qur’an and hadith as they were interpreted by responsible scholars in each generation, and rejection of all that could be regarded as illegitimate innovations, including reverence to dead saints as intercessors with God, and the special devotion of the Sufi orders (Hourani, 1991, pp. 257-58). To preserve his creed, the Wahhabite does not hesitate to destroy the relics of

the past so that any confrontation between myth and historical document can be avoided.

The movement created by al-Wahhab was not important in his own time (he was actually a poor philosopher, not well regarded by Arab colleagues), but was to have wider significance later. This is because he was linked to the Seoud tribe which was striving to take hold of power by conquering the Arabian deserts. The eventual conquest of Arabia by the Seouds and their support given to the puritanical doctrine of al-Wahhab proved to be a decisive factor in modern Muslim history.⁶ Much in the line of what has been said before about political instrumentalization of Islam, the Saudi royal family is essentially a secular polity which has co-opted a religious elite and used Islam in order to consolidate a Saudi national identity and thereby reinforce its own legitimacy (Al-Rasheed, 1996, 2002, 2006; Nevo, 1998). Abdelwahab Meddeb portrays them crudely as a bunch of hard-nose businessmen (more exactly, rentiers) eager to provide an Islamic façade behind which to hide their unrestrained capitalist practices (Meddeb, 2002, p. 125). In the context of the present discussion, the key point is that the wealth of Saudi Arabia, thanks to the abundance of oil in its soil, allowed it to play a major role in the lands of Islam. Many Muslims migrated to Saudi Arabia to work as migrants and later returned to their country of origin, while the government of Saudi Arabia used its immense financial resources to disseminate Wahhabism throughout the Muslim world and beyond.

About two centuries after al-Wahhab, the puritanical interpretation of Islam was revived by Abû al-A'la Mawdûdi (1903-1979) in Pakistan, and by his fervent disciple, Sayyid Qutb (1929-1966), in Egypt. These two thinkers had a deep influence on today's Islamist movement, in particular, on Ussama ben-Laden (Saudi Arabian) and his lieutenant in *el qâ'ida*, Ayman al-Zawahri (Egyptian). While Mawdûdi did not call for war, even though his writings lead to the conclusion that war is required, Qutb claimoured 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.

In Egypt, Qutb joined the Muslim Brothers, an Islamist movement created by Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), who was himself deeply influenced by his master, Rashid Ridha. Followers were to live according to the *shari'a*, purify their heart, and form the nucleus of dedicated fighters of the Islamic cause, which implies their readiness for violence and martyrdom (Hourani, 1991, pp. 445-46; Meddeb, 2002, pp. 114-15, 121-22). Qutb had a decisive influence on this movement and led it into open opposition to Nasser. He was himself arrested, tried and executed in 1966.

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

⁶ 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 Rahnema, 1994, pp. 137-140).

the very country where Mawdûdi propagated his ideology among his own brethren, and in their own language (Meddeb, 2002, p. 122). It bears noticing that, even among the *Mujabiddin* 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. With the Russians out, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the most extremist faction among the *Mujabiddin*, became the prime minister of the Afghan government.⁷ Since internal confrontations between the contending factions of the victors did not stop, the government soon collapsed and a new radical movement, that of the *Taliban*, came to power, quickly joined by the extremist Islamist factions of the *Mujabiddin*. Like Ibn Hanbal twelve centuries earlier, and like king Rahman toward the end of the 19th century (see supra), the *Taliban* were convinced that a uniform, rigid interpretation of the Qur'an is the only way of bringing unity and restoring order among the feuding local tribes and warlords.

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

3.2 *A modernization crisis compounded by military defeats*

What is it that recently caused the Islamic world to turn more radical? The answer seems to be that radicalization of Islamic ideology is a consequence of a deep economic, social and military crisis faced by Muslim societies. This crisis has its roots in the decline of the Arab civilization and its failure to meet the challenge of modernization posed by the Western world. Thus, according to Mohamed Chérif Ferjani, the Arabs are torn 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 as 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, pp. 133-34 –my translation). Note that the above analysis also applies to the deceptively secular ideology of Baathism in which “Arabism’s most basic model always resided in its own past”, and the consciousness of pan-Arabism has been ideologized in such a way as to borrow virtually nothing of the constellation of values associated with the European Enlightenment (Makiya, 1989, pp. 189-212).

Other regions of the world have actually gone through such a modernization crisis (see, e.g., Janos, 1982), and eventually succeeded in resolving it (think of the changes undergone by Japan while shifting from the Tokugawa to the Meiji era). What makes the present predicament of the Muslim world, and the Arab world in particular, so persisting and vicious is the fact that it is sustained by humiliating military setbacks

⁷ Ironically enough, he was strongly 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

(which actually prolong a long tradition since the Arabs have gone from defeat to defeat since the victory of the Mongols over the Abbasids in 1258), and an openly declared support of the Western superpower 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 be a sign that there was something rotten in their societies and in the moral system which they expressed?... the problem of identity was expressed in terms of the relationship between the heritage of the past and the needs of the present. Should the Arab peoples tread a path marked out for them from outside, or could they find in their own inherited beliefs and culture those values which could give them a direction in the modern world?” (Hourani, 1991, pp. 442-43; see also Kassir, 2004).

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

All this is strangely reminiscent of the rebellion led against the Ottoman government in the early 17th century by young and idle students from religious schools. Their leader was a gifted preacher, Kadizade Mehmed, whose sermons emphasized the evils of innovation (“every innovation is heresy, every heresy is error, and every error leads to hell”). His followers considered the Ottoman military and high Ottoman society as “inept and morally bankrupt”, and they “envisioned the recurring debacles on the battlefield as well as the persistent palace scandals as manifestations of a turn away from true Islam”. As pointed out by Daniel Goffman: “In important ways, they constituted a forerunner to Islamic reformers in later centuries who, whether Ottoman, Egyptian, Wahhabi, or Iranian, consistently have argued that the West has defeated Islamic states only because their ostensibly Muslim leaders have forgotten their religious roots. Bring back the Muhammedan state, they all argue, and Islam will again take up its leading rank in the world order” (Goffman, 2002, pp. 118-19).

To whom does the new literal and puritanical Islam appeal most? Not to the poorest of the poor for whom Westernization is magical since it means an abundance of food and medicine. Nor to the rural dwellers who are immersed in “a kind of village Islam that had adapted itself to local cultures and to normal human desires”, an Islam that is pluralistic and tolerant, allowing the worshipping of saints, the singing of religious hymns, or the cherishing of art –all activities formally disallowed in Islam. Religious and

cultural syncretism was thus a hallmark of most rural societies in the lands of Islam.⁸ The people to whom Islam appeals most are “the educated hordes entering the cities of the Middle East or seeking education and jobs in the West” (Zakaria, 2003, pp. 143-44). Also, being cut off from the ties of kinship and neighbourliness to which they were accustomed in their village, rural migrants found a sort of compensation in strong Muslim urban organizations. In other words, the sense of alienation or loss of identity which they experienced in the cities “could be counterbalanced by that of belonging to a universal community of Islam, . . . and this provided a language in terms of which they could express their grievances and aspirations” (Hourani, 1991, p. 452).

Identification with Islamist groups among alienated urban people has been further aided by the fact that in many countries Islamist movements were able to capitalize on the lack of legitimacy of poorly performing states and their failure to integrate the entire population and to increase political participation (many regimes have had only narrow support within particular ethnic, religious or tribal minority groups). They have also filled the gap left by the retreat of the state from the distribution of essential services, such as health, education, and childcare. In Egypt, for example, the number of Muslim NGOs increased from 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, pp. 78-79; see also Harik, 2005, for a detailed review of the Hezbollah’s social activities in Lebanon). Typically, a privately-funded Islamic charitable institution provides a range of services that are organized around a private mosque, including donations for the poor, a clinic for health care, a kindergarten and a primary school. Often, these institutions have also founded religious schools, orphanages and homes for the elderly.⁹

To sum up, in a situation of protracted crisis such as that experienced by the Muslim world, a radicalization of religious beliefs has taken place at the urging of frustrated urban groups and, as we have seen earlier, often by political rulers themselves. Radicalisation 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 (most notably in Egypt, Syria, Sudan, and Iraq where socialism, nationalism and secularism were the dominant ideologies of the post-independence ruling elites), and when military defeats are added to disappointing economic

⁸ 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, p. 86).

⁹ In certain contexts, it must be noted, Islamist doctrines are used by middle class people who want to oppose social groups considered to enjoy undue privileges owing to their tight connection to the regime. In Syria, for example, the Muslim Brothers did not have the same role as those in Egypt: to a great extent they served as a medium for the opposition of the Sunni urban population to the domination of a regime identified with the *Alawi* community (Hourani, 1991, pp. 457). In the Côte d’Ivoire, the rise of Wahhabism occurred during a period of increasing disruption of the traditional society under conditions of fastly growing urbanization and migration movements after the second world war. The Wahhabite doctrine attracted rich merchants whom it supplied with an ideology that was both anti-establishment and ‘bourgeois’. It was anti-establishment in the sense of being opposed to the feudal-like elite of the marabouts, who are at the heart of traditional Islam, but are viewed as impostors illegitimately interposing between God and the faithful. And it was ‘bourgeois’ in the sense of being emancipated from the constraints of the traditional aristocratic system (Miran 2006, p. 250). It is true that its egalitarian discourse also appealed to low caste people willing to liberate themselves from the yoke of the traditional system of hierarchy, but it is only in the 1980s that it started recruiting into the urban poor. For them, Wahhabism offered a partial response to their quest for social protection and spiritual advice in a context of urban economic precariousness (p. 285).

performances, corruption and inefficiency of the rulers. In the process, the achievements of Arab secularism in the field of education and legal development (civil and commercial laws were made secular early on, toward the end of 19th century, in countries like Egypt and Syria), for example, are ignored or, worse, they are considered to be a liability.

An important outcome of the perceived failure of secularism is that Islam has little competition 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, pp. 142-43; see also Kassir, 2004, p. 39; Hassan and Kivimäki, 2005, p. 133).

Islamist opposition is all the more intransigent as many Islamist teachers are rather poor thinkers prone to extreme simplification: self-proclaimed mollahs form an Islamic ‘lumpen-intelligentsia’ made of ill-educated, ignorant people who misunderstand Islam owing to their lack of historical culture (Roy, 1990, p. 73).¹⁰ In some places, important official positions can even be acceded by ill-trained people, such as in Faisalabad (Pakistan) where a *qadi* (Islamic judge) can get his diploma after a six-week period considered equivalent to a master in law (Piquard, 1999, p. 73). It is a military despot, General Zia ul-Haq, who conceded to the *ulema* (in exchange for their support) that the degrees awarded by the *madrasas* could be recognized as the equivalent of university degrees provided some portions of the general curriculum were also taught in them (Zaman, 2007, p. 78).

Finally, the responsibility of advanced countries in the West, and the United States in particular, in creating a political environment conducive to extremist reactions in the lands of Islam cannot be overstated. As a matter of fact, the ability of Muslim countries to move forward has been significantly hampered by the lack of wisdom on the part of the major Western countries in dealing with the most important issues confronting the Arab world, foremost among which are, of course, the Palestinian question. Had the Western powers taken a more enlightened route, perhaps the nascent Arab secular movements in the fifties and the sixties would have been given a better opportunity to take roots. The unwillingness of the West to bring about a just settlement of the Palestinian problem early on, along with the repeated defeats of the Arab armies, has helped push aside secularism and allowed Arab regimes to instrumentalise Islam in order to stay in power, with the simultaneous or consequent emergence of the modern fundamentalist/jihadist movements. The catastrophic way of dealing with the problems of despotic power in Irak, and the rise of Iran as a new assertive power in the Middle East, has further aggravated the vicious nature of the obscurantist deadlock in which many lands of Islam are now being trapped.

¹⁰ 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, p. 73).

4. Conclusion: The distinctive feature of Islam

Leaving aside the important element of the international political context, the above emphasis on the contesting role of fundamentalist, revivalist movements in the context of deeply authoritarian and corrupt political regimes seems to make the case of Islamist organisations rather similar to that of similar movements in other regions of the world, such as Africa and Latin America where neo-pentecostal movements have recently increased their activities to an extraordinary degree. Thus, in the words of Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar:

“In effect, many forms of religious revival challenge the very bases of legitimacy of states that operate through institutions and norms of governance originally created in colonial times. The rather sudden and radical political changes in Africa in the 1990s encouraged the irruption of spiritual movements into political space as people sought alternative sources of authority and at the same time were freed from institutional constraints previously imposed by single-party governments. Seen in this light, the reoccupation of public space by religious movements expresses in a spirit idiom a concern with poor governance. This is clearly the case with neo-pentecostal movements, whose central concern is the presence of evil in society.” (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, p. 100).

In many lands of Islam, by contrast, there has hardly been any opening up of political space through a democratisation process during the last decades. Yet, the prestige of the mosques as rallying points of frustrated feelings is so strong that political rulers find it difficult to keep them under control. In fact, a distinctive feature of Islam compared to Christianity 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. This idea has been forcefully restated by Avner Greif who even establishes a parallel between Islam and Judaism in this regard:

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

Owing to the specific context in which Islam was born, the sacred texts of this faith explicitly address a number of key aspects of the individuals' social and economic life. Precise prescriptions are thus found regarding inheritance rules, proper behaviour of women, etc. (Kuran, 2004a), in contrast to Christianity whose tenets are formulated in general and typically allegorical terms. It is true that, in many matters, especially regarding economic questions, the Islamic principles, whether contained in the Qur'an or in the hadith, are stated so vaguely or so ambiguously that they can be interpreted in many diverse ways (Kuran, 2004c). On some topics, for instance treatment of women, there are even contradictory passages. This said, there also are a number of matters, such as inheritance, for which the statements are extremely precise (see sourate IV “About women”, verses 7-176). The main point that I want to make is that whether the statements are ambiguous or not is besides the point: by their very nature of having been written in a distant past, sacred texts are almost always liable to varied interpretations.

What matters is that, precisely because they explicitly address mundane concerns, the sacred texts of Islam can be so easily invoked by whoever wants to make use of them for political or other purposes.

In conditions of a crisis of the state, opposition movements based on religious affiliation can thus choose puritanical interpretations that find a strong echo among people fed up with the practices of corruption and decadence which their political rulers have indulged in. The fact is that “the decision to oppose the state on the grounds that it is insufficiently Islamic belongs to anyone who wishes to exercise it” (Zakaria, 2003, pp. 124-25, 144). And, in self-defence, rulers can also turn to their own interpretation of the faith, so as to tame political opposition and crush dissent. They will always be able to do so since there are plenty of *ulema* around who hold different views about how Islam should be read. As a matter of fact, Islam leaves a rather ample margin of freedom for the interpretation of the Qur’an, and rules tend to be scattered throughout the works of the *ulema*. The latter do not form a religious establishment that can declare by fiat which is the correct interpretation of the Qur’an, and no central power structure resembling the Vatican (with its ability to excommunicate) has ever existed to lead the Muslim world community, if one excepts the first Caliphate.

As a consequence of this situation, we witness endless, possibly violent, confrontations between rulers and religious opposition that distract attention from the need to undertake progressive reforms that, alone, can enable Muslim countries to compete more effectively with the West. The fact that advanced Western countries have a poor understanding of, and pay insufficient attention to Arab interests and problems obviously complicates the predicament of the countries in which many Muslims are living.

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