

Rethinking the “Middle East” as an Object of Study

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- I . Introduction
 - II . Studying Islam
 - III . Studying Political Islam or
Islamism
 - IV . Studying the State in an Islamic
Context
 - V . (The World of) Islam and Politics
Nowadays
 - VI . Bringing Religion back into the
Study of Western Politics
 - VII . Conclusion: Bringing Everything
Else back into the Study of
“Middle Eastern” Politics

I. Introduction

The “Islamic world” covers a huge area of land with almost 1.6 billion people, integrating multiple different cultural, ethnic and political entities. In its contemporary period, religious institutions, movements, and beliefs have held more political

importance in the Muslim world than in the West. Although attributed to special features of Islam, which are important to some extent, there are also other causes. First are the different historical experiences in the West and Islamic world, and second are the imperial and colonial experiences suffered by Muslims which caused them to become defensive about Islam and to define (as did some Westerners) the situation in religious terms.

One aspect which is usually focused on is the *Shari'a* (normally translated as *Islamic Law*, a concept that has different connotations according to Time and Space), which would appear to be represented as one single and official building being used from Morocco to Indonesia, thus giving that geographical landmass some kind of religious connotation. This grill of analysis ignores the different situations in different parts of the Islamic world, where there are countries which until recently were considered secularist at the same time that having a state religion and the principles of *Shari'a* were the main source of legislation (Egypt pre-2011); countries which do not have state religion but where the president must be a Muslim (Syria); countries where the head of state is also the Prince of the Faithful, something that does not impede political groups for using Islam to delegitimize the political establishment (Morocco); or countries which are considered models of secularism while at the same time have a Ministry of Religious Affairs (Turkey).

The aim of this paper is to contribute to a different epistemology when analysing the diversity of political situations and the role of religion in different contexts of the Islamic world.

II. Studying Islam

In an interview given in 1976 to *Diacritics*, Edward Said (1935-2003), referring to Middle East studies, said that most Middle East experts were social scientists whose expertise was based on a handful of clichés about Arab society, Islam and the like, handed down like tatters, from the nineteenth century Orientalists, and that a whole new vocabulary of terms was bandied about: modernisation, elites, development, stability were talked about as possessing some sort of universal validity, but that in fact they formed a rhetorical smokescreen hiding ignorance on the subject. For Edward Said, the new Orientalist jargon, *i.e.*, of the twentieth century, was hermetic discourse, which

could not prepare one for what was happening in Lebanon, in the Israeli-occupied Arab territories, or in the everyday lives of the Middle Eastern peoples. Two years later, he would develop these and other themes in his seminal book *Orientalism* [Said 2005: 34; 1979].⁽¹⁾

After the Iranian Revolution in the late 1970s and the widespread recognition of the limitations of the secularization thesis, many questioned the compatibility of Islam and Muslims with modernity, reinforcing the old “Orientalist” stereotypes by which the Middle East and/or Islamic world is viewed. Due to the ubiquity of different *media*, “Islam,” “Muslims” and “Arabs” have been more and more in the spotlight, and a series of questions have arose, especially related to politics: Is Islam against modernisation? Is Islam incompatible with Democracy? What are the consequences of an Islamic government for pluralism and for the rights of minorities and women? Should the West fear a transnational Islamic threat or a clash of civilisations? What is the relation between State and Religion in Islam? However, these questions were not new, and echoed the late nineteenth century, early twentieth century ideas about “Islam” and the “Middle East.” In a countermove, others tried to prove that Islam could indeed be “modern” and compatible with democracy. Since 11th September, 2001, there has been much “culture talk” about Muslims and their politics wherever they happen to live in the world so it is not surprising to watch and hear the essentializing impulses of many commentators when the object of study is Islam or Muslims [Esposito 1997; Fuller 2003: 121-122; Lapidus 1975: 363-385; Vatin 1980: III-XIV].

However, while academic discourse and Western media alike have produced reified views of Islam and Muslims in abundance, such views have also emerged from within Islam itself, via interpretations and representations by Muslims on their own religion as unitary, timeless and unchanging. Representations are never simply reflections on or descriptions of reality, of social and religious processes, necessarily already “out there” in the world; they have generative power. In reshaping conceptual categories, they are oriented towards producing something that is given concrete ground; thereby intensifying a reality already alluded to in the discourse itself. It is imperative to pay attention to the genealogies of discourses (academic, state, “official,” global, as well as of those in this paper), which might become authoritative and normative, and through which politics in Muslim societies is comprehended, experienced, legitimated or contested. It must also be remembered that seemingly authoritative discourses and disciplinary practices are neither totalizing, nor are the

outcomes necessarily easily predictable. Moreover, it is also important to heed the warning of those who have argued against automatically privileging religion as the principal—or perhaps unique—foundation for Muslim identity and political practice [Soares and Osella 2009: 2].

The explosion in the research and study of this region and its languages in the past few decades has been remarkable. The number of scholars, not only “Western” but also from the Islamic world, taking up Islam to study it and teach about it has grown greatly. Fields like Linguistics, Literature, History, Politics, Economics, Anthropology, Sociology, Geography and Religion (of course), but also Society, Gender Studies, Media, Sexuality, and many others are now mainstream. However (and Said drew our attention to this), one aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Middle East and/or Islamic world is viewed. Television, cinema and all the other media resources have forced information into more and more standardized moulds, and this “standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth century academic and imaginative demonology of ‘the mysterious Orient’” [Said 1979: 27].

So, it comes as no surprise that some intellectuals, scholars, experts, pundits, journalists and opinion-makers talk about Islam and the Islamic world (with more than 1.5 billion people, dozens of different societies and languages, all spread throughout the world) as if it were a simple object, about which one can make grand generalisations regarding its history of fourteen-plus centuries and comment on the compatibility between Islam and Democracy, Islam and Human Rights or Islam and Progress. Although knowledgeable scholars are increasingly appearing on mass media to give their opinions on what is happening in different places like Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, Tunisia, Libya, Syria and Egypt, there are, however, some aspects related with the scholarly work done on those regions that still holds onto traces of the Orientalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly the concepts of Middle East and Islamic Studies themselves.

For a social scientist to be an expert in “Islamic Studies” it means they have studied “Islam” as an object of social science and understand “Islam” as a fact. For him or her, “there are still such things as *an* Islamic society, *an* Arab mind, *an* Oriental psyche.” Even those who specialize in the modern Islamic world, anachronistically use texts like the *Qur’an* to read into every facet of contemporary Egyptian or Algerian society. “Islam, or a 7th century ideal of it constituted by the Orientalist, is assumed to

possess the unity that eludes the more recent and important influences of colonialism, imperialism and even ordinary politics” [Said, 1979: 301]. Using history, social anthropology, political science, economy and geopolitics as disciplinary backgrounds, different authors such as Gilles Kepel [2000], Malise Ruthven [2002] and Bernard Lewis [2001] among others, still use “Orientalist” concepts in their attempts to analyse reality according to their own preconceptions.

One of Said’s worries, regarding Orientalism, was the danger and temptation of employing its formidable structure of cultural domination by formerly colonised peoples upon themselves or upon others [Said 1979: 25]. For example, Fareed Zakaria [2009], Bassam Tibi [1998] and Abdelwahab Meddeb talk about “Islam” as if it had a geographical existence, or a political and theological structural unity, similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church. After writing *The Malady of Islam*, where all the pessimistic clichés about Islam’s decadence and the dangers of Islamism were superficially analysed, Abdelwahab Meddeb seems to have been taken aback by recent events in the Arab world, particularly in his native country of Tunisia. This led him to write *Printemps de Tunis: la métamorphose de l’Histoire* [Tunisia’s Springtime: History’s Metamorphosis], now talking optimistically about other commonplaces like universal values, non-violence, democracy, the bankruptcy of “the clash of civilizations” and the “end of history” theories, and *laïcité*. The fact remains that none of his books helps us to understand the what, how and why of such complex events [Meddeb 2002; 2011].

In an article published in 2003, Anshuman A. Mondal [2003] wrote that “[u]nderlying the difficulty that most Islamic states have in accommodating political liberalism is Islam itself. Islam’s nineteenth century reformers could not reconcile their faith with western modernity.” Not once did Mondal mention the impact of colonialism and the brutality with which, in some cases, colonial powers denied the “natives” the “sweet fruits” of democracy and liberalism, and how that attitude fuelled the feeling of rejection of everything coming from the West. Various discourses on Islam’s need for reformation are also put forward, something debated inside and outside of the Islamic world [Beinin and Stork 1997: 3-4; Benzine 2004; Moaddel and Talattof 2002], an argument echoing nineteenth century Orientalism and sociological theories on the absence of Reformation in Islam and the untiable knot between religion and politics, ignoring the centuries long tradition of *islah* (reform) in Islam and the fact that many Western countries used (and still use) religion to advance political goals.

According to Mondal, “Western critics often claim that the failure of Islam to modernise is due to the fact that it has had no reformation. The Reformation, it is said, loosened the intellectual shackles of medieval Christendom and led to the development of capitalism and the emergence of the rational individual as the basic constituent of society. The development of Protestantism is also seen as instrumental in the secularisation of European society. Together, these developments crystallised into political institutions that were constitutional and democratic” [Mondal 2003: 28]. Timur Kuran, using this same line of reasoning, argues that what slowed the economic development of the Middle East was not colonialism or geography, but Islamic legal institutions from the 10th century onwards. By the nineteenth century, modern economic institutions began to be transplanted to the Middle East, but its economy has not caught up. Kuran does not explain what happened between the 11th and 18th centuries, and does not mention the fact that this “transplantation” was done using imperial violence and colonial brutality [Kuran 2010].

The theories of Max Weber (1864-1920) and Benjamin Kidd’s (1858-1916) on Protestantism, capitalism and forms of government, developing Karl Marx’s theory of modes of production and Montesquieu’s stereotypes on Eastern despotism, were elaborated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of economical, social, political, military, institutional, scientific and cultural strength of some European countries, especially the “Protestant” ones, like Great Britain and Germany, or the French Third Republic, which was under Positivism momentum and applying *laïcité*. With their theories, Weber and Kidd (who was openly racist), were justifying the landscape of their own times with something they thought had happened as a result of the Reformation. They projected onto the past their historical situation, and also tried to explain the “backwardness” of Roman Catholic countries.

The Reformation, which was a historical process of West European Christianity, in fact, did not imply the loosening of the intellectual shackles of medieval Christendom. That movement was aimed at the abuses of the Catholic Church in Rome, and it produced a period of great political and religious violence that only ended in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia and putting an end to the Thirty Years’ War. Even after that, religious hostilities continued with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. In many Reformed countries it was unthinkable to be a subject of the Crown or a Prince without adhering to the religion of the ruler (*cujus regio, ejus religio*), and many Protestant countries still have State religions today (Great Britain, Denmark, Norway,

Finland, or Sweden until 2000).

According to conventional wisdom, there is no separation between religion and state in Islam. Ernest Gellner [1992: 5-9] thus asserted that Islam “was the state from the very start,” and it was this theological character of Islam which rendered it a “dramatic, conspicuous exception” to the otherwise universal process of secularization. Most readings of “Islamic fundamentalism” aver that since Islam fuses religion and politics, the idea of the state flows from the inner logic of Islam. Across the disciplinary divides, it is a truism to assert that Islam, in contrast to other religions, does not make a distinction between religion and the state, or *sacerdotium* and *regnum*. The idea of an Islamic state, as the argument goes, flows from the theological character of Islam itself. This line of argument, also shared by influential Islamist ideologues such as Abul ‘Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979) and Egypt’s Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), and which Irfan Ahmad [2009] calls the “fusion framework,” still informs, in different ways, most writings on Islam, especially “Islamic fundamentalism.”⁽²⁾

If that is the case, if Islam does not separate religion from politics, how do we explain the fact that almost two-thirds of the member states of the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (formerly Conference) are states that consider themselves to be secular and/or having separation between religion and politics?⁽³⁾ How do we explain the fact that for different Muslim thinkers, such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), Chiragh ‘Ali (1844-1895) and Shibli Nu‘mani (1857-1914), Islam does indeed make a separation between religion and state and theologically it did not entail an Islamic state, a line of thought which was further pursued by the Egyptian ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq (1888-1966) who presented this argument in the wake of the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924?

Conclusions of the frameworks mentioned above are radically different, even antagonistic. However, the methods employed to arrive at these respective conclusions are theological, for the method employed is one which accords centrality to canonical religious texts, particularly the *Qur’an* and the *hadith* (Prophet Muhammad’s statements and actions), in order to derive a given conclusion. Central to this approach is a philological way of deciphering meanings of key words in the texts, especially the concept of *Shari’a*, which is thought to be something applied from Morocco to Indonesia. Usually translated as *Islamic law*, *Shari’a* means, literally in Arabic, *path*, *way*, and evokes, in abstract terms, the concept of Justice or Rule of Law.

One of the aims of this paper is to question the validity of the theological

approach to understanding the dynamics of politics and religion in Islam. The relation between religion and state formation has not been fully explored in the social sciences, due to the fact that, generally, most theorists have assumed that in modern times economic changes have led, and will lead, to the privatization of faith and secularization [Casanova 1994: 11-39], and as a result, religion will not have an impact on state formation in a meaningful fashion and will most likely cease to command popular allegiance [Turner 1988: 322-333]. However, a common complaint from political scientists involved in the study of religion is that religious issues have been largely overlooked by political science. Steven Kettel [2012] shows that political science publications involving religious topics are significantly fewer than those engaging with subjects typically regarded as being more central to the discipline. Moreover, where they have engaged with religious issues, these articles have also focused on a limited number of subject areas and been concentrated in specific disciplinary subfields. In the case of “Islam,” that concentration has been on Islamism or Political Islam.

III. Studying Political Islam or Islamism

Several authors have expressed the view that, in most cases, what is called Islamic resurgence or revivalism is something associated with Islamic militancy or fundamentalism, and that political movements are many times confused with a religious affirmation [Esposito 1983: 3; Nasr 1994: 81; Voll 1994: 3-5]. Over the last few decades, Islam has become a central point of reference for a wide range of political activities, arguments and opposition movements. The term “political Islam” has been adopted by many scholars in order to identify this seemingly unprecedented irruption of Islamic religion into the secular domain of politics and thus to distinguish these practices from the forms of personal piety, belief, and ritual conventionally subsumed in Western scholarship under the unmarked category “Islam.” The claim that contemporary Muslim activists are putting Islam to use for political purposes seems, at least in some instances, to be warranted, since although parties that base their appeal on their Islamic credentials appear to exemplify this instrumental relation to religion, a problem remains: in what way does the distinction between the political and non-political domains of social life hold today? Are European parties that base their appeal on (Democratic) Christian roots religious movements?

There have been innumerable websites and voluminous publications with many projects on Muslim fundamentalists and Islamic fundamentalism and controversial and disputable issues regarding the terms “fundamentalist” and “fundamentalism” when used in relation with Islam or Muslims. However, for John L. Esposito, “the term *Islamic fundamentalism*, while commonly used, is regarded by many as misleading. The term *fundamentalism* is laden with Christian presuppositions and Western stereotypes, and it implies a monolithic threat.” Hence, he suggested alternative, more useful terms like “*Islamic revivalism* and *Islamic activism*, which are less value-laden and have roots within a tradition of political reform and social activism” [Esposito 1996].

Macksood Aftab [1995] had already complained about the terms “fundamentalists” and “fundamentalism” used for Muslims because both terms have been deeply rooted in the western Christian tradition: “the term Fundamentalist is actually derived from a series of essays published from 1910 to 1915 under the title *The Fundamentals* written by British evangelists. The purpose of this twelve-volume collection was to determine which churches, according to the authors, held up to genuine Christian doctrine and the ones that did not. Nevertheless the term Fundamentalist, in the Christian world, is synonymous with the ‘Bible Thumpers’ and the tele-evangelists. To apply the same terminology to Muslims is neither fair nor valid... Therefore the media should stop using the word Fundamentalist to describe any and all Islamic organizations, or be more careful in its usage.”

Almost a decade earlier than Esposito and Aftab, William Montgomery Watt had commented on the term “fundamentalist” used for Islam or Muslims since it was more appropriate and applicable to Christianity. Watt realized that “although it is inexact” to use the term “fundamentalist” for Muslims, the term is retained in the title of his book because it is “convenient” and “popular journalistic usage.” Watt acknowledged and stressed that the term “fundamentalist” was “primarily an Anglo-Saxon Protestant term, especially applied to those who hold that the Bible must be accepted and interpreted literally. The nearest French equivalent is *intégrisme*, which refers to a similar but by no means identical tendency within Roman Catholicism. In Islam, Sunni fundamentalists accept the *Qur’an* literally, though with qualifications in some cases, but they also have other distinctive features. The Shi’ites of Iran, who in a very general sense are fundamentalists [Watt does not explain why or how], are not committed to a literal interpretation of the *Qur’an*.”

Watt did not use the literal interpretation of the *Qur’an* as the basis to

differentiate between Muslim fundamentalists and non-fundamentalist Muslims or between Islamic fundamentalism and non-fundamentalist Islam although the literal interpretation of the *Bible* was the basis for differentiating between Christian fundamentalists and non-fundamentalist Christians. Watt preferred to classify Muslim fundamentalists, conservatives and traditionalists in one category and Muslim liberals in another category. The two categories of Muslims were different because the fundamentalists, conservatives and traditionalists were “those Muslims who fully accept the traditional world-view and want to maintain it intact” while the liberals are those Muslims who see that the traditional world-view “needs to be corrected in some respects” [Watt 1988: 2].

“Islamism,” “political Islam,” “Islamic activism,” and “Islamic fundamentalism” are perhaps the more popular terms of reference; all of them are problematic, not least because all represent Western attempts to succinctly characterize a complex phenomenon for which there is no single agreed-upon term in the Arabic language. So, many decide to use “Islamism” due to its more generalized connotations and its current widespread usage in the public arena.⁽⁴⁾

Relations between states and institutions, and religious communities, have been for more than a century a central concern in the study of what is called the Middle East and Islamic societies; with the notion that Islam does not possess an ecclesiastic institution and that it covers all fields, including Law and State, and that this and the religious are one and the same thing, and that the State and religious authority are embodied in the same person, a vision still common even in the academic world. Ira M. Lapidus [1996: 3-27] says that, contrary to what is thought, there is an important differentiation between State and religious institutions in Islamic societies and that the historical evidence also shows that there is not just one Islamic model for all States and religious institutions, but many, competing with one another. And in each model there are ambiguities in what refers to the distribution of authority, the functions of each institution and the relationships between them.

For Mohammed Arkoun [2006: 260], “in all contemporary societies, developed and underdeveloped, the most recurrent debate is the competition, or radical opposition, between the religious and the secular model in building the best polity and assuring the safest and the most beneficial governance for its citizens.”

According to John L. Esposito [1999: 258], “all the world’s religions in their origins and histories were fairly comprehensive ways of living. Although the

relationship of religion to politics varies, religion is a path or a way of life with a strong emphasis on community as well as personal life. [...] The modern notion of religion has its origins in the post-Enlightenment West. Its restricted definition has become accepted as the norm or meaning of religion by many believers and unbelievers alike in the West. Bereft of a sense of history, few realize that the term 'religion' as known and understood today, is a modern and Western interpretation of it. The West then set about naming other religious systems or isms. Christianity and Judaism were joined by the newly named Hinduism, Buddhism, and Mohammedanism. Thus the nature and function of other religious traditions were categorized, studied, and judged in terms of modern Western, post-Enlightenment secular criteria, with its separation of church and state," a Western notion which is also recent.⁽⁵⁾

For Nikki R. Keddie [1994: 463-466] the supposed near-identity of religion and politics in Islam is more a pious myth than reality for most of Islamic history. It is widely believed that Islam and politics are unusually and closely intertwined in all spheres and periods, with the partial exception of the past century, a view understating the close church-state relations of the Eastern Orthodox churches and of religion and politics in the pre-modern West. In practice, despite the often-cited special role of Roman law and the existence of a clear relationship between church and state in the West, Christianity and Islam had rather similar levels of relations between religion and politics in pre-modern times. After the first four pious caliphs, *i.e.* between the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 Christ Era (C.E.) and 661 C.E., there were essentially a number of political caliphal dynasties that worked through political appointees and broke religious rules when they wished. The body of '*ulama*' partly helped through the creation of schools of law, creating a sphere independent of such essentially temporal rulers, but the '*ulama*'s rulings generally had less force than those of rulers. The independence of rulers from religious control grew as tribal and military converts took increasing power. Authors of advice to rulers often stressed the importance of backing religion, but this was pragmatic advice, not really advice on how to be good Muslims.⁽⁶⁾ Views similar to these on the essential separation of religion and politics can be found in the work of other authors, like the cited Ira Lapidus [1975], Sami Zubaida [1989; 2010], Nazih Ayubi [1991], Emmanuel Sivan [1985] and Aziz Ahmad, to whom it was arguable that Islam was religion and politics (State), *al-Islam din wa dawla*. Even in the Middle Ages this same question existed [Ahmad 1962: 121-130], with conflicting views by ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) and al-Ghazali (1058-1111). In the 1950s, Hamilton

Gibb [1955: 3-27] had already shown that Muslim political thinkers were aware of the separation between State and religion and acknowledged the emergence of an autonomous sphere of religious activity and organisation.

For Mohammed Arkoun [2006: 261-263], “secularism is implicitly and explicitly included in the Qur’anic discourse and the Medina historical experience. The Umayyad-‘Abbasid state is secularist in its sociological and anthropological basis, its military genesis and expansion, its administrative practice, its ideological discourse of legitimacy. The theological and jurisprudential endeavour developed by the ‘*ulama* contributed to concealing behind a religious vocabulary and sacralising conceptualisation, literary devices, the secularist, ideological basis of the so-called ‘Islamic’ polity and governance. [...] All those scholars, Muslims and non-Muslims, who contend today that Islam confuses politics and religion, or Islam does not need to address the issue of secularism because—unlike Christianity—it never developed a clerical regime under the leadership of the Church, neglect the two major historical and sociological facts. These are the confiscation of spiritual autonomy by the top (the state) and by the bottom (lay believers mobilised by ‘saints’ in brotherhoods) that began in 661 and has lasted until today.[...] The large majority of the political regimes which emerged in Muslim contexts after the liberation from colonial domination are *de facto* secular in the sense that they have adopted legal codes, governmental procedures, administrative hierarchies and practices borrowed from liberal Western, or Socialist-Communist patterns of thought and institutional models.”

However, the older view remains strong, and it is still frequently heard that Islam is religion and world (*al-Islam din wa dunya*), implying that in the Islamic ideology the religious and social dimensions of behaviour are integrated. The well-known dictum about Islam being a religion and a state (*al-Islam din wa dawla*) owes its origins to the alarmed reaction in Muslim circles to the final abolition of the caliphate, in 1924, at a time when most Muslim communities were suffering from territorial division under the impact of European colonialism.

In 1925, the Egyptian *shaykh* from al-Azhar University, ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq (1888-1966), published his most controversial book, *al-Islam wa usul al-hukm (Islam and the Foundations of Governance: Research on the Caliphate and Governance in Islam)*, in which he argued that Islam was a “message not a government, a religion not a state” [Al-Raziq 1925]. Although there had been earlier indications of this idea, such as in the writings of the Syrian ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Zahrawi (1855-1916) [Moubayed 2006:

398-399], ‘Abd al-Raziq’s book was unprecedented, unambiguous, and provoked a vigorous reaction and an extremely heated debate which reverberates to this day.

Thinkers like Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), Mawdudi or Sayyid Qutb, who were contemporaries of the abolition of the Caliphate, were the ones who reinvigorated and redefined the notion that Islam was religion and state at the same time, with the conviction that the State built by the Prophet and his companions in Medina was the only truly Islamic and reproducible one in the contemporary world. ‘Abd al-Razzaq Ahmad al-Sanhuri (1895-1971), the distinguished jurist who later codified the Egyptian, Iraqi and other Arab civil laws in a modernized form combining *shari’a* and European principles, could hardly ignore the controversy over the abolition. In his book, *Le Califat* [Al-Sanhuri 1926], he called for a new caliphate to preside over a general assembly composed of delegations from all Muslim countries and communities. Although al-Sanhuri was almost a secularist (or only a cultural Islamist), the contemporary writer Muhammad Sa‘id al-‘Ashmawi credits him with having coined the phrase “*al-Islam din wa dawla*” in an article published in 1929 [Wielandt 2003: 204, n.5].

As demonstrated above, researchers’ opinions on the relations between religion and politics, or *State*, in Islam, throughout history and nowadays, are very divergent: amid such a variety of views and opinions, is it really possible to offer a single answer on the question of what is the role of Islam in the political process? Thus, another aim of this paper is to explore how different thinkers think, and thought, about that role, and under what conditions.

IV. Studying the State in an Islamic Context

According to Nazih N. Ayubi, Nader Hashemi and Emran Qureshi, to define the proper relation between Islam and the state remains a central and unresolved question. Among the chief questions are whether or not revealed sacred text, in this case the *Qur’an*, should be the exclusive or principal source of political legitimacy, and whether or not government should enforce a particular religious doctrine. Islamist movements have been strengthened globally (as recent elections in different countries of the Arab world have shown), and though their ideological positions vary greatly and are contingent upon local circumstances, they all insist on the primacy of the *Shari’a*,

even though they may interpret it in vastly different ways. Support for the ideal of an Islamic state today needs to be situated against the broad failure of the secular post-colonial Muslim-majority state. Although there are a few countries that may qualify as exceptions, such as Turkey and Indonesia, most states in the Muslim world today have been characterized by corruption, cronyism, authoritarianism and varying degrees of political repression. It is in this context that the “Islamic state” option appears most attractive. At times, Muslim political identity today is formed in opposition to and rejection of “the West.” Thus Western support for secularism and liberal democracy, while it pursues foreign policies that are viewed as inimical to Muslim interests, engenders a reactive oppositional Muslim political identity. The consequences of this identity construction lend support to the abstract idea of an “Islamic state” as an alternative to Western models [Ayubi, Hashemi and Qureshi 1995].

In Quentin Skinner’s assessment of Thomas Hobbes’s use of the term *state* to denote the highest source of authority in matters of civil government, this usage was a declaration that could be viewed as marking the end of one phase in the history of political theory and the beginning of another—a more familiar one—announcing the end of an era in which the concept of public power had been analysed in more personal and charismatic terms, and pointing to a simpler and more abstract vision of sovereignty as the property of an impersonal agency, a vision that has remained ever since and has come to be embodied in the use of such terms as *état*, *stato*, *Staat* and *state*.⁽⁷⁾

For Barbara Goodwin [1995: 266-268], the term “state” is a relative newcomer to political debate. Until the nineteenth century political thinkers preferred terms such as “commonwealth,” “political society,” “sovereign power” and “government” to denote what would today be called the “state.” “Nation-state” is a nineteenth-century term, which embraces the whole of a society as well as its political apparatus. The subject here, however, is the state as the major *locus* of power and authority in every modern society. The state consists of the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government, along with all the institutions to which they delegate powers.

In the Islamic world, the term “state” is also a newcomer but, like any other human society, different Muslim communities had to organise themselves politically. Although the original Islamic sources (the *Qur’an* and the *hadiths*) have very little to say on matters of government and the state, the first issue to confront the Muslim community immediately after the death of its formative leader, the Prophet Muhammad, in 632 C.E., was in fact the problem of government and how to select a successor,

khalifah (caliph), to the Prophet. From the start, therefore, Muslims had to innovate and improvise with regard to the form and nature of government. The first disagreements that emerged within the Muslim community, which led to the eventual division of Islam into Sunnis, Khawarij, Shi'is and other sects, were undeniably concerned with politics. But theorizing about politics was very much delayed, and most works of Islamic political literature seem to have emerged when the political realities that they addressed were already in the past.

According to Ayubi, Hashemi and Qureshi, Islam is a religion of collective morals, containing little that is specifically political: the original Islamic sources rarely convey much on how to form states, run governments or manage organizations. If the rulers of the historical Islamic states were also spiritual leaders of their communities, this was not because Islam required the *imam* (religious leader) to be a political ruler as well, but because Islam had spread in regions where the modes of production tended to be control-based and where the state had always played a crucial economic and social role.

The “monopoly” of a certain religion had always been one of the state’s usual instruments for ensuring ideological hegemony (the Roman, Byzantine and Persian Empires are examples), and the historical Islamic state was heir to this tradition. The main piece of political literature inherited from the Muhammadan period is *al-sahifah*, the document often known as the constitution of Medina, the text of which is attributed mostly to the *hijrah* (migration) episode dating from 622 to 624 C.E. This constitution speaks of the believers forming one *umma* (community), which also includes the Jews of Medina. Although composed of tribes, each of which is responsible for the conduct of its members, the *umma* as a whole is to act collectively in enforcing social order and security and in confronting enemies in times of war and peace. Given the limited nature of political stipulations in the *Qur'an* and the *hadiths*, Muslims have had to borrow and improvise in developing their political systems. These systems, however, have been inspired by 1) *Shari'a* (which literally means, in Arabic, *path*, *way*, and is usually translated as *Islamic law*), as represented in the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna*; 2) by Arabian tribal traditions; and 3) by the political heritage of the lands Muslims conquered, especially the Persian and Byzantine traditions.

The influence of the first source was more noticeable during the era of the first four *rashidun* (rightly guided) caliphs (632-661 C.E.), the second during the Umayyad dynasty (661-750 C.E.) and the third during the 'Abbasid (749-1258 C.E.)

and Ottoman (1281-1922 C.E.) dynasties. Muslims had indeed been state builders, in the practical sense, in such fields as military expansion, government arrangements, and administrative techniques—in this respect they probably preceded Europeans. But these were not really states in the modern sense of the term: they were externally imperial systems, and internally dynastic systems, akin to many other ancient and medieval systems that are normally distinguished from the modern state. Since the state is a Western concept, representing a European phenomenon that developed between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries in relation to various factors, including the Renaissance and the growth of capitalism and individualism, it is not surprising that such a concept cannot be found in Islamic thought prior to the modern era. However, Islamic political thought did have much to say about the body politic and, of course, about rulers and governments: these, when examined and reconstructed, can give us an understanding of what is the closest thing to the concept of the state in traditional Islamic thinking. If the concept of the state in Europe cannot be understood in isolation from the concepts of individualism, liberty and law, the Islamic concept of the body politic cannot be understood in isolation from the concepts of *jama'a* or *umma* (the group or the community), *'adl* or *'adala* (justice or fairness), and *qiyada* or *imama* (leadership). Basically, the category of politics in traditional Islamic thought is a classification of types of statesmanship, not types of state; it pertains to the problem of government and especially to the conduct of the ruler, not to the polity as a social reality or to the state as a generic category or legal abstraction.

Islamic political theory took shape subsequent to the historical development that it addressed. Indeed, most major political concepts did not develop except during periods when the political institutions about which they were theorizing were in decline. Thus, for example, the caliphate theory goes back to the period of deterioration of the caliphate as an institution during the 'Abbasid dynasty, the appearance of more than one caliph in several Muslim cities (*i.e.*, the division of the Islamic *umma*), and the growth of opposition movements of Shi'is, Khawarij, Mu'tazilis, Ikhwan al-Safa and others, against the Sunni ruler in Baghdad. Indeed, the caliphate theory was mainly a Sunni refutation of the arguments put forward by the escalating opposition movements (including the Shi'i), and it represented a quest for the ideal, not a positive description of what was actually there. It was only with the process of *tadwin* (inscription and registration), in the middle of the ninth century, that writings on the caliphate emerged, first among the Shi'is, then by way of reaction among the Sunnis, but most particularly

after Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (d. 820 C.E.), a founder of one of the four legal schools, had specified the methodological rules of Sunni thought and had enumerated the sanctioned sources of *Shari'a*: the *Qur'an*, the *Sunna*, *ijma'* (consensus of the learned), and *qiyas* (reasoning by analogy).

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century Muslims thought of politics in terms of the *umma* (a term originally connoting any ethnic or religious community but eventually becoming nearly synonymous with the universal Islamic community) and of a caliphate or a sultanate (*i.e.*, government or rule of a more religious or a more political character, respectively). A concept of the state that might link the community and the government was not to develop until later on. The term *dawla* (used today to connote "state" in the European sense) existed in the *Qur'an* and was indeed used by medieval Muslim authors. However, in its verbal form, the word originally meant "to turn, rotate, or alternate." In the 'Abbasid and subsequent periods, it was often used to describe fortunes, vicissitudes, or ups and downs (e.g., "*dalat dawlatuhu*"—"his days have passed"). Gradually the word came to mean "dynasty," and then, much more recently, to mean, "state."

The Egyptian Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) paved the way for a territorial, rather than a purely communal, concept of the polity when he emphasized the idea of *watan* (or fatherland, as expressed in the French, German and Russian words *patrie*, *Vaterland* and *rodina*). Nonetheless he could not break away completely from the (religious) *umma* concept, nor did he call for a national state in the secular European sense. The first time that the term *dawla* (in Turkish, *devlet*) appears in its modern meaning of "state," as distinct from "dynasty" and "government," is in a Turkish memorandum of about 1837. Islamic thinkers, however, were in no hurry to espouse this new concept of the state. This was because the modern Middle East state system did not emerge until after World War I. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-1897) and Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), therefore, still spoke in terms of the Islamic *umma* and its "firmest bond" (*al-'urwat al-wuthqa*, the name of a publication which both animated in late nineteenth century) and of the Islamic ruler and his good conduct. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1854-1902) went a step further by talking about the Islamic league (*al-jami'a al-Islamiya*) as a religious bond, using the term *umma* not in an exclusively religious but sometimes in an ethnic sense, along with the term *watan* when he spoke of what united Muslim Arabs with non-Muslim Arabs. He also distinguished between politics and administration of religion (*al-din*) and politics and administration of the

“kingdom” (*al-mulk*), saying that in the history of Islam the two had only been united during the *rashidun* era (632-661 C.E.) and that of Caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (r. 717-720 C.E.).

The modern concept of the Islamic state emerged as a reaction and response to the demise of the last caliphate in Turkey in 1924. Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935) started the move in that direction when, as a protest against the Turkish decision to turn the caliphate into a purely spiritual authority following World War I, he published in 1923 his book, *Al-Khilafa aw al-Imama al-‘Uzma* (*The Caliphate or the Grand Imamate*), in which he argued that the caliphate had always been, and should continue to be, a combination of spiritual and temporal authority. He called for an Arab *khilafat durura* (caliphate of necessity or urgency) and maintained that this would give both Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs a state of their own [Legrain 2006].

The intellectual evolution of the concept of “*al-Islam din wa dawla*” took another step forward about a decade later. The political context was marked by British colonialism and an Indian-Pakistani writer, Abu’l ‘Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979), was its major proponent. Indian Muslims had indeed reacted most vociferously to the demise of the Ottoman caliphate by, among other things, forming the Khilafat movement. Most of his political ideas were developed in India in the turbulent period between 1937 and 1941. But whereas many saw the emergence of Pakistan as grounds for optimism, what Mawdudi wanted was not a Muslim state, *i.e.*, a state for Indian Muslims, but an Islamic state, *i.e.*, an ideological state run only by true believers on the basis of the *Qur’an* and *Sunna*. Consequently, Mawdudi directed much of his writing against nationalism and against democracy, because he believed that either or both would result in a non-Muslim government. A particular idea that echoed widely was his Khawarij-inspired concept that *al-hakimiya* (total absolute sovereignty) should be for God alone, not for law and not for the people. Also influential was his emphasis on the Khawarij-Ibn Taymiyya concept that what makes a Muslim is not simply acceptance of the credo, *al-shahadatayn* (there is no god but God, Muhammad is God’s Messenger), but rather active involvement in enforcing the Islamic moral order on the legislative, political, and economic affairs of the society. Mawdudi would influence, among others, the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), member of the Muslim Brotherhood and a most influential figure for contemporary political Islamists.

Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949), founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, appeared to arrive at similar if less-sweeping conclusions about a decade after

the movement's formation. From a moralistic and social emphasis, al-Banna began to move in a political direction and to speak in his writings of "an Islamic nationalism that is far superior to any local nationalism." He denied that the Muslim Brotherhood was a political party but admitted, "politics on the foundation of Islam is at the heart of our idea." To him Islam was everything: "a belief and a form of worship, a fatherland and a nationality, a religion and a state, spirituality and action, a book and a sword." Such a formulation became even more extreme with his fellow Muslim Brother 'Abd al-Qadir 'Awda (d. 1954), according to whom Islam was also "a religion and a state." To this author, the two are so intermixed that they are no longer distinguishable: "the state in Islam has become the religion, and religion in Islam has become the state." And, "just as religion is [the first] part of Islam, so government is the second part, indeed it is the more important part."

The fact is that the few contemporary polities that call themselves, or are taken to be, Islamic states are very different from each other in their most important political aspects. Such countries might be similar in terms of applying so-called Islamic penalties (*hudud*) or of trying to avoid the receiving/giving of banking interest to be forbidden (usury, or *riba*), yet they are very different from each other with regard to their political forms and constitutional arrangements. What is more, they do not usually have any mutual recognition of each other as being Islamic states.

Saudi Arabia is taken to be the earliest contemporary Islamic state, dating at least to the early 1930s. It is a monarchy (a form considered un-Islamic or even anti-Islamic by many), although the king has recently dropped the title of "his royal majesty" and replaced it with the more Islamic title, *Khadim al-Haramayn* ("servant of the two sanctuaries," referring to Mecca and Medina). Saudi Arabia owes its origins to tribal conquests and alliances, and it continues to rely on tribal solidarity to maintain the cohesion of its regime. It does not have a constitution (the *Qur'an* being its fundamental law), nor does it have a parliament or political parties, although it has a modern-looking cabinet and bureaucracy. Socially, it is extraordinarily conservative, although in terms of employment and services it functions in many ways as a welfare state. What gives the state its Islamic character is mainly the role of its *'ulama* who, following a strict Hanbali/Wahhabi tradition, exercises an unmistakable influence by issuing *fatawa* (plural of *fatwa*, a formal legal opinion, a counsel) on social and political matters, controlling *Shari'a* courts, and directing the morals of the police.

Islamic Iran, by contrast, is a republic with a constitution, president, parliament,

cabinet, bureaucracy and court system that holds regular elections (for regime loyalists). The current state owes its existence to a multi-class popular revolution within which the religious wing, led by a politicized segment of the Shi'i *'ulama*, was able to assume the upper hand. Islam played a mobilizing role and Khomeini's (1902-1989) discourse made it possible to combine social conservatism with populism and political radicalism, and to construct a basically *étatist* economy in post-revolutionary Iran. The distinct features of such a regime have been the role of an Islamic jurist as the "Leader of the Islamic Republic," the high representation of *'ulama* in the parliament (*majlis*) and the court system; the *'ulama* also perform key parts in the Guardian Council and the Assembly of Experts. The important role played by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards and the Basij paramilitary corps should also be remembered.

Sudan is another country where the establishment of an Islamic state was attempted by a military regime; in this case the process was resumed later by another military regime. Ja'far Nimeiri's regime (1969-1985) started with distinct socialist and Arabist leanings but was tempted, with the escalation in its economic and political problems, to adopt an increasingly Islamist orientation in alliance with the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood led by Hassan al-Turabi.⁽⁸⁾ In 1983-84, the application of *Shari'a* laws was announced, combined with sweeping powers for Nimeiri himself, stipulated in the emergency law of 1984. Courts were hurriedly formed, summarily handing down severe punishments, including limb amputations. The escalating socioeconomic crisis and the growing resistance in the non-Muslim South, combined with Nimeiri's eccentric arbitrariness, resulted in a popular uprising that ousted him in 1985. But the Islamic movement had used its period in government with Nimeiri to consolidate its organization and to spread its influence within the country's institutions, including the army. This enabled the movement to win in various syndicate and political elections, and when Lieutenant-General 'Umar al-Bashir installed another military regime, in 1989, it was markedly influenced by the National Islamic Front.

Pakistan, which was created in 1947 for the Indian Muslims and was supposed to be a *secular* country, had been claiming to construct an Islamic state, especially since the military *coup d'état* of Zia ul-Haq (r. 1977-1988). The military regime attempted to derive political legitimacy from its program of "Islamization." Initiating the process in 1980, an Islamic legal code, to be applied through *Shari'a* courts, was issued by decree, but this was strongly resisted by the Shi'is and scorned by the women's movement. Tightly controlled elections were held without functioning political parties

and interest-free banking was introduced, but faced serious difficulties. Commissions were formed for the Islamization of the economy and of education but such moves were halted by Zia's death in a plane crash in 1988. The Islamization programme has continued, however, with its own ups and downs, and has resulted in a strengthening of exclusionary sectarian Sunni and Shi'i identities.

It should be clear from these cases that although so-called Islamic states may adopt similar practices with regard to moral and social issues (pertaining to family, gender, dress, alcohol, and so forth) there is little similarity in the political features of such states or even in their socioeconomic orientations.

V. (The World of) Islam and Politics Nowadays

Sami Zubaida [1997: 103-104] asked how applicable the classic concepts of "state" and "politics" were to the world of Islam. Although there is convergence between the essentialist positions of the adherents of the Islamist movements and Westerners writing in the Orientalist tradition, modern states are products of social and cultural transformations accompanying the uneven expansion of a global capitalist economy. According to those essentialist positions, each postulates a cultural essence which underlies and unifies Islamic history and distinguishes it from an equally reductionist notion of the West. They see the territorial nation-state as an alien graft, imposed by the West but remaining "external" to Muslim society, "the game of intellectuals and politicians." In Islamic societies, both Islamists and Orientalists argue, the global unit of solidarity is the Islamic community of the faithful, the *Umma*; the territorial nation-state is incompatible with this higher unity. Western writers would add that alongside this global solidarity there is the more immediate solidarity of primary communities based on tribe, region, or sect, equally incompatible with the nation-state but played out within its alien political field under modern ideological labels like "nationalism" and "socialism." However, different parts of the Islamic world have experienced the impact of the "Nation-state." Although clearly of European origin, its diffusion to other parts of the world (including much of Europe itself) did not create replicas of the British or the French political systems, but has itself structured political processes and ideas in each region, and dominated the assumptions and forms of underlying political activity there. Even for those who would transcend the nation-state

into pan-Arabism or pan-Islamism, the nation-state represents an elemental political fact and constraint. In fact, the assumptions and concepts of the nation-state underlie, implicitly or explicitly, most modern Islamist ideologies. In this and many other respects, they are not continuous with historical Islam but rather modern constructions influenced by current conjunctures.

The “Islamic world” is a huge area of land integrating multiple different cultural, ethnic and political entities, nevertheless, sharing significant common characteristics. What does seem clear, and may make people mistake the pre-modern situation, is that in modern times religious institutions, movements, and beliefs have had more political importance in the Muslim world than in the West. This is often attributed to special features of Islam, which are of some importance, but there appear to be other causes, such as, first, different historical experiences in the West and in the Islamic world, and, second, the imperial and colonial experiences suffered by Muslims tended to make them defensive about Islam and to define (as did some Westerners) the situation in religious terms.

During the twentieth century, and through the impacts of European imperialism and colonialism, two developments worked to modify the political situation in the Islamic world. One was the evolution of nationalism, and the other was the increasing importance of the structure of the state in society. These two trends often supported each other, as an independent nation-state had been the goal of many intellectuals and political activists. In the process, the ideals of the cosmopolitan Islamic community had not been forgotten, but they had to share the stage with the interests of the nation and the state. The *Umma*, the nation and the state became sometimes competitors and sometimes complementary focuses of loyalty for Muslims [Voll 1994: 153].

To use “Islam” and “*Shari‘a*” as generalized categories, as some scholars do, presents some dangers, because one cannot speak of historical entities that are wholly or predominantly determined by Islam. Islamic leaders, communities, cities, and symbols are merely conceptual categories that unduly privilege the cultural and religious over the social and political. As concepts, they reside properly in the minds of their producers but obscure the nature of historical and social realities. Weberian scholars have tried to form an understanding of the Islamic city in comparison with and as distinct from the European city. As the social foundation of capitalism, industrialization, and modernity, the city has become a compelling category in understanding social formation and development. The judgment, generally, has been that, compared with the European

city, the Middle Eastern entity may not be called a city. Bryan Turner [1974: 99], the Weberian interpreter of Islam, characterized the Islamic city as “aggregates of sub-communities rather than socially unified communities.”

Aside from the negative view evidenced in the above statement, the debate about the Islamic city has also produced some interesting ways of understanding the unique “social aggregates” in Islamic civilization. Islam, as van Leeuwen argues, is not a “monolithic force” that shapes manners and customs, much less the nature of a complex city, and the same author regards any city to be consisting of “the various statuses of space, the regimentation of space within urban environments, the influence of social relations on spatial organisation, the role of spatial structures in the exertion of power, or the focuses of intertwining networks in spatial organisation.” The special case of cities occupied by Muslim peoples are but a measure of the “integration of several urban centres within one system which determines their type, and in this process cultural factors are only one of many causes,” with the possibility of “differences and divergent developments” [Van Leeuwen 1995: 154-158].

From this perspective, it makes no sense to speak of an Islamic city with religion as its most distinctive feature. The religio-cultural aspect of social forms is only one of several features, and cannot be used as a point of identification. Calling something an Islamic city, Islamic bank, or Islamic science implies that Islam is its major determining factor. In reality, such naming only hides and obscures other characteristics like ethnicity, ideology, and historical circumstances that equally determine social formation. However, such a critical deconstructivist approach to social forms has the risk of becoming extremely one-sided. While it clearly shows how social scientists and historians impose categories on the subject matter at hand, it fails to consider how the actors themselves work with such symbols, and fails to acknowledge the way in which indigenous actors create and contribute to the symbolic formation of society. No matter how elusive its character, the Islamic city—much like the Islamic leader, ritual, or court—is one of those compelling symbolic categories by which Muslims create history. The task of the social scientist, hence, is to locate these symbols in their broader social context, not to dissolve them, nor neglect how indigenous actors contribute—positively or negatively—to the creation of social entities. As Aziz al-Azmeh [1993] argues, there are as many *Islams* as there are situations that sustain it, and critical reflection must contextualize them into the flow of historical and social forces, and thus deculturalize and demystify them.

VI. Bringing Religion back into the Study of Western Politics

A common complaint from political scientists involved in the study of religion is that religious issues have been largely overlooked by political science. Steven Kettel [2012] shows that political science publications on religious topics have been significantly less than those engaging with subjects typically regarded as being more central to the discipline. And, where they have engaged with religious issues these articles have also focused on a limited number of subject areas and been concentrated in specific disciplinary subfields.

At the same time, and now from a historical point of view, J.C.D. Clark [2012] offers a critical reconsideration of a central component of modernization theory. The model of secularization devised within the sociology of religion, when compared with the results of historical research in a range of themes and periods, is now often radically inconsistent with that sociological orthodoxy. He concludes that an older historical scenario which located in the early modern period the beginnings of a “process” of secularization that achieved its natural completion in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries is finally untenable. In response, he proposes a broader, more historical conception of “religion,” able to accommodate both persistent religiosity and undoubted changes in religious behaviour.

Historical evidence shows that religion has been far more entwined with state formation than has been assumed. In Europe, organized religion thrived with the expansion of the modern state, using its fruits and apparatuses, including those governing fiscal regulation and violence, to augment its own powers [Mann 1979]. States in turn used religious institutions and appropriated church lands and property to augment their powers and revenue. Thomas Ertman [1997] writes that the church was important to the expansion of royal authority in the tenth and eleventh centuries in Latin Europe, and provided the Carolingian state with institutions through which to exercise authority and rule. The Carolingians totally integrated the church into state apparatuses to create state administration, and took over various papal territories and ecclesiastical resources, which accounts for the Christianization of the Frankish Empire of the Carolingians after 800.

Similarly, Robert Wuthnow [1989] has shown that as the rise in trade in the 1500s supported both rise of the state and the Reformation in central and northern Europe, there emerged a symbiosis between the two. In Sweden and Denmark the

princes turned to the Reformation because it provided them with the opportunity to appropriate church lands, quadrupling Crown lands in the case of Gustav Vasa of Sweden, who dissolved monasteries in 1527 and took their land. This trend was also evident in England, where the Reformation was a revolution from above with broad implications for state power and capacity. In 1533, the king was proclaimed head of the Church of England, placing all ecclesiastical affairs in England under state authority. In 1532, the Parliament forced the clergy to surrender ecclesiastical law to the jurisdiction of the Crown and forbade papal annates. The ties with the Vatican were further weakened in 1533 with the Act of Restraint of Appeals to Rome, which prohibited appeals by domestic courts outside the realm. In 1534, the Act of Supremacy named the king supreme head of the Church of England. In the same year, the dissolution of monasteries began, which by 1539 placed all their lands in state hands; and in 1540, all property of the church was vested in the Crown. This allowed the Crown to take over the ancient parish administration that had until that time been ecclesiastical. That administration was made into an instrument of poor relief and provided the Privy Council in London with a direct role in, and considerable control of, local affairs. The fusion of the Reformation and nationalism thus supported the expansion of state capacity and reach [Fischer and Lundgreen 1975; Turner 1988: 326].

Philip Gorski [1993] has underscored the importance of the “disciplinary revolution” that followed the Reformation to shape later state formation in Holland and Prussia. Writing on the Dutch Republic of 1560-1650 and Hohenzollern Prussia of the 1640s to 1720, Gorski argues that it was Calvinism that provided primary support for the “social and organizational basis for establishment of a *strong system of local government*.” In both Holland and Prussia, the state internalized Calvinist ethics and used the strong institutions that they had formed at the base of the society to strengthen the state. This process reached its apogee under Frederick William I, who favoured Calvinist recruits into state institutions. Gorski thus associates the strength of Dutch and Prussian state institutions, especially the bureaucracy, with Calvinist ethics.

The successful use of religion to expand state powers led to the state’s assumption of some form of religious authority, most evident in the English king’s arrogation of the status of head of the Church of England, confirming the observation that successful use of religion to expand state powers requires the state to assume the requisite religious and cultural guise. It is also evident from the above cases that, as states use religion to expand, they ensure certain socio-political roles for religion and

even extend the purview of its powers. Central and northern European states used the Reformation to construct viable states, ensuring the domination over large parts of Europe [Nasr 2001: 18-21].

Even nowadays there are many European countries with State religions, and, in the United States, Christianity, be it Protestant or Catholic, plays an extremely important role in politics, setting the moral boundaries and concerns within which political discussion unfolds, and hence can be considered the premiere political institution in some sense. Greater recognition must be given to the way Western concepts (religion, politics, secular, and temporal) reflect specific historical developments, and cannot be applied as a set of universal categories or natural domains. Although discussions of political motivation or class interest should continue to be important parts of the accounts of contemporary Islam, they are not necessarily germane to a description of every problem the analyst poses. As Nikki Keddie [1994: 463-466] wrote, religions do have a shape and influence coming from the past, although particular adaptations vary with time and circumstance. Hence, it is important to give more attention to religion and its relationship to politics, but without reducing them to narrow categories as if “Politics” were fully embodied in the “State,” while “Religion” was fully embodied in the “Church” (which is also a political organization), or as if the relations between “religion” and “politics” could be reduced to the institutional relations between “Church” and “State” as if with the “Separation of Church and State,” “Religion” and “Politics” had been separated.

VII. Conclusion: Bringing Everything Else back into the Study of “Middle Eastern” Politics

Categorisations and generalisations are natural to humans; they stem from basic cognitive skills which help us give some order to the world. Although categories created by scientists are means to better understand what surrounds us, there is a problem when they become generalisations or start being taken as *reality*. When this becomes the case, instead of helping us, categories become a hindrance—a dangerous one—since the subjects being dealt with are humans and their concrete lives.⁽⁹⁾

“Religion” means different things to different people: it can be an identitarian affiliation, a spiritual affirmation, or just faith; and all of these factors have some

specific impact on society and in the political process, which are not simply exhausted as the “State.” Muslims themselves have often considered Islam a total world view comprising religion and politics, however little this unity has been realized. This view on the totalizing aspect of Islam appears especially in periods of instability, rather than during stable political environments. Although the Islamic revival of recent decades is in many ways novel, it has some important resemblances to revolts of the past, such as a return to the early (idealized) combination of religion and politics, with the enforcement of Qur’anic and legal provisions. Looking at several unconnected Islamic militant movements suggests ideological similarities that owe something to a widespread belief in what relations between religion and politics in Islam should be.

In 1996, Ira M. Lapidus wrote that the history of the Middle East and of the wider Muslim world reveals a variety of institutional situations. The supposed Muslim norm of the integration of state (political organization) and religious authority, and the identification of state and religious community, actually characterized only a small segment of Middle Eastern and other Muslim populations. Undifferentiated state-religious situations were characteristic of lineage or tribal societies, as in Muhammad’s Arabia, North Africa and Morocco, early Safavid Iran, and as in the reformist period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even in such cases the conquest of an agriculture-based, urbanized society would start a process of differentiation that broke down the integral connection of state and religion. Conversely, the historic norm for Middle Eastern agro-urban-imperial societies has been the institutional differentiation of state and religion. Royal households or courts, political elites and the language and cultural style of the ruling classes were different from those of religious elites. In the ‘Abbasid, Saljuq, Ottoman and Safavid empires, the central fact is the differentiation of state and religious institutions, and the central problem has been to define the relations of the two. These relations vary across a wide spectrum, from a high degree of state control over a centrally managed religious establishment to a more independent but co-operative relationship (as in the Saljuq case), along with full autonomy and even open opposition to state policies. Even in cases where Muslims, at least in principle, maintained their aspiration for an ideal society in which state and community were integrated, they were not necessarily committed to bringing it about in practice. In return for state support, the *‘ulama* legitimized the reigning governments and taught the common people the virtues of acceptance and submission. Despite the common statement (and the Muslim ideal) that the institutions of state and religion are unified,

and that Islam is a total way of life which defines political as well as social and family matters, most Muslim societies did not conform to this ideal, but were built around separate institutions of state and religion.

Thus we have two principal Islamic theories of the nature of an ideal Muslim political society. One looks to a unified state and society under the leadership of a caliph whose authority extends to all realms of personal and public concern. The second tacitly recognizes the institutional division between the structures of state and religion and looks to the religious sphere for personal and communal fulfilment. Each of these concepts of the Muslim political order—the unified and the separated state and community—has had a profound effect on the current history of Islamic societies. The contemporary Islamic revival (so-called fundamentalist or Islamist) movements are inspired by the vision of a prophetic community. They attempt to return to the principles of Islamic morality and a renewal of personal commitment to the symbolic foundations of Islam. They commonly aim to control the state and to use the power of the state to enforce Islam, although Islam means different things to different movements. As in the case of their historical predecessors, there is an ambiguity in their attitude towards political power which leaves the way open for a renewed separation of political and religio-communal concerns.⁽¹⁰⁾

The historical actuality of the division of Muslim societies into a realm of political authority and a realm of religio-communal affairs has other contemporary reverberations. The long-established differentiation of state and religious communities has legitimized political power apart from Islam. The Ottoman Empire in particular achieved a *de facto* legitimacy as a conquering state and defender of Muslims, apart from religious validation. Ottoman (and Iranian) rulers were conceived, too, as vice-regents of God: direct agents of God's authority on earth. Beyond the theory of Islamic states lies the reality of legitimate non-Islamic monarchies. Religious communities embody a corresponding tradition of political passivity, and a tendency to accept political actualities and state power based upon conquest and preserved by force as an inevitable reality. In this tradition, the realm of Islamic authenticity lies within the soul of the individual and in the behaviour of individuals in small communities. This historical orientation provides a template for the construction of modern Middle Eastern states around secular cultural identities and development goals defined in either capitalist or socialist terms. In such states as Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Jordan, Islam had been disestablished or the Islamic religious establishment was

brought under state control. Islam no longer legitimates the state and no longer defines its moral or social vision. All of these states have set up secular educational and judicial systems which actually compete with, and even replace, the primary functions of Islam. Where Muslim religious life has in general become separated from state institutions, it flourishes in a differentiated “civil society.” The fact that the mass of the population has Muslim loyalties means that states give special consideration to Muslim symbols and practices. In recent years, with the rising importance of mass Islamic identifications and strong Islamist political movements, state elites have deferred to popular pressure for official recognition of the primacy of Islam and have relaxed, or even reversed, the earlier demand for secularism; still, this has not led to the dismantling of secular legal or educational institutions. As far as the historic legacy remains an important factor in the contemporary Muslim world, its diversity is the basis of a corresponding diversity in the relations of states and religious communities. Today, as has been true since ancient times, we still find both integralist religio-political movements, states defined in Islamic terms, a *de facto* institutional differentiation of state and religion, and a great variety of relationships between the two [Lapidus 1996: 26-27].

As Irfan Ahmad [2009: 147-148] argues, the debate on the Islamic state has been conducted mostly in the field of Islamic studies or area studies and, not surprisingly, theological factors have weighed heavily in these debates. While sensitive to theology, social scientists should have an approach that gives primacy to the political factors and historical context in which philological interpretation is made and unmade, and critically subject theological arguments to the historical-political matrixes that shape them and, more importantly, the product of interpretation. An exclusively theological approach to the canonical texts, i.e. the *Qur'an*, has serious limits. It is not a pristine text that yields meanings on its own and by itself; it is rather the distinct social condition and the biography of the person reading the text which produces its meanings. As the contemporary Egyptian scholar Nasr Abu Zayd observes, “the *Qur'an* is at the mercy of the ideology of its interpreter. For a communist, the *Qur'an* would thus reveal communism, for a fundamentalist it would be a highly fundamentalist text, for a feminist it would be a feminist text, and so on” (quoted in Ahmad [2008: 551]).

Contrary to what Ernest Gellner and others have said, that Islam “was the state from the very start,” the idea of an Islamic state is a distinctly modern development. The proposition by Bernard Lewis and Ann K. S. Lambton that, in Islam, from the beginning religion and the state were one and that the latter was an unsullied embodiment

of *Shari'a*, “the revealed law of God” and hence immutable, is an ideologically de-historicized abstraction, and it does not help us to understand either the modern nature of the state or the complexity of *Shari'a*, including how its meaning changed over time and space and the ways in which it was humanly recast. It is divine for Muslims (at least for those who are practicing the religion) to the extent that its frame of reference is the *Qur'an* and *hadith*, but it is fallible humans who have made and interpreted over time the body of conflicting juridical rules, instructions and ethics generally called *Shari'a* [Eickelman and Piscatori 1996].

To argue that Islam was the state from the very start is, then, to impose a distinctly modern term on a pre-modern social formation. Equally misleading is the dominant assumption—widespread across academic disciplines—that the so-called “theological” character of Islam forces it to fuse religion and politics, and that prior to the European encroachment in the late eighteenth century Muslims rarely studied politics in isolation from their religion [Enayat 2009: 3]. This essentialist view on Muslim political literature neglects *akhlaqi* texts, “mirrors of princes,” aiming at instructing on the right political conduct in specific political contexts and which were concerned not just with ethically good actions but also the issues of statecraft, political culture and philosophy. A tradition of dissidence, “mirrors of princes” redefined *Shari'a* in a “philosophical, non-sectarian and humane” way as a kind of protest against an overly legalistic approach. In many important ways, these ethical-philosophical texts transcended the conventional positions of *Shari'a* to address the concerns of the larger humanity. The history and practices of the Indian Muslim rulers show that most of them did not follow *Shari'a*. Rather, independent of *Shari'a*, they framed secular laws, *zawabit* (administrative, standards, principles). Moreover, the meaning of *Shari'a* itself varied. Far from stable, it was not only a body of juridical rules propounded by theologians, but also included *akhlaq* texts [Alam 2000: 216-245; 2004].

Clearly, the concept of “the state” is quite modern. It entered the lexicon of the social sciences in the nineteenth century in order to understand the dramatic changes in early modern Europe from the seventeenth century onwards. To impose the modern concept of the state on seventh-century Arab society is misleading. While this is not to suggest that seventh-century Arabia was bereft of any political formation, it was only during the early twentieth century that a fully developed political theory of the Islamic state emerged in the discourse of thinkers such as Mawdudi and al-Banna. The reason why the state became central to some thinkers was not because Islam theologically

entailed it. Rather, it did so because of the configuration of the early twentieth century socio-political formations under which the state as an institution had acquired an unprecedented role in expanding its realm of action and the scope of its penetration. Since (political) Islam, or Islamism, was a response to the modern colonial state formation, with its far-reaching consequences, it was only logical that the state became the centre of its discourse, which Mawdudi conceptualized as being indispensable to Islam. It was in the context of the separation between religion and state that Mawdudi argued for a fusion of the state and Islam, making this argument because the colonial state had emerged as an omnipotent institution influencing every domain of life.

As William Connolly [1995] wrote, many scholars have argued that “political Islam” involves an illegitimate extension of the Islamic tradition outside of the properly religious domain it has historically occupied. Few, however, have explored this trend in relation to the contemporaneous expansion of state power and concern into vast domains of social life previously outside its purview—including that of religion. As it is known, through this ongoing process central to modern nation building, such institutions as education, worship, social welfare and family have been incorporated to varying degrees within the regulatory apparatuses of the modernizing state. Modern politics and the forms of power it deploys have become a condition for the practice of many personal activities.

As for religion, to the extent that the institutions enabling the cultivation of religious virtue become subsumed within (and transformed by) legal and administrative structures linked to the state, the (traditional) project of preserving those virtues will necessarily be “political” if it is to succeed. For example, within both public and private schools in Egypt, the curriculum is mandated by the state: those wishing to promote or maintain Islamic pedagogical practices necessarily have to engage political power. This does not mean that all forms of contemporary Islamic activism involve trying to “capture the state.” The vast majority of these movements involve preaching and other *da‘wa* (missionary) activities, alms-giving, providing medical care, mosque building, publishing and generally promoting what is considered in the society to be public virtue through community action.

Nonetheless, these activities engage the domain we call the political both in the sense that they are subject to restrictions imposed by the state (licensing, etc.) and in so much as they must often compete with state or state-supported institutions (pedagogic, confessional, medical) promoting Western models of family, worship, leisure, social

responsibility, etc. The success of even a conservative project to preserve a traditional form of personal piety will depend on its ability to engage with the legal, bureaucratic, disciplinary and technological resources of modern power that shape contemporary societies. This argument diverges from the more common one that asserts Islam fuses religion and politics, *din wa dawla* (religion and state), in a way incompatible with Western analytical categories. It is worth noting, however, that this frequently heard claim does not deny the fact that Muslim thinkers draw distinctions between *din* and *dawla*; only that the specific domains designated by these terms, and the structure of their interrelations do not mirror the situation in Europe in regard to European states and the Church. Moreover, this leaves aside the fact that the division between religious and political domains even in Western societies has always been far more porous than was previously assumed, as much recent work has made clear.

As Mahmood Mamdani [2004] argues, we must make a clear distinction between religious and political identifications and understand that the two can (and often) operate at different levels for different persons. When we are mindful of this distinction we can approach the discussion of Islam and politics with the appropriate mindset, namely one that recognizes the importance of various interpretations of Islam about a particular issue. Furthermore, including a range of other individual, social, economic and political factors, we can realize the complexity in what makes a person hold (or not hold) a particular position. Therefore, in the discussion of Islam and politics, the role of religion and religious interpretation may be minimal or highly relevant, depending on the circumstance. We need to be aware of how religious interpretations are also used politically. Within that space, it is important to examine the different religious interpretations that do exist, as well as interpretations that can exist—and from this, attempt to analyze the political, economic and societal effects on politics, and vice versa. It is important to illustrate to students and social scientists that different interpretations of *Shari'a* (and thus Islam) can, and do, exist.

Notes

- (1) Besides being the title of his book, *Orientalism*, this was also the generic term that Edward Said employed to describe the Western view on the Orient (the Middle East and/or Islamic world), and was also the discipline by which that region and/or concept was, and is, approached systematically,

as a topic of learning, discovery, and practice. It should be noted that his book was published at the time the Revolution in Iran was taking place.

- (2) Examples of this position are Bruce [2000], Huntington [1996], Ismael and Ismael [1985], Krishna [1972], Lambton [1988: 1-10], Lawrence [1995], Lewis [1991; 1996], Madan [2010], Vatikiotis [1987], Von Grunebaum [1953], Watt [1988], and Weiner [1987: 33-64].
- (3) For further details, see the official website of the Organisation (<http://www.oic-oci.org/>) and the legal frameworks for each member state.
- (4) On the diversity of designations with which those phenomena are called see Mitchell and Hashmi [2005: Introduction], Moaddel and Karabenick [2008: 1-4], and Shepard [1987: 307-335].
- (5) Also illuminating are Jason Ananda Josephson's *The Invention of Religion in Japan* [Josephson 2012], and Matthew Scherer's *Beyond Church and State: Democracy, Secularism, and Conversion* [Scherer 2013], which shows us how the term "religion," as it is used in every-day speech, is a very modern concept.
- (6) See, for an example, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings* by Nizam al-Mulk (1018-1092) [Al-Mulk 1978].
- (7) For further details on the linguistic evolution of the word *state* since the thirteenth century and the historical circumstances out of which the linguistic and conceptual transformation uses of *status* and its vernacular equivalents mutated in such a way as to give their modern range of reference, see Skinner [2002: 368-413].
- (8) A Sorbonne-educated legal scholar and founder of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Turabi was, in the early 1980s, Attorney General of the Sudan and was directly involved in the political process that sought the establishment of an Islamic state. For more details on how al-Turabi conceived an Islamic state, see Al-Turabi [1983: 241-251].
- (9) For further details on how the term "Middle East" has become an expression that designates everything related to "Islam" and/or "Muslims" and how it continues to designate, including in the academic world, an object of study which only exists in abstract terms, ignoring the diversity of that "region" and the way its inhabitants view themselves, their identities, their histories and how the knowledge that is still produced in some scholarly environments continues to misinform the way they are seen, see Mohamed [2012].
- (10) For example, in Morocco, which is a monarchy, the king is also the *Amir ul-Mu'minin* (*Commander of the Faithful, Leader of the Faithful*, i.e., besides being the political leader, the king is also the spiritual one), claiming a direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad. However, the Islamist movement *Al-'Adl wa Al-Ihsane* (*Justice and Spirituality/Charity*) does not acknowledge the king as legitimate and advocates for a Republic.

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